# Wisdom Literature from the Bible and the Ancient Near East (Near E 352)

5 credits (A&H)

*University of Washington*

Department of Middle Eastern Languages and Cultures

[Quarter – Room – Times]

## **Instructor Contact Information**

Instructor: Kathryn McConaughy Medill

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Mailbox: in Denny 220-D (MELC Department office)

Office: Denny M220B

Office hours: TBD

To find my office: Go in the main doors of Denny Hall; head left through the Middle Eastern Languages and Civilization offices. Go down the shallow ramp. At the bottom of the ramp, on your right is the door to the mezzanine stairwell. Go up the stairwell one flight. My office is to the left.

## **Course Description**

Investigates wisdom in the Bible and the ancient Near East, drawing on sources from Sumer, Egypt, Babylon, Syria, Hatti, and Israel to address questions such as, “What, to these ancient peoples, did it mean to be wise? What did a wise life look like? What, to them, was the purpose of human life?”

Highlights ways in which ideas of wisdom and its practice changed over time and differed between cultures.

## **Course Modality**

Except in the case of emergency, this course meets **in person**. If your schedule does not allow you to attend most of our class meetings, this may not be the class for you.

## **Course Objectives**

By the end of this course, students are expected to learn

* to recognize the major regions and cultures of the ancient Middle East
* to recognize and contextualize the characteristics of a “wise life” in ancient literary traditions such as the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and biblical traditions
* to analyze the similarities and differences between biblical and extrabiblical wisdom traditions
* to identify four genres of wisdom literature by their distinctive characteristics
* to synthesize their understanding of wisdom genres and of wise action in a wisdom tale of their own
* to reflect on their own ideas about the meaning of life and how their modern sociohistorical context has informed those ideas

## **Course Materials**

Course materials will be available on **our class Canvas site**.

## **Course Format**

Class will meet **in person** twice a week. Each class consists mostly of close reading and discussion rather than of lecture alone, so students are responsible for all readings before the start of class and are expected to actively contribute. At times, the class may be split into smaller groups to further discuss the themes of the class and then each group will present their collected ideas.

Every week students will complete Reading Questions which help to guide and deepen their reading. Our class discussions will often be built on these questions.

Students will each read a different ancient Near Eastern instruction and create an informative poster about it. What topics and themes does this instruction address? What kind of audience did the writer expect and what response did they hope for from that audience? In week 4, student will present these posters in poster-session style. This will help the students to understand the breadth and variety of the wisdom instruction genre.

At the end of the week 5, students wrap up the wisdom instruction unit with an essay giving their contribution to the ongoing scholarly debate regarding the relationship between Proverbs 22-24 and the Instruction of Amenemope. Was the author of one using the other as a source? If so, how and why were they using it, and what does that mean for our understanding of the text?

In week 8, small groups of students work together to create and dramatize their own wisdom tales. What “moral” do they want to present? What characters will work best to present this moral? Can students stay within the wisdom tale genre while dramatizing issues that are important to them?

The class ends with a final exam. Students will recall what they’ve learned about the development, form, and functions of different genres of wisdom literature across the ancient Near East. They will examine short passages from previously unseen wisdom texts and answer questions about them. They will also synthesize what they’ve learned in some short essays.

## **Grading Policy**

You will be able to track your grades in Canvas during the quarter. If you have concerns, please come see me in my office. Due to FERPA, I can’t discuss your grades over email.

Guided Reading Questions

and In-Class Activities 20%

Thinking About Wisdom 5%

Instruction Poster and Presentation 15%

Amenemope Essay 20%

Wisdom Tale Script and Skit 20%

Final Exam 20%

Total Grade 100%

If you complete this course, you will receive a grade out of 4.0.

4.0-3.9 is the equivalent of an A

3.8-3.5 is the equivalent of an A-

3.4-3.2 is the equivalent of a B+

3.1-2.9 is the equivalent of a B

2.8-2.5 is the equivalent of a B-

2.4-2.2 is the equivalent of a C+

2.1-1.9 is the equivalent of a C

1.8-1.5 is the equivalent of a C-

1.4-1.2 is the equivalent of a D+

1.1-0.9 is the equivalent of a D

0.8-0.7 is the equivalent of a D- and is the lowest passing grade.

## **Reading Questions (20% of Grade)**

Many of our readings are accompanied by guided reading questions (see Canvas) which will help you to check your comprehension and to prepare for class discussion. These are due in class on the same day as the readings.

**Thinking About Wisdom Exercise (5% of Grade)**

An in-class exercise early in the quarter where we can think about how social differences between the ancient Near East and our own contexts impact our concepts of wisdom.

**Instruction Poster and Presentation (15% of grade)**

With a partner, student will create a poster for an assigned wisdom instruction and present it poster-presentation style during class time. More details to follow.

**Amenemope Essay (20% of Grade)**

**In an essay of about six paragraphs**, answer the following:

1. Do you think that the writer of Proverbs 22:17-24:22 has a fundamentally different worldview and purpose in writing than the author of the Instruction of Amenemope? Why or why not?

2. What is the relationship between Proverbs 22-24 and the Instruction of Amenemope? Why do you think this?

In this essay you SHOULD

* Use a classic essay structure (introduction with clear thesis, body paragraphs that make points to support your thesis, conclusion that shows how you proved your thesis with their supporting arguments).
* Give supporting evidence for all of your claims! You should use quotes from BOTH primary sources. You can also use lists of references.

Please do NOT assume that quotations speak for themselves. Always explain how the quotation is significant for your argument.

**Remember, being clear and organized is what is most important in academic writing!** More details to follow.

This is an individual assignment. Please do not share your essay with other students. (See Academic Honesty and Conduct section of Course Policies.) If you have questions, please ask me.

**Wisdom Tale Script and Skit (20% of grade)**

Students will work with a small group to script, practice, and perform a wisdom tale of their own. Details to follow.

**Religious Accommodations**

Washington state law requires that UW develop a policy for accommodation of student absences  
or significant hardship due to reasons of faith or conscience, or for organized religious activities.  
The UW’s policy, including more information about how to request an accommodation, is  
available at Religious Accommodations Policy (https://registrar.washington.edu/staffandfaculty/religious-accommodations-policy/). Accommodations must be requested within the first two weeks of this course  
using the Religious Accommodations Request form  
(https://registrar.washington.edu/students/religious-accommodations-request/).

## **Making Up Work and Late Work**

* Even if you miss class, please try to **turn in any assigned work**. Drop it in my department mailbox or email it to me. To get full points, turn it in on the day that it was due.
* For missed in-class activities, I may substitute an alternative assignment. The alternative assignment will, in general, be more difficult than coming to class.
* If assignments are one day late, there will be a 10% penalty; if assignments are two days late, there will be a 20% penalty; and so on. Sunday does not count toward days late since I will not be grading on that day.

## **Incompletes**

Course grades of “incomplete” can only be offered under specific circumstances. See the UW information page here: <https://registrar.washington.edu/students/incomplete-grades/>

## **Advising**

College of Arts and Sciences advising is now being handled by the Humanities Academic Services. They are happy to answer your questions! Find them at <https://hasc.washington.edu/> or email them at [has-center@uw.edu](mailto:has-center@uw.edu).

## **Electronic Devices Policy**

Everyone should have their best possible chance to learn. Using electronic devices for non-academic tasks during class is distracting both to you and to those around you.

* Please don’t use cell phones during class. Phones should be off or silenced.
* Laptops may be used to take notes or to view course materials. Students who are distracting themselves and others with non-academic uses of their laptops will not receive participation points for that class period.

## **Academic Honesty and Conduct**

* Students are expected to treat their classmates and instructors with honesty and respect throughout the course. All exam answers and posters must reflect original work. No form of cheating will be tolerated. The following link has information on academic honesty, plagiarism, and consequences: http://www.washington.edu/uaa/gateway/advising/help/academichonesty.php
* Student are expected to adhere to the University of Washington Code of Student Conduct which can be found at the following link: <https://www.washington.edu/cssc/for-students/student-code-of-conduct/>
* The University of Washington is committed to fostering an environment where the free exchange of ideas is an integral part of the academic learning environment. Disruption of classroom discussions can prohibit other students from fully engaging and participating. Any student causing disruption may be asked to leave any class session, and, depending on the severity and frequency of that behavior, an incident report may be filled with Community Standards and Student Conduct. As a condition of enrollment, all students assume responsibility to observe standards of conduct that will contribute to the pursuit of academic goals and to the welfare of the academic community. For more detailed information on these standards, please visit: <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=478-120>

## **Disability and Accessibility**

* Your experience in this class is important to me. If you have already established accommodations with Disability Resources for Students (DRS), please communicate your approved accommodations to me at your earliest convenience so that we can discuss your needs in this course.
* If you have not yet established services through DRS, but have a temporary health condition or permanent disability that requires accommodations (conditions include but not limited to; mental health, attention-related, learning, vision, hearing, physical or health impacts), you are welcome to contact DRS at 206-543-8924 or uwdrs@uw.edu or [disability.uw.edu.](http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/) DRS offers resources and coordinates reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and/or temporary health conditions. Reasonable accommodations are established through an interactive process between you, your instructor(s) and DRS. It is the policy and practice of the University of Washington to create inclusive and accessible learning environments consistent with federal and state law.

## **Safety and Wellbeing**

* Call SafeCampus at 206-685-7233 any time – no matter where you work or study – to anonymously discuss safety and well-being concerns for yourself or others. SafeCampus’s team will provide individualized support, while discussing short- and long-term solutions and connecting you with additional resources when requested. Find more information here: <https://www.washington.edu/safecampus/>
* They can connect you with emergency food and shelter services if needed.
* UW, through [numerous policies](https://www.washington.edu/titleix/policies/), prohibits sex- and gender-based violence and harassment, and we expect students, faculty, and staff to act professionally and respectfully in all work, learning, and research environments.
* For support, resources, and reporting options related to sex- and gender-based violence or harassment, visit the [Know Your Rights & Resources](https://uw-s3-cdn.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/181/2021/10/15165536/KYRR-booklet-current-version.pdf) guide on the UW Title IX webpage.
* Please know that if you choose to disclose information to me about sex- or gender-based violence or harassment, I will do my best to connect you (or the person who experienced the conduct) with resources and individuals who can best provide support and options. You can also access those resources directly.
* Confidential: [Confidential advocates](https://www.washington.edu/sexualassault/support/advocacy/) will not share information with others unless given express permission by the person who has experienced the harm or when required by law.
* Private and/or anonymous: [SafeCampus](https://www.washington.edu/safecampus/) provides consultation and support and can connect you with additional resources if you want them.You can contact SafeCampus anonymously or share limited information when you call.

Title IX website: <https://www.washington.edu/titleix/>

Support and help page: <https://www.washington.edu/titleix/resources/>

Confidential advocates: <https://www.washington.edu/sexualassault/support/advocacy/>

Officials Required to Report: <https://www.washington.edu/titleix/title-ix-officials-required-to-report/>

Related policies: <https://www.washington.edu/titleix/policies/>

You can find information here about medical services and mental health support at UW: <http://wellbeing.uw.edu>

**Course Concerns**  
If you have any concerns about the class, please try to resolve them first with your classroom instructor. If the matter is not resolved that way, you may turn to the Chair of the MELC Department, Prof. Naomi Sokoloff ([naosok@uw.edu](mailto:naosok@uw.edu)). There are also other resources available to students to resolve complaints or grievances, including Humanities Academic Services at https://hasc.washington.edu/, the Bias Reporting Tool at https://www.washington.edu/bias/, the Office of the Ombud at https://www.washington.edu/ombud/, the University Complaint and Resolution Office at https://www.washington.edu/compliance/uciro/, and Disability Resources, https://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/complaint-mediation/

**Final Note**

By enrolling in this class, you make a commitment to regular and consistent class participation.  
Continued enrollment signifies that you have received a copy of this syllabus and that you have  
been notified of the requirements, examination schedule, and grading policies for the course.The  
instructor reserves the right to revise this syllabus at any time during the quarter. This may involve adding or subtracting readings. Students will be informed of the changes.

## **Course Schedule**

AEL = *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, M. Lichtheim

ALL = *Akkadian Love Literature*, N. Wasserman

AW = *Ancient Wisdom, an Introduction to Sayings Collections*, W. Wilson

BWL = *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, W. Lambert

CCBWL = *Cambridge Companion to Biblical Wisdom Literature*, Dell, Millar, and Keefer

GVR = *Gerhard von Rad and the Study of Wisdom Literature*, Sandoval and Schipper

WLBA = *Wisdom in the Late Bronze Age*, Cohen

WLMI = *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, ed. Richard J. Clifford

WWT = *Was there a Wisdom Tradition?* ed. M. Sneed

### **Week 1: Introduction to Wisdom and the Ancient Near/Middle East**

A [date] Introduction to wisdom, text types, and the ancient Near East

*Required readings*: none

B [date] The study of wisdom literature in the ancient Near East

*Required readings*: Buccellati’s “Wisdom or Not?,” Beaulieu’s “Social and Intellectual Setting of Babylonian Wisdom Literature” (WLMI), “Egyptian Wisdom” (CCBWL)

**Week 2: Wisdom and instruction**

A [date] The study of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible

*Required readings*: Selections from CCBWL

B [date] Egyptian instructions; Thinking about Wisdom exercise

*Required readings*: The Instruction of Ptahhotep (AEL), The Instruction of Amenemope (AEL)

**Week 3: The Instruction Genre**

A [date] Egyptian wisdom or biblical wisdom?

*Required readings*: Introduction to Proverbs, Proverbs 22:17-24:22

B [date] Is biblical instruction literature distinctive?

*Required readings*: Proverbs 1-9, Proverbs 31

**Week 4: The Instruction Genre cont.**

A [date] Poster presentations due

*Required*: Instruction poster!

B [date] Biblical instruction literature redux

*Required readings*: Ecclesiastes

**Week 5: The Wisdom Tale**

A [date] The moral of the story

*Required readings*: Arad Mitanguranni, Truth and Falsehood (AEL), The Eloquent Peasant (AEL), Greenstein’s “Sages with a Sense of Humor” (*WLMI*).

B [date] Woe is me!

*Required readings*: The Dialogue between a Man and His Ba (AEL), Ludlul bel nemeqi (BWL), the Righteous Sufferer (WLBA)

\*Amenemope essay due Friday 5 pm!

**Week 6: The Wisdom Tale cont.**

A [date] Job’s trials

*Required readings*: Job 1-2, Job 42, other selections, Introduction to Job

B [date] Job’s trying friends

*Required reading*: Job selections, Crenshaw’s “Beginnings, Endings” (WLMI)

**Week 7: Proverbs**

A [date] Introducing the proverb

*Required reading*: Sumerian Proverbs (BWL), Hittite Proverbs (WLBA), Proverbs 10-13, Amos 1-3

B [date] The making of a proverb

*Required reading*: Proverbs 14-21, 25-29

**Week 8: Wisdom tale skits**

A [date] Group skits

*Required*: Wisdom tale skits!

B [date] Group skits overflow

*Required:* Wisdom tale skits!

**Week 9: Wisdom poetry**

A [date] Is there a genre of wisdom poetry?

*Required reading*: Ballad of Early Rulers (WLBA), Egyptian Hymns (AEL), Psalm 19, Psalm 119

B [date] Is love poetry wisdom literature?

*Required reading*: Song of Songs, Egyptian Love Poetry (AEL), Akkadian love literature (ALL)

**Week 10: Closing remarks**

A [date] Beyond the ancient Near East

*Required reading*: Selections from AW, CCBWL

B [date]

Wrap-up discussion of wisdom in the ancient Near East, review

**Finals Week**

A [date, time] Final Exam