

Jesus and the Gospels

REL 219

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Course Description

The course will consider the early evidence for Jesus, including the canonical as well as non-canonical gospels. We will examine the narratives detailing the career of Jesus of Nazareth, as represented and interpreted in the four so-called “canonical” gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), apocryphal gospels (such as Thomas, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, Peter, and “Secret Mark”), and a hypothetical “sayings gospel” known as Q. Further, we will query what these texts and others can tell us about the emerging community of early Jesus worshippers, including disciples, apostles, and ordinary people. We will also engage critically with the writings of New Testament scholars who are likewise trying to uncover more about the historical person of Jesus and how Christianity began to emerge in the first three centuries of the common era.

Course Aims

By the end of this course, a diligent student should be able to:

- Identify distinctive features of the primary sources on the historical figure of Jesus.
- Describe and explain key theories about the relationships among the ancient sources.
- Read and analyze current literature on method and theory in Historical Jesus research.
- Apply historical and literary-critical methods in analyzing primary source materials on Jesus and his earliest followers.
- Grasp the interpretive issues facing scholars of the New Testament and be able to discuss them critically.
- Effectively use standard tools in the analysis of primary texts about Jesus and the early Jesus worshippers, including a Gospel synopsis and concordance.
- Effectively communicate and disseminate the results of research in a coherent and organized manner.

Texts

- Kurt Aland. *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: English Edition*. American Bible Society, 1985. NB: You must bring this book to each class session.
- Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*. 2002. [amazon.co.uk/Gospels-Jesus-Oxford-Bible-Series/dp/0199246165?tag=hohtel0c-21](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Gospels-Jesus-Oxford-Bible-Series/dp/0199246165?tag=hohtel0c-21)

Enthusiastic Participation

It is expected that students will participate *enthusiastically* in the module, which means attending class regularly, preparing in advance, and participating in class exercises and discussions, whether on the online discussion forum or in class sessions.

Methods of Evaluation

Map Project	15%
Film Analysis	35%
Final Project	50%

Map Project

A list of geographical locations pertinent to historical Jesus research and set of blank maps will be posted on MOLE. Students will print out the maps and use resources such as the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* and *Antiquity a La Carte* to locate each of the locations. The student is responsible for creating a clear, understandable legend that identifies place names on the map. The map project is **due on 7 March 2017**.

Film Analysis (1000 words)

Select a film from the list below and choose a biblical scene represented in the film. Analyse (1) the sources used by the film (Which texts? Are they canonical? Is there any harmonization being employed?) and (2) using socio-historical criticism, the extent to which the chosen scene reflects any degree of historical reality in its (a) depiction of Jesus; (b) depiction of cultural context; and/or (c) depiction of other major or minor characters. The analysis is **due on 21 March 2017**.

Films: *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Life of Brian*, *Gospel of John*, *Jesus of Nazareth*, *Jesus of Montreal*, *Godspell*.

Final Assessment (1500 words or equivalent)

A final project is **due on 23 May 2017**. You must develop your own thesis statement and argument in response to one of the following prompts:

A) Evaluate three different views of Jesus as teacher in light of Jewish and Greco-Roman leadership models. Support your position with evidence.

B) Pick a lesser character from one of the Gospels. Is it possible to determine whether that character is historical? Support your position with three examples.

C) The Early Jesus Movement was an apocalyptic Jewish group. Support and/or critique this claim with three examples.

**For this assessment, students have the option to produce an “unessay.” In an unessay you have complete freedom of form: you can use whatever style of writing, presentation, citation, even media you want. What is important is that the format and presentation you do use helps rather than hinders your explanation of the topic. In other words, use any form or media that helps you make a compelling and effective argument. One requirements of the unessay is that you include textual evidence from primary sources in some way in your finished product.

Read more about the unessay here: <http://f14tot.ryancordell.org/assignments/unessays/>

The essay and the unessay are both assessed on two main criteria: the development of an explicit thesis statement responding to one of the above questions and the use of evidence to support the thesis statement. In both cases you must include a bibliography of at least 5 peer-reviewed secondary sources other than the textbook and published no earlier than 1980.

Different Learning Needs

If you have a permanent or temporary impairment or condition that can make it difficult for you to undertake study-related tasks like sitting exams, reading, planning and writing assignments, attending classes and taking notes in them or delivering presentations, then you are likely to be eligible for disability support. For more information, see: www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/disability.

Course Schedule & Readings

Class 1: Introduction to Historical Jesus Research

Read:

- Stanton, 3–36, 143–177

Optional but recommended:

- Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition as Social Memory,” pp. 25–42 in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (SBL 2005).
- Zeba A. Crook, “Collective Memory Distortion and the Quest for the Historical Jesus,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 11 (2013): 53–76.

Class 2: Sources & Methods for Historical Jesus Research

Read:

- The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke
- Stanton, 37–96
- John S. Kloppenborg, “The Sayings Gospel Q and the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” *Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996) 307–344

Class 3: Sources & Methods for Historical Jesus Research

Read:

- The Gospel of John, Secret Gospel of Mark
- Stanton, 97–135.
- D. Moody Smith, “The Problem of History in John,” pages 311–320 and Craig S. Keener, “Response: Genre, Sources, and History,” 321–323 in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies* (Tom Thatcher, ed.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

Optional but recommended:

- Bart Ehrman, “The Forgery of an Ancient Discovery? Morton Smith and the Secret Gospel of Mark” 67–89 in *Lost Christianities*.

To be examined in class:

- *Gospel of Thomas*
- *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*
- *The Gospel of Peter*

Class 4: Palestine at the Time of Jesus

Read:

- William R. Herzog II, “Why Peasants Responded to Jesus,” pp. 47–70 in R. Horsley, ed., *Christian Origins* (Fortress 2005).

Class 5: Demographics of the First Christian Communities

- Clarice J. Martin, “The Eyes Have It: Slaves in the Communities of Christ-Believers” pp. 221–239 in R. A. Horsley, ed., *Christian Origins* (Fortress Press).

Class 6: Jesus, Jews, and Christians: the Construction of Identity in Gospel Narratives

- Stanton, 255–268
- Adele Reinhartz, “Judaism in the Gospel of John,” *Interpretation* (2009): 382–393

Class 7: The Historical Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet?

- Stanton, 190–217; 240–267
- Ehrman, chapters 8 & 9 (pp. 125–162) in *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford, 1999).

Class 8: The Historical Jesus: Hellenistic Philosopher, Healer, or Hero?

- Stanton, 218–254

- Lawrence M. Wills, “The *Life of Aesop* and the Hero Cult Paradigm in the Gospel Tradition,” pp. 23–50 in *The Quest of the Historical Gospel* (Routledge, 1997).

Class 9: Jesus’s Last Week

- Stanton, 269–299
- Mark Matson, “The Historical Plausibility of John’s Passion Dating,” pp. 291–312 in Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, S.J., and Tom Thatcher, eds., *John, Jesus, and History Volume 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel* (SBL 2009).

Class 10: Death...and Resurrection?

- Arthur J. Dewey, “The Locus for Death: Social Memory and the Passion Narratives.” Pp. 119–128 in Kirk and Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition, and Text*.