

**New Testament Texts in Context** (new! improved!)  
United Theological Seminary CH261  
Monday evenings 6–9:30

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## Scope and goals of the course

Welcome! CH261 is the introductory course in New Testament at United. We will give attention to the contents of the NT writings, the historical contexts that shaped them, and the contexts in which they are interpreted today. It is thus also an introduction to *contemporary New Testament studies*. I invite your reflection throughout the semester (and beyond) on the following questions:

- *What is the New Testament?* In colloquial terms, people often invoke “what the Bible says” about one topic or another. How *does* the Bible “speak,” if it does, and how do we know what it “says”?
- *What happened?* What different narratives do people tell today about “what happened” regarding Jesus, the apostles, and the rise of Christianity? What decisions do we make in using the NT writings to shape these narratives?
- *What matters?* How do we as modern people relate to the New Testament; how do we use it, invoke it, engage it responsibly? What are the priorities and values, what are the risks and dangers, what is at stake in our interpretation?

## Course expectations

- *Complete assigned readings* before each class session.
- *Participate in class discussions and exercises.*
- *Submit three written assignments* to me electronically at [nelliott@unitedseminary.edu](mailto:nelliott@unitedseminary.edu). These are as follows:
  - (1) Your 3-page summary and response to one of the *recommended* books, due one week after the book is discussed in class (see the schedule), in which you summarize the author’s argument, present your own assessment of its adequacy to its subject, and evaluate its significance for your own appropriation of scripture;
  - (2) a 3-page discussion of a particular biblical passage or theme in which you engage with one of the *required* readings, due no later than the final class session;
  - (3) an integrative essay, of 4-5 pages, due at the time of the final class session, in which you answer the question “what story do *you* tell about what the New Testament is and where it came from?”

Our *required* textbooks are:

Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (a comprehensive essay on the rise of Christian faith in the context of Jewish restoration eschatology and the “dynamics of expectation and disappointment”)

Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (an assessment of turn-of-the-century scholarship on Jesus and an argument for a non-apocalyptic Jesus)

Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul* (an assessment of turn-of-the-century scholarship on Paul and an argument for a thoroughly Jewish Jesus)

Keith Nickle, *Synoptic Gospels*, rev. ed., and

Paul Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, convenient introductions to these Gospels

Our *recommended* textbooks are:

Robert Funk, ed., *Five Gospels*

Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul*

Antoinette Wire, *Corinthian Women Prophets*

William Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*

Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys*

David Rhoads, ed., *From Every People and Nation*

For work with the Gospels: Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* (UBS); online, the website at [utoronto.ca](http://utoronto.ca).

### Course schedule

8 Feb-21 May

- Wk 1 Feb. 7** Introduction to the course (no reading assignments). Ways of reading scripture; “voices” in our context.
- Wk 2 Feb. 14** Class discussion of ways of reading scripture; paradigms for interpretation; “voices” in our own contexts. An orientation to first-century history and New Testament studies. *Read* Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, Part I.
- Wk 3 Feb. 21** Jesus in his historical context. *Read* Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, Part II. *Focus for discussion:* What sense do we make of Gospel accounts of Jesus casting out demons?
- Wk 3 Feb. 28** Understanding Jesus. *Read* Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*. In what ways does Borg’s Jesus differ from Fredriksen’s portrait? Which do you find more persuasive (if either)? *Reports on recommended readings:* Herzog, *Parables as Subversive Speech*; Funk, ed., *The Five Gospels*.
- Wk 4 Mar. 7** Paul the Apostle in context. *Read* Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, chap. 8 (noticing how she frames her discussion of Paul). *Focus for discussion:* the narrative Paul tells in Galatians 1–2 and Philippians 3 and his “speech-in-character” in Romans 7. How would Fredriksen account for what Paul says about himself (?) in these passages? How should we account for Paul’s “conversion”?
- Wk 5 Mar. 14** Controversies over Paul. *Read* Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul*. *Focus for discussion:* Philemon. *Reports on recommended readings:* Elliott, *Liberating Paul*, and Wire, *Corinthian Women Prophets*.

## Reading Week, Mar. 21

- Wk 7 Mar. 28** Regroup/breather. What stories do we tell about the rise of faith in Jesus? How do we regard the history of the sources (and why does it matter)? *Read* Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, to the end; Nickle, *Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 1; *review* Borg, Zetterholm, and insights from recommended readings. Do these authors share the same understanding of the sources (Paul, “Q,” Mark, etc.)? How do you evaluate the sources at our disposal?
- Wk 8 April 4** The Gospels: Matthew. *Read* the Gospel of Matthew in a synoptic presentation (and, if possible, in Funk, *Five Gospels*). Also Fredriksen’s discussion of Matthew and Nickle, *Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 3. *Focus for discussion*: distinctive aspects of Matthew—his birth narratives (chaps. 1–2), the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ relation to Pharisees, Jesus’ parables of judgment, his last week in Jerusalem.
- Wk 9 April 11** The Gospels: Luke. *Read* the Gospel of Luke in a synoptic presentation (and, if possible, in Funk, *Five Gospels*). Also Fredriksen’s discussion of Luke and Nickle, *Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 4. *Focus for discussion*: distinctive aspects of Luke: why are his first chapters different from Matthew’s? His parables? What are distinctive teachings in Luke’s Gospel; how does his passion narrative differ from Matthew’s?
- Wk 10 Apr. 18** Acts. *Focus for discussion*: How do we appropriate Acts as “our” story (if we do)? What are assets and liabilities in Acts for the church today?
- Wk 11 Apr. 25** The Gospels according to Mark. *Read* the Gospel of Matthew in a synoptic presentation (and, if possible, in Funk, *Five Gospels*). Also Fredriksen’s discussion of Mark and Nickle, *Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 2. *Focus for discussion*: what difference does it make to read Mark *last* or to imagine that he might have been written last of the Gospels?
- Wk 12 May 2** The Gospels according to John. *Read* Anderson, *Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*. *Focus for conversation*: what aspects of the Fourth Gospel are most troubling to you? Does Anderson’s discussion help, is it satisfactory, to your concerns?
- Wk 13 May 9** Later developments: Revelation especially. *Read* Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, on Revelation and her epilogue. *Focus for discussion*: Is Revelation a lost cause today? *Reports on recommended readings*: Keller, *God and Power*; Rhoads, ed., *From Every People and Nation*.
- Wk 14 May 16** The stories we tell. Your integrative papers are due at class time. *Focus for discussion*: How has your understanding of the New Testament changed or remained the same?