

Christian Scriptures: An Introduction

RE 202

classroom: Tisch 305

meets: Wed & Fri

10:10-11:30

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Wed 1:00-2:00, *or by appointment.*

Course Description

i.) Jesus of Nazareth

While it is commonly asserted that Jesus of Nazareth is as important as anyone who ever lived, there is a good deal of confusion about what this person taught and what he might have done. What did Jesus mean in proclaiming the Kingdom of God? Did he emphasize social change, or was he more concerned with spiritual liberation? Did he mean to establish a new religion? Or was that the later work of his disciples? Or possibly the invention of Paul? These are among the puzzling issues we will address, even if definitive answers elude us.

Jesus is the Latinized version of the Greek name *Iesous*, corresponding to the Hebrew name *Yeshu'a* (Joshua). Jesus was given the title of Christ (from the Greek *khristos*, meaning “anointed one,” to translate the Hebrew term *mashiach*, or “messiah”), which eventually yielded derivative terms like Christian (“Christ-like”) and Christianity. Jesus as *the* Christ is the central figure in the collection of texts known as the New Testament, which is the focus of this course; it is accounted by many people around the world as Scripture and treasured as the “greatest story ever told.” Therein Jesus transcends any historical identity, and, as the one who atones for the sins of the world and calls upon others to take up their crosses, assumes mythic dimensions. These sacred writings are dense with allusions to earlier scripture and rich in symbolism, which we aim to unpack and to critically engage. Yet, as we do so, we should bear in mind that these sacred writings address religious concerns in ways that continue to speak profoundly to millions of people around the world, and that through the words of the New Testament Jesus of Nazareth is worshipped and emulated on a global scale.

ii.) Canons

The Greek term *kanon* originally referred to a reed cane, used as a measuring stick, so that it designates “a standard,” and it came to mean a standardized list, delimiting any set of works as authoritative or definitive. When we say something is “canonical,” we are saying it is recognized as basic, accepted, axiomatic; in the case of texts, we are saying these are the ones that everyone

should read. In this course we will survey a tremendously influential religious canon, that of the New Testament, through a selective rather than an exhaustive reading (we won't read all, just major parts, of it). In so doing, we will also situate this ancient canon at the confluence of two even earlier canons, that of Classics and that of the Jewish Scriptures. This method rests upon a simple historical fact, which is that *the Christian Scriptures were originally produced by Jews writing in Greek*. A major goal of this course will then be to unpack such a deceptively succinct statement. While we cannot provide a thorough knowledge of either Jewish or Greek writings, we will consider discrete portions of them as relevant intratexts for the study of the New Testament. Our overall intention is to view the Christian Scriptures both as historical documents and as a testament of faith -- a faith rooted in the experiences of those first followers of Jesus as Christ.

iii.) Holy Texts with Human Authors

Scripture, by definition, is not ordinary speech: such words are held sacred, considered to be God's Word; whether claiming to be directly revealed or divinely inspired, this speech does not just to talk about Him, but is presented as *coming from God*. Yet divine inspiration is not accessible to historians, who can neither prove or disprove any claims to revealed truth. Such an elevated ontological status -- this is God's speech, this is divinely written -- can be acknowledged, but it cannot form the empirical basis for historical inquiry. What the historical method does instead is to locate a text in a time and a place, situating it chronologically and geographically, plus identifying the *cultural location* of those responsible for committing the sacred words to writing. Thus we consider the human "authors" (who may be anonymous, attributed, or writing under an assumed name) of holy texts, even if those very "authors" would credit their authorship to God. In focusing on human authorship, we are still interested in how the text functions as Revelation, that is, how it represents the sacred to a human audience, presumably with the intention of constituting a community in right relation with God. But our point of access is to consider the people who produce and consume the texts, rather than proceed directly to the divine.

Two specific points follow from this disciplinary attention to human authorship:

iii.a.) *The authors of the New Testament came from Jewish backgrounds*. The people who wrote the Christian Scriptures typically identify themselves as members of the people of Israel, and their conceptual vocabulary -- their ideas about covenant and Providence, justice and judgment, sin and repentance, sacrifice and atonement -- are clearly "Israelite," which at the time of the Second Temple was transitioning into forms we would recognize as "Jewish."

The practices of the earliest church, such as prayer, fasting, almsgiving, baptism, etc., are all modeled on early Jewish practices. To provide but one prominent example, the Last Supper is actually a Passover *seder*. When Jesus spoke to people, he spoke with them of a shared tradition, a received body of sacred laws and stories, prophecies and wisdom sayings, so that his audience appreciated references to Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, or readily understood things about Temple offerings and synagogue worship.

Similarly, the authors of the New Testament were familiar with earlier biblical texts, most of which were already considered Scripture. The stock phrase employed is "the Law and the Prophets," referring to scrolls which were read in the synagogues (as described in Lk 4:16). Moreover, the New Testament authors would cite some of these texts to show that Jesus had fulfilled ancient Israelite prophecies. Yet while the Jewish Scriptures are originally in Hebrew, some of the first Christian authors may not have been able to read Hebrew, or they might not have spoken Aramaic (the language in which Jesus primarily taught; so Mt 5:22, 6:24, 27:6, Jn 20:16, Mk 5:41, 7:34, 14:36). Instead, many of them probably accessed earlier Scripture through

Aramaic translations (*targumim*), or they read it in the Greek version known as the Septuagint (LXX) -- as was clearly the case for Paul and the author of Hebrews. Here then, *translation is a key feature to grasp*: the whole concept of "Israel," meaning a people in right relation to God, was often mediated through Greek terms.

iii.b.) *The authors of the New Testament wrote in Greek*, and they were thus exposed to the intellectual currency of their day. (This marks a contrast with rabbinic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are mostly in Semitic languages.) Certainly different New Testament authors betray different levels of fluency or literary skill, but as a group they reflect some type of education in and exposure to Greek literature, theatre and art. For instance, basic literacy in Greek would at least involve a rudimentary knowledge of the Homeric epics, as copying out names, phrases and paraphrases were standard exercises. Moreover, public recitation of Homer was common throughout the Greek-speaking world, so that even the unlettered might know the stories of Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus, as well as the pagan gods and monsters. As was the case with the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament authors did not have to be experts in this older canon, but neither were they ignorant of its conventions. We shall see that they knew stories about the heroes of old and the lives of teachers of wisdom, great men who were typically elevated to the status of demigods and who provided narrative models to which Jesus could be assimilated.

iv.) Israel, Hellenized

The larger social, political and cultural forces unleashed by the conquests of Alexander the Great are called Hellenization, which left a profound impact on the ancient Near East, including the region the Greeks called *Palaestina*. By the time of Jesus, Palestinian Jewry had three centuries of exposure to Greek learning, although presumably there was more Hellenistic influence in larger cities than in smaller villages and outlying rural areas. Also by the time of Jesus, Palestine had come under Roman rule, and imperialism contained a religious as well as a political component. Participation in civic rites, and the attendant worship of the Empire/Emperor, had very real social and economic consequences, and so proved a contentious issue in early Christian communities.

Earliest Christianity emerges from Hellenized Judaism, and it develops through polemics with other forms of Judaism, *all* of which were Hellenized to varying degrees. Mentioning only the most well known: at one end of spectrum we find the very Hellenized writings of Josephus and Philo, while at the other end of spectrum we have the library of the Dead Sea Scrolls, much of it produced by a millenarian group choosing to live apart at Qumran. There is significant diversity within the Judaism of the Second Temple period, even between the Sadducees and Pharisees, whose positions are hardly as interchangeable as a cursory reading of the New Testament might suggest. The successors to the Pharisees were the rabbis whose teachings form the basis for later Judaism, and while the rabbis do not appear as overtly Hellenized as Philo, they are nowhere near as separatist or millennialist as the Qumran covenanters. Instead, what the vast majority of Jews in Late Antiquity sought to do was to maintain their archaic religious traditions while also maintaining good relations with the larger non-Jewish society. But through various means of commerce and communication, that larger society left its lasting imprint on Judaism. After all, the Jewish *seder*, mentioned above, is itself modeled on the Hellenic symposium.

v.) Summing up

What we will do in this course is situate the New Testament in its literary and historical contexts,

which means looking at two sets of intratexts, the Hebrew Bible and Classics, to which the Christian Scriptures may be instructively compared and contrasted. On one hand, we read Christian texts as part of a larger library we call ‘the Bible,’ in some sense treating earliest Christianity as another form of Late Antique Judaism, comparable to rabbinic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, or the writings of Philo. On the other hand, by reading the New Testament alongside of pagan myths, Hellenistic biographies and novels, and Greco-Roman rhetoric, we see how the first Church was both a part of and apart from the ancient world.

This literary and historical approach should not be misconstrued as being unsympathetic to a theological engagement with Scripture. It behooves us to recognize the continuing impact these texts have on the life of the Church and their primacy in the spiritual development of so many people today. The ongoing efforts by Christians to read and reread and interpret these canonical texts are well worth studying, even if they cannot be included in an introductory course such as this. Instead, our emphasis is squarely placed on the experiences of the first Christians, so that we may reconstruct their own faith in Christ, rather than read the New Testament through the lens of later theologies.

Course Materials

The Harper Collins Study Bible. Of the making of many Bibles, there is no end (to paraphrase the Preacher; see Ecclesiastes 12:12). Now as a scholar, I prefer the NRSV translation, but some other modern versions are as readable and reliable. For your convenience, I simply ordered this affordable and informative edition. Yet this edition is not just bitestamental, but also deuterocanonical; that is, it *maximizes the canon*, a significant feature when studying such texts historically. Additionally, the annotations in this study edition were prepared by the Society for Biblical Literature, the premiere academic organization for critical engaging Scripture. So it pretty much rocks.

Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology, by Achtemeier, Green & Thompson (Eerdmans, 2001). This tome acts as our “textbook,” by providing 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 %
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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 min.) oral presentation and to lead discussion about one or a set of parables. 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 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. All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form, unless prior arrangements are made with the instructor.

Classroom Civility

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly 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.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out 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 screen 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.

Academic Integrity

I have a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Make sure your work is entirely your own, and that you give credit to any ideas or formulations that originate with others. Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic integrity, whether fully intentional or not. Recall that Skidmore's Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations; on this, see cms.skidmore.edu/writing_guide/honor_code.cfm. Suspected infractions will be reported to the Dean of Studies to investigate.

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 Starbuck Center.

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. I hope that at the core of this agreement we find a mutual interest in critical inquiry, a passion for increased understanding, and an abiding commitment to respectful disagreement. 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

Christian Scriptures Schedule

Jan 25. Introductions.

Jan 27. Preliminaries: Testaments, genres, sources. History & faith.
Reading 1.

Part I: Gospels

Feb 1. Matthew, part 1. **The New Moses.** Reading 2.

Feb 3. Matthew, part 2. **The Sermon on the Mount.** Reading 3.

Feb 8. Matthew, part 3. **Miracles & Ministry.** Reading 4.

Feb 10. Matthew, part 4. **The Last Supper & the Passion.** Reading 5.

Feb 15. Luke, part 1. **The Messiah is Born.** Reading 6.

Feb 17. Luke, part 2. **The Sermon on the Plain.** Reading 7.

Feb 22. Luke, part 3. **Miracles & Ministry, Take Two.** Reading 8.

Feb 24. Luke, part 4. **The Empty Tomb, The Hero Returned.** Reading 9.

Feb 29. John, part 1. **The Word Made Flesh.** Reading 10.

Mar 2. John, part 2. **Signs & Recognitions.** Reading 11.

Mar 7. John, part 3. **The Noblest Death.** Reading 12.

Mar 9. Review: **How Historical is Jesus?** Reading 13.

Spring Break

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Christian Scriptures

Schedule, *continued*

Part II: Acts, Epistles & Apocalypse.

Mar 21. Acts of the Apostles: **Witnessing to Christ.** Reading 14.

Mar 23. The Letters of James and Jude: **Instructing the Faithful.** Reading 15.

Mar 28. Paul, part 1. **A Mission to the Gentiles.** Reading 16.

Mar 30. Paul, part 2. **The Example of Abraham.** Reading 17.

Apr 4. Paul, part 3. **From Adam to Christ.** Reading 18.

Apr 6. Review: **Is Paul More Influential than Jesus?** Reading 19.

Apr 6 is Good Friday;
In the Gregorian calendar, **Easter** falls on Apr 8.

Apr 11. Further Review: On Parables: **Rewards and Reversals.** Reading 20.

Apr 13. Hebrews. **The Priestly Order of Melchizedek.** Reading 21.

Apr 18. Revelation, part 1. **Empire, Apocalypse & Astral Prophecy.** Reading 22.

Apr 20. Revelation, part 2. **The Final Battle & The New Jerusalem.** Reading 23.

Apr 25. Making a Canon: **Community & Conflicts.** Reading 24.

Apr 27. Conclusions.

Christian Scriptures

Readings

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

A passages come from the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians now 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 that day. While reading it, make note of anything you don’t 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 tend to set up our comparisons or discussions. Our textbook, Introducing the New Testament (Achte-meier et. al.) will here be abbreviated as INT. CR stands for the Course Reader.

Reading 1. C: INT chs. 1-3, omitting sections 3.1.1 to 3.1.4 (pp. 1-54, bottom 62-86).

Reading 2. A: Exod 1:8-2:10; Judg ch. 13; Isa 7:14, 8:8.
B: Mt 1:1-4:11. C: INT 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; 2 Kgs 4:1-44. **B: Mt 8:1-20:34.** C: INT 4.2.3-4.2.4 (pp. mid 99-112). Mekhilta (CR); Yoma (CR); Stern, “Rabbinic Parables” (CR).

Reading 5. A: Exod 12:1-28; Isa 52:13-53:12, Isa 62:11; Zech 9:9; Pss 22 & 69.
B: Mt 21:1-28:20. C: INT *finish* ch. 4 (pp. 113-121).

Reading 6. A: 1 Sam 1:1-2:21. **B: Lk 1:1-4:13.** C: INT 6.1-6.33 (pp. 149-mid 162); Talbert, “Miraculous Conceptions and Births” (CR).

Reading 7. **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 8. **B: Lk 9:51-19:27** C: INT 6.3.5 (pp. 166-169); Cotter, “Miracle Stories” (CR).

Readings, *continued*

- Reading 9. B: Lk 19:28- 24:53.** C: INT *finish* ch 6 (pp. bottom 169-174);
Chaereas & Callirhoe (CR); Odyssey (CR).
- Reading 10.** A: Pr 8:22-9:6. **B: Jn 1:1-4:45.** C: INT 7.1-7.3.1 (pp. 175-mid 183).
- Reading 11.** A: 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 12. B: Jn 14:1-21:25.** C: INT *finish* ch 7;
Doran, “Narratives of Noble Death” (CR).
- Reading 13. B: reread Lk 1:1-4.** C: INT 3.1.1-3.1.4 (pp. 55-62)
and *survey* all of ch.8 (pp. 207-244); *read* Crossley (CR) *closely*.
- Reading 14. B: Acts 1-12:17.** C: INT 9.1-9.3.3 *and* 9.4-9.6
(pp. 245-mid 257, mid 262-269).
- Reading 15. B: The Letters of James and Jude.**
C: INT chs. 10, 21, and 22.4 (pp. 271-281, 491-512, *and* 532-534).
- Reading 16.** A: Isa 2:2-4, 56:1-8. **B: First Thessalonians.**
C: INT chs 11 *and* 18.1-18.1.2 (pp. 283-297, 427-439).
- Reading 17.** A: Gen chs. 15-17; Wis 14:22-26. **B: Galatians.**
C: INT ch. 14 (pp. 355-375); Philo (CR).
- Reading 18.** A: Gen ch. 3; Dt 10:16, 30:6. **B: Romans, through ch. 11.**
C: INT ch. 12 (pp. 299-326).
- Reading 19. B: finish Romans.** C: Maccoby, The Mythmaker (CR).
- Reading 20.** Parables: TBA. C: *reread* Funk, “Voice Print” (CR).
- Reading 21.** A: Gen 14:17-20; Ps 110; Jer 31:31-37. **B: Hebrews.**
C: INT ch. 20 (pp. 465-489).
- Reading 22.** 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 23.** 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 24.** C: INT ch.25 (pp. 589-608).