

STANDARD SYLLABUS

New Testament THEO 231

Theo 232 is an introduction to the historical and theological reading of the various documents of early Christianity known as the New Testament.

Knowledge Area(s) satisfied: Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge

Skill(s) Developed: Critical Thinking Skills and Dispositions

Values Requirement(s) satisfied: Understanding Spirituality or Faith in Action in the World

Learning Objectives:

Knowledge Area (Theological and Religious Studies Knowledge):

Competency A. To analyze and interpret religious texts, beliefs, and practices using standard scholarly methods and tools.

The course will survey selected writings of the NT in order to get a general knowledge of the beliefs and practices of Christianity in its earliest period and a critical knowledge of the central texts of the Christian tradition. The course will enable students to become aware of the different methods by which the New Testament can be interpreted. This will include, first of all, a concern to understand the principles of historical criticism as compared with various literal readings which are commonly identified with the movement known as Fundamentalism. As part of the introduction to the historical analysis of the New Testament, the student will be able to identify the various literary genres found in the New Testament and explain why the recognition of genre is essential to the interpretation of the NT. In addition, the student will be able to explain the importance of the oral tradition, the compositional processes and the editorial techniques by which the NT documents have reached their present form.

At times, other methodologies may be employed in order to inform the student of the range of appropriate academic methods. These may include such approaches as feminist criticism, social-science criticism, narrative criticism, and structuralism.

Competency B. To demonstrate knowledge, with attention to historical development, of the central texts, beliefs, ethical understandings, and practices of at least one religious tradition.

The proper study of the writings of the NT is inherently historical. Not only is early Christianity an outgrowth of almost 2000 years of the Jewish tradition, but the NT itself contains a series of documents written over a span of almost one hundred years and in a wide range of venues within the ancient Mediterranean world. All introductory NT courses inevitably contain a survey not only of the history of the biblical period. There will also be concern for the historical development of reflection on the Christian experience during the period covered by the canon.

Competency C. Demonstrate knowledge of the intersections between religion and selected contemporary issues, including ethics, social, political, economic, or cultural issues.

The student will be able to demonstrate knowledge of the intersections between religion and various contemporary issues, for example, by seeing how various methods of interpretation affect their attitude toward other areas of life (e.g. politics) and how erroneous interpretation can lead to fanaticism and intolerance.

Competency D. To evaluate one's own religious perspective and the religious perspectives of others.

Because students of various non-Christian religious backgrounds (Hindu, Muslim, Jewish) take these courses, some students will have the opportunity to understand the Christian tradition over against their own. They are encouraged to explore and articulate these differences.

Competency E. To demonstrate knowledge of central ethical teachings and perspectives of a religious tradition.

Because the writings of the NT were so concerned with teaching proper behavior, any study of the NT necessarily involves a detailed knowledge of the ethical principles which undergirded early Christianity. These will be studied in their various manifestations within the NT as well as in comparison with their Jewish precedents, both within normative Judaism as well as within sectarian writings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Skills (Critical Thinking Skills and Dispositions):

A. Comprehend, paraphrase, summarize, and contextualize the meaning of varying forms of communication, including, but not limited to: written work (fiction and nonfiction), speech, film, visual art, multimedia, and music.

The introduction to the NT focuses on the understanding of texts central to the Christian tradition. A central purpose of the course is to enable the student to recognize the various genres, forms, and literary techniques used in the literature of the NT. She will be expected to be able to distinguish these from their modern counterparts and to demonstrate how the difference of genre affects interpretation. Examples may include the differences and similarities of ancient and modern biography; the nature of apocalyptic writing, rhetorical devices employed in ancient letter writing, etc.

A particularly important issue is the critical understanding of historicity as it applies to the writings of the NT. Hence, the student must learn to distinguish the modern from the ancient notion of history as well as the foundations for the judgment of historical truth as it occurs in modern secular histories and in the religious histories of Judaism and Christianity.

B. Analyze relationships among statements, questions, concepts, descriptions, or other forms of representation intended to express beliefs, judgments, experience, reasons, information, or opinions.

The student will become familiar with the variations in thought within the canon of the NT and will be able to articulate these differences as they appear in the writings of the various authors.

C. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of varying points of view. Generate new ideas, hypotheses, opinions, theories, questions, and proposals; and develop strategies for seeking and synthesizing information to support an argument, make a decision, or resolve a problem.

Because students come to an introductory course in the NT from a variety of backgrounds, some bring faulty presuppositions about the nature of the documents in the collection. Others have strong opinions that may not stand up to rigid academic scrutiny. As a result, discussions about the meaning of various texts reveal opportunities for correction of opinions not founded on critical analysis. Such topics include notions of the absolute inerrancy of the writings, the primary audience intended by the writings, etc.

D. Monitor individual thinking or behavior in order to question, confirm, validate, or correct it.

Discussions in class or on a one-to-one basis as well as opinions expressed in reaction papers serve to reveal uncritical attitudes.

Values Area (Understanding Spirituality or Faith in Action in the World):

Competency A. This course enables the student to demonstrate knowledge of and capacity to articulate the foundations of one's own and others' beliefs or faith traditions.

If one is to demonstrate knowledge of and capacity to articulate the foundations of one's own and others' beliefs or faith traditions, one should be able to demonstrate knowledge of and the capacity to articulate a sufficiently mature and well-educated understanding of the documents of the NT. For most of our students these documents constitute their primary religious foundations. For those who are not Christian or who see themselves as not even being religious, the documents of the NT are important from a cultural standpoint simply because they are so important for the understanding of the religious basis of much of the world.

Competency B: This course helps the student to see how faith traditions or belief systems have been or can be related to intellectual and cultural life.

A primary goal of courses in NT is to explore not only the understanding of the methods by which the NT can be read and properly understood, it is also intended to be an introduction to the system of religious values which permeate the NT. That is, while the course is directed at an understanding of the NT and is not a course in catechetics, because the course addresses the question of methods of understanding, it necessarily develops the sophistication necessary for relating to these writings in a way that is appropriate for someone who is well-educated and well trained in other areas of life. Thus understanding of religious texts acquires the same level of sophistication as that attained in matters of history, science, literature and the social sciences.

Thus the student is assisted in recognizing and living out their personal beliefs or faith traditions in a way that respects the complexity appropriate for an adult dealing with questions of values and the meaning of life.

Competency C. Develop an ability to reflect upon the applications of one's beliefs or faith traditions to decisions in one's personal, professional, and civic life.

While it is not the primary purpose of the course to develop personal reflection upon the application of one's beliefs, a sophisticated understanding of one's foundational religious documents cannot help but contribute to a mature reflection on the relationship of those texts to one's life.

Learning Activities:

Possible array of texts:

- The HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV). New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Daniel J. Harrington, Interpreting the New Testament. New Testament Message 1. Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1990.
- Bart D. Ehrman, The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings. 3rd edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Note: (Instructors may vary the textbooks.)

Possible evaluation methods:

- Lecture
- Discussion
- Papers
- Examinations

Note: (Instructors may vary the evaluation categories.)

Sample Semester Schedule:

INTRODUCTION:

Week 1: Preliminary Remarks and Goals
 The Development of the New Testament

Week 2: Background of the New Testament: The Greco-Roman World and Judaism

Week 3: Methods of Interpreting the New Testament

THE LETTERS OF PAUL:

Week 4: Introduction to Paul and the First Letter to the Corinthians

Week 5: Letter to the Galatians

THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM:

Week 6: The Synoptic Problem

Week 7: Source Criticism and the Sayings Document

THE GOSPEL OF MARK:

Week 8: Introduction to the Gospel of Mark and Miracle Stories and Form Criticism

Week 9: Suffering, Discipleship and the Passion Narrative

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW:

Week 10: Introduction: Jesus as Teacher

Week 11: The Infancy Narratives

Week 12: The Resurrection Narratives

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN:

Week 13: The Gospel of John: The Healing of the Blind Man and the Prologue

THE NEW TESTAMENT, CANON, AND THEOLOGY:

Week 14: Canonization, Inspiration, and Revelation

Note: (Instructors may vary the presentation of topics to some degree, but the material covered will remain the same.)