

NT 1210: Synoptic Gospels
(According to Matthew)
Luther Seminary, Spring Semester 2009

Instructor: Martin Luther

Office: Gullixson Hall XXX

Email: m.luther001@luthersem.edu

Virtual Office Hours: By Appointment

Catalogue Course description: A study of the gospel of Matthew, exploring its structure, theology, and teachings within its ancient setting. Attention is given to its theological and ecclesial significance today, particularly for preaching, and its understandings of mission and making disciples. The study of this gospel is preceded by a general introduction to the synoptic gospels.

Luther Seminary's Purpose for Bible Classes: “Our major goal is that the biblical witness be at the heart of our faith and ministry as we seek to discern the will and ways of God in a variety of cultures, in our own time and for the future” (catalogue, 89).

Where this class fits: Fulfilling the above purpose involves knowing and immersing ourselves in the scriptural texts, developing deep understandings of what these texts are trying to communicate about God, Jesus, and who we are as God’s people. It also involves learning transparent methods of reaching these understandings (we are not into secret or mystical interpretations here). This course will attempt to move toward these objectives. Hopefully the result will be more precision in our interpretation and discernment, and the broadening of the horizon of Scripture’s applicability.

Main Facets of this course:

Enduring understandings: *These are main points of understanding toward which the knowledge and skills learned in this course lead. They will make sense of the knowledge and skills you will attain in this course.*

There are two main headings that categorize the understandings:

1) the particular and 2) the general.

Concerning Interpretation of Matthew in particular:

1. The importance of interpreting Matthew as:

Not just “the gospel”, but a narrative proclamation of the gospel.

Contextually situated.

A ‘synoptic gospel’ and one of four canonical gospel narratives.

2. How a multifaceted, holistic, and context-sensitive understanding of Matthew’s proclamation enhances not only our understanding of the gospel and ourselves as God’s people, but also provides insight and fullness for our proclamation, pastoral care, discipleship, and living as Christian communities in our various contexts.

3. The importance of recognizing that while Matthew’s proclamation occurs in a world far from ours, it asks us to inhabit it and imagine our lives as extensions of it.

Concerning Scriptural Interpretation and Exegesis in general:

4. That scholarly Biblical study provides fruitful insight toward understanding scripture for the proclamation of the gospel today. We can do this—it is not limited to PhDs only. It should not be.
5. That exegesis and interpretation involve work that consists of a complex of individual tasks which may differ from book to book, and genre to genre.
6. The importance of recognizing our place as interpreters in the 21st century as well as the ‘otherness’ of Scripture.
7. That Scripture is written to and for *a people*. This means that its meaning is not limited to ‘what it means for me.’ Interpretation is most useful only as far as it “recognizes the body” and serves God’s purposes as articulated in the gospel message.

Essential Questions: *These are critical questions addressed implicitly through the course. They are not answerable in a brief sentence. In fact, answering them often requires clarity, nuance, sustained thought, and public discussion. These questions serve as a two-way bridge between the knowledge and skills and the enduring understandings.*¹

1. What is the content of the gospel message?
2. Is there a case or argument Matthew is making about Jesus and the gospel? How is he doing this?
3. How do we read Matthew in relation to other gospels? What does this mean for understanding Matthew? What does it mean for proclaiming and teaching?
4. What makes for a useful and appropriate interpretation and use of scripture?
5. What is Scripture? Is it God’s word? How so?
6. How do we connect Matthew’s witness to the gospel to our present circumstances? What does Matthew have to say for us? How do we answer that?
7. Once we identify the underlying ideologies and assumptions behind ours and others’ interpretations, what do we do with them?

Knowledge and Skills: *These are the essential tools for answering the essential questions. They also are meaningless and susceptible to misuse apart from the context of the enduring understandings.*

- You will gain the following knowledge and skills for interpretation:
 - How to identify a ‘pericope’ and its place in the whole
 - Use of Greek (MDiv students with Greek)
 - Translation comparison (all non-New Testament MA students)
 - Awareness of Textual criticism
 - Synoptic comparison—redaction criticism
 - Form/genre analysis

¹ Disclaimer: The instructor does not have certain or definite answers to these questions. We may not answer all of these questions, and we will not ask them directly. They will inevitably arise and they will lead to other questions, all of which are central to our subject.

- Paying attention to context
- Drawing on historical context
 - A beginning/working understanding of the role that cultural, social, political, and religious elements of the first century play in understanding Matthew's proclamation.
- You will gain competency in analyzing, synthesizing, and weighing the relative significance of data from the above tasks for the purpose of timely and contextually sensitive interpretation, teaching, proclamation, and Christian living.
- You will be able to articulate the richness of having four gospel narratives and understand the interpretive value they bring by giving us examples of different ways of proclaiming the same gospel message.
- You will be aware of various exegetical fallacies in your own exegesis and interpretation.
- You will begin to reckon with what goes into carefully discerning life situations and the applicability or non-applicability of certain portions of Scripture to these situations.

TEXTS:

Required

1. Bible (NRSV) a Greek New Testament is also highly recommended.
2. *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek-English Edition*. 12th edition. Edited by K. Aland. Stuttgart: GBS, 2001 (or simply the English edition). This is an indispensable tool for reading the gospels. It provides easy-access comparison among the four gospels, which enables us to hone in on distinctive elements of each gospel writer. I strongly suggest the Greek-English edition for those who read Greek. Having Greek and English side-by-side helps foster continued use of the Greek text, another indispensable tool for preaching.
3. France, R.T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
4. Talbert, C. *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).
5. Westerholm, Stephen. *Understanding Matthew: The Early Christian Worldview of the First Gospel*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.
6. Select one of the following:

Hultgren, A. *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000. This is thorough, but less exhaustive, and also a bit less expensive.

Snodgrass, K. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. This is very thorough and exhaustive. It gives you nearly everything an interpreter needs on the parables. It is also a bit more expensive, but not too much, and certainly worth it.

Recommended

Brown, Jeannine K. *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007. This is a great book that introduces students to the act of interpreting Scripture. It is very readable, clear, and helpful in asking questions that force us to think about what we are doing when we interpret, why we are doing it, and how we are doing it. We will read one of the chapters in the book for class, but I recommend that you get it and read it at some point. **Not Ordered in Bookstore**

Senior, Donald. *What are they Saying about Matthew?* Revised and expanded edition. New York: Paulist Press, 1996. This little book offers a lot of help for the Matthean interpreter. He basically distills all of the major positions on all of the major issues of Matthean interpretation in a clear and easy-to-read manner. Though it is a decade old, it is still very useful—not much has been advanced. What has been advanced can be picked up in France's commentary. In addition, Senior's book has a touch of the pastoral and confessional—he goes beyond the mere academic. **Not Ordered in Bookstore**

Carter, Warren. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006. Warren Carter is a significant guide for exploring the relation of the New Testament writings to the Roman empire. This small book is not required, but I recommend it highly, as it gives readers a good feel of the importance of the Roman context for interpreting the New Testament—an often neglected but essential area of study. Think about the importance of knowing about modern politics for understanding 21st century America.... We will read parts of this book here and there. Otherwise, it will be in the library or on-line.

Nickelsburg, George W.E. *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. This serves as a companion to Carter's book on the Roman empire. Both are brief and hit on main points. Nickelsburg's book has one defect: it focuses mostly on Judaism and Jewish texts less associated with Diaspora Judaism. A brief book on Diaspora Judaism does not exist, at least as far as I know. There are other, larger and more complex books on Diaspora Judaism, but nothing small and useful as a brief introduction. Perhaps I will write one.... As with Carter's book, we will sporadically consult this book.

Carson, D.A. *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996. I recommend this short book for all pastors. Carson writes from the perspective of one who has been in the field for some time and as a pastor who is concerned with sound exegesis. His claim is that poor exegesis and careless interpretation are inexcusable (and potentially dangerous) for the pastor proclaiming the gospel and preaching Scripture to people. He offers many helpful pointers and suggestions for what not to do when interpreting Scripture. We will be reading some from this book. I do not require it since the chapters being read are only recommended and pertain more to exegetical skills than Matthew.

Requirements and Assignments:

Since this is a course on introducing you to both the gospels and exegetical methods, there will be a handful of 'exegetical tasks' you will be required to learn and practice. In addition, we will have one library skills assignment, Greek translation and weekly discussions.

Living with the Text (40%)

In order to learn the various exegetical skills, I want you to “live” with a particular pericope in Matthew. Over the course of the semester, each of you will be looking at a pericope in a number of different ways, all headed toward the end goal of a deep, multifaceted, holistic understanding of their pericope within the larger narrative of Matthew in relation to the other gospels.

It may seem tedious or boring to focus on the same pericope for an entire semester. Do not be deceived! You will quickly find yourself moving beyond the confines of the particular pericope in an effort to understand it within Matthew’s larger narrative. There will be a constant back and forth—“zooming in and zooming out”—as you work to understand your text. The end result will be a deep, multifaceted interpretation of the passage displayed in an exegetical paper, sermon, or Bible study project. I also encourage you to incorporate your work into your particular congregations.

Living with the text will require the following elements. Each is worth 10% of the project grade and the final paper/sermon/Bible study is worth 40%:

1. Greek translation (for Greek students)/translation comparison for non-Greek students (and phrasing?) **Due Feb. 15**
2. Synoptic Comparison **Due Feb. 22**
3. Structure of Matthew **Due March 1**
4. Word study **Due March 22**
5. OT Connections **Due March 29**
6. Analysis of pericope within immediate context and the larger narrative of Matthew (this includes form analysis) **Due April 19**
7. **Final Paper/Sermon/Bible Study Due May 15**

Weekly Discussion (30%)

In this class you will be divided into groups and you will be asked to participate in weekly discussions on the course site. These discussions will be our virtual class time every week. There will be a day for posting your essays/responses to questions concerning the readings, and there will be a day for discussion and interaction with other members of your group.

Library Skills Assignment (15%) Due with final project at end of semester on April 19

For this assignment you must assemble a bibliography on your text. You will be required to cite from a number of different sources and offer *two* one-page summaries of two of the articles, essays, chapters, or whatever. This will be due at the end of the semester with the final project. However, I will check in on your work half-way through the semester.

Greek translation/ translation comparisons (15%)

Eight times during the semester I offer a number of Greek passages for translation or translation comparison. These are noted as “Translation text option”. You must select **three** of them. When you do these is up to you, as long as you do three of them.

Evaluation:

“Pass/Marginal/Fail” option: Timely, successful, and satisfactory completion of all assignments, in addition to faithful attendance is required for receiving a “Pass” for the course. Marginal work in more than 20% of the assignments will result in receiving a “Marginal” grade for the course. Marginal or poor work in 35% or more of the assigned work will result in a “Fail.” I really do not want any of you to turn in “Marginal” work for any of the ‘Living with the Text’ exegetical assignments—and I am committed to working with you on these. That means that you have to blow all of the response essays and the library skills project or translation/translation comparison work to receive a “Marginal.” Please don’t.

Regarding the ‘Living with the Text’ work: You will be graded on each individual assignment *and* on the final project. Good work on the individual tasks leading up to the final project *should* result in good work on the final, which is simply putting together the pieces and saying something meaningful about your pericope for the church today. Each piece turned in will receive an “Excellent,” “Fair,” or “Rewrite.” The balance of these marks will weigh on the overall evaluation of the entire project (more “fair” evaluations than “excellent” will likely result in a “Marginal” for entire project). If you receive a “rewrite” you will have no more than **two weeks** to turn in the rewrite. I want you to succeed, and so if you do receive a “rewrite” you will be meeting with me to work out how you can bump it up to “Excellent.” Those receiving a “Fair” also have this option, but it is up to the discretion of the student.

Letter-grade option: All assigned work will receive letter grades which will be weighed according to the percentages noted above. There is a form available through the registrar for those who desire a letter grade. It is to be filled out and turned in to me in the first week of class.

What makes the grade?

“Pass” (A or B):

Writing. Work earning this grade shows thoughtful and close reading of the text. It consists in clear writing and argument, with interpretations and conclusions well grounded in the text. It also shows some dialogue with secondary sources (articles, books, commentaries) and other texts (OT, Second Temple Jewish, or Greco-Roman).

Essays/discussions. This level of work shows evidence of reading the material well enough to articulate the main claim(s) and relate it to another idea, article, or Biblical text.

Class Preparation. The student shows preparation for class by engaging in discussion and asking questions related to the subject.

Translation/translation comparison exercises. Translation exercises display a growing understanding of Greek or translational issues, with minimal errors in grasping Greek or the significance of certain translational issues.

“Marginal” (C or D)

Writing. This work shows engagement with the text. Nuance is not brought out and conclusions and interpretations are not always clearly grounded in the text. Dialogue with other sources is present, but the engagement is minimal. Writing is less clear, but it is only a matter of revising some things.

Essays/discussions. With the essays, this level of work displays that the student has read the reading material, but not carefully or closely.

Class Preparation. The student shows preparation for class, but not consistently.

Translation/translation comparison. Translation exercises show some competence with Greek, but no real growth and errors are more prevalent than with more superior work. With English translation

comparison, the student shows competency, but not real deep engagement with the issues in particular texts.

“Fail” (F)

Writing. This work shows little engagement with the text. Rather, it is stream of consciousness or altogether making a point not related to the text, but an ‘issue’. The assigned task is not followed well if at all. Dialogue with other sources is not there. Writing is poor.

Essays/discussions. This work does not demonstrate that the student has read any of the reading material, and thus cannot answer a response essay.

Class preparation. This student is rarely prepared for class and contributes little to the overall classroom learning environment.

Translation/ translation comparison. These regularly are poor in quality with little or no grasp of Greek or growth in understanding it; with the English translation comparison, the student simply makes observations on the differences in translations, with no engagement with their significance.

Special Needs:

Students with any technical/virtual disabilities or any other special needs should consult with the instructor at the beginning of the term. All people are welcome to learn and discover in this class. I will do what I can to make this both possible and fruitful for everyone.

A note on the work:

As you look over the syllabus, it seems that I require much. In a sense I do; this is a Master’s level course. I want you all to be engaged, to think hard, and work through Matthew’s story carefully.

Soon you will be teaching others to do the same. However, I have kept within the normal expectations which are: *2-3 hours of work per one hour in class*. Because this is an on-line class, there are also three hours of class time to account for. This means that the work expectation for this class is 9-12 hours per week (2-3 hours of ‘out-of-the-classroom’ work per one hour of ‘classroom’ time). Make time for the impact of these 9-12 hours.

As for the reading: the average person reads *about* 200-250 words per minute, or *about* one page of reading per 1 ½-2 minutes (a twenty-page article or chapter should take around 30-45 minutes to read). I am taking this generalization into consideration, and I have allowed for slower readers (sometimes I am one! This is actually sometimes a good thing). The point: of the two-three hours of preparation for each class, I require *no more than two hours of reading*. This includes the Matthew texts, which I have divided into smaller sections. *Close reading* of the Matthew texts (including some Greek work for you Greek readers) should take no more than 30-45 minutes (and I am being generous!).

The course schedule also allows for time to complete your exegetical assignments that will be given throughout the semester. These should take no more than three-four hours to complete *at the most*. To complete these assignments you usually have at least one week. This means, schedule your time wisely and plan ahead. If you do this, the workload for this class is quite manageable and should not interfere into your work time for other classes. The options for Greek translation/translation comparison exercises are all marked on the syllabus. You can do them early or wait until the day before they are due. The point is that these can be fit into your schedule quite easily. If you do them early, I would suggest reviewing them before the class on which they are due since the texts pertain to the material we focus on in the class on which they are due.