

NT18: Introduction to the New Testament

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Syllabus

Course Description

NT18 provides an introduction to the writings of the New Testament. Rather than approaching these documents as a set of material simply to be learned, however, this course aims instead to teach you how to “Seek the Chaos” in the New Testament texts. As with much of the New Testament, this class motto comes from a passage in the Old Testament:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day. (Gen 1:1-5, NASB)

In this opening passage of Genesis, it is the chaotic and unformed nature of the creation that provides God with the opportunity to speak and bring forth light and structure. Similarly, it is when we approach the biblical texts with questions or confusion that we are most likely to hear God speak in a way that brings light, understanding, and the accompanying spark of life. A familiar text often becomes lifeless and dull, especially when it is understood at only a superficial level.

This course hopes to introduce the NT in such a way that it might always provide an opportunity for fresh encounters. Towards this end, it will teach you how to ask good questions of the New Testament texts, how to begin seeking answers to those questions, and how to think through the resulting theological implications. In short, this course will introduce you to the skills necessary to think like a New Testament scholar.

Course Objectives

By the end of the term, you should be able to:

- Identify quotations from various NT books
- Plot NT locations and character movements on a map
- Outline a NT book by identifying structural keys and tracing the flow of the author’s thought
- Responsibly apply the following approaches / lines of inquiry to the analysis of NT texts:
 - Text Criticism
 - Source Criticism / Synoptic Problem
 - Form Criticism
 - Redaction Criticism
 - Literary Criticism
 - Socio-historical criticism
 - Use of the OT in the NT
 - Historical Jesus
 - Pauline Chronology
 - Mirror Reading

- Canonical Criticism
 - Identify and reflect on the theological implications of these different approaches
 - Discuss the relationship of the early church to Judaism as it is reflected in the NT

Course Activities

We will proceed through the books of the NT in roughly canonical order and will focus on different critical approaches, highlighting the problems they seek to address and the features they seek to explain. Most class sessions will focus on a particular question about the text(s) for that day whose answer will involve the use of different interpretive approaches. The class sessions will therefore seek not only to model the method of a given approach but also to provide an example of its potential interpretive payoff. In addition to these smaller questions, over the length of the course we will also seek to address one of the central questions in NT studies today: how do the different NT documents understand the relationship between the early church and Judaism?

You will be given the opportunity to practice the various interpretive skills both during the class times and through short weekly assignments and precepts that will require you to grapple with the texts of the NT. Secondary source readings will be minimal; unless otherwise indicated in the syllabus, you should try to complete the assignments without consulting them. This active engagement with the primary texts is intended to provide you with a better grasp of the New Testament's content than you would get simply from listening passively to a summary.

Course Evaluation

1. Weekly Assignments (10%)

You will be required to complete 10 out of 12 weekly assignments. These assignments are intended to encourage you to try new approaches to scripture and wrestle with the resulting questions. They will accordingly be graded on a Full Credit / No Credit basis, where Full Credit will be granted for anyone making a good faith attempt to complete the assignment.

Additional assignments beyond the required 10 can be completed for a .5% bump each in the final grade. (Total possible bump: 1%)

2. Map of Palestine showing Jesus' movements in the Gospel of John (5%)
3. Text Analysis on one of three Gospel passages (15%)
4. Annotated Outline of 1 Corinthians or Hebrews tracing the flow of thought (15%)
5. Paper (6-8pp) reflecting on the theological implications of a particular criticism or line of inquiry studied in this course (with reference to the application of the criticism in at least one NT passage). (20%)
6. Final Exam (35%)
 - a. Quotation IDs (20%)
 - b. Map question (15%)
 - c. Analysis of a passage (30%)
 - d. Essay question that will require you to reflect in some way on the relationship of the early church to Judaism (35%)

Concluding Thought

This course aims to challenge and problematize your understanding of the New Testament. The questions that we raise in this course might be unsettling. For some of the questions, you will have found satisfactory answers by the end of the term. Others may require a lifetime (or more!) of reflection and insight to resolve. Yet if God is truth, then we may feel free to pursue the truth without fearing what we might find. Often the very existence of troubling questions points to problems in our current understanding of the New Testament and of God and his ways; only by acknowledging the questions and refusing to settle for unsatisfactory answers can we hope to improve our understanding. This class will accordingly encourage you to embrace and wrestle with the chaos, not as an end in itself, but as a means of pursuing the truth in the faith that his light will one day dawn and bring understanding. Seek the Chaos!