

# **RELIGION 373R — ART AND THE INTERPRETATION OF THE GOSPELS**

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

In brief, Religion 373R is an introductory study of the New Testament Gospels in (a) the context of their first-century historical, social, religious, and literary environments and (b) the resulting interpretations of them in the visual arts throughout the centuries.

In the section on the NT Gospels taught by Dr. Gowler, we will primarily learn about the canonical gospels via the “inductive method,”—a close reading of the primary texts. We will supplement those readings, however, with readings and discussions of historical and methodological issues, including how to perform an introductory exegesis (analysis or interpretation) of a text.

In the section on the gospels and art taught by Dr. Rowland, the underlying presupposition is that 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 texts, illuminate their diverse interpretations, and produce fascinating insights from various historical perspectives.

What we will discover is that the “meaning” of a biblical 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, and this course is a beginning point for experiencing the richness of that chorus of voices that has influenced our understanding these texts. An examination of text and contexts thus will be an illuminating task.

This course is a joint effort between Professor Christopher C. Rowland of the University of Oxford (England) and Professor David B. Gowler of Oxford College of Emory University.

## ***II. Required Texts***



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*Jesus and the Gospels*, by Jarl Fossum and Phillip Munoa. This introduction to the New Testament Gospels and Historical Jesus studies will serve as a resource for the interpretation of the NT Gospels in their first-century contexts.

*Painting the Word*, by John Drury. This book will be the primary resource for our discussions of biblical art.

*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.<sup>1</sup>

### 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 each NT Gospel; (b) write and present an introductory exegesis of a specific NT Gospel passage; (c) evaluate—in writing and in class presentation—visual interpretations of specific passages in 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. **Quizzes/Tests** (30%): There will be two announced quizzes/tests during the semester. The first test is tentatively scheduled for February 8. The second is tentatively scheduled for March 22. Make-ups will only be given for excused absences, and you should notify me (Dr. Gowler) *in advance*. Unannounced quizzes on reading assignments may be given at any time.
- B. **Paper** (30%): Each student will write a paper on a specific gospel passage that includes explorations of both textual exegesis and visual exegesis. The format of the paper should follow a similar pattern: (1) an overview/analysis of the biblical text; (2) a brief introduction to the life and work of the artist(s) whose work was chosen to represent the scene; (3) a discussion of the “visual exegesis” of the selected painting(s) to demonstrate how the artist(s) has/have actualized the NT Gospel text in the production of one or more visual image(s).

Both the Gospel text and works of art for the paper will be selected in consultation with the professors of the course. You should focus on a major event in the Gospels or a parable. Questions about the NT Gospels and the interpretation of specific texts should be directed to Dr. Gowler. Questions about works of art and visual exegesis should be directed to Dr. Rowland (between February 13 and March 8; questions after March 8 should be directed to Dr. Gowler). Due dates for text selection and the final paper will be posted on the class conference.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.



- 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 distributed *at the minimum* one class period before the class presentation.
- D. **Peer analysis/critique of another student’s paper and class presentation** (10%): To facilitate class discussion, each student will also make a formal response to another student’s paper (“B” above). A written critique should also be turned in to the professor the day it is presented.
- 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. “Borderline” grades will also be determined on the basis of class attendance and participation.
- F. **Final exam** (10%): The cumulative final exam will be given Monday, May 7, 2:00 – 5:00.

## V. Appointments

Dr. Gowler’s office hours are Monday 10:00-12:00 and Tuesday 3:45-4:45. 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. Professor Rowland will announce his office hours in class on February 13.

## 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 and to dialogue with others, but everyone’s viewpoint will be respected. We will explore these texts, works of art, 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 96-99 in the Oxford College 2006-2008 Catalog), which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work” (p. 96). 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.



## ***VII. Structure of the Course***

The course will be structured in the following way.

January 19 – February 8: We will begin with an introduction to the Gospels of Mark and Luke which will be led by Dr. Gowler.

February 13 – March 8: Dr. Rowland will lead the class. For those four weeks, we will focus on the Gospel of John, the Gospels and Art, and how to interpret a work of visual art alongside a text.

March 20-29: Dr Gowler will focus on examples of Gospel exegesis and visual exegesis from the Gospel of Luke, as well as issues concerning how to write and present exegesis papers.

April 3-26 (or as needed): Students will present their papers to the class, and the peer respondents will help lead the discussions.

May 1: Review and discussion of the course.

