

SYLLABUS: GOSPELS

06NT5200

FALL 2025, CHICAGO

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE AND DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this class is simple: to better read, understand, and proclaim the four Gospels. Accomplishing such a goal is more complex than it may seem. On the one hand the Gospels are fairly straightforward and comprehensible on their own; the four evangelists are united in their goal to be understood, to testify clearly concerning “the things that have been accomplished among us” so that “you may have certainty” (Luke 1:1-4); these words are written “that you may believe” (John 20:31). There is no sophistry here, no hidden agenda; nor do we find the cryptic secrecy of the later Gnostic gospels, or the high intellectual tone of Greco-Roman historiography. These are simple histories that follow a largely traditional pattern with a clear and straightforward purpose.

And yet they are often radically misunderstood. The history of interpretation is enormously complex, the body of secondary literature mountainous, the variety of opinion on Jesus and his mission dizzying. Add to this the assumptions that we and various cultures bring to the story of Jesus and you have a perfect storm of interpretative problems. It is no wonder that this topic can generate confusion—a confusion that can even undermine the certainty that the gospel writers so wanted to instill.

Actually, one finds a similar confusion recorded *within* the Gospels. Some deliberately obfuscated Jesus’ message and intent (Matt. 22:23ff). Some were curious and confused (John 3). Others started very positively but ended up repulsed by Jesus’ message (John 6-8). And even his closest disciples were frequently dumbfounded, even at their most faithful (Matt. 16).

The reason for all this, though, is not some lack of clarity in the text. Jesus came, lived and taught among us, died a sinner’s death, and was raised on the third day. Yet these events, simple though they may be, have world-altering implications. They challenge every expectation we have about ourselves, about our God, about our neighbor, and about this world. They are wholly unexpected and transforming, for the Jew first, and also the Greek.

To understand why this is the case we will unpack the meaning of the Gospels along four trajectories.

- First, by understanding the *historical events* recorded in the Gospel and their place within history and redemption. Why did Jesus’ message create such an explosive movement? Who are the various characters in the story and why did they react the way they did? Why was this man crucified? To answer these questions, we will first need to see Jesus’ life in its Jewish and Greco-Roman context, which will involve us in extensive discussion of NT backgrounds. Having done that, we will examine how Jesus’ life and teaching resulted in his death at the hands of Jews and Greeks and his resurrection at the hands of his Father.
- Second, we will turn to the *significance* of these events. How is Jesus the fulfillment of OT expectations regarding the Messiah? How does his kingdom relate to Israel? Why did Jesus die

and what did that death accomplish? Why was he raised and what does that resurrection tell us about his Kingdom? In this section we will be focused on how Jesus himself answered these questions in his teaching ministry, paying particularly close attention to the “Kingdom Theology” represented in the Gospels and the climactic place of the resurrection within that theology.

- Finally, we will spend some time thinking about the Gospels *as books* or individual testimonies. What is a gospel? Why do we need four of them? Who wrote them and why? How are they similar and different from one another?
- Along the way we will have opportunity to substantively engage with this history of interpretation on these books. How has the church understood the message of the Gospels? What kinds of concerns did the enlightenment generate and how did critical scholarship respond? Are the Gospels reliable for understanding the historical Jesus? Rather than doing this all at once, we will intersperse such concerns throughout.

B. DATES AND TIMES

Class will be held on Mondays from 8:00 am – 5:00 pm, from Oct. 27 – 31.

All graded materials are due on December 19th, at 11:59pm.

C. INSTRUCTOR

Thomas Keene

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net: <http://signandshadow.com> <http://twitter.com/tommykeene> <http://facebook.com/keenetommy>

D. COURSE WEBSITE

You can find all course documents and some of the readings online via Canvas. All announcements will be made through that site and all assignments should be submitted there. There will also be opportunities to discuss via the forums. Make sure you have access to Canvas before the first day of class.

However, Canvas is fairly limited in its conversational abilities, so if you have a question or comment, please make contact by following these guidelines:

- If your question is in any way suited for a public environment—ie, it might be helpful to others—please use the “student-to-professor” section of the discussion module in Canvas to ask it.
- If your question is more mundane or private, email me.
- Do not use the Canvas email system as it is not suited for lengthy conversations.

II. REQUIRED READING

There’s a good bit of reading in this class, so be sure to get started! Begin with the Bible Reading assignment, then start working through Blomberg.

Readings marked with a (*) will need to be purchased or borrowed from the library. All others will be provided or are available by other means.

In addition to the ordinary kinds of secondary reading required, a number of primary sources are also required. We will discuss these periodically throughout the class, so it is best to read them the week before that discussion. A schedule will be provided on the first day of class for that purpose.

A. PRIMARY SOURCES

1. BIBLE READING

Read (or listen to) each book in a single sitting, preferably from a Reader's Bible (<https://www.crossway.org/bibles/esv-readers-bible-cob/>).

Read through each book a second time, this time making a list of as many distinct textual and exegetical questions you can think of. You will turn in this list as part of your reading report.

2. PRIMARY BACKGROUND SOURCES

You will be assigned short primary source readings throughout the semester at critical junctures (ie, when we get to the portion of class for which that reading is relevant). This will include selections from Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls, 1 Maccabees, the Gospel of Thomas, among others. You will be assigned these selections through the "Discussions" module in Canvas, your engagement with which will contribute to your participation grade. We may also discuss some of these in class.

Note: though many of these sources are patterned after Scripture, they are not inspired. They provide the background within which the Biblical books that we are studying were written and understood. Our goal is to read them critically but appreciatively, and then to discuss them as a class to gain insights in reading the NT.

B. SECONDARY READINGS

*Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey, Second Edition*. 2nd ed. edition. Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2009. Read parts 1-2, 4, 5 (you can skip chapter 19: The Theology of the Gospels)

**A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*. Edited by Michael J. Kruger. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016. Read the chapters on each of the four Gospels.

Ridderbos, H. *The Coming of the Kingdom*. Ontario: Paideia, 1962. Skip the introduction.

Hays, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*. Reprint edition. Baylor University Press, 2017. Read the introduction and conclusion.

III. ASSESSMENT

A. BIBLE READING (8%)

B. SECONDARY READING (7%)

You will testify to the amount of reading you have completed by the final due date for class assignments. Each of your required reading assignments will be listed and you will be required to estimate, on your honor, the percentage of each you completed. I consider a book "read" if you have made every effort to understand its main points and the various justifications offered for that point. This usually requires reading and comprehending each paragraph, but not necessarily each word or sentence. In short: skimming is permissible at certain points and in certain cases, but not skipping.

Partial credit will NOT be given for the Bible Reading assignments or for article/chapter length material

A. PARTICIPATION (10%)

You are expected to be actively engaged in class. This of course includes regular attendance, but in addition you should be interacting with readings, asking questions, sharing your insights, and debating the issues. Discussion will be a regular part of the course rhythm, in addition to lecture material.

There will be occasional **primary source reading assignments** during the class. You will be given two weeks to complete these readings (they will be short) in preparation for class discussion, during which you will be expected to critically engage the material and winsomely participate in the class conversation.

I do realize that everyone participates in a different way, and so other avenues for engagement are available, including through the online course discussion forums and other means. If you think you might have trouble meeting the requirement, don't hesitate to ask me how to move forward.

B. EXEGETICAL PAPER (40%)

You are required to write a 10-15 (double-spaced) page exegetical research paper on a text of your choosing from the Gospels. The paper should be submitted on canvas no later than the last day of the final exam period. Since this is a research paper, you should consult several exegetical commentaries on your chosen passage as well as academic articles and other resources.

While you are not *required* to send me your topic and thesis beforehand, doing so is recommended, particularly if this is one of your first exegetical papers. (If you would prefer to write a Biblical-Theological paper on the Gospels, or some other equivalence, you should talk to me first).

A rubric is provided in Canvas detailing how the paper is graded.

1. TEXT SELECTION

Text selection can make or break an exegetical paper, so choose your text carefully. Your text needs to be short enough that you can do it justice in the space of 10-15 pages, but long enough that it can stand on its own and has its own integrity. Aim for about a paragraph, maybe two if necessary. It is not always easy to determine where your paragraph begins and ends—different English translations and Biblical commentaries divide the text differently (there are no paragraphs in the “original,” at least not as we might consider them), so you will need to do a little research before coming to a final decision. I suggest you pick a section of Scripture (a verse or two) that seems interesting to you, then do a little research on those verses to determine the beginning and ending of the paragraph in which they occur. That final paragraph (or two) should be the center-point of your paper.

2. WHAT IS AN EXEGETICAL PAPER?

An exegetical paper, unlike a theological or thematic one, is centered upon one particular pericope of Scripture (a paragraph or two, depending on genre). That text is the heart of your paper, and your goal should be to explain what that text means in both its immediate and canonical context. By contrast, a *theological* paper is centered around a particular *topic or concept*, the discussion of which will require a multitude of biblical loci. A Biblical-Theological paper is similar to an exegetical paper, but is more concerned with analyzing how the text fits within the broader context of Scripture.

To put it another way: think of a paper as a reasoned answer to an interesting question. What makes an *exegetical* paper unique is that both the question asked, and the evidence put forward, are derived from a particular text of Scripture. It is truly *about* that text. This does not mean, of course, that you should ignore the surrounding context or the rest of the bible, but your chosen text is the center around which everything else is in orbit.

3. HOW DO I WRITE AN EXEGETICAL PAPER?

Once you have picked a text that interests you (see above), begin your research by reading your text (and its surrounding context) over and over again. Go verse by verse and ask yourself tons of questions (and write them all down). No question is too simple (or too complex)! Sometimes the key to a text is found in the questions that seem “too obvious.” Make sure at least one of these questions is “What is the *point*?” In fact, several of your questions should be variations on that all-important idea. Why does Peter say it *that way*? Why does John include *this* in his argument? Why does the author of Hebrews go there? These are all *purpose* questions, and they are the most important ones to ask.

Now start answering your questions. Don't pick up a book or a commentary quite yet. Answer your questions first by prayerfully and humbly looking at the text itself. You will need to look at the immediate context of your passage. How does it fit into the flow of the book as a whole? How does it further the author's main point? Outline your text, and outline the book in which it occurs. These types of activities help you view the text as a small piece of a larger whole.

Once you have started to explore your text a little more a “main point” should begin to coalesce in your mind. Try to write down that main point in a sentence or so. Aim for a “tweetable” main point. Then broaden your horizons. What is the main point of this section of the book? What is the main point of the book as a whole? And how does this book contribute to our overall understanding of the canon, of redemptive history, and of the Christian life?

Only after you have at least preliminary answers to these questions are you ready to crack open a commentary. Start researching your passage in reliable commentaries and articles (the *Word* series of commentaries usually have excellent bibliographies you can consult). In the course of your research you will be able to refine and develop (or reject) the ideas you have already come to on your own.

Now it's time to start writing. Sketch up a preliminary outline. Your organization will of course be dependent on your passage and the main point you want to make, but I suggest you start narrow (that is, with the details of your text) and work your way out (that is, with the literary and then canonical context of your text). After a brief introduction, start by explaining the immediate concerns of the text you picked. Are there any translation issues to note? Any strange words? Describe the flow of the argument and tell us the main point being made. Next, describe how your passage fits into the broader context of the book—start with the immediate context and then increasingly “zoom out” until the whole book is in view. As a final concern, show how your passage deepens our understanding of the Bible as a whole, how it fits into the Gospel of our redemption (this is not the major emphasis of an exegetical paper, but it's good to do). Along the way, or at the end, you can feel more than free to make some “practical applications.”

4. GREEK REQUIREMENT

If you have taken Greek please use it in your paper. Provide your own translation of the passage that you picked and justify that translation when appropriate. Use Greek when appropriate throughout. You do not need to be detailed here, but if you know Greek use it!

5. FORMAT

Your paper should be double spaced with 1-inch margins. Use Times New Roman or equivalent font, 12pt. Cite all your sources following the guidelines laid out in the *SBL Handbook*. or the *Chicago Manual of Style* (I'm fine with either the "standard" method or the newer author-date format). You might want to consider using bibliography software, such as Zotero, to make this process easier. Your paper should include a Works Cited page.

6. FURTHER INFORMATION

You can find additional guidance on writing an academic paper on my blog, starting here:

<http://www.signandshadow.com/2017/11/02/how-to-write-a-seminary-paper-part-1-the-thesis/>

C. MINISTRY APPLICATION PROJECT (20%)

Apply what you are learning by intentionally and substantively using it to serve the church. This is a fairly open-ended assignment and can be accomplished in several ways:

- Preach sermons, teach Sunday School classes, guide an inductive bible study, etc. from the Gospels (yes, this can be the same text as your paper but [don't preach your paper](#)).
- Use passages from the Gospels in pastoral counseling.
- Start up an evangelistic conversation with someone that focuses on a passage from the Gospels.
- Conduct a debate or "disputatio" on some controversial subject matter that we have been discussing in the class, such as the reliability of the Gospels.
- Write a hymn or poem or other creative work derivative of Gospel material that can be used liturgically.
- Perform a rap-battle between the four evangelists (yes, in costume).

Once you have completed your project, you will report out about it in a 500-1000 well-written document that addresses the following:

- What was your project?
- To what extent did you draw on material from the class in your endeavors, and how was it helpful (or why was it not helpful)?
- How did it go?
- What did you learn? What would you like to do differently? What do you need to learn or study or meditate on or practice to do what you did better?

D. SELF STUDY (15%)

Complete ONE of the following, either:

1. BOOK REVIEW

Provide an “appreciatively critical” review/response to an additional book-length reading of your choosing (there’s a bibliography in Canvas). The requirements are as follows:

- First and foremost, your review should be “appreciative.” You may not agree with the author, but you should engage their argument, accurately represent their viewpoint in your analysis, and seek to learn from their perspective in substantive and tangible ways.
- Secondly, your review should be “critical,” by which I mean “probative and investigative” (rather than “polemical and argumentative”). Your goal here is not to demolish but to critique and improve. What about the argument is praiseworthy? Are there flaws in the overall argument? How might those flaws be addressed? What was missing that can be added? What was lacking that could be improved? If you are reading something you disagree with, you should avoid a “take-down” rebuttal, but it is appropriate to state the nature of the disagreement and provide an argument for an alternative.
- 1000 words (+/-), standard academic formatting (cite your sources, use formal language, etc.), great papers will use external sources (but this is not a research paper).

2. POSITION PAPER

Write a 3-5 page position paper that answers one of the following problems associated with the Gospels.

1. Should the events of the intertestamental period impact our understanding of the life and message of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels? If so, what impact does it have? You may want to integrate extra-biblical primary sources into your answer.
2. The Gospels have been described as “passion narratives with extended introductions.” Is that a fitting description? Why or why not?
3. Many have seen a tension between Jesus’ proclamation of “the Kingdom of God” and Paul’s doctrine of “union with Christ by faith.” Jesus, it seems, accents the rule and dominion of God over the earth, calling his followers to “follow him” in lives of faithful and sacrificial obedience to the will of God. Paul, by contrast, calls “the Jew first, and also the Greek” to faith in Jesus, through which they will be justified and sanctified by union with him. Address this issue. Is the tension real? Is it resolvable? Be sure to describe the content and significance of Jesus’ teaching regarding the Kingdom of God in your answer.
4. Assess the historical reliability of the gospels. As you do so, either (1) include within your assessment a narration of the various quests for the historical Jesus and their relevance to the reliability question, or (2) assess the advantages and disadvantages of “harmonizing” divergent or apparently contradictory passages within the Gospels (illustrate with at least one such pair of passages).
5. Solve the “synoptic problem.”
6. Other topics will be considered on request.

IV. SCHEDULE AND OUTLINE

A detailed schedule of required and suggested readings and due dates will be provided on the first day of class, as will an outline of lecture material. Those wishing to get ahead should start by reading the Bible Reading, Blomberg, and the relevant chapters in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the NT*.

V. GRADING SCALE

96-100	A	87-89	B+	Etc.
90-95	A-	83-86	B	<60 F
		80-82	B-	