

## **RELIGION 348 — THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS CONTEXTS**

Writing Intensive, Spring, 2002

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### ***I. Course Description***

Religion 348 is an introduction to the 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 will introduce you to the topics, approaches, and nature of an academic study of the New Testament, with a primary focus on the emergence of the Jesus movement within Judaism. We will therefore 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* (see below), various study guides, New Testament passages, and Internet sites.

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.

Both the schedule and approaches taken in this course are rather flexible. That will allow us to spend greater or lesser time on certain subjects or areas, based on our experiences and discussions as the course proceeds. Therefore, as we progress through the semester, I encourage you to give me your feedback about the course (as I will do for you!), and the class can negotiate possible ways to improve the course as we go along.

This syllabus, along with other course materials (reading guides for Theissen's book, study guides, and other resources), will be posted on this class's Learn Link page. In addition, on the home page of the Oxford College Pierce Program in Religion you will find a list of Internet resources that will be of help to you (click on "Links to Online Religion Resources"):

<http://www.emory.edu/OXFORD/pierceprogram/Pierce.html>.

### ***II. Required 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; other characters are fictional representations of historical personages. This mix of history and fiction, however, is usually built on solid historical data and 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 for students 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*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, by Stephen L. Harris. We will supplement our readings of *Shadow* and the New Testament with selections from this introduction to the New Testament. It provides a non-sectarian, academic perspective on the New Testament.

*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 (especially in our own study guides; see below), 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 the historical 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 other goals of the course more successfully—as well as to improve students' synthetic, critical, and creative thinking skills—by means of writing-intensive assignments.

### IV. Course Requirements

A. **Academic Journal** (50%): The Academic Journal, besides being a repository of your work, will also serve as a developmental record of your reflections and thoughts concerning the various implications of what we read and discuss. Class discussions will follow the lead of your journal entries, so write with 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. The Academic Journal will include:

1. *Analyses of selected chapters of Theissen's book.* I will post reading guides for each chapter on this class's Learn Link conference. **Read these reading guides carefully before reading the appropriate chapter in Theissen's book.** Each student is required to read all of Theissen's chapters carefully in advance of our class discussions. You will be required to do written responses to ten of the eighteen chapters and post them on Learn Link (each chapter has a separate Learn Link folder). I will divide the class into pairs so that students only write responses to every other chapter (with the exceptions that everyone will do chapters 1 and 18). Everyone is responsible for the material in every chapter, however. If it is your turn to post a written response to Learn Link, your analysis of each chapter must be posted on Learn Link before the class meets to discuss that chapter; you and your partner will negotiate specific times. In addition, print out your answers/analyses, place them in your academic journal, 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 give you feedback on these journal entries in class, through LearnLink, and in conferences. I also 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.**

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 2-17, and:

(a) When it is your turn to post a response on Learn Link, you must pick at least one item that you would most like the class (time permitting) to discuss. That section of your response should be in 24-point font (the other sections should be in 12-point font).

Portions of your response will often be projected on the front screen in order to facilitate class discussions (you may wish to set your e-mail to spell check automatically).

(b) For the eight chapters from Theissen for which you do **not** have to write responses on Learn Link, you must read the response from your "partner" and write a handwritten critique (before class) in your Academic Journal. 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 Learn Link postings.

3. *Revisions of three Learn Link responses.* I will ask you to revise three of your Learn Link postings. You should include in these rewrites the additional insights you gained or what things you have reconsidered because of our class discussions of those chapters. These revisions not only fulfill a writing intensive requirement, but they also demonstrate how much you have learned from our discussions.
4. *Answers to assigned study guides.* In addition to the reading guides, you will also work through various study guides that will allow us to focus in some detail upon specific texts or upon particular issues (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls). Unless I indicate otherwise, you should work through these study guides by yourself (some will be done in groups and/or in class). 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 to the study guide on Learn Link (or send them to me via the Internet) by 2:00 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* (e.g., reading guides, assignments from the Harris text, etc.).

B. **Tests** (30%): 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 Chapter 9 of the Harris text. Each test will be non-cumulative and will cover all our activities during that time period (e.g., lectures, readings, study guides, and other activities). Tests will contain both objective and essay questions. 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 there will be one comprehensive essay. The final is scheduled for Friday, May 2, from 9:00-12:00.

D. **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 your fellow classmates. You will be allowed two absences without academic penalty. If you have more than two absences, one point 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 M/W 2:00-4:00, Thursday 1:30-2:30, and Friday 2:00-3:00. If you cannot meet with me during the posted hours, please see me after class, and we will arrange a mutually convenient time. Don't forget, I am (almost!) always available via e-mail and Learn Link. That often is the quickest way to reach me, either at home or in the office.

## ***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.<sup>1</sup>

The members of this class will engage in the academic study of the New Testament. This approach means that we all must be open to the contemporary methods of the scholarly study of these texts and their contexts. We will focus primarily on the interpretation of these texts in the context of their ancient settings, not primarily their direct value for the life of religious communities today.

I simply ask all of you to approach this class with an open mind. For religious believers, no matter your beliefs or religion, this openness must include a willingness to explore interpretations and understandings other than the ones with which you might be familiar (or even comfortable). For those of you who do not see yourselves as religious believers, it means that you should recognize the value of these texts as literature: literature that includes extraordinary historical, literary, social, and cultural information; 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, not to try to force your personal beliefs on others in this class. You will be encouraged to state your opinions and to dialogue with others, but everyone's viewpoint will be respected. 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 94-97 in the Oxford College Catalog), which includes the "responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work" (p. 94). 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.