

Understanding the New Testament

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Aims

Early Christianity represents a diverse collection of beliefs and practices embraced by a number of communities. In the context of Second Temple Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, early followers of Jesus composed texts that described the life of their messiah and developed their ideas about God and his relationship to Jesus. Many of these beliefs and practices are recorded in the collection of writings now known as the New Testament, and many are preserved in manuscripts which did not become canonical.

This course provides an introduction to the texts that make up the New Testament, with special attention paid to how we, as scholars, read these texts. Where appropriate, students will also examine related literature from the world in which the early church flourished. At the same time, the course provides an introduction to the variety of methods available for interpreting ancient literature. Hands-on practice using different theoretical approaches to ancient texts is emphasized.

Learning Outcomes

- Read the entire New Testament
- Grasp the interpretive issues facing scholars of the New Testament and be able to discuss them critically
- Develop textual skills for close reading of both ancient and modern texts
- Become familiar with and apply critically the variety of methodological approaches used in biblical studies
- Become conversant in the possible religious, social, and historical settings in which New Testament texts might have been produced
- Evaluate how early Christian literature might have functioned in communities of believers

Texts

The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Revised Standard Version (Or another version; check with instructor for acceptable versions). *Students are required to bring the biblical text to class.*

Bart D. Ehrman. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. Oxford, 2015 (6th edition)

You may also find this text useful, although it is not required:

Paula Gooder. *Searching for Meaning: An Introduction to Interpreting the New Testament*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Assessment

Learning Cells (x 5) (5%, 8%, 10%, 12%, 15% = 50%)

Learning cells are hands-on analyses focused on one text or question and a reflection paper applying one of the theories/methods discussed in tutorial (~600 words) to be prepared in advance and handed in at the end of tutorial (with hand-written additions/clarifications if needed after discussion). Participation in the learning cell is required and late learning cell papers will not be accepted.

Group Website Project (50%)

As part of a group, you will construct a website that engages in the themes and questions of the course. You may organize your website as you see fit; for example, you may organize your project around a particular textual issue, biblical passage, or person that appears in the biblical corpus.

Your website must contain one item from each of the following categories:

- *Category A: a entry/blog post/essay discussing primary context of textual composition, a historical study, or textual/literary analysis*
- *Category B: representations in audio or visual media (e.g., graphic novel, art work, music, manuscripts, film)*
- *Category C: an entry/blog post/essay engaging your topic in the modern context or through modern hermeneutical concerns*

Your website must also meet each of the following criteria:

- *At least 3000 words in composition, in addition to a bibliography.*
- *Visual elements clearly related to your content (e.g., artwork). These elements must be properly sourced and attention must be given to issues of copyright.*
- *A multi-media component, for example, a podcast or video.*

To facilitate this project, you will have a series of benchmark assignments due during the course of the semester, to be posted on MOLE:

- ***3 March: A short proposal detailing your topic and group plan***
- ***10 March: A preliminary outline of the website components***
- ***21 April: An annotated bibliography containing your preliminary research***
- ***28 April: A mid-semester review of your group's progress***
- ***16 May: A rough draft of the website (via TurnItIn)***

The website will be graded with the following criteria in mind:

- *Required components*
- *Factual accuracy and proper bibliography*
- *Critical analysis*
- *Creativity and aesthetics*

- *Grammar and syntax*
- *Web integration*
- *Evidence of collaborative effort*

Peer evaluations are required by all group members to ensure that work is divided equally and no member of a group feels that he or she is overburdened.

Some class time will be set aside for group work, but the majority of the project will occur outside of class and will therefore require that you schedule regular meetings with your group. The final website must go live by Wednesday 1 June 2016.

Outline of Topics & Readings

1. 11 February

Introduction: The Historical, Social, and Literary Context of the New Testament; Overview of the Methods and Theories of New Testament Scholarship

Read Ehrman, 1–102.

2. 18 February

The Synoptic Gospels: Mark

Read Gospel of Mark

Read Ehrman, 103–119.

Tutorial: Focus: The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Read Ehrman, 235–310.

3. 25 February

The Synoptic Gospels: Matthew & Luke

Read Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Luke

Read Ehrman, 129–168.

Tutorial: Learning Cell #1: Directed Source-Critical Reading of Matthew 16:24–28, Mark 8:34–9:1, and Luke 9:23–27.

Read Ehrman, 120–128.

4. 3 March

The Gospel of John

Read Gospel of John

Read Ehrman, 169–194.

Tutorial: Focus on Other Gospels:

Read *Gospel of the Ebionites, Gospel of Peter, Gospel of Thomas*

Read Ehrman, 214–234.

Learning Cell #2: Directed reading of the apocryphal Acts of John using narrative criticism OR historical criticism.

5. 10 March

Acts

Read Acts of the Apostles

Read Ehrman, 312–333.

Tutorial focus: Narrative Criticism & Acts

6. 14 April

Epistles & Johnannine Epistles

Read Pliny, *Letter to Trajan*

Read 1, 2, 3 John

Read Ehrman, 195–213.

Tutorial: Focus on Feminist Hermeneutics and Reconstructing Women in the Early Church

Read Ehrman, 460–473.

Learning Cell #4: Directed reading of the apocryphal Gospel of Mary using feminist criticism.

7. 21 April

Pauline Epistles:

Read Romans, 1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon

Read Ehrman, 334–431.

Tutorial focus: Rhetorical Criticism

8. 28 April

Deutero-Pauline Epistles, Pastoral Epistles

Read 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, Titus, 1 & 2 Timothy

Read Ehrman, 434–458.

Learning Cell #4: Directed reading of 2 Corinthians 10–13 using rhetorical criticism.

9. 5 May

Hebrews & non-Pauline Epistles

Read Hebrews, 1 & 2 Peter, James, Jude

Read Ehrman, 474–511.

Tutorial Focus: The New Testament and the Other: Jews and “Pagans”

Read: Gospel of John, Hebrews, 1 Peter

& Adele Reinhartz, “Judaism in the Gospel of John,” *Interpretation* 2009 (MOLE)

10. 12 May

Revelation

Read Revelation

Read Ehrman, 529–546.

Learning Cell #5: Directed reading of Revelation using postcolonial criticism. Read: Judy Diehl, “‘Babylon’: Then, Now and ‘Not Yet’: Anti-Roman Rhetoric in the Book of Revelation,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 11 (2013): 168-195.