Reading the New Testament in the Middle East


Expanded course description: Traveling in “Bible lands” gives us a unique opportunity to study the New Testament contextually: first in its historical context (how do the land and the peoples of the land help us read the Bible better?), and second, in its modern context (how do Middle Eastern Christians challenge American Christians to be better readers of the Bible?). As we travel in Egypt, Syria, and Turkey, we will discuss the impact of ancient geography, cultures, languages, religions, and politics on the interpretation of the New Testament. We will also engage with the modern geography, cultures, languages, religions, and politics that form the context for the contemporary church’s reading of the New Testament in the Middle East.

This class satisfies the GE requirement Thinking Globally. Traveling in the Middle East opens the door to a daily, lived practice of cross-cultural communication. We will experience this ourselves, of course, as Americans abroad, and we will discuss and reflect on what our experience of being ‘outsiders’ does for our understanding of ourselves, our own culture, and our reading of the Bible. We will also look for and engage with the sorts of cross-cultural communication that the peoples of the Middle East experience every day. How do Christians and Muslims work together, shop together, live side by side, and relate to each other? How do different Christian groups, in particular the traditional ancient churches (Coptic, Maronite, Catholic, Orthodox, etc.) and more recent Protestant missionary churches, get along? How do people speaking different languages – literally or metaphorically – exist in community?

Thinking Globally requires more than experiencing the meeting, combination, tension, and conflict of cultures. It also means learning to see the world through others’ eyes. As we travel, we will constantly be asking ourselves and the local people we meet how they experience life in the twenty-first century. This process involves careful observation of the places we go and loving interaction with the people we meet, in casual conversation, more formal or official meetings with church leaders, and home stays. What problems do local peoples see in the world and their own society? What concerns do they have about the future? In what ways would these Middle Easterners challenge us to live out the gospel in a global world? In addition to these big questions of global thinking, we will also read the Bible with our new global lenses. How do Christians, Muslims, agnostics, and others in the Middle East understand the Bible? How does the cultural and social life of the places we visit help us understand the New Testament in a different way? What elements of modern society in the Middle East look like or challenge society in the New Testament church?

The intersection of biblical interpretation and global thinking is reflected in the course components and schedule. Specific questions listed for the places we visit are designed to provoke interaction with and sympathetic understanding of local people’s lives and thought. The biblical readings and the supporting secondary readings have been chosen to spark reflection on and challenge of ‘Western’ assumptions about biblical texts, the life of the church (ancient and modern), and the way to be
Christian in a global world. The major ongoing project for the course demands substantive, compassionate engagement with local cultures, churches, and peoples in order to understand the impact and significance of the Bible in the modern Middle East.

**Course goals:**
- To learn the methods and practices of the contextualization of New Testament texts in the ancient world.
- To learn the methods and understand the value of contextual interpretation.
- To identify and interpret the New Testament texts associated with ancient and modern sites in the Middle East.
- To read the New Testament through the lenses of modern society across the Middle East.
- To seek to understand the church’s experience of life in modern Egypt, Syria, and Turkey.
- To sympathetically experience the modern church’s life in the Middle East by interacting, conversing, eating, and staying with Egyptian, Syrian, and Turkish Christians.
- To see life in our global world from the perspective of Middle Eastern peoples.

**Required texts**
- NRSV Bible
- Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP)
- William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey among the Christians of the Middle East* (Holt)
- Course reader (including articles on contextual interpretation, contemporary Middle Eastern biblical interpretation, and the interpretation of New Testament texts in their ancient Mediterranean background; see attached provisional list)

**Course components**
- **Reading (25%)**: There will be required readings on campus and during the trip. Please keep up with your readings to support and help interpret your ongoing, personal biblical and cultural engagement.

- **Discussion (25%)**: Active, substantive participation in class discussions on biblical interpretation (past and present) is mandatory. In addition to general participation, each student will lead a discussion on their chosen New Testament text during the course of the traveling portion of the program.

- **Journaling (20%)**: Each student will keep a journal as we travel. Two topics in particular should be included:
  
  1. Responses to and thoughts on the ‘Questions for the day’ listed on the syllabus. Your reflections should tie the texts we’re reading (biblical and secondary) to the places and people we’re visiting.
  
  2. Specific historical and contemporary events, peoples, cultural, and geographic insights that illuminate a biblical text. Identify and describe the contextual clue, explain how it applies to a specific biblical text, and comment on the significance of this interpretation for the life of the church. By the end of the trip, students will be expected to have at least ten entries.
New Testament study (30%): Before leaving Westmont, each student will pick a focus text for the trip. You will do preliminary research on the text’s historical context on campus, and you will return to the text in Egypt, Syria, and Turkey to read it through the lenses of Christian life in each country. You will lead a Bible study during the trip on your passage. You will write up your original research and ongoing interpretation to be submitted as an 8 to 10 page paper by 4 July (two weeks after our return).

Course plan

Part 1: Contextualizing the Bible
Reading: Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes; Dalrymple, From the Holy Mountain, Part I; selections from the course reader
Introduction: Before we leave, we will discuss the practice of the historical reconstruction of New Testament times and the methodology of contextual interpretation (reading the Bible with and through the eyes of ‘ordinary’ readers, untrained in academic exegesis). Contextual interpretation also introduces key questions about economic and political status, questions that are particularly pertinent in the Middle East today (e.g., women's roles in society, relative Christian wealth and education level, and the political oppression of non-Muslim religions). We will begin to explore the markers of society and culture in the modern Middle East as a window on the church’s experience in Egypt, Syria, and Turkey.

New Testament study: Pick a New Testament text to focus on in your time in Middle East. Read it several times, research its historical context, read a few commentaries or articles on it, and then begin writing about it – its meaning and significance, its historical location, why you chose it, how it impacts the church today, etc.
Some suggested texts: Luke 15; Acts 2; Mark 5; Acts 10; Matthew 18; a portion of Ephesians, Colossians, or Galatians; Revelation 2-3

May 10: The practice of historical contextualization of New Testament texts
May 11: The methodology of contextual interpretation
May 12: Key questions of contextual interpretation in the modern Middle East (e.g., traditional family and social structures, women's roles in society, relative Christian wealth and education level, and the political and ‘fundamentalist’ oppressions of religious diversity)
May 13: Society and culture in the modern Middle East
Special guests: local Middle Easterners

Part 2: Egypt
Out of Egypt I have called my son – The Bible in Egypt
Reading: Dalrymple, From the Holy Mountain, Part VI; selections from the course reader
Introduction: We will be looking at the prophetic use of Egypt in the Old Testament and tracing its influence on Second Temple Judaism and particularly the New Testament. Why does Matthew use Hosea 11.1 to introduce the story of Jesus? What is ‘Egypt’ in the Bible, and what expectations surround it? Why do Mary and Joseph take baby Jesus to Egypt, and what do they do there? Finally, what do these texts look like today, in modern Egypt? How does the Egyptian church – Coptic, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant – understand the biblical traditions concerning Egypt, and particularly Matthew 2?
New Testament study: Revisit your chosen text, and reread it through the lenses of the Egyptian church. Keep track of your new observations, questions, and ongoing interpretation of your text. How does this text speak in the context of ancient Egypt or the modern Egyptian church?

May 15 (Saturday): The pyramids and ancient Egypt (text: Exodus 1-15)
**Questions for the day: Giza is a wild mix of tourists, antiquities, and traditional Egyptian life; extreme wealth (ancient and modern) next to extreme poverty; holiday and hard working day. While we’re in Giza, look for the contrasts and extremes present in and around this ancient-modern city. Consider the contrasts within the biblical text – and consider what reading Exodus 1-15 in modern-day Giza does to our understanding of the exodus story.

May 16 (Sunday): Coptic Cairo (texts: Isaiah 19, Hosea 11)
**Questions for the day: Giza is a wild mix of tourists, antiquities, and traditional Egyptian life; extreme wealth (ancient and modern) next to extreme poverty; holiday and hard working day. While we’re in Giza, look for the contrasts and extremes present in and around this ancient-modern city. Consider how the prophetic promises concerning Egypt might speak to the lives of contemporary Coptic Christians in Cairo. Ask the priests and people you meet about ancient Egypt in Coptic thought. What do the Coptic Christians do with biblical references to Egypt?

May 19 (Wednesday): Wadi Natrun (texts: Deuteronomy 8; 1 Kings 19; Matthew 3-4)
**Questions for the day: At Wadi Natrun, look for the significance of the wilderness as a retreat. Ask the monks and abbots at the monasteries about their experience of Christianity in the wilderness. What is the Coptic understanding of the wilderness in the Bible?

May 20-21 (Thursday-Friday): Minya and Sohag (text: Matthew 2)
**Potential home stays with local Christians
**Questions for the day: As we travel to the monasteries of middle Egypt, look for evidence of the traditions of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in Egypt. Consider the implications of gender in Matthew 2 and in the reading of Matthew 2 in modern Egypt. What significance does the 'Jesus in Egypt' tradition have in modern Coptic thought?

May 23 (Sunday): Mt. Sinai (text: Exodus 19-20)
**Questions for the day: At St. Katherine’s, look for living interpretations of the Sinai story. Ask the monks or your fellow pilgrims about their understanding of the significance of Sinai for the Christian story. How do Egyptians and foreigners understand this place? (And where’s the synagogue?)

Reading: Dalrymple, From the Holy Mountain, Part III; selections from the course reader
Introduction: We will focus on the tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early church, particularly the experiences of Damascus and Antioch in contrast to the nature of the church in Jerusalem. What conflicts and controversies arose, and why? How did the gospel of Jesus impact cultural and social values? What do these stories sound like today in Syria? How does the church in Syria continue to experience cultural and social tension?
New Testament study: Revisit your chosen text, and reread it through the lenses of the Syrian church. Keep track of your new observations, questions, and ongoing interpretation of your text. How does this text speak in the context of ancient Syria or the modern Syrian church?

May 26 (Wednesday): Damascus (text: Acts 9)
**Questions for the day:** In Christian Damascus, look for Paul’s experience of Damascus, and modern reflections of Paul and the ancient church in this city. Consider the significance of threats of danger in the early church and today. In light of the great history of this city, do the presence of the very early church and Paul’s sojourn here matter to its residents?

May 27 (Thursday): Damascus (text: Acts 10-11, 15)
**Questions for the day:** As we jump between Christian and Islamic Damascus, ancient and modern Syria, look for social and cultural conflicts like the ones we find in Acts. Ask the people you meet for their reflections on daily life in modern Syria. How do the many cultures, religions, families, etc., function in contact, relationship, or tension with each other?

May 28-29 (Friday-Saturday): Aramaic Syria (text: Acts 1-2)
**Questions for the day:** The villages in which Aramaic is a living language offer a unique chance to hear what first century Palestinian Jews might have heard in their daily lives. As we travel in this part of Christian Syria, listen for the mix of languages. Consider the experience of language as a tool of and a barrier to communication. How do modern linguistic clashes help us understand the Spirit’s gift in Acts 1-2?

May 30 (Sunday): Crusader Syria
**Special meeting with the abbot of St. George’s monastery**

May 31-1 June (Monday-Tuesday): Dead Cities (text: Acts 3-4)
**Questions for the day:** As we take our pilgrimage to the sites of ancient pilgrimages, look for the interplay of biblical text and the living faith of the church. Ask the ghosts of these sites – and their modern echoes – why they traveled to see the saints and visit their churches. How do the ancient and modern practices of pilgrimage resemble or conflict with each other? How different would these cities be if they had living saints?

3 June (Thursday): Aleppo to Antioch (text: Acts 13-14)
**Questions for the day:** Our transition from Syria to Turkey repeats the move of the early church in Acts 13. As we travel on, look for contemporary shifts in culture as we see it in daily life. Consider the experiences of transition from one land to another. How would Paul and Barnabas have experienced their own transition? How can we better understand the significance of Acts 13 for the early church as we make our own transition?

Part 4: The early church in Asia Minor – Acts, Galatians, Colossians, and Revelation 1-3

Reading: Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain*, Part II; selections from the course reader

Introduction: We will dig into the story of the apostles bringing the gospel to a new place. How did the local geography and society impact the form of the church as we see it in Acts and the letters to Galatia, Colossae, and the seven churches of Revelation? How does locality impact the way we read these biblical texts? What do these texts sound like today in Turkey’s ‘secular’ society?
New Testament study: Revisit your chosen text, and reread it through the lenses of the Turkish church. Keep track of your new observations, questions, and ongoing interpretation of your text. How does this text speak in the context of ancient Turkey or the modern Turkish church?

5 June (Saturday): Tarsus (text: Acts 21-22)

**Questions for the day: As we visit Paul’s hometown, look for the sights Paul would have grown up with. Consider the significance of Paul’s birth in a Roman city for the story of the church.

6 June (Sunday): Cappadocia (text: Galatians)

**Questions for the day: Paul’s letter to the Galatians shows us the cultural and religious clashes of the early church yet again. In Cappadocia, look for ancient and modern instances of the clash of cultures. Consider how the cultures you see around you mix, mesh, and clash. Ask yourself how you look to ‘outside’ eyes. How does the church then and now deal with cultural misunderstandings and confusion?

7-9 June (Monday-Wednesday): Iconium, Pisidian Antioch, and Perga (text: Acts 13-14)

**Questions for the day: Reflect on Paul’s travels in this area. Look for indications of what travel would have been like in his day. Ask each other how your experience of this journey is different from Paul’s. How does this journey help you understand Acts 13-14 better?

10 June (Thursday): Laodicea (texts: Colossians, Rev 3:14-22)


**Special meeting with 'local' Westerners

**Questions for the day: In Ephesus and Selcuk, look for the memory of Paul and the Ephesian church. Consider how the conflict between the Christians and the pagans in Acts might be understood or portrayed in modern Selcuk. How do you see the biblical story coming to life around you?

17-18 June (Thursday-Friday): Sardis, Smyrna, and Pergamum (text: Revelation 1-3)

**Questions for the day: Look for the life of the church, ancient and modern, in these cities. Consider the possible perceptions of the letters to the churches in Revelation: are they justified, cruel, ethical? How does the modern church understand these letters as God’s word?

20 June (Sunday): Istanbul

**Special meeting with the patriarchate

**Questions for the day: Look for religious life in Istanbul. Ask Christians, Muslims, and others you meet about their understanding or experience of religion in modern Istanbul. How does the life of this city show the difficulty or ease of living as Christians in the modern world?
Course Reader: Preliminary List

A. Biblical interpretation

B. Western perspectives on the church in the Middle East

C. Middle Eastern perspectives on the church