

Prof. Wasserman  
Office: Loree 110  
Department of Religion  
70 Lipman Drive  
Phone: 932-6834; or 9641 (main office)  
wasserme@rci.rutgers.edu  
Office Hours: Tues 12:00–1, 5:30–7  
and by appointment

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Rutgers University  
Tues/Thurs 3:55–5:15  
Hickman 118

## **REL 202 (01:840:202:01): INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT/EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

This course will study the history and literature of the earliest Christians. The focus will be on the first century CE and on contextualizing our earliest Christian writings. We will consider the literary form and thought of these texts and seek to understand them within the social, political, and religious context of the ancient Mediterranean.

### **This course meets the following SAS core curriculum requirements:**

- h. Understand the bases and development of human and societal endeavors across time and place.
- i. Explain and be able to assess the relationship among assumptions, method, evidence, arguments, and theory in social and historical analysis.
- k. Explain the development of some aspect of a society or culture over time, including the history of ideas or history of science.
- l. Employ historical reasoning to study human endeavors.

### **COURSE GOALS**

The texts of the New Testament are very important to contemporary religious, political, and cultural life. As an alternative to taking them as objects of faith or sources of self-evident truths, this course aims to look at the Christian writings in their original context and to understand the beginnings of Christianity historically. The aim will be to provide the student with the critical methods for understanding the texts and placing them in their relevant historical, cultural and religious contexts. Students will learn to:

1. Identify and understand the social, political, and religious assumptions of ancient Mediterranean writers in contrast to our contemporary ones. This will include contrasting household and family structures, economies, social statuses, governments, views about the nature and value of persons, and about the nature and limits of the cosmos.
2. Engage in careful, critical reading of the primary source material and learn to ask critical historical questions about the texts, their writers, and their contexts.
3. Appreciate the diversity of the earliest Christian texts and understand why historians speak about Christianities, in the plural, rather than a single, totally unified Christian tradition.
4. Understand how historians piece together a historical story about Christianity from the available evidence and distinguish this from internal Christian claims about its past. This especially means understanding the ways that later canons, creeds, and orthodoxies are involved with interpreting the texts, not simply revealing their self-evident meanings.

### **REQUIRED TEXTS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE**

- 1) *The Harper-Collins Study Bible* (or other NRSV study Bible approved by the instructor)
- 2) B. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> edition:

NOTE: the bookstore automatically orders the new 5<sup>th</sup> edition (red cover) instead of the 4<sup>th</sup> edition (blue cover) which we have been using for years. There are only minor differences in the editions. You may purchase either one, and may find used copies of the blue/4<sup>th</sup> edition online at a substantially reduced price. To facilitate ease of use, the syllabus lists the page numbers for both the Red and Blue editions.

If you find yourself reading pages that do not seem to fit the topic, reading questions, or primary text, please check to make sure you are reading the appropriate pages in the relevant edition.

3) Throckmorton, *Gospel Parallels*

**POLICIES AND REQUIREMENTS:**

1. Class conduct: please see the attached agreement detailing rules for class conduct.
2. Attendance: regular attendance and participation is a significant part of your grade and missed pop-quizzes cannot be made up. In the case of illness or emergency, please inform the instructor as soon as possible that you will not be able to attend class. In the case of more long-term illnesses or other issues, please provide a note from a health-care provider, or, if appropriate, from a dean. More than three unexcused absences will result in a zero grade for attendance. *Students must also bring a copy of the Bible to each class (either the NRSV or the RSV).*
3. Exams: there will be 3 exams, 2 in-class and a final scheduled for Fri., May 9, from 12:00–3:00 in our normal meeting room. *Missed exams can only be made up with a note from the relevant dean or medical professional. Except in very unusual circumstances, there will be no special allowances for students who cannot make the final because of personal vacation plans.*
4. Quizzes and group-assignments: there will be one scheduled map-quiz, numerous pop-quizzes to make sure you are keeping up with the reading, and at least 3 online forum assignments. Quizzes cannot be made up due to illness or emergency but the lowest 2 scores will be dropped.
5. Short paper on the *Gospel of Mary of Magdala*: A 2 page analysis of a chapter from Karen King’s *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala* due at the end of the course. This assignment must be printed out and handed in as you arrive at the final. No late submissions will be accepted. Prof. Wasserman will respond to (optional) drafts of these assignments but these must be submitted by 5/1.
6. Grading: Assignments will be weighted roughly as follows:
  - First Exam 20%
  - Second Exam 20%
  - Final Exam 25%
  - Quizzes and group assignments: 15%
  - Short paper: 10%
  - Attendance: 10%

*Significant improvement or class participation can lift the grade by up to 1/3 (b to b+)*
7. Use of Sakai: some readings, assignment, and course materials will be posted on Sakai, so students must familiarize themselves with the site for this class. From time to time, students will also complete short assignments using the online forums available on Sakai.
8. Email: Students should respond to any e-mail correspondence from the instructor in a timely manner and make sure their e-mail accounts remain in working order.

## SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

### Part 1: The Crucible of Earliest Christianity

1/21	Tues	Introduction to the Course
1/23	Thurs	Historical Approaches to Christian Origins
		Readings: Ehrman, <i>Historical Introduction</i> (Red edition: 1–16; Blue edition: 1–16)

Reading Questions: According to Ehrman, what is historical criticism and how does it differ from other approaches? What is “the canon,” and when, by whom, and for what reasons are canons developed? What are Adoptionists, Marcionites, and Gnostics? What is historical criticism?

1/28            Tues            Texts, Translation, and Interpretation: Textual Criticism  
Readings: Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 17–28; Blue edition: use pdf of Red edition, on Sakai)

Reading Questions: What is textual criticism and how does it relate to historical criticism? What is the ‘Greek text of the New Testament’ and how is this different from the Canon of the NT? How many manuscripts survive of the NT and what criteria do scholars use to try to figure out which ones are the oldest/most original?

Begin studying for Map Quiz on 1/30.

1/30            Thurs            The Greco-Roman World  
Readings: Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 29–48; Blue edition: 17–35)

Reading Questions: What do scholars mean by the term “Greco-Roman world” and why do they use it to understand the lands of the ancient Mediterranean in the time of Jesus? What, according to Ehrman, are the major differences between modern economies, religions, and social structures, and ancient ones? What is the basic structure of the ancient family? What is the significance of the “pyramid of power” in Ehrman?

Map Quiz based on handout (handout and practice map are available on Sakai)

2/4            Tues            Judaism as a Kind of Greco-Roman Religion  
Readings: Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 49–68; Blue edition: 36–55)

According to Ehrman, how is Judaism like other Greco-Roman religions? What are the Covenant, the Law, and the Temple and in what ways are they important to Jewish religious life? What factors lead to the destruction of the Temple (2x), the Babylonian exile, the Maccabean crisis and the Jewish war with Rome? What do we know about the different kinds of Judaism in Palestine in 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E.?

*On-line project:* as assigned in class on 1/30, students will break into 4 groups to discuss the main features of textual criticism and to practice writing an identification for the exam. Students must post their own definitions online on the Sakai forum, engage in discussion with other members of their group, and come to agreement on an ideal ID for “textual criticism of the Greek New Testament.” First posts to the forum must be completed by 2/4; students will have a chance to discuss this in-class on 2/6 before handing in their final assignment (due 2/6, by 5 pm). The assignment will be worth 10 pts (like a quiz) and will be graded based on level participation (e.g., satisfactory participation, 10 pts; little or no participation, 0).

## **Part 2: The Letters of Paul**

2/6            Thurs            Paul and the Beginnings of Christianity  
1 Thessalonians  
Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 324–338; Blue edition, 309–323)

1 Thessalonians is our earliest source for understanding the movement that will become Christianity. How does Paul seem to understand his role as an apostle? How does he characterize his audience and what are his main teachings? When and how does he expect Christ to return? How does Ehrman imagine Paul’s work in founding the church at Thessalonica? Why were Christians maligned as “perverts and criminals,” according to Ehrman?

Online group projects due by 5 pm, posted to the Sakai forums (see 2/4).

2/11        Tues        Paul and the Legacies of Paul  
Galatians  
Philippians

Galatians 1–2 contains Paul’s self-description of his own calling and a conflict with Peter at Antioch; believe it or not, this short text is our earliest and best evidence for the historical timeline of the earliest period! How does Paul seem to understand his “calling” as an apostle and his relationship to Peter and the other apostles? Why does circumcision seem to be such an important issue in Galatians? What seem to be the main arguments and ideas in Galatians and Philippians? What are the most significant similarities and differences between the two texts?

2/13        Thurs        Corinthians  
1 Corinthians  
Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 339–349; Blue edition: 324–334)

As you read 1 Corinthians, focus on the statements about sex and marriage in 1 Cor 7, the hierarchy of gifts in chapter 12, and resurrection in chapter 15. How does Paul seem to be addressing these different issues? How does Ehrman characterize Paul’s basic message? What kinds of “socioeconomic tensions” does Ehrman identify among the Corinthians? Based on the various issues coming up in the letters (attachment to specific leaders, the man living with his stepmother, going to outside courts, eating meat sacrificed to idols, speaking in tongues, sex and marriage, and whether there is any resurrection of the dead) can you imagine what may be going on in the communities at Corinth?

2/18        Tues        Romans I: Paul’s Most Famous (and Infamous) Letter  
Romans 1–8  
Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 372–385; Blue edition: 356–368)

Romans is Paul’s most famous and theologically complex letter. What does chapter 1–2 seem to say about God’s wrath and coming judgment? What is the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to God’s plan and how does Paul use Abraham (in chapter 4) to justify this plan? Why does Paul focus so much on inner struggle and conflict in Romans 6–7? According to Ehrman, what is the “occasion” of the letter? What is a diatribe and what is its significance for understanding the letter? What different models does Ehrman offer for understanding salvation in Paul’s letter?

2/20        Thurs        Romans II, and Review for Exam  
Romans 9–16

How does Romans 9–11 explain the relationship between Jews and Gentiles? How does Paul use the example of Esau and Jacob in chapter 9? What does he seem to mean when in 11:28 he insists that all Israel will be saved? Based on chapters 12–16, what kinds of issues and problems seem to be arising (at least in Paul’s mind) for Christians in Rome?

2/25        Tues        First Exam

### **Part 3: Jesus and the Gospels: Christian Leaders, Texts, and Conflicts**

2/27        Thurs        Mark and Messianism  
Mark  
Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 88–104; Blue edition: 75–91)

According to Ehrman, what is the messianic secret and why might the editor of Mark have included such a motif? What are the various different meanings of “Messiah” in Judaism and what does the writer of Mark seem to mean by asserting that Jesus is the Messiah? What are scribes, Herodians, and Chief Priests,

according to Ehrman? What is the significance of the “son of God” and “son of man” titles for Jesus in their historical context?

3/4            Tues            Mark and Thomas

Mark

Gospel of Thomas (*Sakai*)

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 221–227, on Thomas only; Blue edition: 208–213, on Thomas only)

Bring Throckmorton to class.

Which of the sayings of Jesus in Mark and the *Gospel of Thomas* seem most obscure, interesting, or confusing to you? To what extent does the gospel of Thomas seem to develop a coherent set of teachings? According to Ehrman, why is the collection attributed to Judas Thomas? What points of similarity to the gospels does Ehrman identify? How does the Gospel of Thomas reflect a Gnostic myth, according to Ehrman?

3/6            Thurs            Matthew, Luke, and the Synoptic Problem

Matthew

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 105–113; Blue edition: 92–100)

Bring Throckmorton to class.

What is the “synoptic problem” and according to Ehrman, what is the best way of solving it? Matthew synthesizes the gospel of Mark and adds lot of new material. How do certain major additions (e.g. the sermon on the mount) end up changing the story about Jesus as compared to that in Mark? How has the role of the disciples changed or not changed, esp. that of Peter? Scholars have characterized Matthew as the most “ecclesiastical” gospels—i.e. it promotes the idea of Jesus establishing and giving authority to a church. Based on the text, can you understand why?

*On-line project:* as assigned in class, students will break into 4 groups to discuss the main features of the synoptic problem and to practice writing an identification for the exam. Students must post their own definitions online on the Sakai forum, engage in discussion with other members of their group, and come to agreement on an ideal ID for “synoptic problem.” Online assignment must be completed by 3/11; students will have a chance to discuss this in-class on 3/11 before handing in their final assignment (due 3/11, by 5 pm). The assignment will be worth 10 pts (like a quiz) and will be graded based on level participation (e.g., satisfactory participation, 10 pts; little or no participation, 0).

3/11            Tues            Matthew

Matthew

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 114–133; Blue edition: 101–120)

Online group projects due by 5 pm, posted to the Sakai forums (see 3/6).

Bring Throckmorton to class.

According to Ehrman, why does Matthew emphasize Jesus as fulfilling scripture and what are the different ways that it does so? How is the figure of Moses important for understanding the gospel? What are the major issues/themes/teachings of the famous Sermon on the Mount? Read Peter’s confession in Throckmorton (Matt 16); what major points of contrast do you find between Matthew and Mark? How does the 4-source theory explain them?

3/13        Thurs        Luke

Luke

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 134–153; Blue edition: 121–140)

Bring Throckmorton to class.

What are the most distinctive features of Luke’s gospel when compared to Mark and Matthew? What is “apologetic literature” and why is this important for understanding the author’s ambitions as he writes Luke and Acts? What are the most significant similarities and differences between the birth stories in Matthew and Luke?

3/18        Tues        No Class, Spring Recess

3/20        Thurs        No Class, Spring Recess

3/25        Tues        Synoptic Comparisons

Read Throckmorton on: The Sermon on the Mount/Plain (25–38), The Passion Narrative (181–206), and Appearances of the Risen Lord (206–210)

Using Throckmorton, compare and contrast the Sermon on the Mt. in Matthew with the Sermon on the Plane in Luke, the passions stories in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the post-Resurrection appearances in all three. What are the most significant similarities and differences between the texts? To what extent do these similarities and differences signal important themes and interests of the different writers/editors?

#### **Part 4: Diverse Views on Christianity: Texts, Leaders, and Conflicts**

3/27        Thurs        Acts as Apologetic History

Acts 1–9

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 154–175; Blue edition: 141–162)

Acts is written by the same (unknown) writer as the gospel of Luke as a kind of sequel. What do you make of the prologue? (Note also the apostles are not, geographically, where we left them at the end of the gospel of Luke.) What is an “apologetic history” and why does Ehrman refer to Acts as one? Why are there so many long speeches in acts? What are the main themes of the speeches? How does Acts 9 represent Paul’s so-called conversion and how does this compare to what Paul himself writes in Galatians 1:13–17?

4/1        Tues        More Acts

Acts 10–28

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 28.2, p. 460; Blue edition: box 27.2 (p. 441)

What is the basic story Acts tells about the evolution of the church? How does Luke use the figures of Peter and Paul? What are the main themes in Paul’s speeches? What is the significance of the geographic movements within Acts, culminating in chapter 28, with Paul in Rome? In contrast to the story of Acts, what different theories have historians used to explain the growth and spread of Christianity?

4/3        Thurs        Exam Review

4/8        Tues        Second Exam

4/10            Thurs            Another Kind of Gospel: John

John

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 184–197, begin with “Redactional Perspective” but also read boxes 12.1, 12.2; 12.3; Blue edition: 171–184, begin with “Redactional Perspective” but also read boxes 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3)

What do you make of prologue of the gospel? Why does the text insist that Christ is the logos/word of God? Why does Jesus use so many “I am” sayings in John? Why does Ehrman characterize John as a de-apocalypticized gospel? What is the basic source-critical theory that Ehrman develops for John?

4/15            Tues            The Apocalypse

Book of Revelation

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 490–503; Blue edition: 469–482, on Revelation)

What seems to be the issues that Rev 1–5 addresses in relation to “the churches of Asia Minor”? How does the writer understand “true Christians” and their opponents? What is the basic structure of Revelation, according to Ehrman? What is an apocalyptic worldview? What are other early Christian views about the authorship of Revelation (e.g. Eusebius)?

4/17            Thurs            Paul as a Figure in the Early Churches

Ephesians

Colossians

1 Timothy

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 397–420; Blue edition: 381–401)

What are the main reasons that Ehrman gives for taking Ephesians and Colossians as Pseudepigrapha? What is 3 Corinthians? What are the household rules of Colossians and Ephesians? What are “the pastorals”? Based on these different writings, what kinds of major issues and problems seem to be arising for different Christian leaders that wrote these letters?

*On-line project:* as assigned in class, students will break into 3 groups to consider Ehrman’s argument about whether Colossians, Ephesians, or 2 Thess were written by the “authentic Paul,” with each group focusing on a different letter. Students must post their own (informed) analysis online on the Sakai forum, engage in discussion with other members of their group, and provide an overview of the main issues that will help other students study for an essay question on the exam. Online assignment must be completed by 4/22; students will have a chance to discuss this in-class on 4/22 before handing in their final assignment (due 4/22, by 5 pm). The assignment will be worth 10 pts (like a quiz) and will be graded based on level participation (e.g. satisfactory participation, 10 pts; little or no participation, 0).

4/22            Christians and Jews

Hebrews

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 435–453; Blue edition: 416–434)

Online Forum project due (see 4/17)

According to Ehrman what is “self-definition” and why is it important for understanding the beginnings of Christianity? What kinds of strategies does Hebrews use to explain the superiority of Christianity over Judaism? How is this distinct from the approach of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, discussed in Ehrman?

4/24            Tues            Women and Hierarchy in the Early Churches

1 Timothy

1 Peter

Ehrman, *Historical Introduction* (Red edition: 421–434; Blue edition: 403–415)

How do 1 Timothy and 1 Peter imagine the proper order within their churches? How do they describe the proper order of the household and how is this similar or different to other texts we've read? What does Ehrman mean by the phrase "Gender ideology in the ancient world"? What kinds of roles do we see women playing in the early literature and how do they contrast with later literature like 1 Timothy and 1 Peter?

4/29            Thurs            A Different Type of Gospel: *Mary of Magdala*  
*Mary Magdala*, 3–18, 155–170 (Sakai)

*You should begin working on your short paper on the GMary, 155–190, due at the final.*

What are the most significant points of similarity and difference between the *GMary* and the synoptic gospels? What is orthodoxy and who decided on how to define it? In what ways does the Nicene Creed embody a certain specific view of Christian orthodoxy? What is the "master story" about the origins of Christianity and what, according to King, is wrong with this?

5/1            Tues            Review for Final and *Mary of Magdala*  
*Mary Magdala*, 170–190

*You should continue working on your short paper on the GMary, 155–190, due at the final.*

What (again) is the "master story" about the origins of Christianity and what, according to King, is wrong with this? How do the discoveries at Nag Hammadi challenge this story? How does this master story understand diversity and conflict within the churches?

**5/9    Fri                            Final Exam: Fri, May 9 from 12:00–3:00 in our normal meeting room.**

**All students must arrive promptly at 12:00 and hand in their short papers on the Gospel of Mary immediately. No late submissions will be accepted.**



## EXPECTATIONS REGARDING CLASS CONDUCT

### What I Expect from You:

1. That you be punctual for every class.
2. That you maintain communication with me about any illnesses or emergencies that arise.
3. That you will concentrate exclusively on this course during class hours and no receive or make telephone calls, text messages, or use any electronic device during class.
4. That you will listen to and engage with the lecture and class discussion in a way that is respectful towards other students and the instructor.
5. That you come to class ready to ask and answer questions of substance on the day's readings.
6. That you will maintain openness to critique and argument of all kinds, even if they do not fit with your own deeply held beliefs or opinions.

### What You Can Expect from Me:

1. That I will be clear about what I am looking for on exams and written work.
2. That I will make myself accessible outside of class to address questions and concerns you may have about the lectures, readings, or your performance in the course.
3. That I will listen to your questions and comments and work to integrate them into the class discussion.
4. That I will encourage you to work on note-taking and study skills.
5. That I will push you to retain knowledge rather than simply retrieve it.
6. That I will focus on critical thinking skills, especially in relation to historical analysis and the close, reading of texts.
6. That I will emphasize the distinction between critical thought and personal opinions, beliefs, and received knowledge.

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Signature

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Date