

THE NEW TESTAMENT IS NEW!

An open letter to the president of New York Theological Seminary

Dear Bill:

2646 5 Dec 93

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

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Phone 508.775.8008

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Walking early Thursday morning down Fifth Avenue from Grand Central to your school, I came upon a huge "Christmas" storewindow display that had no suggestion of Christmas but did have a menorah: commerce & the media are making more of Hanukkah & less of Christmas--a fact not good news for either Christians or Jews.

Arriving at the seminary, I happened upon this statement in a course description: *Along with denominations, other seminaries and other faiths, NYTS is trying on "First" and "Second Testament" as new names for this literature in these new times.*

This is a radical change if it is, as the wording leads me to think, school policy. Is it? If so, did it meet with your approval & that of the trustees?

1 The change struck me as like that store window! Hertz is first & some other car-rental is "only second"! The priority-superiority of the "First" is only one false impression the public may get from the change. Tangential to this is the notion that the "Second" is only a development from the "First," a notion Jews find offensive: Christianity is not a Jewish religion but a Hellenistic religion which has, at its heart, profoundly unJewish ideas & feelings (eg, incarnation & Jesus-devotion). Ironical: the new policy wants to decrease Christian offense to Jews, but in this matter increases it!

2 When the history of this liberal-Christian slide away from Old/New Testaments is written, the first impulse will be recorded as the surrender, in certain avant-garde Protestant seminaries, of "Old Testament" to "**Hebrew Bible**." The former title refers to content, the latter only to language (& at that is incomplete: some of the OT is not in Hebrew, but in Aramaic). I studied & taught the OT in Hebrew & Aramaic, but "Hebrew[-Aramaic] Bible" as a linguistic title evades reference to the content, because of which Christians study this literature. Further, I know Jews who are offended by Christians' referring to the Hebrew Bible when what they really mean is the Old Testament, if they were forthright enough to admit it.

3 If SingSing prisoners--the syllabus "BBN 100: Introduction to the Second Testament" contains the offensive sentence (above)--pick up a Bible, any Bible, they will *never* see the major divisions designated as other than OT & NT. But the very title of the course informs them there's something big wrong with the Bible! And in such a course as would knock OT/NT, they will soon learn that there's something wrong with how the Bible talks about God, viz masculinely. Get this: Something wrong with how you speak of the Bible + something wrong with how the Bible speaks of God. Message: The Bible is not a book you can trust. The hermeneutics of suspicion is taught before hermeneutics! By contrast, Chas. Colson's Prison Fellowship, working in prisons in 88 countries, does not begin by setting up P.C. **hurdles** between the Bible & the prisoners.

4 The offending sentence makes what I believe are **three false claims**: (1) That "denominations" are "trying on" the First/Second-Testaments replacement for OT/NT. Which denominations? I can't name one. (2) That "other seminaries" are trying this substitution. Which? Can the professor name two? (3) That "other faiths" are trying this. Which? I know of none, though I can speculate that a few Jews may favor the change. Savvy Jews, however, will know that "testament" is a distinctly Christian word (except in the legal sense, eg Jacob's will [Gn.49]): it smells of what is to Jews the NT's most offensive book, viz Hebrews, which is radically supersessionist (Christians superseding Jews as God's chosen people, as in Plato's parable reality supersedes "shadow" [8.5, 10.1]: fulfilling the messianic prophecies, Jesus abrogated Torah). In Jer.31.31, Eng. Bibles, Jewish & Xn, have "covenant"; but in Heb.9.15 (& in 8.8-12, which springs from Jer.31.31-34) all early (pre-1568) Eng. Bibles have "testament." The Greek Bible, OT(LXX) + NT, uses διαθήκη *diatheke*, which can be translated either way & was used at least from

the end of the 2nd c., in the titles of the Bible's two basic sections. Of the two meanings, covenant & testament, only the second (in both Gk. & Eng.) can mean a testator's will, to be opened after his/her death. "Covenant" of course is not offensive to Jews; but not so with the use of the Gk. word's second meaning in Heb.9.15-26 (viz, the redemptive blood of Jesus, in whose death the old covenant dies into the new). While this ad hominem passage is only tangential to the author's main argument, the tangent would not have been possible on the basis of *berith*, the chief Hebrew word for covenant.....If the teacher of BBN 100 wanted to remove offense to the Jews, she could have used First/Second Covenant instead of First/Second Testament. But that would have done little to pacify me....In 8.13 NRSV (the old covenant "obsolete" & "will soon disappear"), I believe we have an allusion to the Gk. word's second meaning. If so, antisupersessionists, believing as they do that Judaism continues to be a valid religion, have further reason to avoid "testament" in naming the Bible's two main divisions.

5 But (to continue on Heb.8.13) the old-covenant writings, the OT, did not "soon disappear," though Marcion (ca.AD140BCE) thought they should. A learned rabbi said to me that the writings of the so-called new covenant, the NT, should disappear, & we both had a good laugh. Those are the extremes of **canon**, the decision on what should be in/out of the Bible. (Nazified Christians of course agreed with Marcion; & in practice many Christian thinkers have, in my opinion, given too little weight to the pre-Christian scriptures [the OT], the only scriptures the earliest Christians had.)....In historical light, why not name the divisions "Pre-Christian scriptures" & "Christian scriptures"? For one thing, many pre-Christian scriptures--eg, those of India & China--(1) were not used by the early Christians & (2) were not in the line of the revelation of the biblical God. Nor would "Hebrew Bible" / "NT" be accurate: the early Christians did not use the Hebrew Bible but rather the LXX, its translation into Greek. How about "TANAKH" / "Christian supplementary scriptures"? That is proper for Jews, for it puts the accent on the OT: it's the opposite of the Christian bias in "pre-Christian scriptures" / "Christian scriptures." How about "Jewish scriptures" / "specifically Christian scriptures"? An additional objection here is that most of the Hebrew-Aramaic scriptures (ie, TANAKH) are pre-Jewish. (Etymologically, "Bible" cannot include any writings not in Greek: it was the name of the LXX, then of the early Christian canon, viz LXX+NT; so "Hebrew Bible" or "Jewish Bible" are incorrect. "The Bible" is a Christian expression, "the collection of sacred writings of the Christian religion" [RHD²]. But of course "bible" is also used loosely, as eg in the phrase "the bibles of the world" or even "the bible of horse racing.") So how about "Early scriptures" / "Later scriptures"? Won't do: the Talmud is later scripture but of course is not in "the Bible."....The syllabus for SingSing BBN 100 says the course is about "Christian scripture," a vague expression which surely includes material--such as the Gospel of Thomas, used by the Jesus Seminar right along with the four NT Gospels--not in the NT.

6 I've been criticizing attempts to get rid of OT/NT, the universal Christian terms for the Bible's two main divisions. Now I must make the case for retaining **new**.

Christianity began, & was till ejection, like the Qumran community, an *eschatological sect* within Judaism (among many types of sects). It sucked up--a great sucking sound?--all the supposedly futuristic passages in the OT, with a special liking for those with the word "**new**" (for which use any concordance).* The noneschatological sects didn't trust the word "new," & soon all Jews who didn't become Christians didn't trust the word "new": it had become a Christian word. Some Christians have abandoned OT/NT on the assumption that "old" feels more insulting to Jews than "new": historically, the reverse is true....*A new song" 6 times in the Psalter; "I will do a new thing" (Is.43.19; & see throughout Is., Jer., & Eze., the use of "new").

The "**new** covenant" (1Cor.11.25, fr. Jer.31.31; Heb.9.15--is "NT") is intimately connected with the Kingdom of God, Pentecost, "new creation/creature" (2Cor.5.17 et al), new commandment (Jn.13.34, 1Jn.2.8), good **news**, new song, new heavens/earth, New Jerusalem (Rev.3.12, 21.2). Don't dump **new** (NT)!



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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

Subscription, \$15 per year

8 Dec 93

Dear Minka,

Of your work I hear nothing but good, so I hope you don't take #2646 too hard.

I should add a comment on your trendiness vis-a-vis ageism. Your syllabus says one reason for dumping Old/New Testament is to avoid "discrimination against the aged." I got a chuckle out of that. I am old, like being old; and new, I try to keep my thinking & engagements fresh. Besides, wrong antonym: ageism is concerned with old/young, not old/new.

When you got the Thinksheet on Cynthia Ikuta, I wasn't aware that her D.Min. was at NYTS & under you (PC, "with" you). I was nine years on the board--UCBHM--now employing her. It's been & is outstanding for opposition to sexism, racism, & classism. (In '69 I got fired for being too strong against racism, & went to work with Bill Webber to reconfigure NYTS.)

Friday I read her D.Min. project.

She's bright, knowledgeable, socially committed, but with so little Christian theological substance that she's a scandal even in so liberal a denomination as UCC.

Sorry I can't give you a better report on her.

Grace & peace,

encl: letter to Bill Howard

c: Bill Howard



NEW YORK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
The President
5 W. 29th St.
NY, NY 10001

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Dear Bill: *Webster*

8 Dec 93

Thank you for the confirmation. I'll immediately return the fee as a gift.

Friday at 8am in the outtray of the photocopier I found some copies of **enclosure A** (p.1 of Minka's current SingSing NT course). This syllabus distressed me enough to do #2646 (**enclosure B**) & send it to Minka along with a copy of this letter to you. **Enclosure C**.....is a copy of my letter to her.

I'm doubly uncomfortable:

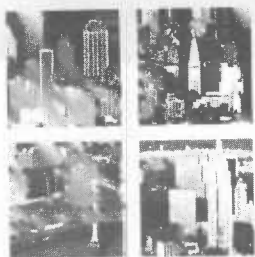
....As an old teacher, I frown at the thought of a school administrator's improper interference in the his/her faculty's work. "Improper" here is important: I'm not for non-interference.

....As old, I try not to meddle in the affairs of the young. But it would be ageism to expect me to put in no word: one aspect of ageism is the prejudicial assumption that the old have nothing to say worth listening to!

On this OT/NT matter, I've said my piece & intend to say no more.

Grace & peace,

William



NEW YORK
THEOLOGICAL
SEMINARY

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Tuesday
14 December 1993

Sweetheart,

Thank you so much for your words
about words of December 8. I am putting
the ones about "nothing but good" under
my pillow with a prayer. For the rest,
you know how important your thoughts,
your ways are to NYTS — have always
been; me, too.

With This, I send Advent love,

Minka Sproge

specifically
for Law B.
Tanaka / X singling out
Holo B / NT
prof X

264.61
How many times, 11

BBN 100 Introduction to the Second Testament
NYTS at Sing Sing,
Fall, 1993

Professor Minka Shura Sprague

Course Description

R. 47

Ng 8/18

Prisoners Bible

avant-garde

BBN 100 is an introduction to the Christian canon of Holy Scripture and the historical critical method of exegesis. We will study the scope of the Second Testament with as much attention to the form and content of its 27 documents as possible. For this, we will use the Bible as the primary text, Hayes and Holladay's Biblical Exegesis for methodology. The lectures, Pheme Perkins' Reading the New Testament, 2/E, and One to Watch, One to Fray will be secondary exegetical sources for the course.

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prison
to B
Eng. - h. B. the
prison
"all the news"

First of all, some words about "what's in a name?" What we call "The New Testament" has had a variety of names over the last 100 generations. In the second century, for instance, Christian writings were called "The Memoirs of the Apostles." And for hundreds of years, Christians everywhere called this part of their Bible Novum Testamentum no matter what language they spoke in the street.

early

Discrimination against the aged, a Christian history of anti-Semitism, growing awareness about language and inclusivity - these all impact our attempt to find a way to talk about the traditions we call "The Bible" with honor and value for each other. Along with denominations, other seminaries and other faiths, NYTS is trying on "First" and "Second Testament" as new names for this literature in these new times.

Prison *Ans! 5th Ann. Manual, no pros!*

Speaking of generations, we will study the Second Testament documents according to the generations in which we believe them to have been written, as we believe them to be related to one another. For this reason, the semester's work occurs in three distinct units:

Sept 13 - Oct 11	<u>First Generation Letters from Paul</u>
Oct 11 - Nov 15	<u>Narratives</u>
Nov 15 - Dec 15	<u>Second and Third Generation Documents</u>

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90% of the final grade will be based upon written work prepared for each unit of material. This includes weekly exegetical worksheets, 3 takehome content quizzes and 3 three-page exegeses. The remaining 10% will depend upon classroom participation, commitment to the learning community. Because the written work is designed to be integrative, late work is unacceptable and subject to penalty.

A final word of advice - this course is for your dialogue with Christian scripture, our dialogue with each other. For this we have faith, each other and the angels; depend on this.

OT: P. X Sprague

BBN 100 Jail Fall, 1993

Course Outline

Unit I First Generation Letters from the Apostle Paul

September 13

Lecture: The NT as Canon, Community and Conversation

For the Next Class

Read: 1 Thessalonians and Galatians
Pheme Perkins, Reading the New Testament, 2/E
pages 114-147, 150-154 and 160-168
Hayes & Holladay, Biblical Exegesis,
Chapters 1 and 3

Prepare: Worksheet on Exegesis of Epistolary Form

September 20

Lecture: The Pauline Corpus, 1 Thessalonians and Galatians

For the Next Class

Read: 1 and 2 Corinthians
Perkins, pages 175-190
Hayes & Holladay, Chapters 4 and 5

Prepare: Word Study Worksheet on Language of Slavery

September 27

Lecture: The Corinthian Correspondence

For the Next Class

Read: Romans, Philemon, Philippians
Perkins, pages 168-174, 147-150 and 154-158

Prepare: Your Epistle to a Congregation

October 4

Lecture: Romans and the Prison Correspondence

For the Next Class

Review: Worksheets, Class Notes and Reading

Prepare: Take-home Content Quiz
3-page Exegesis

Unit II Narratives

October 11

Lecture: Mark

For the Next Class

Read: ~~Mark and Matthew~~

Perkins, pages 23-77, 203-213 and 214-228

Hayes & Holladay, Chapters 6, 7 and 8

Prepare: Worksheet on the Synoptic Tradition

October 18

Lecture: Matthew

For the Next Class

Read: Luke and Acts

Perkins, pages 78-97, 229-241 and 255-269

Prepare: Worksheet on Q Tradition

October 25

Lecture: Luke-Acts

For the Next Class

Read: The Revelation of John (The Apokalypse)

Perkins, pages 312-328

Prepare: Worksheet on the Imagery of the Apokalypse

November 1

Lecture: The Revelation of John (The Apokalypse)

For the Next Class

Read: The Gospel of John

Perkins, pages 98-113 and 242-254

Sprague, One to Watch, One to Pray

Prepare: Rhetorical Critical Worksheet on John

November 8

Lecture: The Fourth Gospel

For the Next Class

Review: Worksheets, Class Notes and Reading

Prepare: Take-home Content Quiz

3-page Exegesis

[Complete the above by November 15 in order
to stay current with reading assignments]

Unit III 2nd and 3rd Generation Epistles and "Letters"

November 15

Lecture Cancelled

For the Next Class

Read: 2 Thessalonians, James, Jude
The Johannine Letters
The Pastoral Epistles
Perkins, pages 150-154 and 281-311

Prepare: Worksheet on Church Issues in the
Second and Third Generations - #1

November 22

Lecture: Trajectories, Themes, Collections - Lecture #1

For the Next Class

Read: Hebrews
Colossians and Ephesians
1 and 2 Peter
Perkins, pages 191-202 and 270-280

Prepare: Worksheet on Church Issues in the
Second and third Generations - #2

November 29

Lecture: Trajectories, Themes, Collections - Lecture #2

For the Next Class

Read: Perkins, pages 1-22

Prepare: Take-home Content Quiz
3-page Exegesis

December 6

Lecture: Trajectories, Themes, Collections - Lecture #3

For the Next Class

Review: Worksheets, Class Notes and Reading

Prepare: Your Second Epistle
[be prepared to read this aloud in class]

December 13

Lecture: The Canon, Community, Voice upon Voice by Faith