

Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

New Testament Backgrounds

NT-722DS (3 units)

Directed Study

Fall 2005 @ MBBS: Fresno

Four meetings

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

A seminar-style study of the historical, political, cultural, and theological context in which the New Testament and other early Christian writings were written. *Prerequisites: BI-505 and BI-525.*

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Through a variety of activities (e.g., readings from primary sources, readings from secondary sources, discussions, presentations, research papers, and interpretative assignments) we will explore the world of the early Christian writings. At the completion of the course, you should be able to:

1. Outline and discuss the major features of the historical background within which early Christianity began and developed. This involves gaining a working knowledge of the various theories and proposals (*Knowledge Objective*).
2. Confess and value these ancient texts addressed to the Christian community during its first hundred years of existence as the focal point of the church's normative scripture. This involves confessing that they bear witness to the definitive expression of God's people-gathering activity in the world through Messiah Jesus (*Values Objective*).
3. Develop and articulate your own position with regard to the various historical reconstructions of Early Christianity and to the various points of debate on matters of NT Introduction. This involves gaining historical-critical skills of being able to assess the following: degrees of probability, burden of proof, appropriate expectations, limits of the evidence, one's own presuppositions, etc. (*Skills Objective*).

MBBS PROGRAM GOALS

This course contributes to the larger goals of the Seminary program in that it will help the student to:

1. Discern with greater precision the subject matter to which the biblical text gives witness, both its foreignness as well as its power to draw, to claim, and to transform life (*Biblical Formation*).
2. Engage in the hermeneutical task of exploring ways that the symbolic world of the ancient text can inform, form, and reform the cultural norms which shape our present faith community (*Ecclesial Formation*).

3. Nurture healthy interpersonal relationships and effective communication patterns in the context of the classroom learning community (*Character Formation*).
4. Develop skills in sound biblical exegesis and interpretation for preaching, teaching, social advocacy, personal enrichment, and our life together (*Ministry/Mission Formation*).

TEXTBOOKS

Readings in the following textbooks are required. They may be purchased (new or used from Amazon.com) or borrowed from the Hiebert Library, which has them on two-hour reserve. Please make reading arrangements with one another, so that everyone has access to these textbook resources.

Barrett, C.K, ed. *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire that Illuminate Christian Origins*. Harper Collins, 1989.

Ehrman, B.D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 3rd Edition. Oxford, 1998, 2000, 2004.

_____. *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader*, 2nd Edition. Oxford, 1998, 2004.

Evans, C. and S. Porter, *Dictionary of NT Background*. InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Gamble, H. *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*. Yale University Press, 1995.

Malina, B.J. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. Westminster John Knox, 2001.

Sanders, E.P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. Penguin Books, 1993.

COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to revision)

Meeting #1: First-Century Mediterranean World

Date: _____ Time: _____

-discuss and process the following, attending to the significance for interpreting the NT

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chpts 1 and 2

Malina, *The New Testament World*, entire book

Barrett, *The New Testament Background*, chapters 1 through 4

Ehrman, *Other Early Christian Writings*—*The Gospel of Thomas, The Gospel of Peter, The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, The Secret Gospel of Mark, Papyrus Egerton 2: The Unknown Gospel, The Gospel of the Ebionites, The Gospel of the Nazarenes, The Gospel According to the Hebrews, The Acts of Paul and Thecla, and The Third Letter to the Corinthians*

-submit concept plan for your Research Paper with the operative question guiding your project

Meeting #2: The Historical Figure of Jesus

Date: _____ Time: _____

-discuss and process the following, attending to the significance for interpreting the NT

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, entire book

Barrett, *The New Testament Background*, chapters 5 through 8

Ehrman, *Other Early Christian Writings—Letter of First Clement, Didache, The seven Letters of Ignatius, and The Letter of Polycarp to the Philippians*

-submit an outline and bibliography for your Research Paper

Meeting #3: The Apostolic Witness and its Development

Date: _____ Time: _____

-discuss and process the following, attending to the significance for interpreting the NT
Gamble, *Books and Readers*, entire book

Barrett, *The New Testament Background*, chapters 9 through 13

Ehrman, *Other Early Christian Writings—Letter of Barnabas, The Preaching of Peter, The Fragments of Papias, The Shepherd of Hermas, and The Apocalypse of Peter*

-research paper is due Dec. 19.

Meeting #4: Final Exam

Date: _____ Time: _____

-participate in an oral final exam

LEARNING ACTIVITIES/ASSIGNMENTS/EXPECTATIONS

The assignments are designed to promote the course and degree objectives listed above. There are three learning activities.

I expect that each student will:

1. Complete three, four-page (single spaced), Seminar Papers. These papers will provide the foundation for our meetings together. One page is devoted to interaction with the Barrett Reader and a second page for the Ehrman Reader. For both of these, be sure to note the insights, surprises, and observations you make. Be especially conscious of noting the ways these non-biblical primary texts illuminate the NT. Note carefully the introductions and footnotes.

Conclude each Seminar Paper with a two-page interaction with the book being discussed for that particular seminar. The **first page** of each of these assignments is devoted to description and observation, and analysis. Here I want you to identify the main features, themes, or ideas that the author presents. How are these ideas developed? What are the arguments used? Pay careful attention to the assumptions with which the author is working, whether stated or otherwise. What insights did you discover? Why were they significant for you? The **second page** of each of these assignments is reserved for interaction with the author. Identify at least **three issues** on which you would like further clarification or about which you would like to challenge the author. The issues could deal with the author's assumptions, arguments, and conceptual development or with the exploration of the implications of the author's work. Put each issue in the form of a question. Include a paragraph of rationale, explaining why the question is significant for NT studies.

These seminar papers are due at _____, one full day before we meet. You may email or fax me your assignment.

Each seminar paper will be graded out of ten points, based on depth of engagement.

The seminar papers will be returned to you at the start of each meeting and will form a major part of our in-class discussion and debate. **I will call on you during our meeting time to restate the major points of the material under discussion (to be sure there is good understanding) and to present one or more of your questions (to launch a constructive discussion).**

2. Write one twenty-page (double spaced), Research Paper. Select an area of NT background that interests you (see topics listed below in the section on the oral exam, for some ideas). You may want to explore texts and themes that could supplement your work on your Senior Seminar or Thesis. Your research paper should give evidence of additional readings in the major Dictionaries and Encyclopedias (e.g., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, *IVP Dictionary of NT Background*), major NT Journals (use ATLA to locate), and other monographs. The paper should be properly documented and formatted. See *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Hendrickson Publishers, 1999) which is in the Reference Section (Ref PN 147.S26) or Slade's, *Form and Style: Research Papers, Reports, Theses*, 11th ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

Submit a general topic area with operative question at Meeting #1.

Submit a detailed outline with bibliography at Meeting #2.

Submit final draft on Dec 19.

See *Appendix* for grading criteria. The research paper is worth 35 points.

3. Participate in an Oral-Final Exam. Each of the twenty items listed below is significant for understanding the world in which Christianity was born and in which the NT writings were produced.

Cynic Philosophy

Dead Sea Scrolls

Didache

Gnosticism

Gospel of Thomas

Greco-Roman paganism

Historical Jesus Research

Jewish Apocalypticism

Jewish Temple

Philo

Josephus

Maccabean Revolt

Marcion

Nag Hammadi Library

Pharisees

Synoptic Problem

Proto-Orthodoxy

Greco-Roman household system

Q Source

Zealot

For the oral exam, we will all meet together and I will ask each of you to speak about three of these twenty topics. You will draw your assignments "from a hat." I suggest you prepare for this in the following way. Think of your five-minute presentation in two parts: **Part One:** Define and/or describe the item. Here you identify exactly what the item is, give examples of who or what best represents this item, and what are its parameters or characteristics. **Part Two:** Explain the significance of the item for locating the NT within its historical setting. Here you elaborate on the impact and/or influence this item on the NT. Give examples from the NT that are clarified by an understanding of the item.

You are free to use any of your previous notes, textbooks, and library resources to compile and compose your preparation notes (e.g., the brief articles in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* [Ref BS 440.A54], the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. [Ref BR 162.2.E53], and the *IVP Dictionary of NT Background* [Ref BS2312 .D53], are very helpful). However, for the actual exam you may not use your prepared notes.

The oral exam will be worth 20 points, based on comprehensiveness.

It is only fair and right that you have equally high expectations of me as well. My commitment to you is that I will endeavor to:

1. Join you in our mutual aim of encountering more deeply the disturbing and inspiring presence of God to which Scripture gives witness. While I function as “supervisor” in guiding your reading and writing, I am committed to participate with you as a “co-journeyer” in our common quest to bring/nourish life and healing in a broken world—which is the mission of God.
2. Foster a learning community atmosphere during our sessions where ideas can be discussed and explored freely without fear of ridicule or attack. Many people have thought deeply on the subject of NT background. While each of these “visions” or “constructions” is not equally valid or defensible, each deserves to be heard and explored within the evaluative process.
3. Provide careful and helpful feedback. I believe that it is pedagogically most helpful to have constructive criticism throughout the learning process. Therefore, I am open to visiting with you about your writing projects so that you can test, clarify, and expand your ideas. Stop by my office and let’s talk. I also aim to give useful feedback on the papers that you turn in and to do so in a timely fashion.

SUMMARY OF GRADING SCHEME

| | | |
|--|-----|--------|
| Seminar Papers (3 × 10 points = 30 points) | 30% | } 100% |
| Seminar Participation (3 × 5 points = 15 points) | 15% | |
| Research Paper (35 points) | 35% | |
| Oral Final-exam (20 points) | 20% | |

NOTES

1. Academic Policies. MBBS academic policies are described at www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies. These policies provide guidance on academic integrity and plagiarism, incomplete course work, extensions, dates for changing registration, non-discriminatory and inclusive language, appeals, etc. Students are expected to be familiar with these policies and will be held responsible for adhering to them. If you have questions about how these policies relate to you or to a situation that you face in your studies, please speak to the professor or consult the Registrar or Academic Dean.

2. Evaluation. Each of the assignments has specific grading criteria (see descriptions above).

All assigned tasks must be completed to be eligible to earn a passing grade for the course.

Please note that “student work will be evaluated by two standards: a) by what is considered the appropriate level of graduate performance, and b) by comparison with work submitted in a given class” (www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/grading).

The letter grade conversions follow the MBBS Grading Template: A (100-94%), A- (93-90%), B+ (89-87%), B (86-83%), B- (82-80%), C+ (79-77%), C (76-73%), C- (72-70%), and F (69-0%) (www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/grading).

The performance expectations are as follows: “A ‘B’ grade is the baseline. A ‘B’ grade means the student is doing satisfactory work. The ‘B+’ or higher grade indicates that the student has exceeded the baseline performance standard. The ‘C’ grade indicates that the student has not achieved the baseline level” (www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/grading).

3. Due dates. Students are expected to submit written assignments on time. Late Seminar Papers will be graded down a point and valued at a maximum of 4 pts if submitted after the seminar begins. Late Research Papers will also be penalized as noted on the Evaluation Template (see *Appendix*). Late penalties may not apply to students who have a documented emergency, which prevents them from submitting the assignment on the due date. Check with me to see if alternative arrangements can be made. You may send your assignments to me by fax or email.

4. Attendance: Students are expected to attend all four seminar meetings in order to be eligible to pass the course.

APPENDIX: EVALUATION TEMPLATE

EVALUATION of *Research Paper* for _____ (student)

_____ APPROPRIATENESS (re: compliance with assignment criteria)

irrelevant/unrelated/improper [1 <-----> 20] suitable/fitting/apropos

_____ ARGUMENTATION (re: development of topic/arrangement of critique)

rambles/disjointed/illogical [1 <-----> 20] reasonable/coherent/sequential

_____ CLARITY (re: style of writing)

broken/obscure/repetitive [1 <-----> 20] flowing/lucid/succinct

_____ COMPREHENSIVENESS (re: coverage of topic or depth of analysis)

superficial/sketchy/shallow [1 <-----> 10] thorough/extensive/deep

_____ CREATIVITY (re: reader reception)

ordinary/average/routine [1 <-----> 10] novel/fresh/innovative

_____ FORM (re: spelling, grammar, diction, and citation conventions)

incorrect/sloppy/inappropriate [1 <-----> 10] correct/accurate/appropriate

_____ CARE (re: quality of presentation)

untidy/illegible/distracting [1 <-----> 10] tidy/legible/impressive

_____ /100 = _____ (reader)

Note: Late assignments will be penalized 2% for each day (or part thereof) after due date.