

RELIGION 348Q (HAPW) — THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS CONTEXTS

Fall, 2014

Dr. David B. Gowler

The Dr. Lovick Pierce and Bishop George F. Pierce Chair of Religion
Director, [The Pierce Institute for Leadership and Community Engagement](#)
Senior Faculty Fellow, [The Center for Ethics, Emory University](#)
Office: Seney 115D; Phone: 770-784-8413; e-mail: dgowler@emory.edu

I. Course Description

Religion 348 is a study of the New Testament in the context of the historical, social, religious, and literary environment of the eastern Mediterranean world during late antiquity.

This course is taught in a *Ways of Inquiry* format, one in which students' own investigations of the historical method in New Testament (NT) studies takes priority. In other words, you will not only learn *about* NT history; you will learn *how to do* NT history. Two elemental issues are the primary focus: (1) How and why do New Testament historians go about their task? (2) How should we therefore interpret New Testament texts? In other words, instead of me just *telling* you how to do these things, you will learn to do them yourselves:

Rel 348 thus introduces the topics, approaches, and nature of an academic study of the New Testament, with a focus on the emergence of the Jesus movement within Judaism. We begin by exploring the continuing quest for the elusive but compelling figure of Jesus of Nazareth, aided by Gerd Theissen's book, *The Shadow of the Galilean*, various study guides, and New Testament passages. We will then examine the gospels themselves, both canonical and non-canonical, and study how historical contexts and literary narratives interact with religious and ethical insights. Finally we will explore other early Christian writings that contribute to our understanding of Christianity as it continued its encounter with the rest of the Hellenistic-Roman world.

Besides being a continuing writing and an INQ course, this course also is participating in Oxford's *Sustainability Theme*. The primary reason is that we will be studying aspects of the historical Jesus, who was a Jewish prophet of social and economic justice (e.g., the parables). The early Jesus traditions denounced the elites in society and proposed a radical re-ordering of human economic relationships (through what is called *vertical generalized reciprocity* and a humane, commonsense approach of a first-century Jewish "peasant").

II. Texts

The Shadow of the Galilean, by Gerd Theissen. This book is a historical novel that combines historical and fictional elements. Some characters are completely fictional (e.g., Andreas); other characters are fictional representations of historical personages (e.g., Barabbas and Pontius Pilate). This mix of history and fiction, however, is built on solid historical reconstructions. Fictitious persons and events include historical data in a poetic way that puts some flesh on the bare bones of historical scholarship. Reading this book is one of the best ways to begin entering the world of the New Testament—a world that is very different from our own.

The New Testament: A Student's Introduction, 7th ed., by Stephen L. Harris. We will supplement our readings of *Shadow* and the New Testament with selections from this non-sectarian, academic perspective on the New Testament.



OXFORD
COLLEGE

EMORY

The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NOAB) in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation. We will work through this text and its study notes very carefully (especially in our study guides; see below), so it is essential that everyone have the NOAB text.

III. Goals of the Course

By the end of this course, you should be able to discuss (a) the emergence of the Jesus movement within the contexts of first-century CE Judaism and the rest of the Hellenistic-Roman world; (b) the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth; (c) the development, content, literary structure, and cultural contexts of the New Testament Gospels; and (d) the life and writings of Paul. An overarching goal is to achieve the goals of the course more successfully—and to improve your synthetic, critical, and creative thinking skills—by means of writing-intensive assignments.

IV. Course Requirements

A. **Academic Journal** (35%): The academic journal, besides being a repository of your work, serves as a developmental record of your reflections on the implications of what we are studying. Class discussions will follow the lead of your journal entries, so the success of this class, to a large extent, depends on your journal entries and your willingness to dialogue about them with other class members. You will turn in the journal at the end of the course (sections of it are due along the way), and most if not all can be placed in your private Blackboard journal in the “Assignments” section. The academic journal includes:

1. *Analyses of chapters of Theissen’s book.* I will post reading guides on Blackboard for each chapter. **Read these reading guides carefully before reading the appropriate chapter in Theissen’s book.** I will give you feedback on your journal entries in class, on your journal, and, if you wish, in private conferences. Each student is required to read Theissen’s chapters carefully in advance of our class discussions, but you will only be required to do written responses to seven of the eighteen chapters (less than half of what was required in previous years). No one writes a response for chapters 1, 2, 3, 17, or 18. **Beginning with chapter 4, you must write a response to alternate chapters (you and your dialogue partner will alternate even/odd chapters).** **Everyone will write a response to chapter 16.** A rough guide is that each *chapter* blog entry should be the equivalent of three handwritten pages.

I will divide the class into pairs so that students only write responses to every other chapter (see below). If it is your turn to post a written response, your analysis must be posted the day before the class meets to discuss that chapter. We will negotiate specific times. In addition, print out your answers/analyses and bring them to class. You should stay two chapters ahead of the class discussions, unless I indicate otherwise. As we progress through the book, you will be given increasingly more flexibility in composing your responses. I will post a sample response from a previous semester as an example of what is expected. The most essential elements of these responses are your own interactions with the text and issues, therefore the most important answers most often will be to the “What else did you find to be important?” questions. **Reflect on such questions as: Why did Theissen write the chapter the way he did? What is he trying to accomplish? Focus on historical and methodological issues. I will call on you in class to discuss at least one important insight from your written response for that day.**



2. *Selection of items for class discussion/Critiques of another student's Theissen responses.* In order to increase class participation and discussion, we will divide the class into pairs for chapters 4-15, and for the seven chapters from Theissen (again, chapters 4-15) for which you do **not** have to write responses, you will read your dialogue partner's written response (after reading the chapter, reading guides, etc.) and give a substantive critique in class. These responses should improve our discussions and collaborative learning, so I will call upon you in class to give your critique of your partner's entries.

You will be responsible for helping to lead class discussions, so your own pertinent observations and questions (especially about historical issues) should dominate your journal entries and responses to your dialogue partner's entries. Once again, for the chapters that you do **not** write responses or critiques (1, 2, 3, 17, and 18), you still must read the chapter, reading guide, and the assigned readings in the reading guide. You are responsible for the material and must participate in class discussions on the chapter.

3. *Revisions of three responses.* You must revise three of your Theissen postings by the end of the course. You should include in these rewrites the additional insights you gained or what things you have reconsidered because of our class discussions and your dialogue partner's critique. These revisions not only fulfill the writing intensive requirement, but they also demonstrate how much you have learned.
4. *Answers to assigned study guides.* Various study guides during the semester will allow us to focus in some detail upon specific texts or upon particular issues. Unless I indicate otherwise, you should work through these study guides by yourself. It is important that you complete these study guides before coming to class (It will greatly facilitate our class discussions); sometimes I will ask you to post your answers on Blackboard by 9:00 a.m. the morning before the class meets to discuss that study guide. Other times I will simply expect you to bring your answers to class.
5. *Other writing assignments.* Include all writing assignments in your academic journal (they may be submitted electronically).

B. **Tests (50%):** There will be two tests during the semester. The first will be after we complete Theissen's *Shadow*. I will then post a detailed schedule for the rest of the semester, including the date for the second test (which will be after we complete Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Tests are non-cumulative, will contain both objective and essay questions, and will cover all activities during that time period (e.g., lectures, readings, and study guides). Make-up tests will only be given for excused absences, and you should notify me *in advance*.

C. **Final Examination (15%):** The final exam will cover material since the second test but will have one open-book comprehensive essay that I will give you in advance.

D. **Class Attendance and Participation (included in Academic Journal grade):** Class attendance and participation are essential to the learning process and to your grade. You are expected to attend each class session, to be on time, and to be prepared to interact in detail with the subject matter. If you are tardy (i.e., arrive after roll is taken), to be counted present for the day, you have to send me an email explaining why you were late; otherwise it will count as an absence. You are allowed two absences without academic penalty. For additional absences, three points will be subtracted from your final numerical average *for each absence*.

We will start every class period with one student giving a brief analysis of what was accomplished in the previous class period. This presentation focuses not on mere summary, but delves into deeper issues and questions the class session raised: *Why we learned what we did in the previous class*. Your fellow students will then have a chance to ask questions or make comments about those issues. That way we can begin the new class session with a better understanding of what we are accomplishing in every single class period.

V. Appointments

My office hours are Wednesday, 2:00-4:00, but you may also come to my office at other times, if you need assistance. Since I also am a Senior Faculty Fellow at the Center for Ethics, I will sometimes be on the Atlanta campus, but I am always available via e-mail even then. Please don't hesitate to contact me. If you cannot meet with me during my office hours, email me, and we can arrange a mutually convenient time to meet.

VI. Course Philosophy

This course is intended for anyone who is interested in studying the New Testament. No prior knowledge of the Bible is required or expected, nor is any particular religious stance encouraged (or discouraged), other than what is outlined below.

For those students who are unfamiliar with the Christian Bible, the following information may be helpful: The abbreviations for the various books of the Bible can be found in NOAB, p. xxv; the pages where each book can be found are listed in NOAB, p. xxiii. Details on chapter and verse citations can be found in the second full paragraph on p. xiv (although I will use the colon to separate chapter and verse, instead of a period). In addition, as we go through the course, please feel free to ask questions about any subject with which you are unfamiliar. Other students will likely have the same question. I will do my best to use non-technical vocabulary and make no assumptions of any prior biblical knowledge.

This class will engage in the *academic* study of the New Testament, which means that we all must be open to the contemporary methods of the scholarly study of these texts and their contexts. We will focus on the interpretation of these texts in their ancient settings, not their direct value for the life of religious communities today. I simply ask you to approach this class with an open mind. For religious believers, no matter your particular beliefs, this openness must include a willingness to explore interpretations and understandings other than the ones with which you might be familiar (or comfortable). For others, it means that you should recognize the value of these texts as literature that has had a tremendous historical, literary, social, and cultural impact upon millions of people around the world for almost two thousand years.

As is to be expected in a college classroom, all of us have divergent beliefs, and I expect you, like me, to respect the viewpoints of others. We will explore these texts and their contexts as carefully as we can and will also strive to be intellectually, historically, and religiously honest.

An essential element of our semester together is the ability to trust each other. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code, which includes the "responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work." Oxford College takes this honor code very seriously, as do I, and penalties for violations are severe. Please read the Honor Code carefully; I will trust you to conduct yourselves accordingly. The Honor Code may be found at:

http://oxford.emory.edu/audiences/current_students/Academic/academic-success/student-honor-code/

