

BS425 Reading Early Christian Literature

Meadville Lombard Theological School

Spring Quarter 2008

Online Course: March 31 through June 6

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Course Description:

This course will examine writings of the New Testament and selected other early Christian texts, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Didache, all in light of their ancient cultural contexts. We will give particular attention to the study of the “historical Jesus”, both for its current cultural significance and as an entry point into the religious significance of the New Testament as a whole

The set of writings that comprises the New Testament was selected by the developing Christian Church over the first four centuries of its history, so that both the contents and early interpretations of the New Testament were intertwined with the institutional growth and theological development of the Church. With the coming of the Renaissance to Europe and the subsequent Protestant Reformation, new interpretive tools and a new interpretive outlook resulted in an emphasis upon rational interpretation that was no longer beholden to the authority of the (Roman Catholic) Church. This approach to biblical interpretation deepened in the period of the Enlightenment, as scholarship became ever more rationalistic and independent of traditional Christian doctrine, Catholic or Protestant.

Unitarianism and Universalism both arose in the context of these intellectual and religious changes, with the critical ability to read the Bible afresh and the impetus (and courage) to question received understandings. We will explore how the NT documents are interpreted in critical, academic scholarship as well as by traditional Christian faith, so that students may be better able (a) to understand Unitarian-Universalist history, (b) to use and interpret the NT writings for their own understanding and ministry, and (c) to interact constructively with ministerial colleagues in other faith traditions.

Textbooks:

Required Primary Sources:

An annotated, scholarly edition of the Bible (this same text will be used for Reading Ancient Israelite Literature); one of the following editions is recommended, in order of preference:

- (1) *New Interpreter's Study Bible with the Apocrypha* (Abingdon Press, 2003). ISBN: 0687278325 [also in a CD-ROM edition].

(2) *New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press; 3rd Rev ed., 2001). ISBN: 0195284852. OR

(3) *HarperCollins Study Bible with the Apocrypha* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997). ISBN: 0060655275.

Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures: Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 2003). ISBN: 0195141822.

Recommended Primary Sources:

Kurt Aland, editor, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (United Bible Societies; 26th edition, 1985). ISBN: 0826705006.

Geza Vermes, translator and editor, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Penguin Classics, Revised edition, 2004). ISBN: 0140449523.

Required Secondary Sources (textbooks):

Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus* (Orbis Books, 2006). ISBN: 1570756619.

Choi Hee An and Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Engaging the Bible: Critical Readings from Contemporary Women* (Fortress Press, 2006). ISBN: 0800635655.

Brian K. Blount, *Then The Whisper Put on Flesh* (Abingdon Press, 2001). ISBN: 0687085896.

John Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals* (Beacon Press, 2004). ISBN: 0807010537.

Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford University Press; 3 edition, 2003). ISBN: 0195154622.

Learning Objectives:

1. Interest in and empowerment for reading and interpreting the NT and other early Christian writings
2. Familiarity with the contents and contexts of these writings
3. Familiarity with scholarly resources for studying these writings, and experience in analyzing their value
4. Familiarity with critical Biblical studies and its literature
5. Facility in interpreting the NT literature, individually and collaboratively, for contemporary ministry and personal reflection

Course Requirements:1. *Class participation:*

As this is an online course, students will need to undertake a great degree of responsibility for their learning, not least by regular participation with classmates in the course's Moodle site and its discussion forums.

- To engender a sense of community among the class, and to offer the instructor some perspective in suggesting readings and research, students should compile a personal profile and post a statement of interests, qualms, and questions regarding the NT, *due by April 7*.
- Regular contributions to class forums in Moodle, on readings in the primary sources and in the textbooks will be required. Students should both *initiate* their own posts and *interact* with those of others. Students are to *initiate* a 2-300 word posting every other week (5 in all), and *interact* regularly (and significantly) with those of others.
- Textual focused seminars: each week, a discussion forum will focus on a particular passage for its historical, religious and ethical significance. Students are to *initiate* a 2-300 word posting every other week (5 in all), and *interact* regularly (and equally significantly) with those of others—these should alternate weeks with readings postings, described above.

2. *Resource survey:*

As students will not have ready access to the physical materials of Meadville's library, and its partner libraries in the Chicago area, students will undertake a survey of resources for biblical interpretation in personal, church and local public (or academic) libraries, *due April 14*. More guidance for this project will be posted online.

3. *Written projects*

- Reports of reading *one* journal articles or essays, to be selected in consultation with the instructor; reports (500 words or more) to be posted on Moodle site for the benefit of the class. It is anticipated that the article will deal with Jesus and the Gospels, or with Paul and his letters. (You may also wish to choose the article in connection with the subject of your research paper.) The report is due *April 21*.
- Book review (4-5 pages), incorporating both summary and critical response, on a title to be chosen in consultation with the instructor. At least a précis of the review should be posted on Moodle. Due by *May 5*.
- Research paper (6-7 pages) and related presentation project (which might be presented in a church context) on a particular *text* from the early Christian literature (preferred) or a selected issue in the study of the literature. A guide for structuring an exegetical paper will be provided. Due by *May 28*.

Criteria for grading written work

1. **Clarity of expression and argument** are fundamental requirements of any written work. Be sure to use your own words as much as possible: avoid overly complex sentences and technical language, unless you can explain it in your own words.

2. **Accurate knowledge and description:** observation and research require close attention to detail.
3. **Critical reflection** on one's own ideas and those of others: not every opinion is right or equally useful. Interpreters of the Bible have many disagreements: a critical reader has to sort these out to the best of her or his ability. Research should not always confirm what one thinks before starting!
4. **Creativity** and conveying **personal interest** are key ingredients to good writing. Do not merely report what others think: tell me what *you* think (and how others have helped or challenged your thinking).

Course Calendar (LS=*Lost Scriptures*)

31-Mar *Introduction: Canon, Text, Chronology, early Traditions*

Primary texts: Mark 16 (note textual additions); Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31, 21:20-25; 1 Corinthians 11, 15:1-11; 1 Thessalonians (all); LS: scan Canonical Lists, pp. 329-342; the Papias tradition:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papias>

Secondary Texts: Ehrman, pp. xxxi-xxxv, chs. 1-3, 29; Buehrens, pp. 3-38; Blount, chs. 1-2

7-Apr *Jesus & the Gospels, 1: the Synoptic Problem, the Gospel according to Mark*

Primary texts: Gospel of Mark; LS: Gospel of Peter, Secret Gospel of Mark

Secondary Texts: Ehrman, chs. 4-6; Buehrens, pp. 141-149; *Engaging the Bible*, ch. IV

14-Apr *Jesus & the Gospels, 2: the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke*

Primary texts: Gospels of Matthew & Luke; LS: Coptic Gospel of Thomas, Papyrus Egerton 2; Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Proto-Gospel of James

Internet Resource: <http://www.utoronto.ca/religion/synopsis/> (multiple Gospel parallels)

Secondary Texts: Ehrman, chs. 7-9; Buehrens, pp. 150-159; *Engaging the Bible*, ch. I; Blount, ch. 3

21-Apr *Jesus & the Gospels, 3: the fourth Gospel and the Epistles of John*

Primary texts: Gospel of John, Epistles of John (3); LS: Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Truth, Gospel of the Savior, Hymn of the Pearl

Secondary Texts: Ehrman, chs. 10-11; Buehrens, pp. 160-178; Blount, ch. 4

28-Apr *Jesus & the Gospels, 4: the historical Jesus*

Primary Texts: LS: Gospel of the Ebionites

Internet Resources: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/theories.html>;
<http://ntgateway.com/Jesus/> (an index of other sites)

Secondary Texts: Ehrman, chs. 12-17

- 5-May** *Paul the Apostle, 1:* context of the early church, Book of Acts, Thessalonians and Philemon
Primary texts: Book of Acts, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon; LS: Acts of John, Acts of Thomas
Secondary Texts: Ehrman, chs. 18-19 (& part of ch. 20; review ch. 9); *Engaging the Bible*, ch. II
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- 12-May** *Paul the Apostle, 2:* the virtual pastor-- Corinthians and Philippians
Primary texts: 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians; LS: Third Letter to the Corinthians, Correspondence of Paul & Seneca
Secondary Texts: Ehrman, ch. 20; Buehrens, pp. 179-186; Blount, ch. 5
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- 19-May** *Paul the Apostle, 3:* Jews and Gentiles-- Galatians & Romans; the Pauline tradition
Primary texts: Galatians, Romans, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 Timothy; LS: Acts of Paul and Thecla
Secondary Texts: Ehrman, chs. 21-24; *Engaging the Bible*, ch. III
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- 26-May** *Other traditions in the canon and the early Church*
Primary texts: Hebrews; LS: Letter of Barnabas
Secondary Texts: Ehrman, ch. 25; *Engaging the Bible*, ch. V & conclusion
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- 2-Jun** *Early Christian apocalypticism*
Primary texts: Revelation of John, (Mark 13, Romans 8, 1 Cor 15, Hebrews 12);
LS: Shepherd of Hermas
Secondary Texts: Ehrman, ch. 28; Buehrens, pp. 187-196; Blount, chs. 6-7
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