

Jesus Before Christianity: Introducing the New Testament

RE 202 (AB)

classroom: Tisch 302

class meets: Tues & Thurs
2:10-3:30 PM

Prof. G. Spinner

gspinner@skidmore.edu

office: Ladd 205 A

office phone: 518-580-8406

office hrs: Wed 11:00-noon, Thurs
1:00-2:00 pm, *or by appointment.*

Course Description

The New Testament is a collection of ancient texts that combines deep piety with social critique, in order to proclaim the radical ethic of the coming Kingdom of God. Focusing on the figure of Jesus as God's anointed, these sacred writings address important religious concerns -- messiah and miracle, sin and salvation, faith and works, among others -- in ways that continue to speak to millions of people today. The strong sense of historical perspective informing our academic study is not meant to lessen the Bible's import in contemporary life, wherein the Christian Scriptures are a testament of faith, cherished as "the greatest story ever told," and combed through for the basis of a Christian life.

Yet to better understand such important sacred texts, we will be situating them at the confluence of two powerful, ancient literary streams: that of the Hebrew Bible and that of Classics. For by channeling currents from both types of sources, the first Christians fashioned for themselves a rich symbolism and redefined themselves as the true Israel, God's People. Our goal in this course will be to understand the spiritual outlook of that earliest Church, rather than to read the New Testament through the lens of later theologies.

Learning Goals

By taking this course, students will:

- i.) become familiar with genres and motifs in the foundational canon of a major global religion, thereby increasing religious and cultural literacy;
- ii.) disaggregate that canon, recognizing that different texts within the canon portray Jesus in different ways;
- iii.) become acquainted with the rudiments of Source Criticism, i.e., conversant with the Synoptic Problem and Q;
- iv.) understand the relation of the Christian to Hebrew Scriptures, as the texts of the New Testament build upon earlier Israelite traditions, as well as demonstrate affinities for rabbinic teachings;
- v.) understand the relation of Christian Scriptures to Greek and Roman literatures, situating the New Testament compositions in a Hellenized society;
- and vi.) situate biblical texts in their historical contexts, not simply out of antiquarian interest, but to better distinguish what a text actually says from what later interpreters insist it must say.

Course Materials

The Harper Collins Study Bible. To paraphrase Ecclesiastes 1:2, of the making of many Bibles, there is no end. My preference as a scholar is for the NRSV translation, but some other modern versions are also readable and reliable. (The King James Version is not among the latter). For your convenience, I ordered an affordable and informative edition, with scholarly annotations prepared by the Society for Biblical Literature, the premiere academic organization for critical engaging Scripture. Note that this Bible is not just bi-testamental, but also deuterocanonical; that is, it *maximizes the canon*, a significant advantage when studying Scripture historically.

Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology, by Achtemeier, Green & Thompson (Eerdmans, 2001). This tome acts as our “textbook,” by providing basic historical background, situating each biblical book within the canon, attending to its literary features, and framing some religious issues for us.

Course Reader. The instructor will provide you with a selection of additional readings.

By looking at the heft of these books, you should understand from the outset that this is a *reading intensive course*.

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	10 %
Response Papers	20 %
Parable Presentation	20 %
Midterm	25 %
Final	25 %

Total	100 %
--------------	--------------

Participation is not a “gimme,” as it requires a strong and continual effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about our topic, and this can not be achieved through dispirited or half-hearted attempts. So: understand that *attendance is mandatory*. You should make every effort to always be at class (and to be on time, and not leave prematurely). Of course, participation is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity. We are going to think through some difficult materials together, and I expect each and every one of you to have something to contribute to that collaboration. *Real education is not a spectator sport.*

Parable Presentations will be scheduled for each student. You are asked to give a short (10-15 mins.) oral presentation and lead the discussion about one (set of) parable(s). A separate hand-out will further explain this assignment.

Response Papers are short pieces of writing (3-5 paragraphs, at least 2 pages) in which you respond to questions that I distribute ahead of time. We will use these short papers as jumping off points for our discussions. You will also turn in your papers, and they will be graded.

The **Midterm** and **Final** are essays of moderate length; you will have a choice of topics. I will say more about effective essay writing and developing your ideas once the semester is under way.

Late work will be marked down. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. *If you need an extension, be sure to request it before the assignment is due.* All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form, unless prior arrangements are made with the instructor.

Fair Grading & A Reasonable Workload

As the above section makes quite clear, I expect you to work. I think the workload is entirely appropriate for this level of course; and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together. But, in the interest of fairness, allow me to be more explicit about what my expectations are, and the standards to which I will hold you.

For each hour spent in class, I expect you to spend 3 hours outside of class reading and writing. This means that you should commit approximately 9 hours per week in preparing and executing assignments. Be assured that **you need to do all of the assigned readings**. There is no way to understand the subject and to fully participate in class if you skip, or skimp, on this most fundamental of labors.

In an era of grade inflation, let me address my understanding of what letter grades signify. I take “C” to be the baseline grade: it is *acceptable*. Thus doing all the assigned work, and doing it adequately, earns one a solid “C.” “B” then stands for doing *better than acceptable*, demonstrating some measurable improvement over “C” quality. And “A” translates to *excellent* - a superlative I do not dispense lightly. I am not interested in employing mathematical models, such as by grading on a curve; I will happily give as many “A”s as I have students earning them. But do understand that such a high grade must be achieved through diligent effort, and can not merely be assumed.

I do not just attach a grade to your written work, but provide you with feedback on your writing. I make this effort in order to help you improve your writing skills, and so it behooves you to attend to that critique, and learn from your mistakes. While not my primary concern, errors in spellings, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on content, so that you learn to express your ideas clearly and to build convincing arguments through a careful use of evidence. This pedagogical concern is shared across disciplines, and this course contributes to that ongoing effort.

With this goal in mind, you will have the option to rewrite certain papers. If you receive a B- or lower on a major paper, then you may exercise that option. (This option only applies for major papers, such as midterms; it is not available for shorter, reflection papers, and, due to time constraints, for finals). If I hand you back a paper with a lower grade, then you can choose to meet with me. We will discuss the shortcomings of the paper, and set a new deadline for the rewritten version. You will turn in the older version along with the newer, and receive the average of the two grades.

Taking a Historical Approach

The study of religion constantly strives for analytical rigor, combining empathy with critical perspectives. The principle method employed in this particular course is historical, as we focus on recognizably human agents, instead of divine beings. We therefore study the sacred texts within their ancient context, considering the circumstances of the people who wrote down and transmitted these canonical sources. Any arguments we make should be grounded in evidence, and we try to test our assumptions.

What is that ancient context? Jesus lived during the period of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, when Judea was under Roman occupation. Jesus himself did not write down his teachings, which he communicated in Aramaic, a Semitic language. Yet the people who authored the New Testament wrote it in Greek, and so we situate their writings in the broader milieu of a Hellenized Israel. As we will see, the books in the Christian canon were originally Jewish works, which promoted the messiahship of Jesus, and so eventually became Christian.

So what then is meant by calling this course, “Jesus Before Christianity”? Many contemporary Christians assume that as soon as Jesus appeared, or once he had been crucified and resurrected, there instantly was Christianity *as we know it today*. But this, as my italicized emphasis betrays, is anachronistic. Jesus’ proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God was a continuation of earlier Israelite traditions, even as he clashed with others about how to interpret or implement those traditions. The earliest followers of Jesus saw him as fulfilling the Torah, which is not the same as founding a new religion.

This historically grounded claim, entirely uncontroversial among contemporary scholars, may be neatly summed up by the title of Geza Vermes’ seminal work: Jesus the Jew. At every turn, the New Testament deeply engages older Jewish texts and traditions. In the aftermath of the torturous death of Jesus at the hands of the Roman authorities, his followers sought to understand those events in terms of promises and prophecies found in the Jewish Scriptures. This begins a process through which Jesus becomes the Christ, whose messianic role is crucial to understanding the subsequent development of Christianity. Yet that development would take centuries, as the religion *of* Jesus shifted towards a religion *about* Jesus. Creedal formulations of a triune divinity only emerge later, hundreds of years after the original Jesus movement.

So the sources we will study in this course all date from the first century, approximately, well before orthodox Christian views were formulated. The images of Jesus presented by these earliest texts are different from later portraits, and they differ from each other. I will highlight that diversity within the canon, and stress the ways in which the earliest forms of Christianity were very much part of the lively conversation among Jews in the first century of the Common Era.

Who then was Jesus *before* any orthodoxy existed that might define Christian beliefs and practices? Was he a radical, rabbi, prophet, martyr, messiah, or, somehow, all of the above? We will explore the various rubrics people in the first century applied to Jesus, as they sought to explicate his life, death, supposed resurrection, and anticipated return. We will probably have more questions than answers, but I trust that our historical approach can yield a productive puzzlement, even astonishment. For the ubiquity of Jesus in many parts of American life has blunted the force of the ancient texts, making him all too familiar. By looking at a multivocal canon featuring a Jewish Jesus, I hope we can recover some of the strangeness of that first century figure.

Classroom Civility

Do not be late to class, do not leave the room during that time, and do not be rude while here. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, yet both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that eating and drinking do not interfere with our learning.

Please turn off your devices *before* you come to class. Take off headphones, remove ear buds, and stow anything unconnected to our class well out of sight. I will start out the semester by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way; but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screens than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students, or to the instructor will not be indulged.

Student Disabilities

I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you will need it, then you must formally request academic accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, and provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Palamountain Hall.

Honor Code

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

Partners in Learning

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. We will debate positions and challenge each other. Yet whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

Jesus Before Christianity: Introducing the New Testament Schedule

- Sept 7. Introductions. Scripture in history.
- Sept 12. Preliminaries: Testaments, genres, sources. Reading 1.
- Sept 14. Matthew, part 1. **The New Moses.** Reading 2.
- Sept 19. Matthew, part 2. **The Sermon on the Mount.** Reading 3.
- Sept 21. *No class:* Rosh ha-Shanah, *the Jewish New Year.*
- Sept 26. John J. Collins will lecture on
“The Invention of Judaism” in Davis Auditorium at 8:00 pm.
- Sept 26. Matthew, part 3. **Miracles & Ministry.** Reading 4.
- Sept 28. Matthew, part 4. **The Last Supper & the Passion.** Reading 5.
- Oct 3. The Letter of James: **Instructing the Faithful.** Reading 6.
- Oct 5. Luke, part 1. **The Messiah is Born.** Reading 7.
- Oct 10. Luke, part 2. **The Sermon on the Plain.** Reading 8.
- Oct 12. Luke, part 3. **Miracles & Ministry, Take Two.** Reading 9.
- Oct 17. Luke, part 4. **The Tomb Emptied, The Hero Returned.** Reading 10.
- Oct 19. Paul, part 1. **A Mission to the Gentiles.** Reading 11.
- Oct 24. Paul, part 2. **The Example of Abraham.** Reading 12.
- Oct 26. Paul, part 3. **From Adam to Christ.** Reading 13.
- Oct 31. The Acts of the Apostles: **Witnessing to Christ.** Reading 14.
- Nov 2. John, part 1. **The Word Made Flesh.** Reading 15.
- Nov 7. John, part 2. **Signs & Recognitions.** Reading 16.
- Nov 9. John, part 3. **The Noblest Death.** Reading 17.

Schedule, *continued.*

Nov 14. *Reviewing the* Parables of Jesus. **Of Rewards & Reversals.** Reading 18.

Nov 16. Hebrews. **The Priestly Order of Melchizedek.** Reading 19.

Nov 21: *No class:* Society of Biblical Literature/American Academy of Religion meets.

Thanksgiving Break.

Nov 28. Revelation, part 1. **Empire, Apocalypse & Astral Prophecy.** Reading 20.

Nov 30. Revelation, part 2. **The Final Battle & The New Jerusalem.** Reading 21.

Dec 5. Making a Canon: **Community & Conflict.** Reading 22.

Dec 7. Conclusions.

Jesus Before Christianity: Introducing the New Testament Readings

The readings for RE 202 are organized into three categories: A, B & C.

A passages come from the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians call the “Old Testament.” *Skim these readings.* Some of you may already be familiar with these sources, others may not. Just be sure you see some relation between the Hebrew Bible readings and New Testament passages assigned in B. If not, you may want to look these over again, and read parts more carefully.

B is highlighted in **bold** and indicates the portion of the New Testament we will be studying for that day. **As our primary readings, you should pay very close attention here.** While reading them, make note of anything you do not understand, or that you might want to discuss.

C passages range from secondary sources to selections from other ancient literatures, such as rabbinic texts or classics. These readings are particularly important, as they will set up our comparisons or discussions.

Our textbook, Introducing the New Testament (Achtmeier et. al.) will here be abbreviated as INT. CR stands for the Course Reader.

- Reading 1.** C: INT chs.1 and 2 (pp. 1-51). Spinner, “Scripture in History.”
- Reading 2.** A: Exod 1:8-2:10; Deut 18:15-22; Judg ch. 13; Isa 7:14.
B: Mt 1:1-4:11. C: INT 3.2 (pp. 62-67) and 4.1-4.2.1 (pp. 89-mid 99).
- Reading 3.** A: Lev ch. 19; Ps 37:1-11. **B: Mt 4:12-7:29.** C: INT 4.2.2-4.2.2.2 (pp. mid 99- mid 103). Maccoby, Jesus the Pharisee (CR).
- Reading 4.** A: 1 Kgs 17:8-24, 19:19-21; 2 Kgs 4:1-44. **B: Mt 8:1-20:34.**
C: INT 4.2.3-4.2.4 (pp. 103-112). Mekhilta (CR); Yoma (CR); Stern, “Rabbinic Parables” (CR).
- Reading 5.** A: Exod 12:1-28; Pss. 22 & 69; Isa 53; Dan 7:9-14; Zech 9:9.
B: Mt 21:1-28:20. C: INT *finish* ch. 4 (pp. 113-121). Flint on Messiahs in Dead Sea Scrolls (CR).
- Reading 6.** A: Prov 2:1-15, 22:17-25. **B: The Letter of James.**
C: INT chs. 10 and 21 (pp. 271-281 and 491-512).
- Reading 7.** A: 1 Sam 1:1-2:21. **B: Lk 1:1-4:13.** C: INT 3.3.2-3.3.3 (pp. 69-74) and 6.1-6.3.3 (pp. 149-mid 162); Talbert, “Miraculous Conceptions and Births” (CR).

Readings, *continued*

- Reading 8.** B: Lk 4:14-9:50. C: INT 6.3.4 (pp. mid 162-166); Funk, “Voice Print” (CR); Moles, “Diogenes” (CR); Diogenes Laertius, Lives (CR).
- Reading 9.** B: Lk 9:51-21:38 C: INT 6.3.5 (pp. 166-169); Cotter, “Miracle Stories” (CR); Ehrman, Jesus, Apocalyptic Prophet (CR.)
- Reading 10.** B: Lk 22:1- 24:53. C: INT *finish* ch 6 (pp. bottom 169-174); Chaereas & Callirhoe (CR); Odyssey (CR).
- Reading 11.** A: Isa 2:2-4, 56:1-8. B: **First Thessalonians** and **First Corinthians 1:1-2:16**. C: INT chs .11 *and* 18.1-18.1.2 (pp. 283-297 *and* 427-439); Maccoby, The Mythmaker (CR).
- Reading 12.** A: Gen chs. 15-17. B: **First Corinthians chs. 12-15. The Letter to the Galatians**. C: INT ch. 13.1-13.3 *and* ch. 14 (pp. 327-346 *and* 355-375); Philo (CR).
- Reading 13.** A: Gen ch. 3; Dt 10:12-22, 30:6-10. B: **The Letter to the Romans**. C: INT ch. 12 (pp. 299-326).
- Reading 14.** A: Wisdom of Solomon 13:10-19. B: **Acts 1:1-3:26, 4:32-5:16, 6:8-10:48, and 17:16-32**. C: INT ch.9 (pp. 245-269).
- Reading 15.** A: Pr 8:22-9:6. B: **Jn 1:1-4:45**. C: INT 7.1-7.3.1 (pp. 175-mid 183).
- Reading 16.** A: Exod 3:14; Isa 55:1-5; Ezek 34:11-24. B: **Jn 4:46-13:38**. C: INT 7.3.2 (pp. mid 183-mid 194).
- Reading 17.** B: **Jn 14:1-21:25**. C: INT *finish* ch 7; Doran, “Narratives of Noble Death” (CR).
- Reading 18.** Parables: TBA. C: INT 8.1 *and* 8.3 (pp. 207-209 *and* 214-224). *Reread* Funk, “Voice Print,” *and then consider* Robinson, “What Jesus Had To Say” (CR).
- Reading 19.** A: Gen 14:17-20; Ps 110; Jer 31:31-37. B: **Hebrews**. C: INT ch. 20 (pp. 465-489); Flint on Melchizedek in the Dead Sea Scrolls (CR).

Readings, *finished*

- Reading 20.** A: Ezek ch. 9; Zech 5:5-6:8; Dan ch. 7. **B: Revelation chs. 1-13.**
C: INT 24.1-24.3.5.1 (pp.555-top 582); Hyginus (CR);
consult Spinner (CR).
- Reading 21.** A: Ezek 38:1-39:20, *and just skim* the long visionary report of the restored Temple in chs. 40-48. **B: finish Revelation.**
C: INT *finish* ch 24 (pp. 582-587).
- Reading 22.** C: INT ch.25 (pp. 589-608).