

Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary

New Testament Backgrounds

NT-722DS (3 units)
Directed Study
Fall 2009 @ MBBS: Fresno
Four meetings TBA

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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 (MBBS desired outcome #1: *Demonstrate commitment to live as a disciple of Jesus in Christian community*;

specifically outcomes 1.1 and 1.2; see <http://www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/educational-outcomes>).

2. Engage in the theological task of exploring ways that the symbolic world out of which the biblical text emerged can inform, form, and reform the cultural norms which shape our present faith community (MBBS desired outcome #2: *Articulate commitment to a biblical theological Christian perspective*; specifically outcomes 2.1, 2.2 and 2.4; see <http://www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/educational-outcomes>).

3. Nurture interpersonal and personal formation by interacting with those (scholars, instructors, and fellow classmates) who represent viewpoints that differ from one's own, and by integrating those insights that are useful (MBBS desired outcome #3: *Interpret one's own and other cultural contexts of ministry using theological perspectives integrated with social scientific approaches*; specifically outcomes 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3; see <http://www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/educational-outcomes>).

4. Develop skills in sound biblical exegesis and theological interpretation for preaching, teaching, social advocacy, personal enrichment, and our life together (MBBS desired outcome #4: *Practice skills in pastoral and educational leadership*; specifically outcomes 4.1, 4.2, and 4.4; see <http://www.mbseminary.edu/fresno/policies/educational-outcomes>).

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 one-day reserve. Please make reading arrangements with one another, so that everyone has access to these textbook resources. While each one would be great to have on your shelf, the texts marked with an asterisk (*) are worthy of purchase in my view.

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

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

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

Evans, C. and S. Porter, ed. *Dictionary of NT Background*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

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

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

*Sanders, E.P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London: 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. 15.

Meeting #4: Final Exam

Date: _____ Time: _____

- participate in an oral final exam

Final Paper due on Monday, December 14

LEARNING ACTIVITIES/ASSIGNMENTS/EXPECTATIONS

The assignments are designed to promote the course and degree objectives listed above. There are three learning activities. First, I list my expectations of students and then, second, I list what students can expect from me.

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 (first Malina, then Sanders, and finally Gamble). The **first page** 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** 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.

Each seminar paper will be graded out of 10 points, based on depth of engagement.

You may send your seminar papers as email attachments. I will print and assess them, returning them to you at the start of each meeting. They 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, 6000 word), 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*, *The New Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, *IVP Dictionary of NT Background*), major NT Journals (use ATLA to locate), and other monographs.

Survey the possible assessments or interpretations that scholars have advocated. What are their relative strengths and weaknesses? Be sure to move up the "taxonomy of thinking" by exercising your critical and evaluative assessment skills. What is the most viable view on the topic? Give your rationale. What areas remain uncertain for you or need further exploration? Format your paper using the appropriate academic form and cite your sources correctly. See "Notes" below for *Formatting Specifications*. See *Appendix* for grading criteria.

If you would like to receive handwritten comments on your research paper, submit a hard-copy version of your paper. You are welcome to send the research paper as an attachment, but I will not print it. I will read your work online and complete the evaluation rubric (*Appendix*), placing it in your mailbox at school.

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

Submit a detailed outline with bibliography at Meeting #2.
Submit final draft on December 14.

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	Josephus
Dead Sea Scrolls	Maccabean Revolt
Didache	Marcion
Gnosticism	Nag Hammadi Library
Gospel of Thomas	Pharisees
Greco-Roman paganism	Synoptic Problem
Historical Jesus Research	Proto-Orthodoxy
Jewish Apocalypticism	Greco-Roman household system
Jewish Temple	Q Source
Philo	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 *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [Ref BS 440.A54], the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. [Ref BR 162.2.E53], *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* [Ref BS 440.N443], and the *IVP Dictionary of NT Background* [Ref BS 2312.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 (as well as other school policies) are described at <http://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, accommodations for disabilities, 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 me or consult the Registrar.

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

All assignments must be completed in order 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” (see <http://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%) (see <http://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” (see <http://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 per day late. 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.

5. Formatting specifications. Parenthetical or footnote citation styles are both acceptable. Choose one and follow it consistently. Consult *The SBL Handbook of Style* (Hendrickson, 1999) which is in the Reference section of the *Hiebert Library* (Ref PN 147.S26) for examples of how to cite dictionary articles, journal articles, monographs, commentaries, books in series, websites, etc. Slade's, *Form and Style: Research Papers, Reports, Theses*, 11th ed. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) is also a useful guide.

6. Course evaluations. Course evaluations are to be completed online and are due one week after the completion of the course. Official grades will not be posted until the student's evaluation of the course is completed.

APPENDIX: Evaluation Rubric

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.