



Grace Communion Seminary

NT501 New Testament Background

Short Syllabus

Instructor: Michael Morrison, PhD

Course description: New Testament Background

This course explores the cultural background of the New Testament, including Jewish history, literature and religion, and Gentile culture and religion, so that students might interpret the writings in their original historical context. This course also covers matters that involve the entire New Testament: canonization, textual transmission, and chronology.

To do well in this course, we estimate that you will need to spend 12 hours each week, for a total of 140 hours.

Required textbooks

Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003. ISBN: [0802822215](#). 620 pages. About \$25.
Kindle edition OK.

Jeffers, James S. *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999. ISBN: [0830815899](#). 352 pages. About \$14.

Keener, Craig S. "The Bible in Its Context." Available free at www.craigkeener.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/The-Bible-in-Its-Context-by-Craig-Keener.doc; or in larger font on the NT501 course page.

Scott, J. Julius. *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995. ISBN: [0801022401](#). 416 pages. About \$13.

To find the lowest prices on these books, click on the links above to use bookfinder.com. You might save on shipping if you purchase all three from the same bookseller.

Recommended books

Evans, Craig A., and Stanley E. Porter, eds. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000. ISBN: [0830817808](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0830817808). An excellent resource for numerous topics. You may preview it at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/0830817808>.

Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014. ISBN: [0830824782](https://www.amazon.com/dp/0830824782). Preview at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/0830824782>.

Student learning outcomes

Through this course, students will...

1. Describe important aspects of Jewish history and culture that provide the setting in which the events of the New Testament occurred.
2. Outline basic features of Greco-Roman religions and culture, in which the early church spread the message of Jesus.
3. Describe the way the New Testament was canonized and copied.
4. Give an overview of the chronology of NT events.
5. Analyze how this background information can lead to a better understanding of the New Testament and its message.

Requirements and assignments

1. **Read the lectures.** Lectures will be posted on Mondays. See the *GCS Academic Catalog*, section VI for study suggestions. If you read the lectures carefully, and take notes, the quizzes will be easy. In addition, you should look up the scripture references in the

lectures. The lectures average about 20 pages each week, and we expect that you will spend about 2 hours on each lecture. Do not try to see how quickly you can read them – try instead to see how much you can get out of them.

2. **Participation.** Part of the learning that occurs in traditional classrooms comes informally, through discussion and interaction with other students. In an online class, this is done primarily through comments posted on a forum. These count for 10 percent of the final grade. See the *Academic Catalog* section VI.G for guidance on making forum comments and section VII.F for how to post your comments on our website.
3. **Three quizzes.** These are open-book quizzes, designed to highlight major points, either from the lectures or from the textbooks. These count for 15 percent of the final grade.
4. **Read the textbooks.** The assigned readings total almost 1000 pages. It may take you about 50 hours to read them – about 5 hours per week. You may want to read less when a paper is due, so you will need to read ahead during the weeks when a paper is not due. It is better to read some each day, rather than trying to do it all in one day.
5. **Two research papers.** One paper will be on the Jewish background; one on the Gentile background. These papers count for 60 percent of the final grade. We estimate that you will need about 50 hours to work on these papers – an average of 2 or 3 hours per week – some weeks more, some less.
6. **One final exam.** Multiple-choice questions will be 40 percent of the grade; short essay questions will be 60 percent of the grade. The exam must be proctored – see the *Academic Catalog*, section VI.L for details on how this may be done. The final exam counts for 15 percent of the final grade.

Assignments, estimated hours, and grade weighting for NT501	Hours ¹	Percentage of grade
Reading the syllabus and lectures	20	
Reading other website documents	0	
Reading discussions and making responses	5	10
Taking quizzes	3	15
Taking the final exam	2	15
Reading the textbooks	50	
Studying for quizzes and the final exam	10	
Writing papers	50	60
Total – about 12 hours each week	140	100

Weekly topics and assignments (tentative)

Week	Topic	Assignments to be done during the week and suggested readings
1	Introduction: why we need to study the background of the NT	Keener, “The Bible in Its Context” Forum
2	History of the Jewish people from the Persians to the Romans	Ferguson, 398-426 Scott, 73-146 Forum
3	The “other” Scriptures – the Apocrypha and their relevance	Ferguson, 431-462 Scott, 147-193 Quiz 1

¹ This is an estimate for the “average” student. A student who reads quickly may be slow in writing papers, and vice versa. Some students will complete the course requirements in less total time, and some will take more time.

4	Other Jewish literature – Dead Sea Scrolls, Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, etc.	Ferguson, 463-489 Scott, 265-323 Forum
5	Judaism: importance of the Law, and messianic hopes	Ferguson, 427-430, 513-582; Scott 195-232 Forum
6	The NT use of quotes from the OT	Jeffers, 14-88 Paper 1 due on June 25
7	Greco-Roman culture and literature	Ferguson, 149-250 Quiz 2
8	Greco-Roman religions	Ferguson, 251-318 Jeffers, 89-109 Forum
9	Chronology of NT events	Jeffers, 321-323, 110-196 Forum
10	The formation of the New Testament canon, and preservation of the text	Jeffers, 197-258 Quiz 3
11	Final exam during July 24–28. Must be proctored, and scheduled ahead of time.	
-	July 31–Aug. 6 does not count for academic purposes due to the GCI conference in Orlando and GCS graduation on August 4	
12	Paper 2 is due by end of Sunday, August 13. papers will be graded and final grades posted by Aug. 21.	