History of Early Christianity
RS 3330 CRN 15628
University of Texas at El Paso
Religious Studies Program
Fall 2026

Instructor: Dr. Clayton Bench
Time: Online
Room: Online
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Course Description and Objectives:
The New Testament (NT) is the central religious text of Christianity. The NT contains the writings of various early followers of Jesus. These writings consist of biographical accounts of the life of Jesus referred to as Gospels as well as collections of epistles from early Christian leaders to various budding Christian communities in the Mediterranean region. Though the canonical NT as it now stands appears to be monolithic and authoritative, this was not always the case. There were many different groups who claimed to be the true followers of Jesus, each with their own perspectives about him along with their own authoritative writings. The disputes that arose between the early Jesus movements were only put to rest in the 4th century CE when orthodox Christian thought became the dominant and authoritative theological worldview of early Christianity. All the other communities who followed Jesus, along with their theological peculiarities, were stamped out or forgotten.

In this course, we will approach these early communal texts (the NT and others) from a historical-critical perspective. As works of literature written and compiled by various social groups over a long period of time, early Christian literature must be understood as a human product. Students should expect to gain a basic understanding of the structure and composition history of the NT as well as basic knowledge about the communities that preserved and transmitted it over time. As an academic course, the student should understand that our approach will be stringently objective and historical-critical. This means that the course is not 'religious' but rather this course directs its attention to what humans call 'religion' and/or 'religious' as its object of study. Topics that are treated with reverence in some social settings (e.g., Sunday schools, religious schools, divinity schools, etc.) will not be treated with the same reverence in this course. The objectives of the course are as follows. Students who take this course should gain: 1) a basic understanding of the overall history of the Early Jesus Movement(s) and; 2) a basic understanding of the different early Christian communities and their textual traditions and; 3) an appreciation for the complexity of religious belief generally but especially, as related to the course, the complexity of early Christian belief.

Required Texts:
Ehrman, B. and H. Mendez. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, Oxford, 8th ed., 2019.
(other required readings will be provided as necessary)

Assignments and Grade Distribution:
Participation: 20% of grade (weekly group discussions)
Quizzes: 20% of grade (weekly quizzes)
Midterm Examination: 20% grade
Final Examination: 20% grade
Written Assignment: 20% of grade (5 – 6 pages, double spaced, Times New Roman 12pt font, written on topic from the topics list in the Written Assignment folder on Blackboard)

Assignment Notes:
Participation: Participation points will be given if the student actively participates in the weekly group discussions. You cannot afford to miss out on the participation points. Make sure to read the group discussion rubric to make sure you are participating fully in the group discussions. Group discussions must be completed before Sunday at midnight each week.
Quizzes: There will be an open book/open note quiz every week. Quizzes must be taken before Sunday at midnight each week.
Midterm Exam: The midterm examination will be based on your readings, lecture slides, and discussion materials from the beginning of the course up to the midterm. It will include multiple-choice questions and two short essay questions.
Final Exam: The final exam will have the same format as the midterm but will be based on the readings assigned in the second half of the semester (i.e., the readings assigned after the midterm).
Written Assignment: Students are required to submit a 5 - 6 page research essay assignment following these instructions: (**1**) closely follow the Research Essay rubric document in the Research Essay folder; (**2**) choose a topic from the Research Essay Topics document in the Research Essay course content folder; (**3**) write a 5 – 6 (double-spaced, Times New Roman 12pt font) page essay that contains the following; a) a clear and concise **research question**; b) a clear and concise **thesis statement** (i.e., reform your research question into a statement); c) an **introduction** that includes your thesis statement, a description of your approach/method, and a brief summary of the facts/evidence that support why you are taking the position you are taking; d) a **paper body** that explains and justifies the facts/evidence stated in the introduction; e) a **conclusion** that summarizes and restates the facts/evidence supporting the position you've taken. (**4**) You must use the Society of Biblical Literature Style Guide; I have provided the Society of Biblical Literature Style Guide Student Supplement in the Research Essay folder. (**5**) You are also required to ***use at least four academic/peer-reviewed sources*** (not including the textbook) in the Research Essay.

Course Outline:
The following schedule/outline is tentative. Time constraints, unforeseen events, and class interest may result in slight alterations.

Week 1	Topic	Readings
8/24 – 8/30	Introduction to the Course Syllabus Introduction to the Course Methodology and Key Concepts	Ehrman, *Introduction* Ehrman, *Excursis 1* (p. 18-19)
Week 2		
8/31 – 9/6	What is the New Testament? Greco-Roman Religious Context and Philosophical Schools of Thought	Ehrman, *Chapter 1: What is the New Testament? Early Christians and Their Literature;* Ehrman, *Chapter 3: The Greco-Roman World of Early Christian Traditions*
Week 3		
9/7 – 9/13	Jewish Religious Context and Second Temple Literature Diversity of Second Temple Jewish Sects – Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots/Sicarii	Ehrman, *Chapter 4: The Jewish World of Jesus and His Followers*
Week 4		
9/14 – 9/20	Early Christian Literature and Genre: Epistles, Gospels, and Apocalypse	Readings to be provided
Week 5		
9/21 – 9/27	The First Letters of Paul and other Contemporary Followers of Jesus (~ 30 – 50 CE): 1 Thessalonians	Ehrman, *Chapter 18: Paul the Apostle – The Man and His Mission* Ehrman, Chapters 19 *Paul and His Apostolic Mission: 1 Thessalonians as a Test Case* 1 Thessalonians NRSV
Week 6		
9/28 – 10/4	Later Authentic Epistles of Paul: 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon vs Competing Itinerant Apostles/ Prophets	1-2 Corinthians NRSV Galatians NRSV
Week 7		
10/5 – 10/11	The Pre-Synoptic Theology of Paul – The Gospel According to Paul: The Letter to the Romans	Ehrman, *Chapter 21: The Gospel According to Paul – The Letter to the Romans* Romans NRSV
Week 8		
10/12 – 10/18	Understanding the Composition History of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (the Synoptic Gospels) *Midterm Examination Review Guide and **Midterm Examination (due Sunday, 10/18, before midnight)**	Ehrman, *Chapter 2: Do We Have the Original New Testament?* Ehrman, *Chapter 7: The Synoptic Problem and Its Significance for Interpretation* Ehrman, *Chapter 5: From Oral Traditions to Written Gospels* Ehrman, *Excursis 2* (p. 101 – 102)
Week 9		

10/19 – 10/25	The Gospel According to Mark	Ehrman, *Chapter 6: Jesus, the Suffering Son of God – The Gospel According to Mark* The Gospel According to Mark NRSV
Week 10		
10/26 – 11/1	The Gospel According to Matthew	Ehrman, *Chapter 8: Jesus, the Jewish Messiah – The Gospel According to Matthew* The Gospel According to Matthew NRSV
Week 11		
11/2 – 11/8	The Gospel According to Luke	Ehrman, *Chapter 9:Jesus, the Savior of the World – The Gospel According to Luke* Ehrman, *Chapter 17: Luke's Second Volume – The Acts of the Apostles* Ehrman, *Excursis 5* (p. 336 – 338) The Gospel According to Luke NRSV The Acts of the Apostles NRSV
Week 12		
11/9 – 11/15	The Gospel According to John	Ehrman, *Chapter 10: Jesus, the Man Sent From Heaven – The Gospel According to John* Ehrman, *Chapter 11: From John's Jesus to the Gnostic Christ – The Johannine Epistles and Beyond*
Week 13		
11/16 – 11/22	Non-Canonical Gospels in Early Christianity and the Communities that Produced them	Ehrman, *Chapter 12: Jesus from Different Perspectives – Other Gospels in Early Christianity*
Week 14		
11/23 – 11/29	Early Conflicts between Christian Communities	Ehrman, Chapter 27: *Christians and Christians*, James, the *Didache*, Polycarp, *1 Clement*, Jude and 2 Peter
Week 15		
11/30 – 12/6	Final Examination Review and **Final Examination (due Sunday, 12/6, before midnight)**	**Written Assignment (due Sunday, 12/6, before midnight)**

Grading:

Marks for assignments, tests, and exams are given in percentages, to which letter grades are also assigned, according to the table below. The percentage mark resulting from the entire term work and examination then produces the final letter grade for the course.

Grading Scale

Percentage Grade	Letter Grade	Grade Points
90-100%	A	4.0
80-89%	B	3.0
70-79%	C	2.0
60-69%	D	1.0
0-59%	F	0.0

Academic Standing and Integrity:

The University of Texas at El Paso prides itself on its standards of academic excellence. In all matters of intellectual pursuit, UTEP faculty and students must strive to achieve excellence based on the quality of work produced by the individual. In the classroom and in all other academic activities, students are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic integrity. Any form of scholastic dishonesty is an affront to the pursuit of knowledge and jeopardizes the quality of the degree awarded to all graduates of UTEP. It is imperative, therefore, that the members of this academic community understand the regulations pertaining to academic integrity and that all faculty insist on adherence to these standards.

Any student who commits an act of scholastic dishonesty is subject to discipline. Scholastic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, collusion, the submission for credit of any work or materials that are attributable in whole or in part to another person, taking an examination for another person, and any act designed to give unfair advantage to a student or the attempt to commit such acts. Proven violations of the detailed regulations, as printed in the **Handbook of Operating Procedures** (HOP) (available through the **Dean of Students Office**) may result in sanctions ranging from disciplinary probation, to failing a grade on the work in question, to a failing grade in the course, to suspension or dismissal, among others." ("Academic Standing," for more information, please visit http://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=61879&submenuheader=1)

A Note on the Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI):

Use of AI technologies or automated tools, particularly generative AI such as Grammarly Premium, Wordtune, ChatGPT or DALL-E, is ***not allowed*** for assignments in this class. Each student is expected to use critical and creative thinking skills to complete tasks and not rely on computer-generated ideas. Any direct use of AI-generated materials submitted as your own work will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution (OSCCR).

Policy for Late Assignments:

Students who consult with me in advance regarding expected issues preventing the timely completion of an assignment may, at my discretion, be granted an extension. Otherwise, assignments may be handed in one class-day after the stated deadline without penalty, with a 10%-per-class-day penalty assessed for each subsequent class-day of lateness.

Special Needs

If you have a disability and require special needs classroom accommodations, please contact *The Center for Accommodations and Support Services* Monday through Friday 8:00a.m. – 5:00p.m. at the Union East Room 106. You can also reach the center by phone at (915) 747-5148 or by email: cass@utep.edu .