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Office Hours: Tues 11–1:00  
and by appointment

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Rutgers University  
Tues/Thurs 5:35–6:55  
RAB 206

## **REL 202 (SECT. 3): 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.

### **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**

*The Harper-Collins Study Bible* (or other NRSV study Bible approved by the instructor)  
B. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition  
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 Wednesday 12/22 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: there will be one scheduled map-quiz and numerous pop-quizzes to make sure you are keeping up with the reading. Pop 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 2–3 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 uploaded to the Sakai site before class on the due date; no late submissions will be accepted.
6. Grading: Assignments will be weighted as follows:
  - First Exam 20%
  - Second Exam 20%
  - Final Exam 25%
  - Quizzes: 15%
  - Short paper: 10%
  - Attendance: 10%

*Significant improvement and/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.
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

9/2            Thurs        Introduction to the Course

9/7            Tues            Historical Analysis and Religions  
 Readings: Ehrman, *Historical Introduction*, chapter 1 (pages 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?

9/9            Thurs        Texts, Translation, and Interpretation: Textual Criticism  
 Readings: Ehrman, 487–498

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?

9/14          Tues            The Greco-Roman World  
 Readings: Ehrman, 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)

9/16          Thurs        Judaism as a Kind of Greco-Roman Religion  
 Readings: Ehrman, 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.?

## Part 2: The Letters of Paul

9/21            Tues            Paul and the Beginnings of Christianity  
1 Thessalonians  
Ehrman, 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?

9/23            Thurs            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?

9/28            Tues            First Exam

9/30            Thurs            1 Corinthians  
1 Corinthians  
Ehrman, 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?

10/5            Tues            Paul's Most Famous Letter: Romans  
Romans 1–8  
Ehrman, 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?

10/7            Thurs            Romans: Jews, Gentiles, and the 'End'  
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?

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

10/12 Tues Mark and Messianism  
Mark  
Ehrman, 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?

10/14 Thurs Mark and Thomas  
Mark  
Gospel of Thomas (*Sakai*)  
Ehrman, 208–213 (on Thomas)  
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?

10/19 Tues Matthew, Luke, and the Synoptic Problem  
Matthew  
Ehrman, 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?

10/21 Thursday Matthew  
Matthew  
Ehrman, 101–120  
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?

10/26 Tues Luke  
Luke  
Ehrman, 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? Using Throckmorton, compare and contrast the Sermon on the Mt. in Matthew with the Sermon on the Plane in Luke. What are the most significant similarities and differences between the texts? What are the most significant similarities and differences between the birth stories in Matthew and Luke?

10/28      Thurs      No Class

11/2      Tues      Second Exam

11/4      Thurs      Acts as Apologetic History  
Acts 1–9  
Ehrman 141–162 (focus especially on 148–162)

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?

11/9      Tues      More Acts  
Acts 10–28  
Ehrman, 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?

11/11      Thurs      Another Kind of Gospel: John  
John  
Ehrman, 171–184 (begin with "the gospel of John from a Redactional Perspective")

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?

11/16      Tues      The Apocalypse  
Book of Revelation  
Ehrman, 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)?

#### **Part 4: Varieties of Christianity 95–200 CE: Diversity and Conflict**

11/18      Thurs      Paul as a Figure in the Early Churches  
Ephesians  
Colossians  
1 Timothy  
Ehrman, 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?

11/23        No Class, Thanksgiving Recess

11/25        No Class, Thanksgiving Recess

11/30        Tues        Women and Hierarchy in the Early Churches  
                  1 Timothy  
                  1 Peter  
                  Ehrman, 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?

12/2        Thurs        Christians and Jews  
                  Hebrews  
                  *Epistle of Barnabas* (Sakai)  
                  Ehrman, 416–434

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*?

12/7        Tues        A Different Type of Gospel: *Mary of Magdala*  
                  *Mary Magdala*, 3–18, 29–34, 155–170 (Sakai)

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? How do the discoveries at Nag Hammadi challenge this story?

*Begin work on short paper on Mary Magdala with outline, 155–190 (see suggested outline on Sakai).*

12/9        Thurs        Mary Magdala and Varieties of Christianity  
                  *Mary Magdala*, 170–190

*Short paper due (min. 600 words) explaining the basic thesis/argument of King, 155–190, defining key terms, and evaluating her most important arguments.*

What is the “master story” about the origins of Christianity and what, according to King, is wrong with this? How does this master story understand diversity and conflict within the churches? How do the discoveries at Nag Hammadi challenge this story? To what extent might we find a “womanist” theology in *GMary*?

**Final Exam: Wednesday 12/22 from 12:00–3:00 in our normal meeting room**

## 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 do not 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 concentrate exclusively on this course during class hours.

### 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.

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Signature

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Date