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Introduction to the New Testament

Spring Semester 1999 -- 107 Hyer Hall

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Course Description

An examination of the New Testament writings, with special attention to their social context within the Mediterranean world of the first two centuries of this era. Class work will involve a study of current socio-historical and literary methodologies and an exploration of how these have been used to illuminate the probable meanings that the New Testament documents had in their original historical contexts, as well as the meanings that later generations of interpreters discovered within them.

Texts

Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. This volume contains the primary texts of the course, including the entire New Testament in the NRSV translation. The other writings in the reader—various early letters, non-canonical gospels, and miscellaneous materials—are documents that help illuminate our understanding of the controversies that emerged over the interpretation of early Christian beliefs and traditions in the second century CE.

Tyson, Joseph B. *The New Testament and Early Christianity*. New York: Macmillan, 1984. Written by the former instructor of this course, this book provides a wealth of information about various methods used by contemporary scholars of the New Testament, as well as some of the fruits of these scholars' research. Moreover, it supplies helpful background information about the Greco-Roman-Jewish milieu of the first two centuries of the present era.

Readings from both of these volumes are noted in the outline of class meetings, below. Class discussions, computer discussion board topics and exam items will be drawn from material found within these two texts, as well as from various hand-outs and information covered in class sessions.

Course Requirements

I. Class Attendance and Participation (10% of Final Grade)

Since we will be covering a voluminous amount of material in this course, regular attendance at class sessions is essential. While lectures will be the focus of these sessions, class time will also be devoted to an analysis and discussion of the materials associated with the day's topic. Consequently, students are expected to "read, mark and inwardly digest" the required readings assigned for the dates specified below in preparation for class discussions. Occasional homework assignments will be given as tools for absorbing some of the key facts and terms.

II. Computer Discussion Board Entries (20% of Final Grade)

Beginning with the second week of the course, each student will be required to make weekly contributions to a discussion board located on the instructor's Web site. All posts to the discussion board will be anonymous to everyone except the instructor, and must be entered by 5 pm on Friday for that week's set of entries. Submissions may be made for credit up to a week after the deadline with a 10 point penalty. Entries should address the material arising from that week's readings and class sessions; they may also be made in response to a post made by another student (within the bounds of civility, of course). Some starter questions will be included in the class outline below, not to induce a rigid set of Q & A responses, but simply to stimulate thought. Entries will be judged on the depth of their reflections and *not* on whether the student agrees with the interpretations of the instructor. See the discussion board handout for additional technical information on posting your entries.

III. Two Mid-Term Exams (40% of Final Grade)

There will be two mid-term examinations held during class time, one on February 5 and the other on March 5. Each will last the entire class period and will consist of identification, definition, and essay questions on the topics covered in each unit of study. Prior to the examinations, the instructor will supply study sheets that the students may find helpful in exam preparation.

IV. Final Exam (30% of Final Grade)

The final examination will be held during the published examination period. It will be similar to the mid-term exams in format, but will cover more material.

Outline of Class Meetings

I. Introduction (January 11-15)

Reading: Tyson, Chapter 1

Class sessions:

Mon. 1/1	Overview: Going Online, Textual Criticism and Dates to Remember
Wed. 1/13	Sources: The Written and the Unwritten
Fri. 1/15	A Question of Methodologies

Discussion Board (Week 1): Try a test message to be sure you understand how to post to the system. Suggested topic: What do I hope to gain from this course?

II. The Context of Early Christianity (January 18–February 5)

Reading: Tyson, Chapters 2, 4 (Greco-Roman material); Chapter 3, FAQs of the Second Temple Synagogue Web Site—www.smu.edu/~dbinder/faqs.html (material on Judaism).

Class sessions:

Mon. 1/18	<i>No Class: University Holiday</i>
Wed. 1/20	Athens meets Jerusalem
Fri. 1/22	Foreign gods, Mysteries and Philosophies

Discussion Board ([Week 2](#)): How might have Hellenistic ideas and practices influenced both Jewish thought and the rise of Early Christianity?

- Mon. 1/25** Judas the Hammer: Forerunner of Jewish Independence
Wed. 1/27 The (Roman) Empire Strikes Back
Fri. 1/29 Jewish Groups: From Essenes to Zealots

Discussion Board ([Week 3](#)): In what ways did the Roman rule of Palestine differ from that of the Hellenistic kings? Was Jerusalem's destruction inevitable?

- Mon. 2/1** Jewish Institutions: The Temple and the Synagogues
Wed. 2/3 Review for Exam
Fri. 2/5 **Examination over Parts I and II.**

Discussion Board ([Week 4](#)): Based on your present understanding of early Christianity, how would you place it in comparison with other Jewish Groups? Were there basic incompatibilities that might have made worship in the Temple and in the synagogues difficult for early Christians?

III. Jesus and the Gospels (February 8-March 5)

Reading: Tyson, Chapters 5–8; pp. 368–375. Ehrman, pp. 362–364 (Introduction and Section 2). See Additional Readings Below.

Class sessions:

- Mon. 2/8** The Historical Jesus: Will the Real Jesus Please Stand up?
Wed. 2/10 Synoptic Problems and Solutions
Fri. 2/12 Parallel Columns and Redactional Tendencies

Discussion Board ([Week 5](#)): What is your opinion of the various portraits of the "historical Jesus" that you have encountered? Which solution to the Synoptic Problem do you find most convincing—and why?

- Mon. 2/15** Matthew's Jesus: A New Moses? (**Reading:** Matt 1–2; 5–7; 23; 26–28)
- Wed. 2/17** Luke's Jesus: An Orderly Account (**Reading:** Luke 1–2; 4:16–30; 22–24)
- Fri. 2/19** Mark's Jesus: The Suffering Servant (**Reading:** Mark 1–4; 13; 14:12–16)

Discussion Board ([Week 6](#)): Of the three Synoptic portrayals of Jesus, which one do you prefer? Which one do you like least?

- Mon. 3/1** Form-ing an Oral Tradition
- Wed. 3/3** Thomas: A Fifth Gospel? (**Reading:** The Gospel of Thomas)
- Fri. 2/26** Reconstructing a Historical Jesus: Critiquing Criteria

Discussion Board ([Week 7](#)): How would you rank *Thomas* as a historical source in the Quest for the Historical Jesus? Which Criteria do you think are most useful in constructing a portrait of the Historical Jesus?

- Mon. 3/1** John's Jesus: The *Logos* Became Flesh (**Reading:** John 1–3, 18–21)
- Wed. 3/3** The Life of Jesus and Review for Exam
- Fri. 3/5** **Examination over Part III.**

Discussion Board ([Week 8](#)): How does John's portrait of Jesus differ from that of the Synoptics? How does it agree?

IV. The First Christians (March 15-April 2)

Reading: Tyson, Chapter 9; pp. 361–368, 415–418 (Jewish Christianity); Chapter 10 (Pauline Christianity).
See Additional Readings Below.

Class sessions:

- Mon. 3/15** Acts: An Orderly Account, Part II (*Reading:* Acts 1–2; 8; 10; 15–19)
Wed. 3/17 Jewish Christianity: Grappling with Torah (*Reading:* James 1–5; Ehrman, pp. 135–141)
Fri. 3/19 Jewish Christianity: After the Order of Melchizedek (*Reading:* Heb 5–10)

Discussion Board ([Week 9](#)): How does Hebrews reinterpret the meaning of the Temple cult in view of the death and resurrection of Christ?

- Mon. 3/22** Pauline Christianity: A Correspondence Course
Wed. 3/24 Galatians: Quarreling Rabbis (*Reading:* Gal 1–4)
Fri. 3/26 1 Thessalonians: A Need for Hope (*Reading:* 1 Thess 1–5)

Discussion Board ([Week 10](#)): Galatians has been called "the Magna Carta" of Christianity. How might this document represent a parting of the ways between Christianity and Pharisaic Judaism?

- Mon. 3/29** 1 and 2 Corinthians: A Preoccupation with Gnosis (*Reading:* 1 Cor 1–3; 11:17–15:58; 2 Cor 10–12)
Wed. 3/31 Romans: Being Weak and Strong in Faith (*Reading:* Rom 1–2; 14–15)
Fri. 4/2 *No Class: University Holiday*

Discussion Board ([Week 11](#)): Noting especially the evidence of the Corinthian correspondence, what functions did charismatic gifts play in the early churches? What are some of the responses of early Christianity to issues of social status, including slavery?

V. The Second Phase of Christianity (April 5-30)

Reading: Tyson, Chapters 11-12. See Additional Readings Below.

Class sessions:

- Mon. 4/5** Philemon & Philippians: Rejoicing in Chains (*Reading:* Philemon; Phil 1–4)
- Wed. 4/7** Colossians & Ephesians: From the Cosmic Christ to the Household of God (*Reading:* Col 1-4; Eph 5–6)
- Fri. 4/9** The Pastorals: The Need for Leadership (*Reading:* 1 Tim 2–3; 2 Tim 1)

Discussion Board ([Week 12](#)): What forces appear to have driven the early churches to curtail prophetic ministry and the role of women as teachers by reinforcing a strict hierarchical polity?

- Mon. 4/12** 1 Clement: More Trouble in Corinth (*Reading:* 1 Clement)
- Wed. 4/14** The Didache: An Early Church Manual (*Reading:* The Didache)
- Fri. 4/16** Revelation: Apocalypse Now! (*Reading:* Rev 1–3, 21–22)

Discussion Board ([Week 13](#)): How do you think the churches in Asia might have greeted Revelation, particularly in view of their tenuous positions within Greco-Roman society?

- Mon. 4/19** Ignatius: An Early Martyr (*Reading:* Ignatius to the Ephesians)
- Wed. 4/21** Conflict in the Community of the Beloved Disciple (*Reading:* 1 John 1–5)
- Fri. 4/23** The Flowering of Gnosticism and Churches' Response (*Reading:* 2 Peter 1–3)

Discussion Board ([Week 14](#)): What, in your opinion, was at stake in the debate

between the adherents of Gnosticism and those of the churches that were eventually to define Orthodox Christianity?

Mon. 4/26 Marcion: A Rejection of the Wicked Creator & Building a Canon
Wed. 4/28 Early Catholicism: Acceptable Diversity
Fri. 4/30 Review for Exam

Discussion Board ([Week 15](#)): Reflect back to the beginning of the semester on what you hoped to gain from this class. In what ways were these aspirations fulfilled or left unrealized?

Tue. 5/4 8-11 am: Final Exam over Parts IV and V.

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