

F 200

RELIGION 348 — THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS CONTEXTS

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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 the 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, internet links, and other resources), will be posted on this class's Learn Link page and, I hope, on a web page in the near future.

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.

The New Testament: A Student's Introduction, 3rd 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 guides (especially in our own study guides; see below), it is essential that everyone have

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- 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, will depend on your journal entries and your willingness to dialogue about them with other class members. The Academic Journal will include:
1. An analysis of each chapter of Theissen's book. In order to guide your analysis, I will post reading guides for each chapter on this class's Learn Link page (and on a web page in the near future). As we progress through the book, you will find that you will be given increasingly more flexibility in composing your responses. Your analysis of each chapter must be posted on Learn Link by 2:00 a.m. before the class meets to discuss that chapter (with the exception of three chapters of your choosing). In addition, print out your answers/analyses, place them in your academic journal, and bring them to class. You should stay three chapters ahead of the class discussions, unless I indicate otherwise. After we discuss each chapter, you should add a handwritten paragraph or two indicating what additional insights you have gained from our discussion of the chapter (n.b., this will help you prepare for tests).
 2. 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); therefore you should post your answers to the study guide on Learn Link (or send them to me via the Internet syllabus) by 2:00 a.m. the morning before the class meets to discuss that study guide.
 3. Other writing assignments (such as answers to questions from Harris's book, your analyses of New Testament readings, and so forth).
 4. Film Critique. After we have read Theissen's *The Shadow of the Galilean* and worked through the Gospels, we will see a film (which we will choose together) that purports to depict Jesus of Nazareth. Each student will write a review of the film, which will include comparisons/contrasts based upon what you have learned about the historical Jesus.
- B. **Tests** (30%): There will be two tests during the semester (tentatively: October 12 and November 14). 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*. I will use the plus-minus grading scale not only for these tests, but for all of your grades.
- C. **Final Examination** (10%): The final exam will be Thursday, Dec. 14, from 2:00 – 5:00 p.m.
- 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 *unexcused* absences without academic

penalty. As an incentive to attend all the class sessions, however, two points will be added to your final average for each “cut” that you don’t use (e.g., if you have no unexcused absences, I will add four points to your final numerical average). If you have more than two unexcused absences, two points will be subtracted from your final numerical average *for each absence*. For an absence to be counted as an excused absence (i.e., illness and visit to a physician, religious observances, participation in a college-sponsored activity, death in the family), I must be notified in advance.

IV. Appointments

My office hours are M/W 2:00 – 3:00 p.m. and T/Th 10:00 – 11:00 a.m. 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.

V. 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.

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 views 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 49-51 in the Oxford College Catalog), which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work” (p. 49). 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.