



McMaster Divinity
College

Preaching Difficult Biblical Texts

MS 3P1060

Winter Term 2026 | Wednesdays 2 p.m. - 3:50 p.m. | Camelford Hall

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Office hours Wednesdays 4 p.m. - 5:30 p.m.

The mission of McMaster Divinity College is to develop effective evangelical Christian leaders for the Church, academy and society through graduate-level education, spiritual development, and vocational formation.

Teaching Philosophy:

To foster a theologically rich, text-centred environment based on the conviction that Scripture is God's living Word, speaking into the life of the Church today. To critically explore the Bible together as a unified story, centred on Christ and situated within God's redemptive mission.

Description:

"For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." (1 Corinthians 1:21, NIV 2011). This course trains students to preach difficult biblical texts in a way that is theologically rich and pastorally faithful. Scripture is not just a written record—it is God's living Word, meant to be proclaimed and applied in every generation. As such, this course will challenge students to engage passages that are often avoided due to interpretive difficulty, theological tension, or cultural controversy, like Genesis 22 (the testing of Abraham), Joshua 6 (the fall of Jericho) and 1 Peter 3 (Christ preaching to the spirits). Students will learn to interpret these texts within the whole counsel of God, attending to the unity of the Old and New Testaments in the unfolding story of redemption. We will not treat these texts as devotional curiosities, but as living words in the canon of Scripture that speak, challenge, comfort, and point to Christ. This course reflects a commitment to Scripture's clarity and sufficiency, and is rooted in a deep belief that faithful, text-driven preaching—especially from difficult passages—is essential to the health of Christ's Church today.

Specializations:

Biblical Studies, Church and Culture, Pastoral Studies

Objectives:

Knowing

- Identify theological, textual, and interpretive challenges in selected difficult passages from both Old and New Testaments
- Analyze how challenging texts contribute to the overall redemptive storyline of Scripture, with attention to biblical theology and genre
- Evaluate the theological frameworks presented by core authors and compare their approaches to difficult texts
- Summarize the interpretive significance of key passages using appropriate scholarly tools and biblical-theological insights
- Trace the person and work of Christ through difficult passages in a way that is faithful to the whole canon

Being

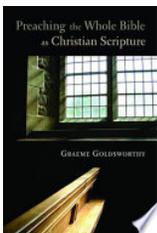
- Articulate a personal and pastoral commitment to preaching the whole counsel of God, including difficult and theologically complex texts
- Reflect on how Scripture forms the preacher's own faith, humility, and trust in God's character when encountering hard texts
- Demonstrate gospel-centred convictions shaped by Scripture's authority even in the midst of interpretive uncertainty
- Being a person that has the humility to accept the limitations of knowledge

Doing

- Construct sermon manuscripts that faithfully and clearly proclaim difficult biblical texts in local settings
- Integrate biblical-theological insights into sermon preparation, using scholarly resources appropriately to clarify misunderstandings and wrong interpretations
- Speak winsomely to engage concerns arising from difficult texts
- Present difficult texts in language that is clear, faithful to the text, and appropriate to the hearers' context

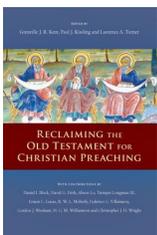
Course Resources:

Required Texts



Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

This book will help give us a Biblical theological framework to work with in interpreting difficult texts.



Kent Grenville, Paul Kissling and Laurence Turner, eds., *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.

This book sheds new light how to interpret different major categories of Old Testament texts, as well as sample sermons and outlines.

Assignment Weights:

A.	Development of Biblical Theology Paper	30%
B.	Exegesis Paper and Sermon 1	25%
C.	Exegesis Paper and Sermon 2	25%
D.	Letter to a Congregation: what and why and anticipate 3 questions	<u>20%</u>
	Marking rubrics are listed below.	100%

Course Assignments:

- A. Development of Biblical Theology Paper (30%). In order to work from difficult texts, you will require a Biblical Theology for preaching. How do the Old and New Testaments relate? Is there an overall trajectory? How is the triune God in Scripture, Father, Son, Holy Spirit to be understood? Core texts for this course present this foundation well. For this paper, summarize aspects of how each of the four core authors in books marked * in the Bibliography construct a theological framework for preaching (Goldsworthy, Kent, Ferguson, Wright). Highlight overlaps, divergences, and contributions to a gospel-shaped homiletic (1500 words). Next, apply this Biblical theology to a category of difficult texts found in Kent or Murawski (250 words). What related principles can be used for interpretation? Finally, as a close reading exercise without resorting to commentaries, apply this Biblical theology to one the difficult texts from the Course Description. Explore its meaning and preaching implications (1000 words). 2750 words including footnotes. DUE See Course Outline.

Marking rubric for A. :

Criteria	Description	Weight
1. Engagement with Reading List sources	Clear awareness and interaction with scholarly voices.	40%
2. Application to category of texts	Relates Biblical theology for preaching to this genre	15%
3. Difficult text	Close reading, articulates key words, themes, canonical connections	30%
4. Writing Quality	Clear, academic in tone, and almost completely free from grammar and spelling errors! Well-structured, flows logically between sections.	10%
5. Presentation	Follows MDC style guide.	5%

- B. Exegesis Paper and Sermon 1 (25%) Imagine you are preparing to teach or preach a difficult text. This will include preparation and communication. Choose a difficult text from the Course Description and write a point form exegesis summary (750 words including footnotes) using relevant commentaries and scholarly sources for key interpretive points. Write a sermon manuscript that draws on Assignment A. for its meaning and direction (2500 words). Your manuscript should deal faithfully and closely with the text, with attention to a Biblical Theology for preaching, and assume as hearers the congregation where you serve. Use language that is regularly spoken in your local setting. Remember that a sermon is not an essay. 3250 words including footnotes. DUE See Course Outline.
- C. Exegesis Paper and Sermon 2 (25%). Identical to B., except use a different difficult text.

Marking rubric for C. and B. :

Criteria	Description	Weight
1. Depth of Exegesis	Engages directly with text, communicates key features and messages	20%
2. Biblical theology	Shows awareness assignment A. for shape and content of sermon	20%
3. Clarity of message	Structure and approach in sermon manuscript, does sermon speak (mostly) about the triune God?	20%
4. Application to local congregation	Are hearers accounted for effectively?	20%
5. Language and Presentation	Suitability as a spoken medium	20%

D. When you preach or teach from a difficult text it will be important to communicate with your fellow leaders and congregation. In this assignment, write a letter to your church leaders explaining what precipitated your inclusion of Sermon C. and why you believed it was important (500 words). Address any local needs or wider cultural trends that lead you here (500 words). Finally, anticipate 3 difficult questions people in your congregation may ask you after preaching this difficult text, and give answers (1000 words). 2000 words including footnotes.

Marking rubric for D. :

Criteria	Description	Weight
1. Conviction	Is it clear why you had to preach or teach this text?	25%
2. Connection	Aware of and able to articulate context for this sermon	25%
3. Ongoing Engagement	Detail in continuing conversation, clarity in face of difficult questions	40%
4. Writing Quality	Clear, academic in tone, and almost completely free from grammar and spelling errors!	10%

Course Schedule (subject to change):

Week	Date	Topic	Reading	Work Due
1	Jan. 7	Christ in all the Scriptures Luke 24:25–47; John 5:39; 2 Cor 1:20; 1 Pet 1:10–12 Course introduction	- Goldsworthy, <i>ch 1-3</i> . - Kent, <i>Introduction</i> .	
2	Jan. 14	Biblical theology for preaching difficult texts	- Goldsworthy, <i>ch 4-9</i> .	

PART I: The Otherness of God

2	Jan. 21 Holiness	Holy God: Ps 99 Enthroned: 1 Kgs 8:1–13; Isa 6:1–4; Rev 4 Dangerous Presence: Exod 19:9–13; 1 Chron 13:1–14	- Goldsworthy, associated genres. - Kent, associated genres. - 100 pages for assignments. - Biblical passages and one commentary section on 2 of them.	
3	Jan. 28 Justice	Principle: Exod 20:5 National judgement: 2 Sam 21:1–11; Jer 31:27–30 Mercy: Jonah	- As above.	
4	Feb. 4 Complexity & Exclusivity	Divine testing: Gen 22:1–19 Spiritual absence: Ps 51:10–12; Matt 12:25–32 Offensive grace: Matt 20:1–16 Unique authority: Ex 20:2–6 Heavenly council: Gen 1:16–17; Ps 82; Job 1–2 Human gods: Gen 3:5, 22; Exod 21:1–6	- As above.	A.
Part II: Moral Tensions				
6	Feb. 11 Truth telling	Language: Exod 20: 7, 16 Are lies ever ok? Josh 2:1–5; 1 Sam 16:1–5 Oaths: Josh 6:26; Ps 120:1–4; Matt 5:33–36	- As above.	

MDC Reading Week

7	Feb. 25 Enemies	Approach to: Exod 20:13 Punishment of: Gen 9:6; Rom 13:1-4 <i>Lex Talonis</i> (eye for eye): Ex 21:23-25 <i>herem</i> warfare: Deut 20:16-18; Josh 6:17-25; 7:24-26	- As above.	
8	Mar. 4 Retaliation	Vengeance, Imprecation: Ps 137, Ps 109, Ps 38, Ps 139:19 Retribution: Rom 12:19-21 Gospel: Matt 5:38-42	- As above.	B.
Part III: Family, Body and Property				
9	Mar. 11 Marriage	Marriage: Gen 2:18-25; Exod 20:14 Divorce and Jesus: Matt 19:1-12 Physicality: Gen 1:26-31, Rom 12:1-2, 1 Cor 6:12-20	- As above.	
10	Mar. 18 Ethics	Sexual Practice: Rom 1:26-31 Men and Women in the Church: 1 Cor 11:2-15 Protecting family: Deut 24:1-4, Ruth	- As above.	
Part IV: Doubt and Deconstruction				
11	Mar. 25	Divine Silence: Ps 88; Lam 3 Jesus and Doubt: Matt 11:1-6 Wounds from within: <i>Ezek</i> 34; Matt 23:1-36 Meaning: Ecc 1:2, 3:1-15 Failure: John 21:15-17; 2 Tim 2:13	- As above.	C.
Part V: Cosmic Conflict				

12	Apr. 1	Satan and Sovereignty: Gen 3:14–15; Isa 26:19–27:1; Rev 12:7–18 In Testing: 2 Sam 24:1–16 // 1 Chron 21:1–16 Approach: Eph 6: 10-12	- As above.	D.
Part VI: Ambiguous and Strange Texts				
13	Apr. 8	Nephilim: Gen 6:1–4; Jude 3–7 Christ in Hell: 1 Pet 3:18–22 Genealogies: Gen 5, 10; 1 Chron 2, Ruth 4: 18-22, Ezra 2:62, Neh 7:64, Matt 1:1-17, Luke 3: 23-38	- As above.	A.

Course Policies:

The best way to reach me is email. Give me 2 weekdays to respond. If you leave a voicemail, then email me to say so.

Avenue 2 Learn will be used. Make sure you log in after 11:59 p.m. the Friday before each class to check announcements and any readings updates.

Come see me during office hours. Use this link to book a 15 minute chat by adding your name under the date. If you are second, we start 15 minutes after office hours start. If you are third, and office hours start at 2p.m., we will meet at 2:30p.m. <https://tinyurl.com/3zrs4tyc>

Attendance is mandatory unless there is a big crisis, such as illness or loss. Please let me know by email what is going on. Keep an eye on the syllabus, Avenue 2 Learn, or talk to peers to catch up on material missed.

If a class is cancelled, perhaps due to inclement weather, then check Avenue 2 Learn at the start time of that class for instructions. Class activities may be moved there in asynchronous format. This will help to ensure that we stay on target in the course.

Lectures will use the NIV (2011) translation of the Bible, which I prefer for all assignments.

Make every attempt to use excellent English in what you write. Read over your assignments multiple times before submitting them. Short sentences often speak more clearly than long ones. Review *The Elements of Style by Strunk and White* (4th ed., 2000).

Formatting requirements for all assignments are according to the McMaster Divinity College style guide. <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/MDC-StyleGuide-May-2024.pdf>

Submit all assignments in PDF format via Avenue 2 Learn. Extensions are rarely granted, so plan to finish ahead of schedule in case the unexpected arises. Late work is docked at a rate of 2% per day. Assignments submitted after the last class will be not counted.

Explore the Digital Theological Library for fast and wide-reaching access to over 1.5M commentaries, monographs and scholarly articles.

Academic Standing and Grades:

Percent Grade	Letter Grade	Grade point (12pts)	Grade point (4pts)	Grade Guideline
90-100	A+	12	4	for work displaying mastery of the subject-matter, creativity and individualized integration of insights and their relationship
85-89	A	11		
80-84	A-	10		
77-79	B+	9	3	for work displaying a good level of competence and comprehension
73-76	B	8		
70-72	B-	7		

Note: Letter grades are given for all courses. Plus and minus signs indicate work of higher or lower quality within the guidelines for each letter grade.

Academic Honesty:

Academic dishonesty is not qualitatively different from other types of dishonesty. It consists of misrepresenting the ownership of written work by deception or by other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include any number of forms such as: copying or using unauthorized aids in tests, examinations; plagiarism, i.e., submitting work that is not one's own (regardless of the means of its production, including AI) but passing it off as if it is; submitting work for credit in a course for which credit is being or has already been given, unless the previously submitted work was presented as such to the instructor of the second course and has been deemed acceptable for credit by the instructor of that course; aiding and abetting another student's dishonesty; giving false information for the purposes of gaining admission or credit; giving false information for the purposes of obtaining deferred examinations or extension of deadlines; forging or falsifying McMaster University or McMaster Divinity College documents.

A special note about AI:

You are expected to do your own thinking and to write your own papers, etc., and not to have AI do this work for you. There may be value in using an AI tool to help you locate and collate resources or to help you "tidy up" your English grammar, usage, and mechanics, especially if English is not your native language. However, using AI to create content for you and then submitting that content as if you created it is considered plagiarism (i.e., submitting work that is not one's own as if it is one's own) and is a violation of the academic honesty policy.

AODA:

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), the content of this course is intended to be accessible to all students who are enrolled in the course, including those with disabilities. If a student requires accommodation to participate fully in this course, that student is to contact SAS at McMaster University, who will then work directly with the McMaster Divinity College Registrar to negotiate reasonably appropriate accommodation for the student. The MDC Registrar will communicate with faculty regarding necessary accommodations. Please note that an accommodation is not retroactive and must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation.

Gender Inclusive Language:

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that inclusive language will be used in chapel services and all MDC assignments. In reference to biblical texts, the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God should be respected, but you will need to use gender-inclusive language for humans, and you will need to quote from a gender-inclusive version such as, for example, the following: NRSVue (2022), TEV/GNB/GNT (1976), CEV (1995), NLT (1996), NIV (2011), and the CEB (2011).

Bookstore:

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

Disclaimer:

The course content outside the official MDC syllabus language is the intellectual property of the Professor. This syllabus may change up to and including the first day of class.

Selected Bibliography:

In addition to these books, students will also use relevant commentaries on the difficult texts list in the Course Outline.

Required Texts

*Grenville J.R.Kent, Paul J. Kissling and Laurence A. Turner, eds., *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching*. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010.

*Goldsworthy, Graeme. *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

On Preaching and Difficult Texts

Bruce, F. F. *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983.

Carroll, Rodney L. M. and J. Daniel Carroll R. *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996.

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

Derouchie, David J. *Delighting in the Old Testament: Through Christ and for Christ*. Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2024.

Davis, Ralph Dale. *Word Became Flesh: How to Preach from the Old Testament Narrative Texts*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006.

Duguid, Iain M. "Old Testament Hermeneutics." *In Seeing Christ in All of Scripture: Hermeneutics at Westminster Theological Seminary*, edited by Peter A. Lillback, 17–22. Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2016.

Eswine, Zack. *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.

*Ferguson, Sinclair. "Preaching Christ from the Old Testament". PT Media Paper 2. Proclamation Trust. 2015.

<https://cst-media.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/doc-sferguson-peachingchrist.pdf>

Gibson, Scott M. and Keith Willhite, eds. *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003.

Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999.

— — —. *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989.

Hamilton, Donald L. *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992.

Hamilton, James M. Jr. *Typology: Understanding in the Bible's Promise-Shaped Patterns: How Old Testament Expectations Are Fulfilled in Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021.

Kaiser, Walter C Jr. *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

Keller, Timothy. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Penguin Books, 2015.

Mathewson, Steven D. *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021.

McClure, John S. *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

McLaughlin, Rebecca. *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019.

Murawski, Brian. *Preaching Difficult Texts of the Old Testament*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2021.

Ryken, Leland, and Tremper Longman III. *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1993.

Robinson, Haddon W. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014.

Stott, John. *Between Two Worlds*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017.

— — — —. *The Challenge of Preaching*. Updated ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015.

Willhite, Scott M., and Scott Gibson, eds. *The Big Idea of Biblical Preaching: Connecting the Bible to People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003.

*Wright, Christopher J. H. *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014.

— — — —. *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

— — — —. *The Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL, 2004.

Themes

Beale, G. K. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*. NSBT 17. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004.

Boyd, Gregory A. *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001.

Cole, Darrell. "Sex, Lies, and Spies." *Providence Magazine* (2017). No Pages. Online: <https://providencemag.com/2017/12/sex-lies-spies/>

DeYoung, Kevin. *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

DeClaissé-Walford, Nancy L. "Embracing the Psalter's imprecatory words in the 21st century." *Acta Theologica* 32 (2021) 275–92.

- Duke, Rodney K. "Visiting the Guilt of the Fathers on the Children': Is God Immoral?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 87 (2015) 347–65.
- Goldingay, John. *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah*. Westmont: IL, InterVarsity Press, 2014.
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- McDowell, Andrea G. "Crime and punishment." *In The Oxford Encyclopedia of ancient Egypt* 1:315–20. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Middleton, J. Richard. *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021.
- Moberly, R. W. L. "Justice and the Recognition of the True God: A Reading of Psalm 82." *Revue Biblique* 127 (2020) 215–36.
- Odafe, George. "Women Head Covering: What Tradition is Referred to in 1 Cor 11:2–16?" *Jos Journal of Religion and Philosophy* 2 (2020) 212–24.
- Pearcey, Nancy R. *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018.
- Peterson, D. G. "Holiness." *In Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 544–51.
- Pierce, Ronald W., et al. *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005.
- Piper, John, and Grudem, Wayne, eds. *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021.
- Richards, E. Randolph, and Richard James. *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020.
- Ryken, Leland, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. "Holiness." *In Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech and Literary Patterns of the Bible*, 388–391. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- Sprinkle, Preston. "Paul and Homosexual Behavior: A Critical Evaluation of the Excessive-Lust Interpretation of Romans 1:26–27." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25 (2015) 497–517.
- Tidball, Derek. *The Message of Holiness: Restoring God's Masterpiece*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010.
- Westfall, Cynthia Long. *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016.