

## **Introduction to the World of the New Testament** Introduction to the Course and Notes for Preparation

***“One of our primary goals in this course is to provide a variety of lenses and interpretive tools that will allow you to understand the literature of the New Testament in relation to its historical and cultural contexts so that you can faithfully and imaginatively interpret New Testament texts in your own contemporary ministry contexts. In other words, we want to teach you how to interpret the New Testament texts, not just interpret them for you.”***

*Dr. Ray Pickett, Video One, New Testament Literature*

There is a lot of information in this course. Some of what you will hear in these lectures you have probably heard before, but much of it may be new to you and your study group. The world in which the New Testament was written was filled with people, just like our world. They had jobs, families, needs, dreams and desires, just like we do. However, the world of the New Testament was also very different from our world. We will explore that world in this series of video lectures by three Lutheran scholars from across the country. Some of the information you hear will not only be new to you but it may also challenge what you have heard about the New Testament and the world into which it was born. This is a course which provides you with the opportunity to dig a little deeper into the scriptures of the New Testament, to understand what it means to interpret them in our own time and place, and to seek to understand how the words of scripture hold meaning for the Church, and for each one of us, today.

This study guide is created with congregational study groups in mind. There are four sessions in this course. The first 3 have video lectures and this guide provides discussion questions and information for each lecture. The 4<sup>th</sup> session gives participants an opportunity for practicing Biblical interpretation together. We envision a four-week session in which your group studies the world of the New Testament, with each class lasting 60 minutes. However, this guide can be adapted to the needs of your group.

The general format for each sixty-minute class is as follows:

- Gathering, Opening Prayer, and Setting the Scene for the Day (10 minutes)
- View Video (20-25 minutes)
- Discussion Questions (20-25 minutes)
- Closing (5 minutes)

### **For the Session Facilitator(s)**

As a facilitator for this learning experience you have taken on a very important role in the educational ministry of your faith community. Thank you for helping to build up the body of Christ by helping others to learn more about scripture and faith.

Below are some considerations to take into account as you plan each weekly session

- Before each session, view the material for the coming week. Watch the video to familiarize yourself with its contents and consider which discussion questions you would most like to consider. Take into account the time available for your

gatherings and the members of the group to determine which questions would be most interesting and relevant.

- Prepare the room that you will be meeting in. Make sure the TV/DVD player is working and the video is cued to the right lecture. Arrange the furniture so that everyone can see the video and engage in conversation with one another.
- Encourage participants to bring their Bible with them for reference and also provide some Bibles for those who do not have one available.
- There is a lot of information covered in each lecture. Invite participants to take notes on important concepts and their insights so that they can better engage in discussions following the video. Provide paper and pencils for them to take notes.
- Provide copies of the session handout, as applicable, for each participant. The handout providing the graphic of the hermeneutical circle should be provided for both the first and fourth sessions.
- Pray for the members of your group, the facilitators, and your time together as you prepare each week.

### **Additional Resources**

The video lectures reference the following book:

Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, New York: Oxford, 2004. ISBN 0-19-515462-2.

## **Session 1: New Testament Literature & New Testament Canon**

In today's video lecture Dr. Ray Pickett of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago discusses New Testament literature and provides background information about the process of interpreting scripture. Dr. Pickett covers questions of context, both the contemporary context and that of the ancient world of scripture. In order to faithfully interpret a text, biblical interpreters need to attempt to understand the ancient world and how people lived. This lecture also provides a model for the interpretive process called the hermeneutical circle. Included in this lecture are sample questions an interpreter of Mark 1:1 might ask, and discussion of how those questions might be answered.

### **Learning Goals**

1. To understand the importance of context when interpreting a biblical passage.
2. To understand what the hermeneutical circle is and how to use its steps in the process of biblical interpretation.
3. To discover the types of questions that are asked when engaged in the art of biblical interpretation.
4. To practice interpretation of a passage.

### **Opening (10 minutes)**

After welcoming participants to this study, spend a few minutes discussing why participants decided to be a part of this class and what they are hoping to learn during this course. Follow the initial discussion with an opening prayer.

### **View Video Lecture, part I: New Testament Literature (15:20 minutes)**

Dr. Pickett ends the first video with an exercise in biblical interpretation. Before moving on to the general discussion questions spend some time answering the questions he provides for Mark 1:1, which are also listed below. The exercise asks the group to respond as best they can to questions about particular meanings of words and concepts in the passages.

### **Discussion (10 minutes)**

Spend 10 minutes discussing the questions provided by Dr. Pickett at the end of the first part of the video lecture.

- To what does the word "beginning" refer?
- What are the connotations of "good news," which is a translation of the term "gospel"?

Please feel free to use the resources in your Bible (a Bible dictionary, textual notes or study notes) to answer the questions.

## **View Video Lecture, part II: New Testament Canon (5:54 minutes)**

### **Discussion Questions (20 minutes)**

- 1) Is it surprising to you that we don't know who wrote each of the New Testament books? In what ways does the fact that we don't always know who wrote the books of the New Testament change how you view them?
- 2) What does it mean to you to approach the study of scripture with humility?
- 3) The people who make up the Lutheran church come from many different backgrounds. Some of us were raised within the traditions of the Lutheran Church or another Protestant denomination and some of us come from the Roman Catholic Church. Many of us were not raised in a church or any kind of religious community. Given these facts, how were you taught to understand scripture as a child? How do you understand it now?
- 4) When talking about the hermeneutical circle Dr. Pickett discusses the world in front of the text, which is the world in our time and place. This world defines our sense of reality through stories, values, norms, symbols and practices that shape how we understand the world. As a group, make a list of some of the stories, values, norms, symbols and practices that have shaped the reality in which you practice biblical interpretation. (For example, one story that has shaped the reality of citizens of the United States is that if you work hard enough in life you will be better off than your parents. This story has shaped how those of us who identify as Americans interpret the stories of the Bible).
- 5) Dr. Pickett notes that there is not one correct interpretation of a biblical passage; instead texts have a surplus of meanings. Some interpretations, he states, are stronger or more compelling than others but in the end we are not dealing with objective historical truth when we are interpreting scripture. Spend some time discussing within your group the implications of a scripture passage having more than one meaning. How have you experienced a variety of interpretations of a passage in your own life and context?

### **Closing (5 minutes)**

Invite each member of the group to share the most surprising or interesting new piece of information they learned in the class today. Then, bring the class to an end by reciting the Lord's Prayer together.

### **Additional Discussion Questions**

The following questions can be used to expand the length of the class session.

- 1) After hearing Dr. Pickett's explanation and use of the hermeneutical circle, what questions remain about how the process can be used for biblical interpretation? What do you perceive as the benefits of using this model?
- 2) Every time we approach the scriptures we are engaging in an act of interpretation. How does use of the hermeneutical circle as a tool for interpretation compare with the ways that you have approached interpreting scripture prior to this course?

## **Session 2: Greco-Roman World**

From aspects of daily living to a broader perspective regarding life as a member of Greco-Roman society, Dr. Sarah Henrich of Luther Seminary introduces the learner to the world in which scripture was born. Dr. Henrich discusses important topics such as an honor and shame culture, the Roman imperial system, and the ways in which early Christians lived within the confines of this society. Dr. Henrich points out that understanding the ancient world will help us to better know and understand the New Testament.

### **Learning Goals**

1. To understand the many differences between our world and the world of the New Testament.
2. To appreciate the cultural importance of honor and shame, including how these concepts affected relationships and events in New Testament times.
3. To understand some of the everyday realities of life under the Roman imperial system.

### **Opening (5 minutes)**

Begin the class by welcoming the participants. Follow the initial welcome with an opening prayer.

### **View Video Lecture, Part 1 (1:25)**

Dr. Henrich begins this lecture with a set of questions designed to get us thinking about our world, and how it would appear unusual to someone who was not from here. Take a few moments to discuss the questions below that Dr. Henrich supplies.

### **Discussion Questions (10 minutes)**

- If you had to describe to this person the world in which you lived, how long would it take you?
- What things would you single out to say about the world?
- Make a list of what you, or others in your group, would decide to say. What stands out about the list?

### **View Video Lecture, Part 2 (24:40)**

### **Discussion Questions (15 minutes)**

- 1) Dr. Henrich discusses the qualities of the Greco-Roman world that are very different from our own. These qualities include darkness, slowness, face-to-face communication, the importance of speech and rhetoric, the importance of letters, and also the fact that it was a hierarchical system. Given the many differences between our world and the world of the Bible, discuss as a group the ways that you can try to understand the world in which the New Testament was written. Spend some time trying to imagine what daily living in a world with the aforementioned qualities would entail. Use what you know from New Testament stories to help your group envision daily life in this context.

- 2) A culture of honor and shame permeates the stories of the New Testament. As you think through the stories of the gospels and epistles, can you identify any instances where the implications of an honor and shame culture are evident in the story? For example, the story of Jesus with the woman at the well (John 4:7-26) carries the overtones of the honor and shame culture of the ancient world. Just by talking to the woman, whom he is in no way related to, Jesus and the woman are bringing shame upon themselves because unrelated men and women were not to talk with one another.
- 3) The Roman imperial system, and the wars that were fought in order to maintain it, led to the spread of religion in the ancient world. Using your knowledge of the New Testament, what were some other ways that Christianity spread throughout the ancient world? Do you see any similarities with the spread of Christianity today?
- 4) Dr. Henrich points out that monotheism seemed narrow-minded to many ancient people because religions of that time period often had multiple gods that were worshipped. Therefore, the early Christians and Jewish people were considered unusual in their world because they only worshipped one God. As a group, identify ways that following only one God would have set Jews and Christians apart from their neighbors who worshipped more than one god.

### **Closing (5 minutes)**

Invite each member of the class to share the most important thing they learned today in regards to understanding the world of the New Testament. Then, bring the class to an end by reciting the Lord's Prayer together.

### **Additional Discussion Questions**

The following discussion questions can be used to expand the length of the class session.

- 1) Dr. Henrich states that many people in the ancient world believed they existed in a zero sum economy. Basically, the prevailing idea was that if one person got more, it meant another person got less. This directly contradicts the Bible, in which we see time and again that there is abundance. Dr. Heinrich quotes Isaiah 55 and also suggests that the stories of Jesus demonstrate this abundance. As a group, make a list of the biblical stories you know in which abundance of any kind is demonstrated.
- 2) Dr. Henrich explores the way that honor was earned differently between men and women in the ancient world. Men received honor through public means such as protecting and providing for their family, while women's honor was gained through their modesty. In what ways do these concerns regarding honor and shame, as related to gender, appear in the stories of the gospels? In what ways do you see this concern for honor based on gender roles in our current times?

### **Session 3: The Jewish Context of Early Christian Literature**

In this lecture Dr. Rick Carlson of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg discusses the Jewish context of the ancient world and its influence on early Christian literature. He makes the point that if we hope to interpret the biblical texts, it is important for us to understand more fully the Jewish context of the world behind the text. In this lecture Dr. Carlson discusses the identity markers of the Jewish people in the ancient world, and how Jesus fits into this context. He also touches upon the interplay between early Christianity and the Jewish context.

#### **Learning Goals**

1. To understand the Jewish context from which early Christianity emerged.
2. To understand the various ways Jesus and the early Christians were viewed by the Jewish people of their time.
3. To unpack the role of the Torah, or Law, in the life of the Jewish people.
4. To understand the role of the temple in the lives of the Jewish people and the economy of Jerusalem.

#### **Opening (5 minutes)**

Begin the class by welcoming the participants. Follow the initial welcome with an opening prayer.

#### **View Video Lecture (20:51)**

#### **Discussion (20 minutes)**

- 1) Dr. Carlson names several dualities that exist between Jewish people who are living a righteous life, and people who are living in ways that the Jewish faith deemed unrighteous. These dualities include holy vs. unholy, clean vs. unclean, pure vs. impure, and Jew vs. Gentile. Jesus often crossed the boundaries between these dualities to make his point that God's grace and love exceed any limits that humans try to impose, even with the best of intentions. However, Jesus crosses these boundaries as a Jew. Dr. Carlson references Isaiah 49:6, and reminds us that the promise of being a light to the nations was not, and is not, reserved for the Church alone. We would be mistaken to assume that it does not apply to the Jewish people, God's elected, as well. Discuss what it means for the Church, both then and now, that both the Jewish people and the Christian Church are to be a light to the nations, helping to share the news of God's salvation with all people. Have you ever considered that salvation does not belong strictly to the Christian Church, but also to the Jewish people? Does this change how you understand Jewish-Christian relationships? In what ways might this affect how you understand the stories of scripture?
- 2) Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This is the Shema and faithful Jewish people are instructed to repeat it daily. Now read the "Great Commandment" found in Matthew 22:36-40, Mark 12:28-34, and Luke 10:25-28. The Great Commandment is comprised of guidelines found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and

Leviticus 19:18. The Law of ancient Judaism influenced early Christianity in a multitude of ways. As a group, and using your Bible as a resource, find and list examples of the Great Commandment being carried out in scripture. Also, take some time to list current examples of the Great Commandment being carried out in our world today.

- 3) Dr. Carlson points out those of us who live in the world in front of the text have been trained to view the Torah, or Law, as an onerous burden, and have come to understand first century Judaism as a religion in which its adherents must be obedient to the Torah in order to earn salvation. Dr. Carlson states that this is simply not the case. In a Judaic mindset a Jewish person is in right relationship with God because God elected, or chose, the Jewish people. Therefore, the Torah is a gift because by obeying it a person is given the tools to have a right relationship with God and other people. Following the Torah is a daily response to God's grace. Using what you know of the Law in scripture, can you identify ways in which following the Law would encourage a right relationship with God and other people? One place to begin this discussion could be with the 10 commandments (as found in Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21). As a group, spend some time envisioning how the Jewish people in the time of Jesus would have understood Jesus actions in light of the commandments of the Law.
- 4) The last section of the video lecture discusses the importance of the Temple in Judaism, noting that it was one identity marker for the Jewish people in ancient times. As a group, and using what you know of the Temple from scripture, envision how losing the Temple would have affected daily and ritual life for the Jewish people. Given what you have learned about ancient Christianity through the video lectures make a list of markers of Christian identity. What are the similarities and differences between the markers of Christian identity and the markers of Jewish identity?

### **Closing (10 minutes)**

Invite each member of the class to share the most important thing they learned today in regards to the Jewish context of early Christian literature. Bring the class to an end by reciting the Lord's Prayer together.

### **Additional Discussion Questions**

The following discussion questions can be used to expand the length of the class session.

- 1) Dr Carlson states, "Jesus presents a different interpretation of the Torah, which lands him in a lot of trouble with various religious authorities." Similarly, the apostle Paul has a different interpretation of the Law and it's implication for the Church when compared with other members of the Church in his day. In each case, their unique interpretations lead both men into difficult situations for the sake of the Gospel. As both Jesus and Paul indicate, there are multiple ways to interpret scripture. As you learn more about the process of interpretation, how will you encourage discussion among members of your group regarding various interpretations of one passage? Are there limits to a valid interpretation? Are some



interpretations of a given passage simply wrong, or do all interpretations have merit?

- 2) Dr. Carlson touches on the monotheistic nature of Judaism. Since Judaism was monotheistic, there was a lot of concern in Jewish scriptures regarding idolatry. As a group, make a list of instances of idolatry in the Old Testament. When an act of idolatry is committed, what is the scriptural response to such an act?

## **Session 4: Interpretation**

In this session participants will have the opportunity to practice the art of biblical interpretation. This session will include study and discussion.

Participants will be asked to gather a number of resources to assist them in interpretation. Each participant will need a Bible, pen and paper. Additional resources that will be useful if they are available, but are not necessary, include concordances, study Bibles, Bible dictionaries and Bible commentaries. Access to the internet, if available, is also useful. However, this session can be done with the only resource being a Bible.

### **Learning Goals**

1. To practice the art of biblical interpretation.

### **Opening (5 minutes)**

Welcome all participants to today's session. Explain that today's format for class will be different from the past few weeks, as there is no video to view because today's session is putting what the class has learned over the past few weeks into practice. Follow your welcome with an opening prayer.

### **Putting all Together: Interpretation (40 minutes)**

Divide the class into small groups of 3-4 people. Each group will be working on the same passage for this activity, Mark 10:46-52, which is the story of the healing of Bartimaeus.

As Dr. Pickett discussed in the first video lecture, the questions that we bring to a text will affect how we read any given passage of scripture. Today, the class will work through a series of questions to dig more deeply into Mark 10:46-52. As the class works through the questions provided, more questions will arise. Each question helps the interpreter to arrive at a deeper understanding of scripture. It is important to note that, depending on the group's time constraints, there may not be time to work through all of the questions provided. This exercise is meant to open up participants to the kinds of questions one might ask in the process of interpretation, as well as try their hands at some interpretation. Some participants may feel overwhelmed at the number of questions and the breadth of information covered. Assure participants that the most important aspect of today's exercise is to simply attempt to work through the process of interpretation to gain a better understanding of the biblical text.

We will be using the hermeneutical circle as our guide today. Please have participants refer to their handout from the first day, and provide additional copies for those who do not have their original handout. This handout will serve as a visual aid to the process of interpretation.

## World in Front of the Text

This is the world in which we live and it defines our sense of reality. It is also the place we begin when reading any passage of scripture. Whether we are aware of it or not, we often approach scripture wondering what it means in our context. When we become aware of how we approach any given text, we can then unpack our preconceived assumptions about the text.

First, have each group read the passage one time through, then have each group spend time working through the following questions.

1. What is the first thing you noticed about this story?
2. Is there a word, phrase, or image that remains with you after the story is read?
3. Does this story make you think of any other stories you have heard before?
4. What does this story mean to you?
5. What kinds of feelings does this story evoke in you?

## World Behind the Text

The world behind the text is the cultural world that serves as a frame of reference for the initial audience in the ancient world. Considering the world behind the texts invites us to consider what the text communicated to its first audience.

Have each group read the story out loud. In the first century world most people would have heard the stories of Jesus read out loud due to the high rate of illiteracy and the costs of written communication.

1. Dr. Pickett notes that it is important to ask yourself what seems most irrelevant, as that may be what was most relevant to the first audience. Are there words or phrases that do not seem important to the story? What aspects of the passage seem irrelevant?
2. Why might the crowd around Bartimaeus tell him to be quiet when he calls out to Jesus?
3. Is there a cultural reason the story is set in Jericho? What else happened in Jericho? Where is Jericho on the map of the ancient Greco-Roman world? What towns are near Jericho?
4. What does the term “Son of David” refer to? Are there other places it is used in scripture or in the ancient world?
5. What does the phrase, “have mercy on me?” mean in the ancient world? Was it used outside of a religious context? What might it mean in the gospel of Mark?

## World of the Text

The world of the text is the world of the text itself, on its own terms, as best as we can understand this in our time and place. This is where the literary context of the passage is taken into consideration. A particular story is considered in relation to the whole story. Again, it is important to pay specific attention to what you don't understand, as that may open up a new path for interpretation.

Read the text through a third time and then work through the following questions.

1. What names does Bartimaeus use to address Jesus in this passage? What is the significance of using different names?
2. Where is the story of the healing of Bartimaeus located in the gospel of Mark? Where does this act of healing come in the greater story of the life of Jesus?
3. How do you think this story fits in to the gospel of Mark as a whole?
4. Are there other stories of healing in the gospel of Mark? Where?
5. Are there other incidences of Jesus healing a blind person in Mark? Where?
6. Are there other stories in the gospel of Mark in which one of the central characters is blind? Where?
7. Does this story or one like it exist in any of the other gospels? Anywhere else in scripture?

### Discussion (10 minutes)

- What did you think of this beginning process of interpretation? What did you find most difficult?
- What was the most interesting piece of information you learned about this passage and what would you still like to learn?
- What conclusions can you form about the meaning of this passage?

### Closing (10 minutes)

Invite participants to share the most important item they will take away from this class and how it will be used in their practice of Biblical interpretation. Also, thank participants for being a part of the class. Then, bring the class to an end by reciting the Lord's Prayer together.