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June 2025

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Religious Studies
Advanced Subsidiary Level

PAPER 3: New Testament Studies
9RS0_03

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9RS0_03 New Testament Studies 2025

Introduction

The 2025 sitting of the GCE Religious Studies 9RS0/03 paper (New Testament Studies) reflected a strong and encouraging performance across the cohort. Many candidates demonstrated a sound academic grasp of the material, often paired with a visible enthusiasm for the subject. Responses were generally well-structured and informed, and the best were marked by clarity of expression, critical engagement with the text, and thoughtful theological insight.

A wide-ranging and secure knowledge base was evident throughout, with increasing confidence in addressing the specific demands of each question. Notably, Question 4 elicited many sophisticated responses that showcased effective synoptic links, demonstrating both breadth and depth of understanding. At the top end, candidates constructed coherent arguments supported by precise textual references, relevant theological vocabulary, and appropriately deployed scholarship. These responses often displayed maturity in evaluation and a nuanced understanding of the wider context of the Fourth Gospel and Luke's Gospel.

However, time management continues to affect the performance of some candidates. While most attempted all questions, several responses revealed an imbalance in time allocation—particularly when disproportionate effort was spent on Question 1 (8 marks) at the expense of higher-value questions such as Q3(b) and Q4. Improved exam technique, including a clearer awareness of mark tariffs and answer length, would help maximise candidate achievement.

A further issue involved the misplacement of content within scripts. Responses written in the margins or in incorrect spaces risk being overlooked due to the structure of the marking process, in which questions are marked independently. Centres are advised to remind candidates to clearly indicate the continuation of responses and use the correct booklet space for each question. Additionally, the unnecessary use of extra sheets—especially for low-tariff questions—highlights the importance of careful planning under timed conditions.

Handwriting legibility was a barrier in a minority of cases. Where difficulties with written expression exist, candidates may benefit from typing their scripts. Centres are encouraged to consider access arrangements where appropriate to support candidates' success.

A key area for development remains the accurate use of Gospel content. Misattributions—such as confusing Lazarus of the parable (Luke 16:19–31) with Lazarus of Bethany (John 11), or conflating healing miracles across Gospels—highlight the need for greater textual precision. Even when responses are thoughtful and well-argued, misidentification of key content undermines their accuracy and cannot be rewarded. Close reading and Gospel-specific preparation are essential.

Encouragingly, enthusiasm for New Testament studies remains high. Many candidates wrote with genuine engagement, particularly in longer evaluative questions. Centres are to be congratulated for preparing candidates well, especially in developing their ability to respond to synoptic demands with relevance and depth. The most successful responses in 2025 were theologically informed, critically evaluative, and confidently rooted in the text. These candidates should be commended for their thoughtful and rigorous approach to the paper.

Q01 Explore key ideas of the Healing of the Official's Son and the Healing at the Pool

Candidates were expected to demonstrate accurate and detailed knowledge of both the Healing of the Official's Son (John 4:46–54) and the Healing at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–18). Successful responses explored the distinct theological themes of each Sign. For the Healing of the Official's Son, key ideas included belief in the power of Jesus' word, the importance of faith without physical evidence, and the development of progressive belief. In the Healing at the Pool, candidates were expected to identify the controversy surrounding Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, Jesus' challenge to legalistic interpretations of the law, and the deeper symbolism of restoration and spiritual renewal.

Both signs from the Fourth Gospel offered opportunities to explore broader theological concepts such as Jesus' divine authority, the nature of faith, and Johannine themes like life, judgment, and signs as revelations of Jesus' identity. Candidates who recognized the significance of these signs within the overall structure of the Fourth Gospel performed well.

A notable number of candidates confused the Healing at the Pool of Bethesda (of the paralysed man) with the Healing of the Blind Man at the Pool of Siloam (John 9), which is a distinct miracle. This factual error significantly impacted A01 marks and limited candidates' ability to explore the correct theological content.

Some responses referenced replacement theology, where Jesus is seen as fulfilling or replacing aspects of Jewish religious practice (e.g. healing at the pool versus traditional healing waters), and touched on other theological ideas such as ancestral sin or spiritual blindness, though these were more appropriate to other signs (e.g. the man born blind).

To achieve high A01 marks (up to 8), candidates needed to include sufficient factual detail and demonstrate sound knowledge of both healings. While scholarly references were not required, the best responses were often enriched by engagement with scholarly perspectives, particularly those focusing on Christology, Signs in the Fourth Gospel, and the theology of belief. However, full marks could still be awarded without such references, provided the response was accurate and detailed.

It should be noted that Question 1 is assessed solely on A01 (knowledge and understanding), and there is no requirement to analyse, evaluate, or offer an opinion (A02). Overly lengthy answers, sometimes extending to two pages, were

not always rewarded with higher marks and often indicated poor time management. This sometimes came at the cost of more substantial essay questions (e.g. Q03(a/b) and Q04), where higher marks are available.

In summary, Question 1 required focused, accurate selection of relevant theological material. While comprehensive coverage of the entire topic was not necessary, candidates were expected to address the specific healings mentioned in the question. Precision, both factual and theological, was essential for high achievement.

Q02 Assess the significance of two forms of biblical criticism (source, form or redaction criticism) for understanding the relationship between the synoptic Gospels.

This question required candidates to demonstrate specific and accurate knowledge of two forms of biblical criticism—limited to Source, Form, or Redaction Criticism—as applied to the Synoptic Gospels. Broader or unrelated approaches (e.g. narrative or textual criticism) fell outside the scope of the question and did not meet the assessment requirements. Candidates were expected to show clear understanding of the distinctive features of the two selected methods and to apply relevant scholarship to assess their significance in understanding the literary and theological relationships between Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Most candidates opted for Source and Redaction Criticism, which were the better-known approaches. Source criticism was particularly popular, though some responses lost focus by going off on tangents or offering lengthy summaries of methodology rather than addressing interpretive significance. Redaction criticism was also widely used, though in mid-level responses it was often less fully developed than Source criticism.

Form criticism was less frequently chosen and generally less well understood. Many students appeared less confident in applying it, though some produced excellent responses. The best answers here used Form criticism not in isolation but as part of a broader evaluative approach, recognising its limitations in explaining synoptic relationships directly, while noting its value in reconstructing earlier traditions.

The strongest responses offered a balanced, focused, and comparative assessment of the selected methods, supported by well-chosen scholarship. These candidates engaged critically with key theories such as the Two-Source Hypothesis, Markan priority, and the editorial strategies of Matthew and Luke, referencing scholars like Streeter, Bultmann, Bornkamm, and Conzelmann. They went beyond descriptive accounts to assess which methods offered the most insight, sometimes arguing, for instance, that redaction criticism is only meaningful once source relationships are established.

At the mid-range, candidates often demonstrated sound knowledge of one criticism but gave less attention or depth to the second, with some confusion evident—particularly between source and redaction criticism, and occasionally

between redaction and narrative criticism. While the latter confusion was more understandable, it still limited focus. A tendency to describe methodology without linking it to synoptic interpretation also reduced impact at this level.

Lower-level responses often showed confusion between methods or presented vague, generalised commentary. Some simply restated the question, asserting that criticism helps understand Gospel relationships without explaining how. Others summarised critical methods without applying them to specific synoptic issues, such as the synoptic problem, the double tradition, or redactional tendencies in individual Gospels.

To reach the higher levels, candidates needed to accurately define and distinguish the methods, support their discussion with relevant scholarship and textual examples, and clearly assess how each approach contributes to understanding the similarities and differences between the Synoptic Gospels. Although many candidates showed knowledge of critical methods, only a few offered fully synthesized conclusions that compared the relative value of the chosen approaches within the specific context of synoptic relationships.

Overall, candidates who successfully engaged with the question's AO2 demand and demonstrated interpretive focus, clarity, and critical use of scholarship performed most strongly.

Q03a Clarify the ethical teachings illustrated in the passage from the parable of the Lost son.

This question required candidates to extract and explain ethical teachings from a well-known parable, with particular focus on the specific verses provided. The best responses identified and explored key ethical principles such as repentance (the son acknowledging his sin and seeking forgiveness), forgiveness (the father's immediate and compassionate response), and unconditional love/agape (the father's actions reflecting divine love). These were often framed within the wider context of Jesus' ethical teachings, Luke's Gospel themes (such as reversal, marginalisation, or the Kingdom of God), and wider biblical material including the Beatitudes or other examples from Jesus' ministry.

Many of the strongest candidates referenced the text directly and moved beyond mere summary, instead interpreting the passage's symbolic meaning – most notably the relationship between God and humanity, with the son representing the sinner and the father symbolising God. Strong answers analysed how the text reflects core Christian values such as grace and reconciliation, often supported with thoughtful theological language and contextual understanding. These responses typically offered a thematic and structured approach, often including short introductions or conclusions to situate the parable within a broader literary or theological framework. The strongest also avoided retelling the story and instead explored how meaning is conveyed through structure and language.

In the mid-range, candidates often showed solid understanding and structure, frequently explaining the parable line-by-line. Many began to draw out its universal themes – grace, restoration, and compassion – though this was not always developed in depth or clearly tied to the question. At this level, understanding of ethical teachings was sometimes sound but underexplored; some responses identified repentance and forgiveness but did not expand these ideas or link them beyond the text. Occasionally, there was confusion between explanation and application, or an overreliance on paraphrase without sufficient interpretive engagement.

Several candidates across both (a) and (b) became side-tracked by modern-day applications of the parable. While some relevance was occasionally established, this often came at the expense of focused textual analysis, particularly at the lower levels. In such cases, answers sometimes veered toward addressing different questions—possibly those for which the candidate was better prepared—rather than engaging directly with the passage.

At the lower end, many responses focused on retelling the parable. While these showed basic familiarity with the story, they often lacked critical engagement or recognition of its deeper ethical or theological significance. Responses tended to use general language such as ‘being kind’ or ‘doing the right thing’, without precise reference to concepts like agape, repentance, or grace. Some candidates simply repeated the question, offering vague statements about the passage teaching people how to live, without explaining how or why. In the weakest responses, engagement with the passage was minimal or irrelevant material was introduced, indicating misunderstanding of the task.

Achievement across all levels could be improved by referencing the extract closely, with attention to specific language and imagery, using accurate theological terms such as agape, repentance, grace, and reconciliation, demonstrating how parables function allegorically, particularly within Luke and finally relating ethical teachings not only to modern-day application but to Jesus’ ministry and the broader message of Luke’s gospel.

3b) Analyse the contribution of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus for understanding the ethical teaching of Jesus.

Question 3b required candidates to demonstrate detailed understanding of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) and to analyse how it contributes to an understanding of Jesus’ ethical teaching. This is a demanding task that requires precision in both textual recall and interpretive analysis.

At the highest levels of attainment, candidates produced well-structured responses that engaged closely with the parable’s ethical and theological implications. These candidates explored key themes such as reversal of fortune, judgment, accountability, and social responsibility. Many drew attention to Jesus’ concern for the poor and marginalised, interpreting the reversal in the afterlife as a powerful critique of economic injustice. Stronger responses also recognised literary

details—for instance, that Lazarus is named while the rich man is not—and discussed the theological or symbolic significance of this contrast.

Better responses went beyond surface-level moralising to offer thoughtful commentary on faith, repentance, and spiritual blindness. Some candidates made good use of the broader context of Luke's gospel, linking the parable to related teachings such as the Narrow Door, the Sermon on the Plain, or the Sheep and the Goats. The best candidates also referenced first-century attitudes to wealth, Jewish eschatology, and the concerns of the early Christian community, using these to enrich their analysis. A small number incorporated scholarly viewpoints or theological frameworks to great effect.

A notable feature of stronger responses was their ability to draw comparative links to other parables, most commonly the Good Samaritan. When these comparisons were thoughtfully developed, they helped highlight common themes such as marginalisation and moral obligation. However, an interesting omission was the Prodigal Son, which shares thematic similarities regarding forgiveness, reversal, and divine mercy—a comparison that, when used well, could have deepened analysis.

Mid-level responses also attempted to bring in wider context, though this was often misapplied. The Good Samaritan was frequently referenced, but in many cases, this felt like pre-prepared material rather than an intentional comparison. These responses lacked the precision to explain how or why the parables were thematically connected, resulting in generic or digressive analysis. In some cases, the inclusion of other parables appeared to pad out the response, detracting from the focus on the set text.

Another key limitation at this level was confusion around the parable itself. A significant number of candidates mistook the parable for another, most commonly: confusing Lazarus with the Lazarus of Bethany, whom Jesus raised from the dead; blending the parable with the Rich Young Ruler ('What must I do to inherit eternal life?'), treating the parable as if it were two separate stories. These errors, while sometimes well-explained, undermined the accuracy and could not be credited for AO1, as they were not based on the correct text. Even otherwise strong responses were weakened when built on a misidentified or conflated parable.

At the lower levels, candidates often retold the parable at length, with limited or no analysis. Ethical concepts were referenced in vague or reductive terms, for example stating that 'rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven', without exploring the parable's more complex messages about justice, faith, and spiritual responsibility. Others repeated general statements on 'helping others' or 'being kind', often across several paragraphs, with little progression or development. In some cases, Jesus was incorrectly described as a character in the parable, or Lazarus was said to be asking for money—factual inaccuracies that significantly reduced credibility.

There was also evidence, particularly at the lower end, of candidates attempting to answer a different question—perhaps one they were more familiar with—rather

than engaging directly with the task of assessing how this parable contributes to Jesus' ethical teaching.

Improvement across the levels can be achieved by accurately recalling the specific details of the parable and its structure, analysing how the ethical teachings are conveyed, rather than just describing them, drawing careful comparisons with other parables only when relevant and justified, avoiding pre-learned responses that do not directly address the set text or the question's demand for contribution and interpretation, using precise theological vocabulary (e.g. judgment, reversal, repentance, eschatology) to strengthen clarity and depth.

Finally, centres should continue to remind candidates of the weight of Questions 3 and 4, which together comprise 60 of the 80 available marks. Those who overextend on Q01 or Q02 may not leave sufficient time to fully develop their responses to these extended essay questions. A clear plan and careful time management are essential.

Q04 Evaluate the significance of Jesus' challenge to Judaism.

This question was generally well tackled by candidates, and many engaged meaningfully with the material. Most responses showed a secure grasp of the New Testament context and the theological implications of Jesus' teachings and actions. The strongest responses demonstrated a high level of conceptual clarity and were able to balance textual understanding (AO1) with critical analysis and evaluation (AO2).

This question was generally well received by candidates, with the majority demonstrating secure knowledge of New Testament material and a sound understanding of the religious context of first century Judaism. The best responses were those that combined critical engagement with theological content, thoughtful use of scholarship, and sustained evaluation. Candidates, who grasped the historical tensions between Jesus and the Jewish authorities were able to explore both sides of the argument and tended to perform well.

Most candidates demonstrated a solid knowledge of key events and ideas, such as: Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees and Sadducees, the significance of the Sabbath healings and miracles, the cleansing of the Temple, the 'I AM' sayings and Jesus' claims to divinity, and the crucifixion and resurrection. Stronger candidates successfully located Jesus within the first century Jewish context, showing awareness of messianic expectations, Roman occupation, and the role of the Temple authorities.

The best candidates demonstrated very strong subject knowledge, clear focussed structure plus sophisticated engagement with both the historical and theological dimensions of Jesus' challenge. Excellent responses demonstrated the integration of New Testament texts and interpretations plus thoughtful counterarguments (e.g., Jesus as a reformer, not a revolutionary). Many candidates referenced key events such as the cleansing of the Temple, Jesus' miracles, claims of divinity (e.g., 'I AM' sayings), and his trial and crucifixion. These were used to show how Jesus

presented a significant challenge to the religious establishment of his day. There was improved use of scholarship, with some candidates referencing named scholars (e.g., Sanders, Wright, Rivkin) and interpretations to support their analysis. The synoptic links from Philosophy of Religion (particularly Wittgenstein's language games) and Ethics (especially around law, justice, and compassion) were integrated with increasing confidence, to show miscommunication between Jesus and the Jewish authorities thus adding theological depth to many responses. Evaluation (AO2) was more successful where candidates clearly presented both sides—those who argued Jesus' challenge was significant (e.g., threatening temple authority or law) and not significant (e.g., aiming to reform rather than replace Judaism) demonstrated stronger critical thinking.

In the lower levels there was evidence of descriptive answers: Some candidates narrated events (e.g., miracles, crucifixion) without analysing how these represented a challenge to Judaism or why they were significant. This limited access to higher AO2 marks. Several responses had a lack of balance where they focused heavily on why Jesus challenged Judaism, without properly evaluating how significant this challenge was, thus drifting away from the evaluative nature of the question. In weaker responses the synoptic content was a bolt-on and many responses included references to other areas of study- these were sometimes inserted without clear relevance or integration into the argument. Issues in terminology and spelling where some candidates showed a lack of care with key terms e.g., spelling 'Pharisees', 'resurrection', 'blasphemy', 'synoptic' incorrectly, at times detracted from otherwise strong arguments. Performance can be enhanced if the response is tailored to the precise wording of the question—this one required evaluation of significance, not just explanation. It is worth noting that synoptic links should deepen the argument, not distract from it and the synoptic material should be explained and relevant.

Paper Summary

Overall, candidates demonstrated an encouraging and growing confidence in engaging with complex theological, ethical, and historical material. Many showed a solid grasp of key texts, concepts, and scholarly perspectives, and were increasingly comfortable in applying these to the demands of the questions. Where candidates moved beyond narrative and description to sustained, critical evaluation, their responses were significantly stronger.

Centres are to be commended for the high levels of preparation evident in many responses. Candidates approached the paper with enthusiasm and intellectual curiosity, often making thoughtful and creative connections across the specification. To continue this trajectory from good to excellent, the following advice is offered:

- Structure essays clearly: begin each paragraph with a focused point, support it with evidence (from texts, theology or scholars), and follow with critical evaluation.
- Use scholarship meaningfully—avoid name-dropping and instead integrate scholars' views to strengthen and interrogate your argument.
- Tailor responses carefully to the specific wording and demands of the question—avoid 'pre-learned' material that is only partially relevant.
- Develop counterarguments in full, showing awareness of complexity and different viewpoints, rather than listing them briefly.
- Practise answering under timed conditions, focusing especially on balancing time according to the mark allocations.
- Use the official answer booklet correctly, avoiding supplementary attachments unless necessary.
- Manage time effectively: ensure Q1 is concise, allowing sufficient time for higher-mark questions (especially Q3 and Q4).
- Provide precise examples and direct textual references to illustrate and support points clearly.
- Express your personal judgement clearly in A02 questions, using reasoned argument and justification.
- Continue to build a broad and nuanced range of scholarship—depth and variety both contribute to stronger evaluation.
- Pay attention to key terminology and accurate spelling, especially of technical terms and scholars' names.
- Ensure that arguments remain evaluative throughout—avoid drifting into description or retelling of biblical narratives.
- Integrate synoptic links naturally where appropriate, especially from Philosophy (e.g. divine attributes, eschatology, religious language) and Ethics (e.g. agape, situation ethics, law vs grace).
- Always prioritise clarity and organisation: signal your argument clearly at the start of each paragraph and ensure a logical progression of ideas throughout.