

RELIGION 348 — THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS CONTEXTS

Writing Intensive, Fall, 2009

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I. Course Description

Religion 348 is an introductory 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 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, New Testament passages, and (optional) readings from *What Are They Saying About the Historical Jesus?* 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.

II. Texts

Required:

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, 5th 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.

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



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Recommended:

What Are They Saying About the Historical Jesus? by David B. Gowler (WATSA HJ?). This work summarizes, analyzes, and critiques current influential portraits of Jesus. The book will not be required reading, but it illuminates the first one-third of the course on the historical Jesus (e.g., see the section on Gerd Theissen, pp. 121-132), and a review of this book may be done for extra credit. WATSA HJ? concludes that any portrait of the historical Jesus must come to terms with Jesus as both an apocalyptic prophet and a prophet of social and economic justice for an oppressed people.

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*** (40%): The academic journal, besides being a repository of your work, also serves as a developmental record of your reflections on the implications of what we read. Class discussions will follow the lead of your journal entries, so write with your fellow class members in mind. 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). The academic journal includes:

1. *Analyses of chapters of Theissen's book.* In order to guide your analysis, 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 these journal entries in class, 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 fourteen of the eighteen chapters. No one writes a response for chapters 1, 2 and 3. **Beginning with chapter 4, you must write a response to every chapter, but you are allowed to skip one chapter without penalty** (I would advise not skipping 8, 11, 12, or 14).

We will attempt to use the blog function on Blackboard for these written responses, and your blog entry for each chapter must be submitted by 7:00 a.m. the day it is due. A rough guide is that each blog entry should be the equivalent of three handwritten pages.

2. **You will be responsible for helping to lead class discussions, so include your own pertinent observations and questions in your journal (blog) entries.** 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. The most essential elements of these responses are your interactions with the text and issues; **the most important questions to answer are:**



Why did Theissen write the chapter the way he did? What is he trying to accomplish?

Note: For the chapters which you do **not** write responses (1, 2, 3, and one other), 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. *Selection of items for class discussion.* When you post a response blog on Blackboard, you must pick at least one item that you want the class (time permitting) to discuss. Mark that section clearly in your blog entry. Sometimes portions of your response may be projected on the smartboard in order to facilitate class discussions.
 4. *Revisions of three response blogs.* You must revise three of your blogs 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. These revisions not only fulfill the writing intensive requirement, but they also demonstrate how much you have learned.
 5. *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 7:00 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.
 6. *Other writing assignments.* Include all writing assignments in your academic journal.
- B. **Tests** (50%): There will be two tests during the semester. The first test will be after we complete Theissen's *Shadow*; the second 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** (10%): The final exam will cover material since the second test but will have one comprehensive essay.
- 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. You are allowed two absences without academic penalty. For additional absences, three points will be subtracted from your final numerical average *for each absence*. Borderline grades will be determined on the basis of class attendance and participation.

V. Appointments

My office hours are Mondays 10:00-12:00. If you cannot meet with me during these times, please see me to arrange a mutually convenient time (Mon-Thurs). I am also always available via e-mail, 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. 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.¹

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 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 103-107 in the Oxford College 2009-2010 Catalog), which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work” (p. 101). 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.

¹ 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

