



BI521 New Testament Background

Short Syllabus

Instructor: Michael Morrison, PhD

Course description:

This course explores the cultural background of the New Testament, including geography, climate, Jewish history, literature and religion, and Gentile culture and religion, so that students might interpret the writings in their original context.

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

Bell, Albert A., Jr. *Exploring the New Testament World: An Illustrated Guide to the World of Jesus and the First Christians*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998. ISBN: [9780785214243](#). Very good used, \$10.

De Silva, David A. *A Week in the Life of Ephesus*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2020. ISBN: 978-0830824854. 176 pages. \$17.
Historical fiction. Kindle editions OK for all books.

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 \$20.

Keener, Craig S. “The Bible in Its Context.” Available free at www.craigkeener.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/The-Bible-in-ItsContext-by-Craig-Keener.doc and in larger font on the course page.

Scott, J. Julius. *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995. ISBN: [0801022401](https://www.isbn-international.org/product/0801022401). 416 pages. About \$20.

To find the lowest prices on these books, use bookfinder.com.

Recommended books

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

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. 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*,¹ section VI for study suggestions. If you read the lectures carefully, and take notes, the quizzes will be easy.

¹ On the GCS home page, in the left column, in the box labeled “About GCS.”

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 through comments posted on a forum. These count for 15 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. Each week that we have a forum, you should make at least one comment by the end of Thursday and reply to at least one student by the end of Sunday.
3. **Three quizzes.** These are open-book quizzes, designed to highlight major points, either from the lectures or from the textbooks. These count for 10 percent of the final grade.
4. **Read the textbooks.** The assigned readings total about 950 pages. We estimate that the average student reads at about 20 pages per hour, so it may take you about 50 hours to read the books – 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 a paper is not due.
5. **One paper concerning the Jewish background of the NT.**
6. **One paper concerning the non-Jewish background of the NT.** These papers count for 60 percent of the final grade. We estimate that you will need about 60 hours to work on these papers – an average of 2 or 3 hours per week – some weeks more, some less.
7. **One final exam.** Multiple-choice questions will be 40 percent of the exam; 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 BI521	Hours ²	Percentage of grade
Reading the syllabus and lectures	20	
Reading discussions and making responses	8	10
Taking quizzes	3	15
Taking the final exam	2	15
Reading the textbooks	45	
Studying for quizzes and the final exam	5	
Writing exegetical papers	60	60
Total – about 12 hours each week	143	100

Weekly topics and assignments (tentative)

Week	Topic	Assignments to be done during the week
1	Introduction: why we need to study the background of the NT	Keener, “The Bible in Its Context” deSilva, pages 1-50 Forum
2	How Geography and Climate Affect the New Testament Story	Bell, Scott, 73-146 Forum
3	A Summary of Old Testament History and Religious Culture	Bell, Scott, 147-193 Quiz 1

² 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	History of the Jewish people from the Persians to the Romans	Bell, Scott, 265-323 Forum
5	The Apocryphal writings and their relevance	Bell, Scott 195-232 Forum
6	Other Jewish literature – Dead Sea Scrolls, Pseudepigrapha, Josephus, etc.	Jeffers, 14-88 Quiz 2
7	Judaism: importance of the Law, and messianic hopes	Bell, 149-250 Paper 1 is due at the end of June 27
8	The NT use of quotes from the OT Chronology of NT events	Bell, 251-318 Jeffers, 89-109 Forum
9	Greco-Roman culture and literature	Jeffers, 321-323, 110-196 Forum
10	Greco-Roman religions	Jeffers, 197-258 Quiz 3
11	Chronology of NT events (optional)	
11	Final exam. Must be proctored, and scheduled ahead of time.	
12	Paper 2 is due by end of week 12: August 8 Papers will be graded and final grades posted by August 15.	