

The New Testament in Ancient and Modern Context
RS104-G1 (4 units) Preliminary Draft

1. Description, Rationale and Objectives

This course is principally designed to enrich students' understanding of the New Testament—especially the Gospels and Acts 1-15—by exploring its physical and geographical settings in the Middle East, by visiting relevant archaeological, historic and traditional sites, and by placing the Gospels and Acts in their historical, social, cultural and political contexts. Readings, lectures, guided tours, discussions, arranged visits and intense exploration will illuminate our study of the New Testament and, more broadly, the world of early Judaism and Christianity.

Alongside our study of the ancient world, the program will also consider multiple dimensions of the modern Middle East, including its faces of Islam, Eastern Christianity and contemporary Judaism, as well as various aspects of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Conversations with Jews, Muslims and Orthodox Christians will challenge students to assess and solidify their own traditions. Whenever possible, we shall correlate the modern context with our study of the New Testament, consider how Middle Eastern Christians are contextualizing their faith, explore the relevance of Jesus' message for today's world, and ask what faithful Christian discipleship should look like in today's complex and conflicted world.

2. Relationship to Curriculum.

- 2.1. General Education. Satisfies the following GE requirements:
 - 2.1.1. II. Common Inquiries: G. Thinking Historically.
 - 2.1.2. III. Common Skills: A.2: Writing/Speech within the Major.
 - 2.1.3. III. Common Skills: A.3: Writing/Speech outside the Major.
- 2.2. Religious Studies: upper division RS NT elective for RS major and minor.

3. Objectives. The studies and itinerary of this course are shaped to accomplish the following objectives.

- 3.1. To show students new ways of reading the Bible and to provide new resources for interpreting the life of Jesus, the earliest days of the Christian movement and, more generally, the Christian faith.
- 3.2. To show students the value of Middle East geography, topography, history, culture and archaeology for placing Jesus in proper context.
- 3.3. To provide students with resources for life-long patterns of reading and studying the Bible that take full account of the its historical (social, political, religious) context.
- 3.4. To develop in students the basic skills of Biblical interpretation, with particular attention to historical background, social context, political dynamics, cultural expectations and religious practice and, more generally, to move students toward more serious, critically informed study of the New Testament (especially the Gospels and Acts).
- 3.5. To develop skills in oral presentation by offering numerous formal and informal opportunities for verbal reflection, processing, debate, analysis and evaluation.
- 3.6. To help students learn to respond with maturity and good will to stressful situations, challenging relationships, and demanding physical situations.
- 3.7. To cultivate in students a growing capacity to see the world from other perspectives, to appreciate cultural difference, and to explore complex issues from multiple perspectives.

- 3.8. To provide a basic framework for understanding the complexities of Middle Eastern religion, politics and ideology, and to encourage active reading on Middle East issues.
- 3.9. To cultivate active, informed participation in programs of reconciliation and peace-making as an expression of faithful Christian discipleship.

4. Assignments

4.1. Oratio: three oral presentations.

- 4.1.1. **On campus: selected reading.** Each of you shall select one of the class readings to review with *extra* care (beyond what is expected of all students) and to offer a 5-7 minute presentation, highlighting key issues, assessing the thesis and argument, and guiding the class through several discussion questions. Evaluation will consider your grasp of content, success at communicating complex ideas, usefulness of discussion questions, and effectiveness in oral presentation. I shall model this oral exercise during the first class period, offer instructions in organization, preparation and delivery, and meet with each of you before and after your presentation to provide input and feedback. **Value: 5%**
- 4.1.2. **On site presentation: Bible interpretation.** Bible study of assigned passage. Each of you shall research a passage from the Gospels or Acts 1-15 that has ties to a site we will be visiting, and then lead the group in a brief (15-20 minute) Bible study on-site. Commentaries and secondary literature will be on reserve in the library. I will provide a model in class prior to our departure. A draft outline of your study will be due on May 10 (worth 5%), and you will turn in a final outline with study notes shortly before your presentation when we meet one-on-one to discuss it. We'll meet again afterwards for assessment. During your presentation, I will be most interested in:
 - your attention to the Biblical text (words, themes, flow of thought)
 - your ability to link your passage to its literary and historical contexts
 - your responsible use of primary sources (including and beyond the Bible)
 - your sense of the important (exegetically, theologically, historically)
 - your respect for the "rules" of the literary genre (e.g., ancient historical narrative, ancient biography, "rewritten Bible")
 - your ability to draw the group into thoughtful reflection and discussion
 - your oral delivery: organization, clarity, creativity, rhetoric and appropriateness.**Value: 20%** (including 5% for draft submission). Due dates will be coordinated with the itinerary.
- 4.1.3. **On site presentation: historical context.** Oral presentation on an historical, political or religious theme of direct relevance for a particular site. Resources will be on reserve in the library. A draft outline of the study will be due on May 10 (worth 5%), and you will turn in a final outline with study notes when we meet one-on-one to discuss your work shortly before your presentation. We will also meet one-on-one afterwards for assessment. During your presentation, which shouldn't go longer than 10-15 minutes, I will watch for evidence that:
 - you are familiar with the major historical issues and debates surrounding your topic and location, and with the particular challenges scholars face in constructing an account of people, events and developments from ancient times
 - you have weighed a range of critical sources and display responsible use of primary literature (Josephus, Dead Sea Scrolls, etc.)
 - you have begun to think about the significance of social place, time and critical distance on the interpretive process
 - you know the facts without excessive dependence on notes

- you can tell a good (hi)story
- you can field questions comfortably and competently
- you have not neglected matters of delivery: organization, clarity, creativity, rhetoric, appropriateness.

Value: 20% (including 5% for draft submission). Due dates will be coordinated with the itinerary.

4.2. **Forum: participation in the “public square.”**

In response to required readings and experiences, the group shall regularly (once or twice per week) convene the “Forum”—a group meeting with rotating student leadership structured to foster open dialogue, raise challenging questions, and explore issues in New Testament studies, process experiences and handle matters of community life.

Value: 20% based on preparation, participation, and on taking a turn or two, with a partner, as forum leader.

Readings. A preliminary bibliography from which readings will be selected follows. Not included here are readings addressing the modern Middle East. These will be included in the final version.

4.3. **Compositio: a daily personal journal.**

Each student shall maintain a personal, daily journal of reflections on the intersection of Bible readings, site visits, guest lectures and personal, cross-cultural experiences. Each dated, daily entry shall include (but need not be limited to):

- The most significant site of the day (why significant, how so).
- The most significant experience of the day (why, how).
- A Biblical text of notable relevance for the day (why, how, new perspectives).

Daily entries need be no longer than 250 words but can be as full as you like. (You’ll be showing this to your grandchildren.) *Forum* sessions (see above, #2) may include opportunities for public reading of excerpts. Due in the airport prior to departure for LAX. **Value:** 20%

4.4. **Inquisitio: final chance to make connections.**

A final, open-journal exam—part essay and part oral—will call for broad synthetic reflection and integration around one or two selected themes. The group will help determine the final selection of questions. Unsharpened, possible topics include:

- The Jewishness of early and contemporary Christianity
- The politics of Jesus in his day and ours.
- Obstacles ancient and modern to the spread of Christianity
- The political and social realities of Jesus’ world and the modern Middle East.
- Travel in the Middle East as an aid to New Testament study
- Jesus’ apocalyptic expectation in ancient and modern context.

Value: 15%. Date negotiable, will be decided by the class.

5. **Bibliography and Textbooks**

Required Texts

Bible (light-weight, not pocket-sized, in one of the following translations: RSV, NRSV, NASV, NIV, TNIV, NLT).

Course Reader: Selected Readings from Primary and Secondary Texts.

Recommended

Murphy-O’Connor, Jerome. *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*. OUP, 1998.

Primary Sources

Biblical texts: esp. Gospels, Acts, 1 Maccabees

Dead Sea Scrolls: War Scroll (1QM), Community Rule (1QS)

Josephus, *The Jewish War* (revised edition: Penguin Classics, 1981).

- Nag Hammadi corpus: Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Mary
 Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Psalms of Solomon, Jubilees, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch.
 Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars* (Penguin Classics, 2003)
 Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (Penguin Classics)
The Letters of the Younger Pliny (Penguin Classics, 1963).
- Secondary Literature**
- Blomberg, Craig. *Contagious Holiness: Jesus' Meals with Sinners*. IVP, 2005.
 Borg, Marcus J. and J. D. Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2006.
 Burridge, Richard A. and Graham Gould. *Jesus Now and Then*. Eerdmans, 2004.
 Evans, Craig. *Jesus and the Ossuaries: What Jewish Burial Practices Reveal about the Beginning of Christianity*. Baylor University Press, 2003.
 Gill, David W. J. *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting*.
 Hanson K. C. and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Fortress, 1998.
 Hellholm, D., ed. *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*. J. C. B. Mohr, 1983.
 Hemer, Colin J. *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*. Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989.
 Horsley, Richard and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus*.
 Jeffers, James S. *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era*. IVP, 1999.
 Kee, Howard C. *The Origins of Christianity: Sources and Documents*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1973.
 Klauck, Hans-Josef. *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*. B. McNeil, trans. T. & T. Clark, 2000.
 ibid., *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles*. Fortress, 2003.
 Levinskaya, Irina. *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting*.
 Mason, Steve. *Josephus and the New Testament*, 2nd ed. Hendrickson, 2003.
 McClymond, Michael J. *Familiar Stranger: An Introduction to Jesus of Nazareth*. Eerdmans, 2004.
 Millard, Alan. *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*. Sheffield, 2000.
 Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome. *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*. OUP, 1998.
 Reed, Jonathan. *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.
 Sanders, E. P. *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63BCE-66 CE*. Trinity, 1992.
 Shanks, Hershel and Ben Witherington, III. *The Brother of Jesus*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.
 Tripolitis, Antonia *Religions of the Hellenistic Roman Age*. Eerdmans, 2002.
 Winter, Bruce W. *The Book of Acts in its ancient Literary Setting*.
 Witherington, Ben, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Eerdmans, 1998.
 Wright, N. T. *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. InterVarsity Press, 1999.
 Selections from *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Biblical Archaeology Society).