

Course: Introduction to the New Testament
Professor: Mikael Haxby
Email: Mikael.haxby@gmail.com
Schedule: Tuesday-Thursday 2:15-3:35
Location: Hickman 205 (Tue) and Ruth Adams 110A (Thu)
Office Hours: Tuesday 12:00-1:30
Office: Loree 102

In this course we will study the history of early Christianity, primarily through the study of the texts which became the Christian New Testament. To understand the social, religious and intellectual contexts in which these texts emerged, we will be reading not only from the New Testament but also from non-Christian sources as well as other Christian texts which did not become part of the canon. We will explore how these settings shaped both the texts and the early Christian communities which honored these texts.

At the same time, I want to ask how our contemporary setting likewise shape the way that we read, the questions that we ask and the answers that we derive? There is no one comprehensive or standard reading to be sought of any of these materials. Rather we must bring a multiplicity of methods and perspectives to the study of the New Testament. We will consider how reading the New Testament from different perspectives might inform new readings, and how each student's individual context might shape his or her approach to the text.

Course Books

HarperCollins Study Bible (or any "New Revised Standard Version" translation)
Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: An Introduction*
John Gager, *Reinventing Paul*

Course Requirements:

- 1) Attendance and participation. We will be engaging in regular discussion in class, so coming prepared with copies of the course texts, is required. Missed classes for illness or other reasons can be excused, but you have to contact me in advance to let me know. More than three unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for attendance.
- 2) Reading Responses. There are three short response papers required over the semester. These are not due on a specific date, but one must be turned in by September 29th, another must be turned in by November 5th, and you must have all three done by December 3rd. These are papers of about a page in length. You are expected to engage with course materials, but you have freedom to choose your topic. The questions for "discussion" each week can help guide your response.
- 3) Exams. There will be two in-class exams, both consisting of essay questions. The topics will be given to you in advance to prepare, but you will be required to write the essays in class during the exam time.

4) Paper. The final paper project is a 6-8 page paper due by Friday, December 18. The final draft should be submitted to me by email. You will be required to submit a paper proposal and annotated bibliography by November 24th.

Grading:

25% Attendance + Participation

15% Response Papers

30% Exams

30% Final Paper

September 1:

Introduction

Discussion of “The Anointing of Jesus”

September 3:

Discussion: What is a “canon”? Why is there a canon? Has there always been a canon? What does the existence of a canon mean about materials not included in the New Testament?

We will also begin our discussion of ancient Judaism, as the notion of a “canon” has its roots in ancient Jewish thought. This is an extremely important topic in the study of the New Testament. For a long time it was considered acceptable in scholarship to refer to the Judaism of the New Testament era as “late Judaism”, as if this were the last form that Judaism took before it finally birthed Christianity. This is obviously deeply wrong, as the Jewish tradition continues into the present day, and deeply offensive as it dismisses contemporary Jews and Judaism as somehow unimportant to the history of Judaism.

This attitude, perhaps more troublingly, is (sort of, maybe?) echoed in parts of the early Christian tradition. As we read the Gospels, we will see many negative, angry or dismissive comments about Jews and Judaism, and we will read many tendentious, critical portrayals of Jewish characters. There are three important points to remember here. (1) The Gospels are first and foremost a heroic portrait of Jewish characters, and there are no suggestions in any of the Gospels that Jesus and his followers are not devoted Jews. (2) The attacks on Jewish opponents (Pharisees, High Priests, Scribes, etc) should be seen as evidence of *intra-Jewish* conflict between people, all devoted Jews, who have different opinions about how Jewish life and society should be ordered. These are not characterizations of all Jews or of Judaism in general. (3) We should be somewhat skeptical of the Gospels’ portrayal of Jewish opponents. If you watch an attack advertisement during election season, you know that you are being given only one interpretation of events, and they be stretching the truth of those events. When people and movements are portrayed in the style of an attack ad, don’t immediately trust that you’re getting an unbiased story.

This is why it’s very important for us to spend some time learning about ancient Judaism and the rich diversity of the Jewish tradition. The same is true of the larger ancient Greco-Roman world of the Mediterranean, although our early sources are generally less engaged in critique of the Romans. We need to be knowledgeable about the ancient world because our sources just assume

deep knowledge of the ancient world. Imagine trying to watch *Empire* and not having any knowledge of the history of race and racism in the United States, for instance. You'd be lost. It doesn't talk about that history in every scene, but it assumes an audience who know about it. Texts reflect their world willy-nilly, and we need to be able to follow along as best we can.
Reading: Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Chapter 2, Chapter 4, Genesis 1-3, 15-17, Exodus 12, 20

September 10:

Discussion: Religion and diversity in the ancient Mediterranean world. Christianity clearly begins as a Jewish movement, in an ancient world ruled by the Roman Empire. What was the nature of diversity in ancient Jewish culture? How did Jewish and Christian communities fit within the broader ancient Roman view of religion?

For Daniel 7, it is very important that you read the introduction to the text in the Harper-Collins Study Bible as well as the footnotes. Relate these notes to the history of the ancient Jews laid out in Ehrman, Chapter 4.

Reading: Ehrman, Chapter 3, Josephus on the Jewish Sects ([Antiquities 18.1-6](#), [Life 2](#)) Daniel 7, [Dead Sea Scrolls IQS "The Community Rule" \(PBS Frontline, Online\)](#), ["The Empire's Religions" \(PBS Frontline, Online\)](#)

September 15:

Discussion: What are the modern contexts of our interpretation? How do the places we come from impact the way we read? Further, is the purpose of critical scholarship to determine the "real" meaning of the text? The "original" meaning? If not, what is it?

Reading: Schüssler Fiorenza, "Feminist Hermeneutics"; Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod*, introduction

September 17:

Discussion: Our earliest sources in the New Testament are not the Gospels, which were probably written more than 30 years after the death of Jesus. Instead, they are the letters of Paul, and his letter to the Thessalonians. What do we learn about Paul, about these Thessalonians, and about Jesus from the first sources? Who were the first Christians? What did they believe about Jesus?

Reading: 1 Thessalonians; Ehrman, Ch. 21 (5th ed), Ch. 20 (4th ed)

September 22:

Discussion: One of the great mysteries of the New Testament is the letter to the Corinthians. In it Paul responds to a variety of concerns and seeks to ease tension in the community while presenting himself as an authority to be listened to. What were the debates in the Corinthian community? We only know what Paul said to the Corinthians—we don't have direct evidence of what the Corinthians themselves thought. As you read the letter, try to piece together the opinions, the practices, the early theologies of the Corinthian community, and think about what they probably said back to Paul, in letters that are lost to history.

Also, what is important about Jesus to the Corinthians? What does Paul know about Jesus? (Note 1 Cor 15 for a little bit of Paul's own history.)

Reading: 1 Corinthians: Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Ch. 22 (5th ed), Ch. 21 (4th ed)
In Ehrman, read just sections on Corinthians.

September 24:

Discussion: What does the Gospel of Mark say about Jesus? Who is he? This was the first of the New Testament Gospels, and so it has to spend a lot of effort explaining exactly who Jesus is, why he is important, and why, if he's so important, did he die? What are the answers to these questions?

Reading: Gospel of Mark, Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Ch. 7 (5th ed), Ch. 6 (4th ed)

September 29:

Discussion: Matthew and Luke are both based on Mark. What is different in Matthew from Mark? Why did Matthew make changes in the story or the presentation of the story, and to what ends? Notably, how does this Gospel discuss Jews and Judaism?

Reading: Gospel of Matthew; Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Ch. 8-9 (5th ed), Ch. 7-8 (4th ed)

October 1:

Discussion: What is different in Luke from Matthew and Mark? Note here in particular the place of women and the poor in the story. What is the import of the focus on these figures? What does this tell us about the early Christian community?

Reading: Gospel of Luke; Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Ch. 10 (5th ed), Ch. 9 (4th ed)

October 6:

Discussion: Who is Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible? Is Jesus portrayed as Wisdom in Mark, Matthew or Luke? What does it mean for a male figure to be equated with a female divine force?

Reading: Genesis 1-2; Proverbs 1-9, Wisdom of Solomon 7-9

Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet*, 131-155 (reserve)

October 8:

Discussion: What is "Q"? Did it really exist? What sort of Gospel is this? Does it have a narrative at all, or is it just a collection of sayings? Who was it written for?

Reading: [Gospel Q](#), Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Ch 8 (5th ed), Ch. 7 (4th ed) (re-read)

October 13:

Discussion: The Gospel of Thomas, unlike Q, is a sayings gospel that we have in a physical copy. What do you think people who wrote sayings gospels were trying to say about Jesus? Who is Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas? Wisdom? The Savior? The crucified one?

Reading: [Gospel of Thomas](#)

October 15:

Discussion: The Gospel of John is the most strikingly different of the Gospels. How does this story of Jesus stand side-by-side with the stories from Matthew, Mark and Luke? How similar is it in theology to the stories in Thomas and Q? Note the idea of Jesus as "the word" – what is similar and different between "word" and "wisdom"?

Further, this story talks about an individual community, one that has apparently broken off from their local synagogue. What do we learn about this community? When the Gospel talks about

“Jews”, does this mean all Jewish people? Or does it mean something peculiar to this community?

Reading: Gospel of John; Ehrman, *The New Testament*, Ch. 12 (5th ed), Ch. 11 (4th ed.)

October 20:

Discussion: Who was the historical Jesus? What do we know about him from the Gospels?

Reading: Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 224-290, Ch. 15, 17 (5th ed), Ch. 14, 16 (4th ed)

October 22:

First Exam

October 27: Library orientation in preparation for research paper.

October 29:

Discussion: We return to Paul and talk about the great divide in the early communities regarding the question of Jewish practice. Are new Gentile believers in Christ required to maintain the Jewish Law? If they don't, then who are these new Gentile believers and what is their relationship to Jewish believers in God? To Jewish believers in Christ?

Reading: Galatians; Ehrman, *The New Testament* Ch. 22 (5th ed), Ch. 21 (4th ed)
In Ehrman, read just sections on Galatians.

November 3:

Discussion: It has often been said that Paul founded Christianity when he converted away from Judaism. John Gager offers a strikingly different interpretation of the letters of Paul, something called “The New Perspective.” What do you think of the New Perspective? Is it convincing?

Reading: Gager, *Reinventing Paul* 1-100

November 5:

Discussion: The Letter to the Romans is among Paul's most complex works, as he presents as best as he can his full theology to a community he has yet to meet. Consider Gager's questions as you work through this difficult text. Is Paul converted or called? Is he preaching something new within Judaism or something new that is separate from Judaism?

Reading: Romans, (Gager 101-144 for reference)

November 10:

Discussion: Here we return to Corinthians and the early communities. What were the roles of men and women, parents and children, masters and slaves in the first Christian communities? How were hierarchies put in place?

Reading: 1 Corinthians 5-8, 11; Colossians; Ephesians; Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 380-392

November 12:

Discussion: Written later, again in Paul's name, are the “Pastoral Epistles” of which 1 Timothy is the most notable. What kind of social structure does 1 Timothy exhort? Who are the “widows” and what is 1 Timothy concerned about? Can you piece together, from the letters of Paul, who these widows might be and what they might have to say in response to Timothy?

Note also the reading of Genesis which 1 Timothy lays out. How well or poorly does this reading fit within the Pauline tradition?

Reading: 1 Timothy

November 17:

Discussion: Here's another perspective on the early Christian community, the book of Acts. What does this text have to say about Jews and Gentiles in the early community? How well does it accord with Paul's story? With Gager's interpretation?

Reading: Acts 1-16, Ehrman, *The New Testament*

November 19:

Discussion: By the end of Acts, who is this Christian community that has been formed? What is their relation to Jews and Judaism? What are the roles of women and enslaved people in these communities? How well does the story of Acts accord with the letters of Paul?

Reading: Acts 17-28

November 24:

Discussion: While Acts is the only narrative of the lives of the apostles which is found in the Christian New Testament, it is far from the only such narrative written. Here we meet Mary of Magdala, whom we know from the Gospels as a disciple of Jesus, in the gospel written about her, the Gospel of Mary.

This text is sadly fragmentary, as there are several important pages missing from the only known copy. Focus instead on the text's opening and conclusion. There are two key discussions between Mary and the other disciples. What do they discuss? How are Mary and the other disciples characterized? Who do you think the author wants us to sympathize with?

How is this story different from the story in Acts? What is the Gospel of Mary trying to say about the nature of the early Christian community, as compared to the book of Acts?

Reading: [The Gospel of Mary](#)

December 1:

Discussion: This text tells the story of a young woman, Thecla, who sees the apostle Paul and becomes deeply devoted to Christianity. What does Thecla tell us about the lives of ancient Christian women? What sort of power and agency was available to them, and how could they take it? Note how Thecla is regularly at risk of violence. What is the text saying about violence and gender? Further, who is Paul in this text? What is important about him? What does he have to say about gender and sexuality? Does this Paul resemble the Paul of his letters, the Paul of Acts, the Paul of 1 Timothy?

Reading: [Acts of Thecla](#)

December 3:

Discussion: The book of Revelation contains first a series of letters to communities in cities in Asia Minor (Turkey). The book then goes on to describe a vision of the apocalypse, of a world order overturned from the rule of “Babylon” to the rule of God.

In much ancient Jewish writing, “Babylon” is used as a stand-in for present-day oppressors. The vision of a world overturned seems to recall a desire for these losses to be avenged by God and for the Romans, imagined as Babylon, to receive punishment in turn. Is this, then a Jewish text? What is the relationship of this text to the letters of Paul or to those Christian Jews who seemed to disappear from the story in Acts? Is this one of their stories?

Reading: Revelation, Elaine Pagels, *Revelations* (selections)

December 8:

Discussion: Revelation is a text shot through with violence. How is one supposed to read it in the contemporary world? Obviously the contemporary world has seen innumerable examinations of how Revelation speaks to our situation today. Should Revelation be seen simply as an ancient response to ancient questions? Why does it still speak to people so powerfully today?

Reading: Ehrman, Ch. 30 (5th ed), Ch. 29 (4th ed) (only sections on Revelation)

December 10:

Second Exam