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Portraits of Jesus in Contemporary and Ancient Debate

Instructor

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Institution

Bowdoin College, a small secular liberal arts college with an enrollment of 1,300 students.

Course Level and Type

The course was offered at the 200 level with no prerequisites. When it was offered, the course drew students from all four years, including senior religion majors and freshmen taking their first course in religion.

Hours of Instruction

39 hours - 3 hours a week over a 13 week semester.

Enrolment and Last Year Taught

Spring, 1998 (taught in a modified form for a senior special topics seminar at Skidmore College in Fall, 1998). Thirty-five students were enrolled.

Course Description

There may be no other figure in Western history who has consumed the minds, the hearts and the imaginations of so many as Jesus. Our fascination with Jesus has produced two divergent streams, from antiquity until the present day. There are those who seek to fill out the opacity of details that surround the Jesus of first-century Palestine. Who was he, precisely? An itinerant, charismatic teacher? A healer and miracle-worker? A social revolutionary? There are also those who believe that Jesus is whomever we wish him to be - an ahistorical figure on whom we may project our own needs and desires. Some expand the opacity of Jesus' life by providing new details, beyond that which the New Testament writings can offer us. In this course, we will examine some of these different "Jesuses" which emerge from the "Quest for Jesus" through the ages, including several interpretations of Jesus in historical studies, and several interpretations of Jesus from art and literature.

Some Links to On-line Resources

- [The Bible Gateway](#)
- [Rev. Roger J. Smith's Home Page devoted to Images of Christ](#)
- [Christus Rex et Redemptor Mundi](#) (for links to the Vatican Museum)

Readings

We will focus on this class on reading primary sources in English translation. I have ordered the following books for purchase at the Textbook Annex:

- The Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha (Revised Standard Version)
- P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*
- Luke T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus*
- Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*
- John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*
- John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*
- Thomas Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*
- C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*
- C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

All these books will also be [on reserve](#) in the [Hawthorne-Longfellow library](#). You will also find useful resources via [the on-line course guide](#).

Some On-Line Resources on the Quest for the Historical Jesus

(Warning! Not all of these represent academic sites; nor do I necessarily endorse their perspectives!)

- [Richard Shand's Home Page for the Historical Jesus](#)
- [The Jesus Seminar Home Page](#)
- [The Jesus Seminar: Criteria](#)
- [The Quest for the Historical Jesus](#)
- [The Search for the Historical Jesus](#)
- [The Jesus Puzzle](#)

Weekly Topics and Readings

(readings available on-line have been highlighted):

Jan 20th: Course Intro: Jesus and "Gen-X"

no readings assigned; look carefully over the syllabus and course requirements
-start your academic study journal with a series of goals and critical questions

Jan 22nd: The Quest for Jesus: Critical Issues and Approaches

Readings: P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, pp. 3-17; 67-130.

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, pp. xxvii-xxxiv

Lecture Outline: Methodologies

Class Handout: Evidence for Jesus in early Pagan and Jewish sources

Class Handout: Critical Questions

A Good (if irreverent) [review-essay](#) on Historical Jesus Studies

Jan 27th: The Earliest Gospels in Different Perspectives: MARK

Readings: Gospel of Mark (bring Bible to class)

[Lecture Outline: The Gospel of Mark](#)

P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, pp. 44-52.

Someone has assembled resources on Mark on a [Gospel of Mark](#) Homepage

Jan 29th: no class today!

(get started on either Matthew or Luke in preparation for next class)

Feb 3rd: The Earliest Gospels in Different Perspectives: MATTHEW and LUKE

Readings: Gospel of Matthew Gospel of Luke

[Lecture Outline: The Gospels of Matthew and Luke](#)

P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, pp. 27-43.

Bring a Bible to class!

Feb 5th: The Earliest Gospels in Different Perspectives: JOHN

Readings: Gospel of John

[Lecture Outline: The Gospel of John](#)

P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, pp. 19-26.

Bring a Bible to class!

Here is a link to a [papyrus fragment of the Gospel of John](#) dated ca. 110 AD: our earliest fragment of Christian scripture.

Feb. 10th: The Earliest Gospels in Different Perspectives: THOMAS

Readings: [Gospel of Thomas](#) (bring text to class!)

[Lecture Outline: The Gospel of Thomas](#)

Take a look at this outstanding [home page devoted to the Gospel of Thomas](#) by Thomas scholar Stevan Davies

Feb. 12th: Early Interpretations of Jesus I: Paul of Tarsus

Readings: Romans 6; 2 Cor. 5:16-20; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1-3:4 (bring text to class!)

P. Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, pp. 52-61, 133-176.

Feb. 17th: Early Interpretations of Jesus II: Some Gnostic Perspectives

Readings:

[Second Treatise of the Great Seth](#)

["Round Dance of the Cross" from Acts of John](#) ([click here for the continuation of the "Round Dance of the Cross"](#))

[The Dialogue of the Savior](#)

Majella Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings* (on reserve)

Feb. 19th: Early Interpretations of Jesus III: Heterodox Interpretations

Readings:

[The Infancy Gospel of Thomas](#)

Feb. 24th: Early Interpretations of Jesus IV: The Evolution of an Image (slide lecture)

Readings:

T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, chs.1,2,4,6.

Lecture Outline: Early Christian Art

Mid-Term Assignment

Feb. 26th: Early Interpretations of Jesus V: Constantine, Justinian and Imperial Christianity

Readings:

T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, chs.1,2,4,6.

[Lecture Outline: Imperial Christianity](#)

March 3rd: Computer Technology Class

Class today will be held by Matthew Jacobson-Carroll in Adams 208. Sign up for either the early session (3:30-4:45 pm) or the late session (4:45-6 pm).

March 5th: Film/Discussion: "The Robe" (1950) and "Barabbas" (1961)

March 6th: Drop-in Computer Lab from 2:30-5 pm, Adams 208

Bring your essay on disk and ask Matt for any help you might have with creating your website

March 10th: The Quest for the Historical Jesus

Readings:

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 11, 12.

Lecture Outline: The First Quest for the Historical Jesus

March 12th: The Remythologization of the Historical Jesus

Readings:

C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*

*****n.b.:your first website assignment is due today, by midnight.*****

Spring Break

March 31st: Reactions to the Historical Quest

Readings:

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*

***** I will redistribute your papers for peer evaluation this week*****

April 2nd: Reactions to the Historical Quest and the Jesus Seminar

Readings:

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*

I recommend that you look at the Jesus Seminar Websites I have listed at the beginning of this syllabus for additional background on the Jesus Seminar.

April 7th: Jesus the Jew

Readings:

G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, pp. 19-83 (on reserve)

E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, pp. 61-76; 319-340 (on reserve)

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, chs. 3,4.

April 9th: Jesus the Cynic Sage?

Readings:

["Q"](#)

Burton Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, pp. 133-208 (on reserve)

Burton Mack, "Q and a Cynic-Like Jesus" (on reserve)

If you'd like to read a recent article from *The Atlantic Monthly* on the Q Debate and recent Jesus scholarship, [click here](#). Here's a [link](#) to an earlier (but also useful) article.

[Lecture Outline: Jesus the Cynic vs. Jesus the Jew](#)

*****your peer evaluations are due today by 5 p.m. at Ashby House*****

April 14th: Jesus the Political Revolutionary?

Readings:

John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, ch. 7,9,10.

Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (on reserve)

[Lecture Outline: Jesus the Revolutionary](#)

April 16th: Jesus the Feminist?

Readings:

Jean Shaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*

T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, ch. 5

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, pp. 72-159 (on reserve)

Guest Lecturer: Tom Beaudoin, Boston College

April 21st: Jesus the Magician?

Readings: M. Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (selections) (on reserve)

[Toledoth Yeshu](#)

Second Book of Jeu

T. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*, ch.3.

Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, ch. 8,13.

Lecture Outline: Jesus the Magician

April 23rd: Who Killed Jesus?

Readings:

John Dominic Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Antisemitism*

Ellis Rivkin, *What Crucified Jesus?* (on reserve)

Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus* (selections) (on reserve)

April 28th: Film/Discussion: Denys Arcand, "Jesus of Montreal" (1990)

No readings assigned. Use the time to work on your website assignment

April 30th: Film/Discussion: Martin Scorsese, "The Last Temptation of Christ" (1988)

No readings assigned. Use the time to work on your website assignment

*****n.b.: your second website assignment is due tonight, 12 midnight*****

May 5th: no class today

*****I will redistribute your papers for peer evaluation this week; the peer evaluations are due May 12th at 5 pm. No extensions allowed!*****

Additional Course Information

Course Format

This will be predominantly a lecture course, though certain classes will be conducted as seminars. I will lead off each session with an overview of the week's readings. I will leave sufficient time at the end of each class for discussion and questions.

Course Requirements

1. Attendance at all classes. If you are sick, or away from school for an emergency, please let me know in advance if possible. You may send me e-mail or leave a message on voice mail. Absence from more than three classes over the semester may result in a lowered grade.
2. Readings for each week must be completed in advance of classes.
3. Everyone is expected to keep an academic study-journal of your responses to class readings. You may also include responses to lectures, discussions and films. Journals may be hand-written or word-processed, and should be done at least once a week. Journals must be submitted three times during the semester; I will not necessarily warn you in advance when these will be collected.
4. You will be asked to submit two short papers (ca. 6-8 pages) ; the first on a selection of images of Jesus from early Christian art and the second on either "Jesus of Montreal" or "The Last Temptation of Christ."

These must be submitted electronically; they must incorporate into the text either image-files or real-time video capture. I will provide more information about these assignments in class; we will also work with a technical assistant. Here are directions on the first short paper assignment.

5. Since these papers will be submitted electronically, they will be available for all members of the class to evaluate. Each student will be responsible for evaluating the papers of two fellow-students. Critical responses to these papers (ca. 2-3 pages) must be submitted to me in written form.

Grading Policies

1. To receive a passing grade, students are expected to satisfy all course requirements, as described above. Failure to meet any individual requirement may be grounds for receiving a failing grade for the course.
 2. Students are required to observe the honor code.
 3. For the purpose of determining your final grade, course work will be weighted as follows:
 - Attendance and participation (in class and electronically): **10%**
 - Weekly Journals: **25%**
 - Two short papers: **45%**
 - Peer-Evaluation of short-papers: **20%**
- I will not accept papers submitted after deadline.

Pedagogical Reflections

I got the idea of this course from Elaine Pagels at Princeton University, who teaches a "Jesus in Ancient and Contemporary Debate" every few years. She allows her students to suggest a wide range of materials on Jesus which they find interesting, while also encouraging work on the "canon" of Historical Jesus scholarship. Every time I've offered this class, students have likewise brought in material they find stimulating: modern novels, comic books, or music. I place an emphasis on analysis of films, particularly "Jesus of Montreal" and "Last Temptation of Christ." I also use snippets of films and videos: such as showing three cinematic versions of an episode (e.g. Jesus' baptism in Pasolini's "The Passion According to St. Matthew," "Last Temptation," "The Greatest Story Ever Told" then discussing the role of interpretation of NT accounts. Worthy of comment, I think, are the mandatory "web site" assignments in which each student had to create and "publish" a web site rather than submit a traditional assignment. There were a few downsides to this requirement: some students resented the amount of energy they needed to invest in learning a new technological skill; it also required a great deal of set-up time on my part (I'm not particularly web-savvy myself, so I needed to learn a lot too. On the more positive side, I was ecstatic at the results. In almost every case, the students had far exceeded my expectations of them. Since the papers were available to anyone who might want to see them (including anxious parents and best friends studying abroad or on the opposite coasts) students took more responsibility for the caliber of their work. They were given the opportunity to refine their work past the due date; checking the status on their sites a month after they were due, I was astonished to discover that two thirds of the class had updated or made improvements to their sites within the last two days, even though their grades for them had been submitted long before! The websites also allowed for students to pursue other talents besides effective writing (not to say that writing isn't of paramount importance!) such as artistic creativity, pedagogical and organizational skills, and communication of ideas. In an attempt to mitigate the downsides of the web assignment as I teach the course this semester, I'm suggesting they work in groups and break up responsibility for each web-site, and I'm allowing the option of a more traditional essay in place of a web-site for those who might resent such an intimidating prospect as learning a new technology.

...if you've gotten this far, you deserve to take a look at a couple of fun links:

[Jesus of the Week](#)

[Where's Christ](#) (in the spirit of Where's Waldo) (warning: takes a while to download)

Select a location



http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwaar/syllabi/portraits_of_jesus-denzey.html

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