HARVESTING EVIDENCE
FOR NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

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The extensive discussion by ancient historians of the world in which early Christianity took root is largely bypassed by NT scholars, although its corpus intersects with many important aspects of life and thought in the early period of the Roman empire. In the history of scholarship unprecedented access is now available through electronic means to the primary first century material and bibliographical information of secondary discussion of it. The yield in the areas of philology and NT studies has generally been disappointing. One of the major obstacles for New Testament scholars has been to find a way into these vast fields of evidence and to harvest the insights of other scholars. The cultures in Rome and the Roman East (of which Palestine was part) need to be understood in order to appreciate critiques of them by NT writers.

The goals of the Institute for Early Christianity in the Graeco-Roman World, Tyndale House, Cambridge, are not only to engage post-doctoral research fellows in innovative, long-term projects in NT studies, but also to expose those contemplating or beginning doctoral studies to the vast array of extant information from that world germane to their own discipline. The Institute ran an intense eight-week introductory course on the sources of the first century in the summer of 2001.

Ten days were spent in Corinth, Ephesus, and Aphrodisias learning how to ‘read’ the archaeological sites. There are inscriptions unique to Corinth which are bypassed by students of the NT when they visit the museum on the site which has been operated by the American School of Archaeology for over a century. Ephesus now boasts the largest number of houses under cover of any archaeological site in the East. They are in an excellent state of preservation thanks to Austrian archaeologists. That provides an ideal setting to reflect again on the social phenomenon of households as venues for early Christian meetings and the ideological reasons for adopting familial language to reinforce their perception of one another as ‘siblings’ in the family of
God. Aphrodisias is a significant site excavated largely by Turkish archaeologists. It supplements evidence of aspects of the setting of the churches discussed in the book of Revelation and other important background information relevant to the whole book. On-site lectures were followed by an examination of the evidence and aimed at deprogramming many misconceptions about the first century in the Roman East and allowing the material evidence to begin to reprogram perceptions of that world in order to begin to read the NT through a different lens.

There then followed six weeks of intensive lectures and tutorials in Cambridge centred on major extant Graeco-Roman literary remains, papyrological and epigraphic evidence, as well as pre-70 AD rabbinic material and other Hebrew and Aramaic sources. Each afternoon a document was set for private study that supplemented the species of evidence examined in the morning sessions. The research fellows of the Institute lectured in their given specialities and an epigraphist from Cambridge University also helped the participants decipher the information encapsulated in the vast evidence of that sub-discipline of ancient history. In that particular field the careful study of inscriptions can still yield surprising dividends for NT studies. The course was deliberately structured to ensure that the primary focus was on the literary and non-literary sources themselves. Only after they were carefully examined were secondary comments reviewed. This was done in the belief that graduate students with a good grounding in Hebrew and koine Greek could learn how to use this material. This approach helped to avoid the pitfalls of ‘parallelomania’ by developing skills in asking questions appropriate to the material, and to benefit from the insights of those ancient historians who have commented on the particular documents. Significant material that helps illuminate the text of the NT was central to the lectures and tutorials.

Participants benefited from undertaking all the courses, thereby gaining an appreciation of the diversity of extant material and how deficiencies in evidence from literary sources can often be made good by non-literary material. In an era when various sub-disciplines of ancient history operate in isolation from each other, there is a pressing need to help graduate students contemplating further studies in NT to understand the material from the ancient world that places their corpus in its original context.

Details for the course in 2002 from: Warden@Tyndale.cam.ac.uk