

Introduction to the Jewish Background of the NT



Instructor

Dr. Matthew Colvin
m.colvin@davenantinstitute.org
(778) 967-4262

Description

This course is an exploration of the use of extra-Biblical Jewish sources in scholarship on the New Testament. After the first week's orientation to the sources and the history of scholarship, each subsequent class focuses on one particular topic for which Jewish background is especially illuminating: politics, sexual and social norms, government, sacraments, eschatology, and linguistic influences. Special attention is given to areas of Jewish life that are less familiar to Christian readers of the NT, especially the field of law. Students will gain a sense of the criteria of profitable and proper handling of Jewish sources; the ability to use them in their own study of the Bible; and the joy that comes from solutions to exegetical puzzles, resulting in a better understanding of Scripture.

The course does not require knowledge of the ancient languages, although those who know the languages will benefit from them. All readings, both ancient texts and modern scholarship, will be provided in English and distributed via Google Classroom.

Format

Each weekly class meets for 2 hours via Zoom. Before each Zoom meeting, students should read the assigned selections from Jewish sources and modern scholarship. Most weeks will also include a "flipped classroom" video lecture that should be watched before class.

Weekly Topics

Week 1: The Sources

A brief survey of 2nd Temple and Rabbinic Jewish sources, and of the history of modern scholarship on them, from its beginnings in Germany with the Institutum Judaicum and P. Billerbeck, to contemporary work such as the *Compendium Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, D. Instone-Brewer's *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the NT*, and *The New Testament Gospels in their Jewish Contexts*.

Week 2: Language

A survey of odd phrases and linguistic features in the NT that are either "Semitisms" ("Hebraisms" or "Aramaisms") or reflect distinct features of Jewish life. Discusses the Hebrew scholarship of St. Jerome and Origen; Hellenistic Jewish methods of interpreting the Biblical

text; the Septuagint and the Targums as examples of Jewish translation choices; allegory and midrash; Aramaic *vorlages* behind the Lord's Prayer.

Week 3: Politics and Martyrdom

Study of passages in the NT that are illuminated by political texts from Philo, Josephus, and the Talmud. Comparison of Jewish and Christian martyrdom texts, drawing on the work of N.T. Wright and Patrick Stefan.

Week 4: Sex, Marriage, and Divorce

The work of D. Daube and D. Instone-Brewer is brought to bear on passages of 1 Corinthians to shed light on the Biblical text from Rabbinic and 2nd Temple sources about marriage, divorce, and homosexuality.

Week 5: Rituals and Purity

Draws on Rabbinic discussions of purity and ritual actions to illuminate some otherwise mysterious passages in the gospels and Paul: the woman with the bleeding; the Samaritan woman and her pitcher; and "otherwise your children would be unclean" (1 Cor. 7).

Week 6: Ecclesiastical Polity

Surveys the debate that has raged since the Reformation over the Jewish antecedents of Christian church government and offices, including the thesis of synagogal origins (Stillingfleet and Vitringa) and the scholarship of Rengstorff and Daube on the concept of apostleship (*shlichut*) in Rabbinic law and the NT.

Week 7: Sacraments

Sketches an approach to scholarship on the Lord's Supper and Baptism from Jewish sources, drawing on the instructor's *The Lost Supper* (2019) and on F. Gavin, *The Jewish Origins of the Christian Sacraments*.

Week 8: Eschatology

Comparison of Jewish and Christian eschatological doctrines: the Sadducees' question to Jesus; Pharisaic conceptions of resurrection; the Pauline doctrine of justification in comparison with that of the Qumran community; Rabbinic concepts of Heaven and Hell.

Assessment

Exegetical commentary (20%) - Students will work up a passage of the NT and write a brief commentary on it, applying suggested ancient Jewish sources and evaluating their usefulness.

Final paper (40%) - A 10 page essay on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor.

Final exam (40%) - An open-note exam consisting of multiple choice and short answer questions based on the readings and lectures.