

## Course Syllabus

### DVNT721 BACKGROUNDS TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Spring Semester, 2004  
Wednesdays and Fridays, 11:00-12:20  
3 Hours

Allen P. Ross

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will survey the literary, cultural, and historical backgrounds to the New Testament. Special attention will be given to Old Testament prophecies as understood in the period, to the historical developments within the land that gave rise to the Herodians, Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, to daily life in the time of Jesus, and especially to the Rabbinic literature that informs so much of the material in the Gospels and the early Church.

#### COURSE OBJECTIVES

Because this is such a wide ranging course, covering material that is seldom included in biblical studies, there are several objectives:

1. To learn as much as possible about **Messianism** and Messianic expectations of the first century by studying the prophecies in the Old Testament and the Jewish interpretations of those passages.
2. To construct the **historical framework** that gave rise to the various ruling parties and individual leaders in the time of Jesus, and to trace that history through to the destruction of Jerusalem and the nation as well as the early Church under Rome.
3. To become familiar with the **Rabbinical** and historical **literature** that is important for this period, and to learn how to interpret and use it in biblical studies. The focus will be on the *Mishnah*, *Midrash*, *Targum*, *Talmud*, and medieval commentaries, as well as the writings of Josephus and other historians.
4. To see how the literary and historical backgrounds help us understand **Scripture** better. The course will include close readings of various tractates in Rabbinic literature, as well as topical studies from the Bible.

5. To gain a better understanding of **eschatology** through a comparison of Christian and Jewish views. The focus of Jewish eschatology will necessarily be on the future of Israel and the land, and the focus on Christian eschatology will be to see if these views fit within the New Testament view.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### 1. Assigned Reading (25%)

Each student will be expected to read all the reading assignments in the books and the class notes and report on the fulfillment of the requirement. The reading should be done in conjunction with the daily topics covered in the class. Because we will be covering so many different areas, there will not be any one text book for this class, but several that will be recommended. Some of the reading will come from books available in the library; but most from class handouts. Each student should keep a running log of the reading done, pages read. 500 pages will satisfy the reading requirements of the course.

Since there will be a good deal of photo copying necessary for this class, at the end of the semester a collection will be taken to offset some of the expense. It will not exceed the amount of a small text book--if a text had been required for the course.

The reading assignments and class handouts will be made in advance of the due date so that everyone can be prepared for the class discussions. Reading far ahead will not be helpful in a class like this.

The books that will be used most frequently and therefore recommended texts (for those who plan to use them beyond this class) are:

Blackman, *The Mishnah* (New York: Judaica), 5 Vols. (Or Danby, *Mishnah* [Oxford Press], 1 Vol.). Blackman's edition has Hebrew and English and copious notes; Danby's has just the English; the prices are not that far apart.

Abraham P. Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Manners* (New York: KTAV, 1980).

R. Travers Herford, *Pirke Aboth, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964)

Jacob Neusner, *Messiah in Context* (Fortress Press, 1984)

George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Fortress Press, 1981)

Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979)

Herman L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Atheneum, 1974)

Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham, Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

The writings of Josephus

At times the class reading will be posted on my web-site for the students to download. That address is [www.christianleadershipcenter.org](http://www.christianleadershipcenter.org)

## **2. Prepare a Paper on the Historical and Cultural Backgrounds (25%)**

Each student will prepare a historical study on one of the following subjects: Hasmoneans, Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Herodian Family, Chief Priests, Scribes, or the Jewish Revolts. These will be due on the day that they will be discussed in class. No more than two students may write on any one subject; we shall sign up everyone for their topic on the second class period of the semester.

The paper can be a formal research paper (of about 10-15 pages double spaced), or a more creative project geared for teaching in the Church.

## **3. Prepare a Topical Paper from Rabbinic Literature (25%)**

There are eight topics to be covered in the second half of the course; each student will prepare a paper or project on one of these topics to be handed in on the day it is to be discussed in class. The choices will be limited so that there will be no more than two students for any one paper. The student(s) who did the project will then take a leading role in the class discussion. We shall also sign up for this topic on the second class period of the semester.

You will see from these topics that the point of the study will be to interpret the Jewish teaching correctly and see how it informs passages in the New Testament. It can be a formal research paper, or a creative presentation (although properly researched material will still have to be turned in).

#### 4. Final Exam (25%)

There will be a creative final exam scheduled which will cover both the historical and cultural backgrounds and the Rabbinic literature--the *Mishnah*, *Targum*, *Midrash*, *Talmud*, *Josephus*--their dates of compilation, their contents, and their value in interpreting Scripture.

Students may opt for a project in lieu of a final exam; the project would be along the order of a Scripture-indexed summary of all the ideas covered over the semester with references to the Jewish literature. Students who wish to do this instead of the final exam would find it helpful to developing it along the way. It will be due on the day of this course's exam--May 14.

#### COURSE PROCEDURE

The course schedule below shows that the course will alternate between lectures and class participation. There are several topics, especially at the beginning of the semester, which require the distribution and explanation of materials and texts. The class will make use of the assigned readings, class handouts, and informal lectures on those days.

On the other class day each week there will be a close reading of the Rabbinic literature. The student will be expected to participate in the reading and discussion of these passages. We will work from the English translations, of course, but the class will make constant references to the original text (for example, how can one study vows without discussing "*korban-its* a gift").

Depending on the number of projects done for a class period, students will be invited to share what they have found in their research, either informally in the discussion, or formally with a class presentation. This will factor into the total grade for the project.

**Note:** To gain the maximum benefit from the class, and to be able to participate in the discussions, students have to be present. More than four un-excused absences will result in a full letter grade reduction for the course. And, for the projects that will be covered in class, no late work will be accepted. If the project is not ready, another will be assigned, and the grade for the project will be reduced a full letter grade.

#### COURSE SCHEDULE

**Wed Jan 28** Introduction to the Course: Schedule, Requirements, Bibliography; Introduction to Rabbinic Literature.

**Fri Jan 30** The *Mishnah*: Reading Selection: Tractate *Pirke Aboth* 1, 2.

- Wed Feb 4** Lecture: The Plan of Redemption from Creation to the New Covenant; and Messianic Prophecies.
- Fri Feb 6** No Class.
- Wed Feb 11** The *Mishnah*: Reading Selection: Tractate *Pirqa Aboth* 3, 4.  
**Fri Feb 13** The *Mishnah*: Reading Selection: Tractate *Pirqa Aboth* 5, 6
- Wed Feb 18** Lecture: The Messianic Age and First Century Jewish Expectations  
**Fri Feb 20** The *Mishnah*: Reading Selection: Tractate *Sanhedrin* 1-3.
- Wed Feb 25** Lecture: The Intertestamental Period: Hasidism and Hellenism, and the Rise of the Jewish Sects and the Hasmonean Kings. **Historical studies on Hasmoneans, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes due.**  
**Fri Feb 27** The *Mishnah*: Reading Selection: Tractate *Sanhedrin* 4-6.
- Wed Mar 3** Lecture: The Roman Government and Client Kings--the Herodians. **Historical study on the Herodian family due.**  
**Fri Mar 5** The *Mishnah*: Reading Selection: Tractate *Sanhedrin* 7-10.
- Wed Mar 10** Class Discussion: Everyday Life in the First Century.  
**Fri Mar 12** Introduction to the *Targums*; Readings from the Torah and Isaiah.
- Wed Mar 17** Lecture: The Chief Priests and Scribes, their Lives and Beliefs  
**Historical study on Priests and Scribes due.**  
**Fri Mar 19** The *Targums*: Reading Selections: 1 Samuel 2 and Canticles.
- Wed Mar 24** The *Mishnah*: Readings from Tractate *Shabbath*; and Jesus' Conflict with the Jewish Leaders over the Sabbath Day.  
**Topical study due on sabbath interpretation.**  
**Fri Mar 26** The Purity Ritual: The Jewish *Miqweh* and Christian Baptism  
**Topical study due on ritual baths and baptism**
- Wed Mar 31** **Spring Break**  
**Fri Apr 2** **Spring Break**
- Wed Apr 7** The *Mishnah*: Readings from Tractates *Pesah* and *Bikkurim*; and the Last Supper and Resurrection of Jesus. **Topical study due on Passover and/or Firstfruit.**  
**Fri Apr 9** The *Mishnah*: Readings from Tractates *Yoma* and *Sukkoth*; and the Christian interpretation of the Day of Atonement and Feast of Tabernacles. **Topical study**

**due on Day of Atonement and/or Tabernacles**

- Wed Apr 14** Lecture: The Jewish Revolts and the Writings of Josephus.  
**Historical study on Jewish revolts due.**
- Fri Apr 16** The *Mishnah*: Readings on Benedictions and Blessings; Discussion on Synagogue Worship and Christian Worship. **Topical study due on liturgy and synagogue worship.**
- Wed Apr 21** Introduction to the *Midrash*; Readings from the Psalms.  
**Fri Apr 23** The *Mishnah*: Readings on Tithes, Vows, and Oaths  
**Topical study due on tithes and/or vows**
- Wed Apr 28** The *Midrash*: Reading Selections from the Torah.  
**Fri Apr 30** Discussion: Hillel and Shammai and Jesus on Marriage and Divorce. **Topical study due on marriage and divorce**
- Wed May 5** Lecture: The Diaspora: Persecution and Preservation, Text and Talmud  
**Fri May 7** “All Israel Shall Be **Saved**”--**Isaiah**, Tractate **Sanhedrin**, and the Book of **Romans**; Jewish and Christian Eschatology.  
**Topical study due on Jewish and Christian eschatology, a survey or a specific topic**
- Fri May 14** **Exam or Project Due.**

I. Introduction to Rabbinic Literature

*General Terms*

## ***Mishnah***

The Hebrew verb *shanah* means “to repeat, to study (something handed down orally), to teach.” The noun *mishnah* then means “study, oral lore (in contradistinction to *mikra*’ which is a “lection” or “reading.”

The oral lore, or the body of ancient Jewish traditional learning, falls into three general classes. There is *Midrash*, the exposition of Scripture; *Halakoth*, traditional statements of law in categorical form; and *Haggadoth*, Scriptural expositions of a *non-halakic* character, such as proverbs, parables, and narratives.

The term *mishnah* can refer to any single teaching or statement of law, in which sense the term *halakah* is also used, the sum of the teachings of any teacher in the Tannaitic period, the entire content of traditional law as it had been developed by the end of the second century A.D. (Also called C.E., the common era), or the classical collection of teachings made by Judah ha-Nasi (the prince), Rabbi, in the third century. This is the *Mishnah, par excellence*. In the form in which we have received the *Mishnah*, there are additions and modifications that were made later.

## ***Mathnitha***

Of the same signification as the Hebrew *mishnah* is the Aramaic *mathnitha*, from *teni, tena* “to hand down orally, study, teach.” Frequently in the *Mishnah* we will see expressions like “our teachers have handed down” or “our teachers have taught.”

The word *Tanna* (plural *Tannaim*) stands for a Tannaite, a teacher mentioned in the *Mishnah* belonging to the earlier times (200 B.C. to 200 A.D.). Because they learned the teachings by repeating them and handing them down, they had memorized most of the text and the teachings.

The Amoraim were the teachers in the post-Tannaitic times. In the early periods they relied heavily on the Tannaites, men who transmitted orally the oral law and the teachings of the great teachers.

## ***Baraita***

This word literally means “the extraneous one.” It is the generic term for all tannaitic teachings and dicta not included in the *Mishnah* of Rabbi. These are harder to deal with since we do not have a critically edited collection. But frequently reference will be made to such teachings.

## ***Gemara***

The verb *gemar* means “to complete,” and later “to study.” The noun then means “that which has been learned” or “knowledge acquired by learning.”

*Gemara* has become the term for the second constituent part of the Talmud, the collection of the discussions relative to the *Mishnah* at the hands of the Amoraim. There are different views on the way this is used, but the standard way is as stated here. The Talmud is arranged topically, and each topic will have first the paragraph from the *Mishnah*, and then the discussion from the *Gemara*. The *Mishnah* is in Hebrew, the *Gemara* in Aramaic; the selection from the *Mishnah* is written in a block in the middle of the page, the *Gemara* around it like a fence.

### ***Talmud***

The Hebrew verb *lamad* means “to study, to learn,” and in the causative stem *limmed* it means “to teach.” One derived noun *talmid* is a “disciple,” and *talmud* is “instruction” (especially concerning holy Scripture). So Talmud is the comprehensive term for the teachings of the *Mishnah* and the Aramaic discussions attached to each of them.

In its contents the Talmud includes both *Halakah* and *Haggadah* (see below).

There are two Talmuds, the Babylonian Talmud and the Palestinian Talmud. The former is the standard Talmud most often used, and the latter is more concerned with the opinions and teachings of the teachers in Jerusalem.

### ***Midrash***

The noun is from the verb *darash*, “to enquire, seek out, investigate, to expound.” The noun *midrash* then denotes such an investigation into Scripture for the purpose of expounding it. Hence, we have *Bet Ha-Midrash*, the House of Study where scholars devoted themselves to the study of the Bible.

But *Midrash* is the term for those literary works of their study, some quite ancient. Often the title of the individual collection uses this word in it.

There are two verbs that are used for the study and interpretation of Scripture that might help the understanding here. There is the *peshat*, the “simple” meaning, the straight forward literal reading of the text; and there is the *derash*, the derived exposition of the passage. As an exposition, the lateral is often an analogical application of the simple meaning of the text.

### ***Halakah***

The verb is the simple verb *halak*, “to walk, go.” Figuratively, the noun “walking, going” refers to the *teaching one follows*. A passage that is “*halakic*” is one that provides the accepted ruling or guidance from the law. The plural *halakoth* refers to collections of legal precepts or statements of laws.



Something becomes *halakah* if it is held in acceptance for a long period of time, or when it is vouched for by a well-known authority, or when it is supported by an accepted proof from Scripture, or by a majority vote in the assembly. Once the body of teachings has become fixed, a teaching that does not harmonize with *halakah* will not be followed.

### ***Haggadah***

This noun comes from the verb *nagad*, or more accurately *higgid* in the precise form of the verb, which means “to tell, narrate.” The Aramaic form of the noun is *Aggadah*. The title, whether Hebrew or Aramaic, denotes all teachings that are not *halakic* or legal. Biblical students search Scripture (*derash*), and the Scripture indicates to them (*higgid*) something that transcends the first impression from reading the text. We shall soon see how *haggadic* passages differ from *halakic* passages.