

## “The Bible as Literature”: Portfolio I

Assigned: October 4th, 2012

Due: October 11th, 2012



The following five-stage portfolio assignment has been designed with several related goals in mind. First of all, it should help you to consolidate your readings from the Kugel text, while simultaneously strengthening your appreciation of the “text and context” of the Hebraic imagination, in both its creations and creativity. Secondly, as you concentrate on the origins and development of the Bible in this light, you should begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of the essential role played by various acts of interpretation in the very life of the works which it comprises. Finally, you should begin to develop greater confidence in your own authorial voice as both a reader and participant in the life of these various senses of the word “text.”

Each “stage” of this portfolio assignment will require a good deal of consideration, as well as some very thoughtful, concise writing on your part. I ask that you complete these stages in the order in which they are presented, as doing so will help you a great deal. When you have finished, please include all of your materials in a thin, two-pocket folder of some kind, and write your name clearly on the front. Also, if at all possible, **please cut and paste a picture of yourself** on the first page of your portfolio so that I can continue to remember everyone’s names.

### Stage I

From chapter one of the Kugel text (“The Creation of the World”), please choose an “exegetical motif” that intrigues you, discuss its importance to some of the interpreters who have explored its possible significance, and tell me exactly why it interests you as it does. In addition, please say a word or two about how this motif has helped you to understand the *specific* text from which it has been derived in a new light (**this should be two to four paragraphs in length**).

### Stage II

From chapter two of the Kugel text (“Adam and Eve”), once again choose an “exegetical motif” that intrigues you, discuss its importance to some of the interpreters who have explored its possible significance, and tell me why it interests you as it does. In addition, this time say a word or two about how your investigation of this motif may have helped you to better understand your own powers of reading and interpretation more *generally*. (**this should be two to four paragraphs in length**).

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### Stage III (P Writer)

With your response to **Stage I** in mind (and perhaps in front of you), please discuss the creation account found in Genesis 1:1 - 2:3. In your discussion, please devote a few lines to the following:

- How is intelligence or intelligibility displayed here?
- Is intelligence a central thematic element of this creation account?
- Is intelligence a central formal concern of this creation account? In other words, does it affect the “shape” or “style” of the composition itself? If so, how?

**Your response should be two to four paragraphs in length.**

### Stage IV (J Writer)

With your response to **Stage II** in mind, please discuss the creation account found in Genesis 2:4 - 3:24. In your discussion, please devote a few lines to the following:

- How are the senses or various experiences of “being embodied” addressed here?
- Is the aesthetic nature of this work a thematic element of this creation account?
- Are aesthetic concerns a central formal element of this creation account? In other words, do these affect the “shape” or “style” of the composition in any ways? If so, how?

**Your response should be two to four paragraphs in length.**

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“For if God should really speak to a human being, the latter could still never know that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for a human being to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and be acquainted with it as such. But in some cases the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is not God’s; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion.”

Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*

“Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?”

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

“The epiphany of the Absolutely Other is a face by which the Other challenges and commands me through his nakedness, through his destitution. He challenges me from his humility and from his height.”

Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height”

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### Stage V

Above are three excerpts, taken from some very influential considerations of the *Akedab*, or the story of the binding of Isaac by Abraham (Gen. 22:1-20). Please read these according to all that you know about the Hebraic imagination (*yetzer*), both seen as the power which makes man most “godlike,” and that faculty which can potentially lead man to great “evil.” Draw from anything that you feel is contextually helpful in “Genesis” in this regard, or anything from Kugel or class discussions that might help your thinking about this topic, and try to “make sense of the story for yourself,” in light of your own experiences. You may place the story and themes of the *Akedab* within a more personal context if doing so helps you to better understand these in any way. You may want to focus on a word or two from the story, or perhaps on a certain phrase that you find meaningful as you approach this story exegetically. You should also feel free to check the Kugel chapter on Abraham with all of its exegetical motifs for additional ideas (chapter 9).

After you have thought about this for some time, **please choose one of the following questions and give me your take.** In doing so, please discuss how your own life experiences and beliefs have helped you to come to your conclusions. This is a class on literature, but I certainly welcome your deeply held beliefs and ideas, even if these technically fall outside purely literary parameters.

1). Kant says that as individuals we have an absolute duty to the moral law (the universal), and this means that it is always a form of temptation to even think of transgressing the law as such, or of ourselves as being an exception to this moral law in any way, shape, or fashion. Do you agree with this claim, and if so, how does this color your reading of the *Akedab*?

2.) Kierkegaard says that, as impossible as this is for reason to understand, sometimes falling back on ethical certainty, or doing the right thing ethically, is actually a temptation that must be avoided. Hence, he asks to consider if it is ever justifiable to see oneself as an exception to ethics, or to suspend the moral law for something higher. What do make of this intentionally provocative position, and how does your thinking in this regard color your reading of the *Akedab*?

3). Levinas says that true revelation grounds all fundamental ethical considerations, that this revelation is never a move away from ethics, and that it is a temptation to ever think otherwise. According to his understanding of this point, it is the face of the Other that states in unequivocal fashion the command: “thou shall not kill,” and this is a revelation of the absolute authority of the ethical. The greatest temptation is ultimately to believe that the inviolability of the moral law derives from human reason alone. Do you agree with this claim, and if so, how does this color your reading of the *Akedab*?

**Once again, your response should be two to four paragraphs in length.**

**Good luck, have fun, and use your imaginations (your good ones)!**