

NATURE AND MEANING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

BIB102H.02

Spring Semester, 2008
Eastern University
M/W/F 11:00—11:50
McInnis 300

Professor: Dwight N. Peterson
219 McInnis 610 341-1709
dnpeters@eastern.edu
Office Hours: as posted on my door or
by arrangement

Course Description

The New Testament is the second major part of the Christian Bible. Christians have long held it to be the Word of God that bears witness to Jesus of Nazareth and his significance as the Christian Messiah. The 27 books of the New Testament exist at an interesting interpretive nexus. They are in some sense the fulfillment or completion of the Old Testament; they were written in the first century of the Common Era amidst an enormously complex and interesting set of cultural, religious, linguistic, political and other contexts; they were collected and became Christian Scripture over the next several centuries; they have been an authoritative and shaping presence throughout the history of the Church from very early in her history; they have been an important force in shaping the culture of the West since the time of the Roman Empire, and by that means of many other cultures; and they have held a special place in the hearts and minds of individual Christians, including many of you. All of these characteristics of the New Testament make it well worth studying. This semester we get to do that. We will read and discuss much of the New Testament. In addition, we will read a draft of a text I am in the process of writing, as well as other secondary readings. Our goal in the course will be to become familiar with the content of the New Testament and its cultural and literary contexts, as well as to notice how the New Testament has functioned and continues to function authoritatively in the Church.

Course Objectives

1. *To read the New Testament.* The New Testament is the primary text in this class. It is more important for you to read it than any of the other assigned readings. By the end of the course you will be able to tell me (or anyone else, for that matter) what the book of Philemon is about, what is different and similar between Romans and Galatians, what makes the book of Revelation unique in the New Testament, etc. You will also be able to see a passage from the New Testament on a page and tell if it is from Matthew or John or I Thessalonians, etc. To that end, there will be measurement opportunities to measure your recognition of biblical passages and understanding of the content of the New Testament.
2. *To learn about the social and historical contexts that gave rise to the New Testament and the earliest churches.* To that end we will read about and discuss historical and social currents that characterized the Mediterranean world in and around the First Century A.D.
3. *To become familiar with the geographical setting of the New Testament.* To that end, you will prepare two maps, identifying important sites in the first century Mediterranean world.
4. *To be introduced to what New Testament scholarship looks and feels like.* To that end I will introduce selected topics of interest to biblical scholars in recent years.
5. *To write reflectively and clearly about the New Testament, to interact with the New Testament, and to practice thinking out loud, arguing, coming to consensus, etc.* To these ends, class attendance and participation will be at a premium. In addition, weekly preparation papers will encourage you to be ready for discussion of the topics for the week.

Required Texts

- Burridge, Richard A. *Four Gospels, One Jesus? A Symbolic Reading*. Second edition. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005. ISBN: 978-0-8028-2980-1
- Coogan, Michael D., Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, Pheme Perkins, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*. 3rd edition. New York: Oxford, 2001. ISBN: 0-19-528484-4
- Gorman, Michael J. *Reading Paul*. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2008.

During the course of the semester copies of drafts of a text on the New Testament that will also be required reading for the course will be made available to you on the BlackBoard site for this class. There will be other required readings, as well, which will be provided to you in various ways.

Attendance Policy

This course will emphasize class participation and discussion; consequently, I will take attendance each day. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS AN EXCUSED ABSENCE IN THIS COURSE. Instead, you get *three free absences*. After that, each additional absence will result in a three percentage point deduction from your final grade. According to Eastern University policy, the equivalent of nine hours of absences from a Core course (for this course, this means 9 absences) results in automatic failure of the course.

Course Requirements

1. *Reading*. You will read most of the New Testament, along with selected secondary readings. I expect you to read all assigned readings on time. For our purposes, "on time" means "before class on Friday of the week for which the reading was assigned." There may also be additional reading assignments that you will be expected to have read for a particular class period. At the end of the course you will submit a reading report telling me the percentage of the reading you have done "on time." This report will constitute 5% of your final grade. ***This portion of your grade is entirely under your own control!***
2. *Attendance and participation*. This course will emphasize class participation and discussion. I will take attendance at each meeting. See attendance policy above.
3. *Map assignment*. You will produce and label two maps—one of the Mediterranean Basin in the first century A.D., and one of Palestine in the first century A.D. See page 6 of this syllabus for more details. The maps will constitute 5% of your final grade.
4. *Preparation papers*. You will write fourteen (14) 1- to 2-page papers according to the schedule printed in the Tentative Schedule beginning on page 4 of this syllabus, to be turned in at the class period on the date each is due. These papers are intended to help you to prepare for the topic to be discussed in class for that day. Each paper must be typed and double-spaced, with your name and the date on which it was due on a single line across the top of the paper. You should use 1-inch margins all around. You may write notes on your papers during class discussions. ***Because these papers are important for your preparation for particular classes, late papers will not be accepted under any circumstances.*** If you write 14 acceptable papers, you will earn full credit for 20% of your grade. You will lose 2 percentage points off your final grade for the class for each paper that is not turned in on time. ***This portion of your grade is entirely under your own control!***
5. *Measurement Opportunities*. There will be a midterm measurement opportunity, as well as a final measurement opportunity. These will be largely objective and will attempt to measure your

knowledge of the content of the New Testament, along with other things we have discussed in class.

Disability-related student needs

It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, accommodations to students who have disabilities that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. I strongly encourage any students with disabilities to contact me as soon as possible to discuss their individual needs for accommodations so that those needs can be met in a timely manner. If you have a physical or learning disability that affects your performance in class and for which you will require accommodation, you must also contact the Cushing Center for Counseling and Academic Support in 210 Walton Hall (third floor), x5837. If the professional staff of CCAS determines that you require special arrangements in order to maximize your performance in and enjoyment of my class, they will write me a letter to that effect, recommending particular arrangements. ***I will accept their recommendations.*** That said, I am not at liberty to make arrangements directly with students. It is imperative, therefore, that you go through CCAS.

Statement regarding expectations related to academic integrity

When speaking about standards for our community at Eastern University, the *Undergraduate Catalog* mentions that violations of University policy include "all forms of dishonesty, including cheating [and] plagiarism...." I expect you to know, understand and follow Eastern University's expectations for academic behavior in this class.

Grading

Grading is on a 10-point scale. +'s and -'s are at the high and low ends of these ranges.

A	90-100
B	80-90
C	70-80
D	60-70
F	Below 60

The following represents the percentage of your final grade which each of the requirements will constitute:

Reading report	5%
Maps	5%
Preparation Papers	20%
Midterm measurement opportunity	30%
Final measurement opportunity	40%
	100%

Discussion Guidelines

This course depends to a great extent on your participation during class time. Sometimes class discussions work very well, but sometimes they do not. The following are some guidelines that are meant to maximize good discussions.

1. *No yelling except in designated areas.*
2. *Everyone is encouraged to participate.* This means YOU.

3. *Everyone's voice is worth being heard.* Be kind to one another.
4. *This does not mean that whatever you say is immune to or beyond criticism.* Nor does it mean that you must not disagree with or criticize something one of your classmates has said. When you contribute, you should expect to have what you say put under scrutiny. When you criticize, do so in a civil way, recognizing that your criticism will in turn be open to critique. This is the nature of academic discussion; it is the way all of us learn to articulate our thoughts in clearer and more persuasive ways.
5. *If at any time you feel as if you have been talking too much, YOU HAVE!!!* Be careful not to dominate class discussion.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

Week	Topic	Reading	Due/Notes
Week 1: Jan 14-18	Getting to know you. What is the New Testament? Development of the Canon. Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts.	1 Maccabees	
Week 2: Jan 21-25	Introduction to the Gospels. The Gospel of Mark.	Mark; Burrige chapters 1-2	No class Monday PP#1 Maps due Friday
Week 3: Jan 28—Feb 1	The Gospel of Matthew.	Matthew; Burrige chapter 3	PP#2
Week 4: Feb 4-8	The Gospel of Luke.	Luke; Burrige chapter 4	PP#3
Week 5: Feb 11-15	The Gospel of John. What do we make of the Gospels?	John; Burrige chapters 5-6	PP#4
Week 6: Feb 18-22	The Acts of the Apostles. Introduction to Paul.	The Acts of the Apostles; Gorman chapters 1-5	PP#5
Week 7: Feb 25—29	The Thessalonian Correspondence.	I, II Thessalonians; Gorman chapters 6-7	PP#6 Friday: Midterm
Spring Break: March 3-7			
Week 8: March 10-14	The Corinthian Correspondence. Galatians.	I, II Corinthians; Galatians 1-2. Gorman chapters 8-9	PP#7
Week 9: March 17-21	Galatians. Ephesians.	Galatians; Ephesians; Gorman chapters 10-11	PP#8, 9; Friday is Good Friday—no class

Week 10: March 24-28	Philippians. Colossians.	Philippians; Colossians	PP#10; Monday is Easter Monday—no class
Week 11: March 31—April 4	Romans.	Romans	PP#11
Week 12: April 7-11	Philemon. The Pastoral Epistles.	Philemon; I, II Timothy; Titus	PP#12
Week 13: April 14-18	James. The Johannine Letters.	James, I-III John	PP#13
Week 14: April 21-25	The Apocalypse.	The Apocalypse	PP#14
Week 15: April 28	Wrapping up.		Monday: Last day of classes

Additional Reading Schedule

The Tentative Schedule on the previous page notes only required readings from the Bible. Other required readings will be announced in class as the semester progresses.

The **FINAL MEASUREMENT OPPORTUNITY** has been scheduled by the authorities from on high to be administered on **Friday, May 2, 2008 from 9:00—11:00 AM**. *According to Eastern University policy, Final Measurement Opportunities must be taken at the time scheduled.*

I do not like to reschedule due- or test-dates. Late work will either receive no credit or result in a substantial deduction from your grade. **THERE IS NO PROVISION FOR EXTRA CREDIT.**

Nature and Meaning of the New Testament (BIB 102)

Map assignment, Spring 2008

Draw *each* of these maps on separate 8 ½ x 11, unlined sheets of paper.

Due: Friday, January 26, 2007

Locate the following on the map of the Mediterranean Basin

Bodies of water

Mediterranean Sea	Aegean Sea	Nile River
Dead Sea	Bosporus	Sea of Marmara
Sea of Galilee	Hellespont	
Jordan River	Adriatic Sea	

Geographical Regions

Palestine	Bithinia	Italy
Asia	Pontus	Cyprus
Galatia	Syria	Malta
Pamphylia	Macedonia	Egypt
Pisidia	Achaia	Patmos

Cities

Jerusalem	Lystra	Thessalonica
Caesarea	Derbe	Beroea
Damascus	Miletus	Athens
Antioch	Ephesus	Corinth
Tyre	Colossae	Cenchreae
Sidon	Troas	Lechaeum
Iconium	Philippi	Rome

Locate the following on the map of Palestine

Bodies of water

Mediterranean Sea	Dead Sea
Sea of Galilee	Jordan River
Lake Huleh (Semechonitis)	

Geographical Regions

Qumran	coastal plain	Plain of Esdralon
Jordan Valley	Galilee	
hill country of	Samaria	
Judea	the Decapolis	

Cities

Jerusalem	Nazareth	Tyre
Bethlehem	Nain	Sidon
Jericho	Cana	Caesarea
Emmaus	Bethsaida	Esdralon
Capernaum	Tiberias	Joppa

Questions about the Gospel of Mark

Mark begins by quoting "Isaiah." What texts does he actually quote? What is the significance of beginning his Gospel by quoting the OT, and particularly Isaiah?

What do you learn about Jesus from the several pericopae in chapter 1 which occur in what is presented as a single day?

Read Jesus' explanation of why he speaks in parables in Mark 4 (note that he quotes Isaiah). Is this surprising to you? Why? What does this tell you about what parables are (at least in the Gospel of Mark)?

Pay special attention to Mark 8:22–10:52. This is a highly structured portion of his Gospel. Make an outline, paying special attention to structural elements (e.g., beginning/ending, repeated things).

Questions about the Gospel According to Matthew

Who wrote the "Gospel According to Matthew"? What evidence can you draw on to support your conclusion? Where does the author overtly draw attention to his own identity (e.g., using the first person singular pronoun –"I"–, or naming himself, or otherwise making it clear that he is an eyewitness to the events he narrates)?

Assuming first impressions are important, what sort of impression does the Gospel make on you in its first two chapters? What is significant about how we are introduced to Jesus?

Make a list of things that happen in Matthew's birth narratives (1:18–2:23) and in his resurrection narratives (27:57–28:20; the resurrection narratives proper do not actually begin until 28:1).

How is Mark similar to and different from Matthew? How does Matthew differ from Mark, where, and in what ways? For Example, where does Matthew begin his story in comparison to Mark? Assuming that the Gospel of Mark ends at 16:8, where does Matthew end his story in comparison to Mark? What sorts of material does Matthew have in his middle (i.e., neither the beginning nor the end) that Mark lacks?

One of the things scholars of Matthew observe in the body of the Gospel is the alternation between narrative and discourse. What does this mean? Which passages in Matthew are narrative, and which are discourse?

In the first sermon in Matthew (hint: this is the first extended tract of discourse in the Gospel), Jesus is presented as interacting extensively with the Jewish Torah or Law. How would you characterize Matthew's Jesus' rhetorical relationship to the Torah? Does he reject it entirely, or embrace it entirely? Or does he do something else with it? Does he come under its authority, or does he place it under his own authority?

What is the basic geographic outline of the Gospel as a whole? In other words, Jesus is an itinerant preacher and teacher; where does he go and in what order?

Questions about the Gospel of Luke

How is the Gospel of Luke similar to and different from the Gospels of Mark and Matthew? Make a list of differences in three categories: beginning, middle and end. How can one make sense of these differences and similarities?

Pay special attention to the first 4 verses of Luke and the first 5 verses of Acts. Especially with regard to Luke 1:1-4, what do you learn about the author, the audience, the methods by which the Gospel was written, the sources he used, and the purposes for which he wrote?

The first two chapters of Luke are narratives surrounding the conceptions and births of John the Baptist and Jesus. Make a list of general characteristics you observe about these two

chapters. In particular, who are the main characters? What sorts of people are they? What happens and in what order? With regard to the birth of Jesus, what events are narrated in Luke? What is the purpose of all the poems in these chapters? What impression do these two introductory chapters make on you, especially as they relate to the relationship between Jesus and the history of the Jews?

Many readers believe Luke is organized along a geographical theme. Pay attention to the following: Where does the first scene in Luke occur? Where is Jesus taken soon after he is born? Where does he go as a young boy of 12? Where does the last of the three temptations take place? After 9:51, toward what geographical location is the book oriented? Where do the events of the last week of Jesus' life occur? Where do the resurrection appearances occur in Luke (compare these where Mark promises that Jesus will appear, and where Matthew narrates those appearances)? Where geographically does Luke end? Do you notice a pattern? How might you make sense of this pattern?

Compare and contrast the temptation narratives in Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12,13, and Luke 4:1-13.

Compare and contrast the events after the burial of Jesus in Luke with those narrated in Mark and Matthew. Make lists of what occurs and in what order in each Gospel.

Questions about the Gospel of John

We have focused on how Gospels begin in our surveys of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Do this again for John. Where does John begin his story? What sort of first impression is he trying to make on you. Who is the "word"? How, from the text, do you know? Is this different from what we have learned about Jesus so far in the Gospels? How?

We have noticed that the Gospels appear reticent to let you know much if anything about their authors. Is this the case for the Gospel of John? Who wrote this book? How do you know? (i.e., find passages in the Gospel which point to an author)

What is the purpose of the Gospel of John (John 20:30,31)? What might this say about the original audience?

How is John similar to and different from the first three (or "Synoptic") Gospels? Be as specific as you can be. In particular, make a list of things that appear only in the Gospel of John.

Many scholars have said that John's "symbolic world" is "dualistic." What could they mean by such a statement? Find evidence in the story John tells for this dualism.

Another thing that is often said about the Fourth Gospel is that its narrative proceeds on two levels. Specifically, vocabulary is used which can have two meanings: one which Jesus appears to intend, another which the characters in the Gospel actually perceive (usually mistakenly). Pay special attention to Chapters 3 (the conversation with Nicodemus), 4 (the conversation with the woman at the well), and 9 (the story of the man born blind), and look for these two levels. Be prepared to converse about these in class.

Who is the Beloved Disciple? Where does he appear in the Gospel? Does the Gospel ever explicitly identify him? Why do you think he is routinely identified as John, the son of Zebedee?

What do you think holds the Gospels together? We have emphasized the differences between and among them in class, but it is clear that they actually share many things in common, and perhaps have a common message (or set of messages). Make a list of things they share in common, and be prepared to converse about them.

Questions about I Thessalonians

I Thessalonians is probably the first extant Pauline letter, written to the church Paul had recently founded in Thessalonica. Consider the following questions in preparation for class.

Compare Paul's itinerary in Acts 16-17 with his reported travels in I Thessalonians. How do they match up? Make lists of his itinerary in each book and line them up with each other.

By using the "telephone technique" we have discussed in class, sketch out in as much detail as you are able the "occasion" for this letter. What is Paul's relationship like with these people? How long has he known them? What sorts of issues in their church have called forth Paul's letter to them?

Chapters 4 and 5 of I Thessalonians address issues related to the "Parousia" or return of Christ. When does Paul expect the Parousia? Note particular passages.

Questions about I Corinthians

The Corinthian Correspondence (I and II Corinthians) is the longest correspondence we have to any single church in the New Testament. In these letters, Paul addresses particular issues confronting this particular church (a list of which you will compile from I Corinthians), names particular people, and gives specific pastoral direction. For these reasons, the Corinthian Correspondence provides an explicit window into a particular Pauline church. We think we know more about the Church at Corinth than any other particular church.

Paying attention to the following passages (I Cor 1:11; 5:9; 7:1; 2 Cor 2:1-4), sketch out in as great detail as you can the relationship and correspondence between Paul and the church at Corinth. There were more letters exchanged between Paul and Corinth than just these two. Piece them together.

Paul addresses a long list of particular pastoral issues in I Corinthians. Read the book carefully and list them, along with the passages that address them.

The unity of the church is a special theme running throughout I Corinthians. This is so probably because the church at Corinth was such a divided community. What sorts of things divided them? Why does Paul believe unity to be so important?

The presence and roles of women in the earliest churches, especially in Pauline churches, is a topic of endless interest among readers of the New Testament. Paying attention to the following passages (I Cor 1:11; chapter 7; 11:5; and 14:33bff.), what can you say about women in the church at Corinth?

Paul's letter to Corinth was "occasional"; i.e., it was called forth by particular circumstances in that church at that time. Reading I Corinthians carefully, generate a list of reasons why Paul wrote this letter.

What sorts of things do we learn about the Pauline churches and Paul's ministry from I Corinthians?

Questions about Galatians

Galatians is a letter written by Paul "to the churches of Galatia." We do not know precisely where these churches were—other than somewhere in the country we now call Turkey. We do not know the names of any of the folk at Galatia. We do not have access to their social levels of the same sort as we have at Corinth. Acts does not give us nearly as much of a story about Paul at Galatia as it does about the Thessalonian correspondence or the Corinthian correspondence. We do not know when this letter was written—somewhere in the mid-50's of the first century C.E. is as good a guess as we can get.

On the other hand, we do know that there was a major theological/social problem at Galatia, a problem about which Paul had strong feelings and views. This problem, Paul thought, cut right to the heart of the Gospel; it is a problem which many modern exegetes have taken to point to the so-called "center" of Paul's thought. This problem has something to do with the issue of how people are "justified" or "declared righteous" before God—does justification come by means of "faith" or by means of "works." And what exactly are these "works" about which Paul has such strong negative feelings anyway?

Here are some passages from Galatians that indicate that, whatever else is going on, there is a lot on the table for Paul. A lot depends on an appropriate understanding of "faith" and "works" and "justification."

- 1.1 "Paul, an apostle *not of humans, nor through human agency*, but through Jesus Christ and God the father who raised him from the dead."
- 1.6 "I am amazed that you have so quickly turned away from the one who called you in the grace of Christ for another gospel." This is in place of what we have come to expect from a Pauline letter—a thanksgiving section.
- 1.8 "[Whoever preaches to you a gospel] different from which I preached to you, let him be accursed."
- 3.1 "O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?"
- 5.12 "Would that those who are troubling you would mutilate themselves!"

The main part of the theological argument is conducted in chapters 3 and 4 of Galatians. These chapters are followed by a couple chapters of parenesis (moral exhortation; stuff to do), in which Paul, as always, makes it clear that he believes the Christian life needs to be lived out in particular sorts of ways. While the last four chapters have a lot in them worthy of discussion, I want us to focus our discussion on the first two chapters of Galatians. So for next time, ponder the following items:

What is the issue at hand here? In other words, why is Paul so worked up? Or, what counts as "another gospel which is in fact no gospel at all"?

Make a list of all the characters who come into view in the first two chapters. Who are they? Why are they important? Why does Paul introduce them?

Make a list or time line of Paul's activities as he narrates them in these chapters.

What is Paul's relationship with the "human" authorities in Jerusalem?

Why does Paul tell that long history of his former life, conversion, travels and relationships — good and bad — with the Jerusalem authorities? How does this all serve to set the table for the argument which follows?

Questions about Ephesians 5:15-33

This is the longest passage in the New Testament that addresses the nature of the relationship between a wife and her husband. The words here are often quite controversial—especially the word "submit" used to describe what a wife is supposed to do with respect to her husband. As you prepare for a class discussion on these verses, ask the following questions:

Where do you come from? What is your own opinion regarding husbands and wives and how they ought to relate? Where does this opinion come from? What marriages are you familiar with, and what do they look like with respect to this passage? I ask these questions to emphasize

that most of us come to a passage like this one with experiences and judgments that do inform how we read these words.

Why do you think I have linked vv. 15-20 with vv. 21-33?

Make a list of verbs and actions associated with wives, and a similar list of verbs and actions associated with husbands. What does this show you?

What effect does Paul's comparison of the marriage relationship to that between Christ and the church have on your reading of these words? What precisely is comparison being made? How would you characterize the relationship between Christ and the Church?

How and where is the issue of "leadership" (in particular, the husband as the "spiritual leader" of his family) addressed?

What should Christians do with a passage of Scripture like this one? What have Christians done with it?

Questions about Philippians

Paul's letter to the Philippians was most likely written toward the end of Paul's ministry, either in the late 50's or early 60's. Paul is a prisoner when he writes the letter, and appears to have a good relationship with this church, which he founded (see Acts 16). There is virtually no question among scholars that Paul is the author of this letter, although some people think it might be a letter cobbled together after the fact from a number of smaller letters and letter fragments. In preparation for that discussion, here are some questions to guide your thinking.

How would you characterize the relationship between Paul and the church in Philippi? Be specific, and tie your observations to particular passages.

Philippians is not one long argument like Romans. It rather addresses a number of topics, which might give us a bit of insight into the character of this particular church. Reading like a detective, make a list of reasons why Paul appears to have written this letter. Be specific, and tie your observations to particular passages.

Many readers of Philippians have detected a particular "feel" or ambiance to the letter, a feel different from that of most of Paul's other letters. What do you think this might be?

Philippians 2:5-11 is a beautiful passage, often called the *Carmen Christi*, or Hymn to Christ. Pay close attention to the hymn and its context. What does one learn about Christ in this hymn? And perhaps more importantly, to what end does Paul quote it? (In other words, assuming theology and practice always go together, what purpose might Paul have had in quoting such a deeply theological hymn?)

What sorts of characteristics of Paul and his personality do you see reflected in this letter? I have particularly in mind his non-thank-you thank-you in chapter 4.

One of the signs that a letter has undergone later editing is what scholars call literary seams—places where it is evident that an abrupt change of topic or tone occurs. The presence of such seams in Philippians is what has led many readers of the letter to think it is the result of the joining of earlier, originally unrelated, letters or fragments of letters. See if you can detect any such seams.

Questions about Romans 9-11

Romans 9-11 are some of the most difficult chapters in Paul. It is the only place in his letters in which he addresses the phenomenon of Jews who do not believe in Jesus. This phenomenon is problematic for Paul because God has made promises to Israel, which might appear to have gone

unfulfilled. But if God has not and will not fulfill his promises in the Old Testament to Israel, then how can such a God be trusted to fulfill his promises to other people, people like us who believe in Jesus as Messiah and depend on God to be true to his word? Can God be trusted to deliver on his promises or not? This is the question addressed in Romans 9-11.

A variety of related issues is raised in these chapters, as well. For instance, it is in this context that Paul addresses issues of predestination and the utter sovereignty of God (chapter 9). It is also in context that Paul addresses the fate of "Israel according to the flesh" and, in a related issue, the appropriate relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the church (see especially chapter 11 and the discussion of grafting and fig trees). Your job is to read these chapters and be ready to converse about them. The following questions and instructions are intended to help you focus your attention on the very difficult chapters.

Why is the trustworthiness of God such an important issue for Paul, and for all Christians? You will need to pay attention to other passages in Romans, particularly 8:28-39, for an answer to this one.

Pay attention to the shape of the argument of these chapters, particularly of chapter 9. Break it down into its steps to be able to follow Paul's logic.

Is predestination good news or bad news for Paul, and why? Hint: it is good news for Paul! This will strike most of you as surprising, and perhaps even chilling, as the very idea of predestination strikes most of us as profoundly bad news. Ask yourself two questions. First, how does Paul utilize predestination in his argument; how and why is it good news for him? Second, what about you (or us) makes predestination seem so oppressive?

How does Paul see Israel (in particular Jews who do not believe in Jesus) fitting into the long-term plan of God? This question is addressed at length in chapter 11.

Questions about Philemon

Philemon is the shortest letter that bears Paul's name in the New Testament. Its brevity, along with the presumption that the letter is personal rather than corporate in nature, have created a situation in which many people have neither read nor even attempted to understand it. This is too bad, because the letter is a good window into a particular church struggling to live faithfully. The letter also contains perhaps the funniest verse in the New Testament (v. 19).

The letter is addressed mainly (more on this below) to a man named Philemon, who appears to be as person of consequence in a church with which Paul is acquainted but did not personally found, perhaps in the city of Colossae in what today is called Turkey. Paul writes from prison; if his place of imprisonment is Rome, then the book can be dated to around 60 AD, toward the end of Paul's ministry and life. It seems that Paul struck up a relationship with a man named Onesimus, who seems to have been Philemon's run-away slave. This letter, perhaps carried by Onesimus himself, is meant to clear a path for Onesimus' safe return to Philemon's presence.

In preparation for class, think about the following questions:

While the letter is known as "Paul's letter to Philemon," to whom is it addressed? What effect might this wider audience have had on Philemon as he heard the letter read?

In as specific detail as you are able and as the letter allows, flesh out the story behind the letter.

Who are the characters involved? What are their relationships to one another? What events

have occurred, when and where? Be prepared to cite specific passages to support your story.

Paul appears to be trying to be very careful with Philemon. Give examples of this care. Why do you think Paul is being so careful?

Philemon has often been seen as an example of elaborate arm-twisting. Find examples of this in the letter.

It appears that Paul wants Philemon to do something with or for Onesimus. What is it that Paul wants him to do? Why do you think Paul doesn't come right out and say it? Why doesn't Paul just come out and condemn slavery?

What practical relevance might a letter like Philemon have for those of us who wish to be faithful followers of Jesus in our own world?

Questions about Revelation

The book of Revelation is a scary book, full of animals and numbers and colors and devastation and destruction and death, as well as victory and restoration and redemption. In our own day, as evidenced by the recent *Left Behind* series of books by Tim LaHaye, evangelicals tend to think the book of Revelation is mostly about predicting what will happen at the end of time. These predictions often include characters like the Antichrist and events like the "rapture." It is interesting to note that neither the Antichrist nor the rapture is even in the book of Revelation. The word Antichrist is used 4 times in 1 John, and 1 time in 2 John, but zero times in Revelation. The only passage in the New Testament which can be construed as having something to do with the "rapture" is in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Still, recent Evangelical interpretation of Revelation features the Antichrist and the "rapture" prominently.

This makes me wonder if we might be looking for the wrong things when we read Revelation, namely things that are not there. Indeed, I believe the book of Revelation is much less about the future than it is about Christians living faithfully in the world here and now, in the sure and certain hope of a future that is entirely in God's hands. This is the reason I want to read parts of Revelation with you, so that we can all see together that Revelation is a practical book that applies to our attempt to live faithfully in the presence of God today.

In preparation for class, think about the following questions and do the following things.

Read the whole book without trying to make sense of it. Allow the images to happen to you.

Put on a horse head and run through the cafeteria screaming wildly. Report on the reception you receive.

Pay special attention to chapters 4-6. Make several lists and diagrams. First, make a list of characters. Who appears in these chapters? Second, make a diagram of the space in which these chapters occur. What and who is in the space, and where? Third, trace the plot. What happens in what order? What is the most important thing that happens in these chapters?

While the book of Revelation features virtually no quotations from the Old Testament, it is practically marinated in it. Trace as many OT references as you can in chapter 4.