

1-1-1999

NT 740 Seminar on the Passion and Birth Narratives

Ben Witherington

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Recommended Citation

Witherington, Ben, "NT 740 Seminar on the Passion and Birth Narratives" (1999). *Syllabi*. Book 395.
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NT 740 -- SEMINAR ON THE BIRTH AND PASSION NARRATIVES
TUESDAYS, THURSDAYS, FRIDAYS
11:00--11:50 P.M.
CLASS HELD IN BC 157

DR. BEN WITHERINGTON, III

OFFICE HOURS: I CAN NORMALLY BE FOUND IN MY OFFICE ON TUESDAYS, THURSDAYS, AND FRIDAYS FROM 8:30 UNTIL NOON EXCEPT FOR CHAPEL TIME OR CLASS TIME. IF YOU ARE UNABLE TO REACH ME THERE YOU MAY TRY TO REACH ME THROUGH: 1) MY VOICE MAIL AT 858-2329; 2) MY EMAIL AT BENW333@HOTMAIL.COM; 3) THROUGH MY GRADUATE ASSISTANT RICHARD CORNELL'S SPO BOX.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is intended to help you begin to weave yourself through the maze of NT studies on these selected passages. During the course we will be exploring several major subject areas: 1) the historical substance of these narratives, focusing on things like the virginal conception and bodily resurrection of Jesus; 2) the social and cultural milieu in which early Jesus and his family and disciples lived; 3) the practice of the scholarly study of the NT (source, form, redaction, genre, rhetorical criticism et al.); 4) questions of literary structure and editing of these narratives; 5) the practice of exegesis and hermeneutics.

COURSE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

In this course I intend to introduce the student to what detailed study of the Gospels in their original language and settings amounts to. We will explore both the original texts and the scholarly discussion of them and evaluate the historical, theological, literary problems and possibilities these text generate. We will attempt to discern what these texts tell us about the historical Jesus and his mission and ministry. We will evaluate how the historical study of these texts does and should affect the way we use them during the appropriate seasons of the church year.

In this course I expect for you to: 1) develop competence in reading the literature on the NT critically, and using basic commentaries and tools; 2) explore the different areas and disciplines and aspects of NT studies; 3) learn how to do basic research and writing in NT studies; 4) gain an understanding of the crucial nature of studying Biblical texts in their original contexts; 5) understand and develop skills in basic exegesis and hermeneutics so that sermons, teaching lessons, counseling material can be prepared.

The student who successfully completes this course and masters its material will be well prepared to enter any upper level exegesis or Biblical Theology course, and indeed to go on to further study in the field.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

There will be one book report, one term paper and a final exam. The exam will be a take home test, but they will not be open book or open note tests. They will be open brain tests! You will however be able to use your Bibles (just don't copy all your class notes into your Bible!). You will be allowed to take whatever time you want on these tests during the week in which the test is given (i.e. you will have a one week opportunity to see the test on the web page and take it).

There will be a term paper of no more than fifteen pages of text (plus notes and bibliography) on some subject related to the five areas covered in the course as listed above. I will expect you to follow one of the following standard formats for such papers-- APA style, MLA style sheet, Turabian. This paper is due the last Friday of October. You should be prepared to use eight to ten good sources for your paper. The Bible and Webster's dictionary do not constitute sources. Resources listed in your text books as primary and secondary sources do. I would recommend your using 2-3 good articles and 4-5 good commentaries or NT monographs. Log on to the Asbury Web page and the library line and you can survey the possibilities.

There is one group project for this course. You will be divided into two work groups of five each. You will be expected to do either: 1) a detailed critique of one of the text books (at least ten pages), after taking whatever time necessary to discuss the form and content of this critique. Of course you will all need to have read the textbook chosen before critiquing it, and you will need to set up your own e mail discussions or chat room discussions about it leading to the final product; or 2) construct a case study based on what you have learned about the first century social milieu. In particular you will want to investigate in the case study how first century persons would handle 'family values' differently than we would. For example construct a scenario in which you are Onesimus, the runaway slave and you are now returning to Philemon. What are the problems facing you and how will you handle them? What are the possible outcomes? How should the fact that you are now a 'brother' affect the decisions you and Philemon make? This will be due week four of the course.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

Inevitably I always hear groans at this point because I require quite a few texts. It is my view that you are only as good a teacher or preacher or counselor as your library is, and you will use the resources available to you. This is even more critical for students who do not take their education, or a significant portion of it, on a seminary campus site. Therefore this is my small attempt to help you build a good library full of tools useful for a long time to come. My own last year in seminary I had to spend \$5,000 (1977 dollars!) to get my library up to a bare minimum of usefulness. You will need a book budget from now on, if you don't already have one. Perhaps you have a relative or friend or church who would be willing to give you a book allowance.

- 1) R. E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977 (pb).
- 2) R.E. Brown, The Death of the Messiah, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1994 (hb).
- 3) B. Witherington III, Women in the Earliest Churches, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1991 (pb).
- 4) J.B. Green, et al.eds., Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Downers Grove: I-V Press, 1993, (hb).

READING SCHEDULE

It is very important that you keep up with the reading schedule. In fact I would encourage you to start early and get ahead. The course is basically divided into three parts (see the course description above), and the reading is parceled out accordingly. I'm assuming that you've already read the relevant articles in Green's Jesus and the Gospels in the NT520 class but if not, it should be added to your required reading assignment

Brown's The Birth of the Messiah should be read in its entirety during the first four weeks of the course.

Brown's The Death of the Messiah is a lengthy two volume work and involves much technical discussion. It will be important to focus attention on the major issues in each section. You may omit reading the sections labeled Analysis in Volume 1 and labeled Comment in Volume 2 so you may sample a range of the discussion. I expect however that each student will read 750 pages from the two volumes, picking and choosing as you find interest. Some will enjoy the historical comments and analysis more, some the literary discussion more, but one should sample both to get a feel for the nature of the critical scholarly discussion on these matters.

Only chapters 4 and 5 of Witherington, Women in the Earliest Churches are required to be read and may be read at anytime during the course.

In addition, one should make time to view the three lectures Raymond Brown gave while at Asbury in spring 1998.

NOTE: I will be asking on the final exam how much of the required reading you have done. This will effect borderline grades (pushing them up or down).

COURSE SCHEDULE

Weeks 1-4: We will be dealing in depth with the birth narratives, considering historical, literary, theological, ethical and spiritual issues.

Weeks 5-9: We will deal in depth with the passion narratives, considering historical, literary, theological, ethical and spiritual issues.

Weeks 10-13: We will deal in depth with the resurrection narratives, considering historical, literary, theological, ethical, and spiritual issues. Consideration will also be given to hermeneutical and homiletical matters throughout the course.

SCHEDULE OF ASSIGNMENTS

The first assignment due will be the book critique and class presentation. It must be submitted during week four of the class. The term paper will be due the last Friday of October, and the final exam will be distributed during the last class. It will be a take home exam. More details will be unveiled in mid-October.

WEB MANIA

There are a wide and wild variety of websites that you may find helpful for Biblical studies:

1) <http://www.luthersem.edu/learnnet/biblepro/bible.htm>; 2) if you want to test your Bible knowledge try <http://www.spectra.net/~diana/webt2.htm>; 3) <http://www.americanbible.org>; 4) <http://www.gospelcom.net/ccmag/mags.html>; 5) [http://scholar.cc.emory.edu scripts/highplaces.html](http://scholar.cc.emory.edu/scripts/highplaces.html).

If you are looking for a major league search engine try: 1) <http://ww.findspot.com/>; or 2) <http://argos.evansville.edu/>.