

REL 112: Introduction to the New Testament

Elon University, Spring 2007

M,W,F 9:25-10:35

Alamance 302



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Course Description

It's ironic that the collection of writings by the followers of a teacher who had been killed by the Roman Empire would eventually become some of the most influential writings in Western history. Such is the case with the writings known as the New Testament. Compared to the writings of their contemporaries, those of Jesus followers lack a polish and sophistication. Yet, the stories they told and the images they created captured the hearts and imaginations of many ancient Jews and Gentiles, fast becoming the primary lens through which communities and individuals interpreted their lives and their realities.

In this course we will study the diverse writings of the NT as products of their original historical, social, and religious contexts. We will ask how these ancient writings served to interpret and respond to the life situations of the earliest Christians. By asking this question, we prepare ourselves for thinking critically about the ways the NT writings have been appropriated and interpreted in later contexts.

Students should recognize that this course engages in the academic study of the NT. While many modern faith communities understand these writings as a source of divine guidance and a tool for personal reflection, these *are not* the foci of this class. This course welcome students of all faith traditions and religious backgrounds (including those who were raised in non-religious contexts) as we explore together how these writings reflect the concerns of Christians in the first century and how these texts been culturally important.

Course Objectives

- Students will obtain familiarity with some of the most popular and culturally important NT writings.
- Students will be introduced to major critical issues in the interpretation of this literature, including questions of authorship, translation, and canon formation.
- Students will develop a set of analytical tools for developing and assessing interpretations of biblical texts.
- Students will begin to engage the issue of how ancient texts shape modern cultures and individuals.

Required Texts

Harper Collins Study Bible (Please bring this to class each day).

Bart D. Ehrman, *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (Oxford, 2004).

Other readings will be available through Blackboard or distributed in class.

Requirements

Familiarity with the Syllabus & Class Requirements: Success in this course demands that you are familiar with this syllabus and the schedule of readings. **You** are responsible for knowing what is required in this course and when things are due. I would also recommend checking your Elon e-mail daily in case announcements regarding have been sent.

Reading Log: You are expected to keep up with the reading in this course, including both secondary sources (e.g. the textbook, articles, essays) and the NT writings. You are required to keep a reading log for this course (a template will be available on Blackboard). In this log you will record when and where you have completed each reading for this course and you will include at least one comment and one question for every reading done.

I will collect your reading logs five times during the semester. These times will be unannounced, so I expect you to bring your reading logs to class each time we meet. The logs will be graded pass/ fail based upon whether you have been keeping up with the readings and upon your questions and comments. You have one opportunity to take a grace on handing in your log. The four pass/ fail grades will be averaged to make up 10% of your final grade.

Attendance and Participation: Students are expected to come to class prepared and ready to participate in class discussions. I understand that things happen (e.g. illness, court dates, etc.). As a result, you are allowed three free absences in this class and I don't need or want to know why you're absent. *Every absence* after these first two will result in your attendance/ participation grade being lowered by a third (e.g. 4 absences = A-, 5 absences = B+). Really . . . even if you are absent on account of sickness. Attendance and participation will comprise 10% of your final grade.

Negative class participation (e.g. sleeping, ringing cell phones) will also count as a class absence.

Film Viewing: This course is organized into four "acts," each which includes a film that helps us think about the texts we will be studying and which raise important interpretive questions. Due to time constraints, these films will not be shown in class; rather, I have set up screenings for these films outside of class time. You are **strongly encouraged** to attend these screenings, although not required to attend them. If you do not attend the screening, you are required to watch or *re-watch* the film on your own prior to the day of the screening and you are required to complete a 1-2 page, single-spaced, typed reflection upon the film. This is due at the class period immediately after the screening. Failure to turn this in will result in your attendance grade being lowered by a third.

Map and Dates Quiz: Students will take a short quiz on basic information related to the study of the NT and early Christianity. Students will be asked to learn select dates and be able to identify places on a map. The date of the quiz is noted on the syllabus and the information to be covered will be distributed in class early in the semester. This quiz will be worth 5% of your grade.

Interpretive Essays: You will be asked to write four 4-5 page essays at the end of each “act” of the course. Topics will be provided for each essay. Writing guidelines will be discussed in class prior to the first essay. Each essay will be worth 15% of your grade.

Final Project: At the end of the semester students will be asked to create their own version of a NT canon using a variety of sources. This will be due on the day of the final and will be worth 15% of your final course grade. (See Appendix Document).

In addition, I reserve the right to give unannounced quizzes if people are failing to come prepared for class. These quizzes will be figured into the “Reading” grade.

Grading Breakdown:	
Reading	10%
Attendance	10%
Quiz	5%
Essays	60% (15% each)
Final Project	15%

Elon Academic Honor Code

Students in this course are expected to be familiar with and follow Elon’s Academic Honor Code. According to this code, Elon students are expected to:

- refrain from cheating, including plagiarism.
- refrain from lying.
- express opinions with civility and with consideration for the opinions of others.
- respect shared intellectual property and resources.
- promote the importance of the honor code in all their interactions for the benefit of the learning community.

Class Conduct

This course assumes that learning best occurs in an environment that allows for a free exchange of ideas and opinions. We can learn from the different perspectives of those around us. In light of this, all class participants are encouraged to consider the perspectives of others, being respectful of the fact that we represent a variety of ethnic and social backgrounds, abilities, classes, genders, sexualities, and religious affiliations. This does not mean we refrain from critical inquiry and debate, rather in this classroom we will engage in critical conversations with an attitude of humility and grace toward one another.

Course Schedule

Please note that this schedule is subject to change per the instructor's discretion. However, **you** are responsible for keeping up with any changes that are announced in class, even if you are absent.

- Jan 31 Introduction to the Course
- Feb 2 Truth and Consequences: Why Study the NT
Reading: Rodney Clap, "The Appeal of *The Da Vinci Code*: Dan Brown's Truthiness" in *The Christian Century* (2006).
Irving Greenberg, "Anti-Semitism in *The Passion*: A Rabbi Reflects on Mel Gibson and the Gospels" in *Commonweal* (2004).
Donald Senior, "Blame the Gospels?: A Theologian Responds" in *Commonweal* (2004).
- Act 1: Imagining the Ancient World: The NT's Context**
- Feb 5 Introducing the NT's Greco-Roman Context
Reading: Ehrman chs. 1-2
- Feb 5 **Screening: *Gladiator***
8:00 in Alamance 302
- Feb 7 Religion in the Roman World
Reading: Apuleius, "Vision of Isis" from *Metamorphoses*.
Marianne Bonz, "Religion in the Roman World" *From Jesus to Christ*:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/religions.html>
- Feb 9 The Social Matrix of the Roman World: Citizenship, Slavery, and Gender
Reading: Keith Bradley, "Resisting Slavery in Ancient Rome" *BBC: Ancient History, Romans* (2003):
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/slavery_01.shtml
Suzanne Dixon, "Roman Women: Following the Clues" *BBC: Ancient History, Romans* (2003):
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/roman_women_01.shtml
Valerie Hope, "Social Pecking Order in the Roman World" *BBC: Ancient History, Romans* (2003):
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/social_structure_01.shtml

Musonius Rufus, "Why Women Too Should Study Philosophy:"
<http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/wlgr/wlgr-philosophers.shtml>

- Feb 12 Judaism in the Roman World
Reading: Ehrman ch. 3
 L. Michael White, "The Political History of the Jewish People," *Frontline: Apocalypse!*:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/jews.html>
In class: Map and Date Quiz
- Feb 14 Jewish Religion in the Roman World
Reading: 1 Maccabees 1-2
 The Shema
 Shaye Cohen, "Temple Culture," *From Jesus to Christ*:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/temple.html>
View: Bet Alpha Synagogue (Blackboard)
- Feb 16 Jewish Messianic Expectation: Responding to Roman Rule
Reading: 2 Samuel 7:1-17
 Psalm 2
 Daniel 7
- Act 2: Portraits of an Unexpected Messiah**
- Feb 19 The Gospels in the Ancient World
Reading: Ehrman chs. 4-5
Due: Essay 1
- Feb 21 The Story of a Secret Messiah: The Gospel of Mark
Reading: The Gospel of Mark (focus on chapters 1-5, 8).
- Feb 23 The Story of a Secret Messiah: The Gospel of Mark, cont.
Reading: The Gospel of Mark (focus on chapters 13-16).
- Feb 26 The Birth and Baptism of a Messiah: Jesus in Matthew & Luke
Reading: The Gospel of Matthew (focus on chapters 1-4).
 The Gospel of Luke (1-5:11)
 Ehrman chs. 6-7
- Feb 28 The Life of a Messiah: Jesus in Matthew & Luke
Reading: The Gospel of Matthew focus on chapters (5-6, 24-25).

The Gospel of Luke (focus on chapters 4:16-6, 10:25-11:13).

- Mar 2 The Death of a Messiah: Jesus in Matthew & Luke
Reading: The Gospel of Matthew (focus on chapters 26-28).
 The Gospel of Luke (focus on chapters 22-24).
- Mar 5 The Question of a Historical Jesus
Reading: Ehrman chs. 10-11
 Josephus on Jesus:
 <http://www.virtualreligion.net/iho/jesus.html#testimonium>
- Mar 7 **Screening: *Jesus of Montreal***
 8:00 in Alamanca 302
- Mar 7 Depicting Jesus: Reflections on *Jesus of Montreal*
Reading: Adele Reinhartz, "Jesus in Film: The Hollywood Perspective on the Jewishness of Jesus," *The Journal of Religion and Film* (1998):
 <http://avalon.unomaha.edu/jrf/JesusinFilmRein.htm>
- Mar 9 Jesus in the Johannine Tradition: The Divine Logos Revealed
Reading: Ehrman ch. 9
 The Gospel of John (focus on chapters 1-4)
- Mar 12 Johannine Anti-Judaism and the Crucifixion
Reading: The Gospel of John (focus on chapters 8-9, 18-21).
 Robert Kysar, "Anti-Semitism and the Gospel of John" in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity* (1993).
- Mar 14 The Johannine Tradition Continued
Reading: 1,2, 3 John
 The Apocalypse of John (selections).
- Mar 16 The Resurrection of Jesus and the First Believers
Reading: Matthew 28
 Luke 24
 John 20-21

Spring Break

Act 3: Writings of the Apostle

- Mar 26 A Man Named Paul
Reading: Ehrman ch. 12
 Acts (selected passages TBA)
- Due: Essay 2**

- Mar 28 Paul: Living at the End of the World, maybe . . .
 Reading: Ehrman ch. 13
 1 Thessalonians
 2 Thessalonians
- Mar 28 Screening: *The Apostle*.
 8:00 in Alamance 302**
- Mar 30 Who or What Is An Apostle? Reflections on *The Apostle* and 1 Corinthians
 Reading: Ehrman ch. 14
 1 Corinthians
- Apr 2 Paul and the Body: Ancient and Modern Bodies, or Why We Should Know
 What Paul Says About Bodies.
 Reading: Galen, "A Comparison of Female and Male Anatomy":
<http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/wlgr/wlgr-medicine351.shtml>
 Hippocrates, "Hysterical Suffocation":
<http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/wlgr/wlgr-medicine345.shtml>
- Apr 4 Paul and the Body: 1 Corinthians
 Reading: 1 Corinthians
- Apr 6 Paul and the Body: 2 Corinthians
 Reading: 2 Corinthians
- Apr 11 Paul's Troubles with Circumcision and the Circumcised
 Reading: Ehrman chs. 15-16
 Galatians
- Apr 13 Paul's Troubles with Circumcision and the Circumcised
 Reading: Romans
 John G. Gager, "Paul's Contradictions" in *Bible Review* (1998).
- Apr 16 In the Wake of Paul: The Pseudonymous Letters
 Reading: Ehrman ch. 17
 Colossians
 Clarice J. Martin, "The *Haustafeln* (Household Codes) in African American Biblical Interpretation: 'Free Slaves' and 'Subordinate Women'" in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (1991).

Apr 18 Women in the Wake of Paul
Reading: Ehrman ch. 18
Acts of Paul and Thecla

Act 4: Christian Responses to Persecution

Apr 20 Early Christian Persecution
Reading: Nero's Persecution of Christians
Pliny's Letter to Trajan
Due: Essay 3

Apr 23 The Response of 1 Peter: Don't Rock the Boat!
Reading: Ehrman ch. 20
1 Peter

Apr 25 Revelation Responds
Reading: Revelation (focus on chapters 1-3).
"The Book of Revelation," *Frontline: Apocalypse!*:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/brevelation.html>

Apr 27 Revelation Responds
Reading: Revelation (focus on chapters 4-12).

Apr 30 Revelation Responds
Reading: Revelation (focus on chapters 13-21).
"The Resiliency of Apocalyptic Belief," *Frontline: Apocalypse!*
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/explanation/resilience.html>

May 2 Imitating Christ and Christian Persecution
Reading: The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity.

May 2 Screening: Romero
8:00 in Alamance 302

May 4 Closing the Canon in Response to Persecution
Reading: Selections on the NT Canon.
Due: Essay 4

May 7 Reviewing the NT Canon

May 12 **Final Exam, 8-11**
Due: Final Projects

Imagining the Canon
Due: May 12 @ 9:00

After a semester of studying the New Testament, you should have some sense that this collection of writings is a diverse group of texts reflecting a number of specific contexts and different purposes. This collection, moreover, was not “closed” until the fourth century.

Imagine that you are living in the fourth century and you have been asked to compile your own canon. The local church leader, Chloe, has asked you to gather a collection from the variety of Christian texts that have been circulating in your area. The “texts” are listed below. She asks that you put together a presentation for her to take to the council that will decide the final canon. This presentation can be in the form of a written text, an illustrated outline, or some other format. Chloe has encouraged you to be as creative as you want! However, she asks that it will include the following:

- 1) a list three criteria for determining which texts should be included;
- 2) at least 7 and no more than 10 texts, selected from the lists below. You must have at least two texts from each list below;
- 3) a short explanation of why each text is included;
- 4) an explanation of how the order of the canon.

List A

Jesus of Montreal
The Apostle
Romero
Acts of Paul and Thecla
The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity
Revelation

List B

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts
1 Thessalonians
1 Corinthians
Colossians
1 Peter