

## Reading the Gospels as Literature

### April 12 to May 17, 2010

#### Course Outline

About a generation after Jesus was crucified and after the Jerusalem temple was razed by the Romans, writers in different places began to write down what they knew and believed about Jesus' life, death and resurrection. While Jesus is the central character in each of the gospel narratives, the writers see him from different perspectives and portray him in divergent ways for their communities.

In this program, we will read each gospel in its entirety, as separate works of literature, and consider Jesus as the protagonist in each story from the standpoint of the authors, the communities for which the gospels were written and our own experiences of the stories in our own time. References will be made to other gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Secret Gospel of Mark and the Protevangelium of James.

#### April 12 Gospel as Literary Form

The gospel is a literary form with identifiable features and characteristics that distinguish it from historical narratives. We will consider the gospels as "crisis literature," examining the historical contexts that gave rise to them. We will also explore the "synoptic problem": the relationship between the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and their known or hypothetical sources.

#### April 19 Mark

The Gospel of Mark is the earliest and shortest canonical gospel. We will read it as a concentrated, fast-paced story, intricately written, portraying the life of Jesus as a country peasant who suddenly became a healer and teacher.

*To prepare: Read all of Mark's gospel.*

#### April 26 Matthew

Matthew's gospel revolves around a man who, from his birth, was destined to become a great leader, like Moses, to whom kings from afar would pay tribute. Great crowds gathered to hear him speak. Though Jesus had many followers, Matthew never forgets that he had significant enemies, too.

*To prepare: Read all of Matthew's gospel.*

#### May 3 Luke (and Acts)

Luke is the gospel chronicler, intent on bringing his community detailed accounts of Jesus life and ministry. Jesus is portrayed as one of the poor whose lives had been profoundly affected by

the Roman occupation of Palestine. After his death, his wisdom and compassion inspire a new religious movement.

*To prepare: Read all of Luke's gospel.*

### **May 10 John**

The Fourth Gospel stands apart from the others as a glorious reflection on the significance of Jesus' life. Apart from a few stories of remarkable detail and clarity, Jesus is depicted as an almost other-worldly being, wrongly victimized by religious authorities. John focuses on Jesus' character and the meaning of his life and resurrection.

*To prepare: Read all of John's gospel.*

### **May 17 Jesus in, and Apart from, the Gospels**

Wrap up, with discussion of the Gospel of Thomas and stories from other gospels.

*To prepare: Readings will be handed out on May 10.*

#### **Text:**

Since this is a course that relies on reading the texts and not on Greek exegesis or translation issues, read any version of the gospels that appeals to you. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*, Robert J. Miller, editor (Polebridge Press, 1992) is both a readable and highly accurate translation. *The Message: The New Testament in Contemporary Language* by Eugene Peterson (NavPress, 1993) is a fresh, bright translation that, while not scholarly, blends scholarship with modern idiomatic speech in a fresh, energetic style.