Teaching “The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus” for the First Time

a. Course Structure. This course (see Sample Syllabus) optimally should be organized as a seminar course, in which case enrolment should probably be limited to 12-15 students, in order to allow for fruitful discussion and direct group engagement with the textual issues that arise. This would also allow a student’s seminar to form part of her/his evaluation. A larger class should eliminate the seminar component of the evaluation, leaving the instructor to handle (as she/he prefers) the issues which otherwise would be covered in the seminars. This course could be taught to undergraduates in religious studies or to post-baccalaureate students in divinity or theology programs (etc.). At either level, some earlier course-work in biblical studies (in particular the critical historical study of the gospels) should be a prerequisite, but this course could be offered with no prerequisites as long as basic issues such as source, form, and redaction criticism are covered at the beginning of the course and are carefully put into practice throughout. If this course is taught at the MA level, the seminar component should definitely be added.

b. Background Reading. Instructors for whom the canonical gospels are not an area of expertise may wish to familiarize themselves with basic questions and issues pertinent to the gospels by reading the introductions to major commentaries. Almost any of those referred to in Revisiting the Empty Tomb would be helpful, but I recommend for the Synoptics at least those in the Hermeneia series:

- Adela Yarbro Collins, Mark: A Commentary (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007)
- Ulrich Luz, Matthew 1–7: A Commentary (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007)

For the Fourth Gospel I recommend:


See the following for a very accessible introduction to Q—its basis in the Two Document Hypothesis, its composition and social location, and its significance for understanding Jesus and Christian origins.

Helpful (though now a little dated) essays on these writings and on individual topics of significance to this course (e.g., “Son of Man,” “Resurrection,” “Synoptic Problem”) can be found in:


c. Maintaining Focus on the Texts. Certain kinds of historical questions should be explored in this course, whether those are questions about background (Roman rule in Jerusalem, for instance, or early Jewish burial customs or ideas about resurrection), or about the events that the texts claim to recount. In teaching this course previously, I have found that students often have difficulty in negotiating the difference between what the text says and the “event” the text “reports.” For example, a student may ask, Why did Pilate wash his hands (Matt 27:24) or declare Jesus innocent three times (Luke 23:4, 13-16, 22) but still have him executed? In my opinion, more fruitful engagement with the text takes place on a literary or imaginative level: What is the significance of remembering (retelling, depicting) the story in this way? In what ways does this text intend to form/inform its readers’ views? Maintaining this kind of focus on the text, and also a basic understanding of the development of Christian theology about the death and resurrection of Jesus, can also be helpful in dealing with situations where students read their theology into the text.

d. Integrating Other Media. Because of the immense cultural impact of the passion and resurrection narratives, the instructor may find it helpful to work other media into lecture and discussion sessions. Students could do likewise in their seminars. Use, for instance, a piece of art (the Isenheim altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald) to introduce a historical discussion of devotional or theological approaches to Jesus’ death, or a clip from a movie (the brief burial and resurrection scene from Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*) or an audio clip (“Theologians,” by Wilco) to lead into a conversation about current views about resurrection. Liturgical and devotional materials could also be helpfully integrated at various points in the course, as well as other historical sources indicating the text’s history of reception. With a little imagination, the instructor could facilitate inter-disciplinary theological reflection and a broader historical perspective on the foundational narratives of Christianity by making such connections between the texts and their “deployment” in various media.