

**RELIGION 347 CRW — PORTRAITS OF JESUS:
ART AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE GOSPELS**
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I. Course Description

This course will explore the New Testament Gospels as literary works of art in their first-century contexts and how passages from these gospels have been dynamically (re)interpreted through the visual arts. Students will learn to perform an introductory exegesis (analysis or interpretation) of a text, a visual exegesis of a work of art interpreting that text, and a careful examination of the dialogues between these literary and pictorial works of art.

An exploration of how people have responded to biblical texts through the visual arts can be as interesting, illuminating, and historically important as an examination of what the texts meant in their “original” contexts. Explorations of texts and their various written and visual interpretations reveal the polyvalency and power of these narratives, illuminate their diverse interpretations, and produce insights from various historical perspectives.

What students will discover is that the “meaning” of a text does not reside alone in the creative genius of its creator(s). There is a complex correlation between text and contexts, creation and contemplation: We, knowingly or not, stand on the shoulders of centuries of conversations; our own interpretations are never independent of the reception history (i.e., how these texts have been interpreted over the centuries in scholarship, art, music, etc.) of these texts. This course is a beginning point for experiencing the richness of that chorus of voices that has influenced our understanding these texts.

II. Required Texts

Painting the Word, by John Drury. This book will be the primary resource for our discussions of biblical art. It focuses on works in the National Gallery in London.

An Introduction to the Gospels and Acts by Charles Puskas and David Crump. This volume surveys the historical contexts for the four New Testament Gospels and introduces modern academic approaches to the Gospels.

Illuminating Luke: The Passion and Resurrection Narratives in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting (Paperback), by Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons. This book gives several examples of how visual and textual exegesis can be integrated, and its chapters will serve as partial models for students’ exegetical papers.



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The New Oxford Annotated Bible (abbreviated as NOAB) in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Since we will be working through this particular text (and its study notes) very carefully, it is essential that everyone have the NOAB text.¹

III. Goals of the Course

By the end of this course, you should be able to (a) identify the basic plot, literary structure, themes, message, and major events of the Gospels of Mark and Luke; (b) write and present an introductory exegesis of a specific NT Gospel passage; (c) evaluate—in writing and in class presentation—visual interpretations (i.e., paintings) of specific passages from the NT Gospels. An overarching goal is to achieve the other goals of the course more successfully by means of writing assignments and class presentation assignments.

IV. Course Requirements

- A. **Tests/Quizzes** (30%): There will be two announced tests during the semester. Make-ups will only be given for excused absences, and you should notify me *in advance*. Unannounced quizzes on reading assignments may be given at any time.
- B. **Exegetical Papers** (40%): Each student will write a paper on a specific work of art from the National Gallery in London (see the attached list) and the gospel passage the visual art interprets. This exploration of both textual exegesis and visual exegesis should follow a similar pattern: (1) an overview/analysis of the biblical text; (2) a brief introduction to the life, work, and historical context of the artist whose work was chosen to represent the scene; (3) a discussion of the visual exegesis of the selected painting to demonstrate how the artist has actualized the NT Gospel text in the production of the visual image (25%).
- The Gospel text/work of art for the paper will be selected in consultation with the professor. Due dates for the entire process will be posted on the class conference. After your class presentation, the peer critique of your paper, and the meeting with the professor and peer reviewer (see “C” and “D” below), you will revise the paper accordingly (15%).
- We will begin on the very first day of class to work on the skills necessary to write an exegetical paper, and the paper will develop in stages over the course of the semester. Due dates for text selection, paper draft, and final paper will be posted online. To help you develop the skills for writing an exegetical paper, we will examine some gospel texts in detail, and you will sometimes write one-page exegetical observations on those passages before coming to class. These papers will be peer-evaluated and discussed in class.
- C. **Class presentation** (10%): Each student will make a formal presentation of her/his paper (“B” above) to the class as a whole. The paper should be given to the professor and the peer reviewer *at the minimum* three days before the class presentation (points will be deducted for late papers).

¹ For those students unfamiliar with the Christian Bible: 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.



- D. **Peer analysis/critique of another student's paper** (10%): To facilitate class discussion, each student will also make a formal response (give a critique and help lead the discussions) to another student's paper ("B" above). A written critique should also be turned in to the presenter and the professor the day the critique is presented. The presenter, reviewer, and professor will then meet privately after the presentation and critique to discuss necessary revisions of the paper.
- E. **Class attendance and participation** (10%): Class attendance and participation, especially in this class, 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 with the subject matter and each other. You will be allowed two absences without academic penalty. If you have more than two absences, three points will be subtracted from your final numerical average *for each absence*. Participation in religious observances, participation in a college-sponsored activity, or absence due to a death in the family will not count as absences, if I am notified in advance. Participation grades will include such exercises as your one-page exegetical observations (see above). "Borderline" grades will also be determined on the basis of class attendance and participation.
- F. **Final exam** (10%): The final exam will be cumulative.

V. *Appointments*

My office hours are Monday 10:00-12:00. If you cannot meet with me during these times, please see me, and we will arrange a mutually convenient time. I am also always available via Learn Link, which is often the quickest way to reach me. Please don't hesitate to contact me.

VI. *Course Philosophy*

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

As is to be expected in a college classroom, all of us have divergent beliefs. You are encouraged to state your opinions, to dialogue with others, and to respect the personal religious beliefs (or non-beliefs) of others. We will explore these texts, works of art, and their contexts as carefully as we can and will also strive to be intellectually and historically honest.

An essential part of that honesty is the ability to trust each other. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code (pages 103-105 in the 2008-2009 Oxford College Catalog), which includes the "responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work" (p. 103). The Honor Code also indicates that we cannot tolerate actions in others that violate this code, so I (and you) am obligated to report any violations. 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.

