
Jesus in Film
RELS 211
Fall 2021
Online



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Course Description: A study of the production and reception of films about Jesus, similarities and differences with canonical and extracanonical Gospels, and popular and critical reactions.

This course uses Jesus films from the past 50 years to analyze the Gospels and the historical Jesus. The course investigates the reception history of the Gospels, including early attempts to weave the four gospels into one coherent story as well as “apocryphal” attempts to supplement the canonical gospels. The course also studies the reception of Jesus films, including initial reactions—both popular and critical—and the films’ enduring legacies. Key questions include how to balance faithfulness to biblical texts, historical accuracy, and artistic license as well as how to portray Jesus, the disciples, Jews/Judaism, and Romans/imperialism.

Office Hours: I am available every weekday via phone and teleconference; just email me and let me know.

Communication: The best way to reach me is via email. I make every effort to respond to emails within 24 hours. Students are responsible for checking their WKU email account once daily in case there are announcements pertaining to class.

Academic Integrity: Regarding *cheating*, WKU states, “No student shall receive or give assistance not authorized by the instructor in taking an examination . . .” In this course, specific examples of unauthorized assistance include giving or receiving quiz and exam questions from other students, whether currently enrolled or from previous sections of the course. For written work, students must avoid *plagiarism*, which the University defines as “any use of another writer’s words, concepts, or sequence of ideas without acknowledging that writer properly.” *Violations almost always result in either a zero on the assignment or an automatic F in the course.*

Accommodations: In compliance with University policy, students with disabilities who require academic and/or auxiliary accommodations for this course must contact the Student Accessibility Resource Center located in Downing Student Union, 1074. SARC can be reached by phone number at 270-745-5004 [270-745-3030 TTY] or via email at sarc.connect@wku.edu. Please do not request accommodations directly from the professor or instructor without a faculty notification letter (FNL) from SARC.

Learning Outcomes: (1) Analyze the development of self in relation to others in society. (2) Examine diverse values that form civically engaged and informed members of society. (3) Evaluate solutions to real-world social and cultural problems, particularly artistic freedom. (4) Employ reliable sources and deploy valid arguments within the academic study of religion. (5) Gain historical perspective and understanding of connections between past and present. (6) Evaluate enduring and contemporary issues of human experience.

Required/Recommended Texts:

Robert J. Miller, ed. *The Complete Gospels*. 4th ed. Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2010.

Adele Reinhartz. *Jesus of Hollywood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Reinhartz’s book is available via the library as an e-book. You may have to open a few browsers or make a few attempts, but you can download the entire book as PDFs. This book is excellent, and you must use it for your essay. Her chapters are also good models for how to write the essay for this class.

In case you don’t have Miller’s book, you can read the Gospels online via the links provided below.

Assessment:

Quizzes	40%	every couple of weeks
Midterm Exam	30%	week of October 4–8
Essay/Final Project	30%	Friday, December 3

Short Blackboard *Quizzes* will cover factual knowledge from the readings, lectures, and films. I'll post a quiz every couple of weeks, and I'll give you grace period to complete them; please do not fall behind.

The *Midterm Exam* will comprise synthetic essay questions on major themes or characters. We will have a live Zoom class session for review at the beginning of the exam week, and the sessions will be recorded for students who may not be able to tune in live.

The *Final Project/Essay* options include a research paper on an aspect of a particular film or a research paper on a particular theme or character. Students may work in groups for this project. See the last page of the syllabus for full details.

Due Dates: Given the pandemic, I have tried to make due dates flexible, so there is a full week to review and take an exam, and students are welcome to work ahead and turn in the final project early. I hope that everyone will be able to keep up. Having said that, if you feel overwhelmed, become sick, or find yourself responsible for caring for someone who is sick, please know that I will do my best to accommodate your needs. Just get in touch with me and be honest, and I'm confident we can work something out.

Academic Study of Religion: According to the University Catalog, "The mission of the religious studies program is to promote the academic study of religion at WKU and in the Commonwealth of Kentucky." Accordingly, this course uncovers, as established by critical scholarship, the human history behind texts that Christians have deemed sacred. In these endeavors, the course does not presume any religious affiliation on the part of the students. Neither does the course intend to privilege any one set of religious (or non-religious) beliefs over any other.

Schedule: This is an asynchronous course, but to provide structure for the course, the schedule is set up like a MWF course. I recommend completing each day's assigned reading before watching the lectures.

Tatian's Diatessaron on September 20 is the only Gospel not included in Miller's collection, so there is a link on Blackboard; for other Gospels not found in the Christian Bible, I have included links to online editions wherever possible. Books of the Bible divide into chapters, and chapters divide into verses; for example, Mark 1:18 refers to the book of Mark, chapter one, verse eighteen, which is on p. 24 of *The Complete Gospels*: "And right then and there they abandoned their nets and followed him." If you do not use Miller's *Complete Gospels*, then please use the NAB, NIV, or NRSV.

As noted below, all films are available online in one format or another. Swank and Kanopy are streaming sites accessible via the WKU Library; just click 'Databases' under the search bar and then 'K' or 'S'.

The topics and assigned readings are listed below. There is an **accompanying video lecture** for almost every day of class, so be sure to click each date on Blackboard, and that will take you to the lectures.

PART 1: INDIVIDUAL GOSPELS

Monday, Aug. 23

Live (and Recorded) Zoom Introduction beginning at 10:20 a.m.

- Wednesday, Aug. 25 “Introduction” in Reinhartz, 3–20
handout on Blackboard—Basic Filmmaking Terminology
Recommended: Scorsese, “Standing up for cinema” (on Blackboard)
Recommended: *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* (on Blackboard)
- Friday, Aug. 27 Gospel of Mark in Miller, *Complete Gospels*
Recommended: Alex McCowan’s performance (1 hr. 45 min.)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBw66sx6IJU>
- Monday, Aug. 30 Gospel of Matthew in Miller, *Complete Gospels*
- Wednesday, Sept. 1 “Pharisees” in Reinhartz, 197–212
<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/people/main-articles/pharisees>
- Friday, Sept. 3 Pier Pablo Pasolini, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 1964
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x6kf3qx>
this film comes and goes from YouTube
it’s also included with Amazon Prime
- Monday, Sept. 6 **LABOR DAY: NO CLASS**
- Wednesday, Sept. 8 Gospel of Luke in Miller, *Complete Gospels*
- Friday, Sept. 10 Mark Goodacre, “The Synoptic Jesus and the Celluloid Christ: Solving the Synoptic Problem through Film,” *JSNT* 80 (2000): 31–44.
- Monday, Sept. 13 John Heyman, *Jesus* (a.k.a. the Jesus film), 1979
<https://www.jesusfilm.org/watch/jesus.html/english.html>
- Wednesday, Sept. 15 Gospel of John in Miller, *Complete Gospels*
- Friday, Sept. 17 “Caiaphas” in Reinhartz, 213–25
- Monday, Sept. 20 Philip Saville, *The Gospel of John*, 2003
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAAZ6HPXdMU>
- PART 2: GOSPEL HARMONIES**
- Wednesday, Sept. 22 Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (reading posted on Blackboard)
- Friday, Sept. 24 George Stevens, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, 1965
stream via the WKU library’s Swank database

Monday, Sept. 27	<i>Infancy Gospel of James</i> in Miller, <i>The Complete Gospels</i>
Wednesday, Sept. 29	“Mary” and “Joseph” in Reinhartz, 67–96
Friday, Oct. 1	Catherine Hardwicke, <i>The Nativity Story</i> , 2006 stream via the WKU library’s Swank database
Monday, Oct. 4	Live (and Recorded) Zoom Review for Midterm Exam at 10:20 a.m.
by Friday, Oct. 8	<u>MIDTERM EXAM IS DUE ON BLACKBOARD BY 11:59 P.M.</u>
Monday, Oct. 11	<i>Gospel of Peter</i> in Miller, <i>The Complete Gospels</i>
Wednesday, Oct. 13	“Satan” in Reinhartz, 181–95
Friday, Oct. 15	FALL BREAK: NO CLASS
Monday, Oct. 18	Mel Gibson, <i>The Passion of the Christ</i> , 2004 stream via the WKU library’s Swank database also included with Amazon Prime
	PART 3: THE HISTORICAL JESUS
Wednesday, Oct. 20	“History and Anti-History” in Reinhartz, 21–40 & “Jesus” in Reinhartz, 43–63
Friday, Oct. 22	Denys Arcand, <i>Jesus of Montreal</i> , 1989 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiBBI4bNINM
Monday, Oct. 25	Dale Martin, “Jesus in Jerusalem: Armed and Not Dangerous,” <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> 37 (2014): 3–24.
Wednesday, Oct. 27	W.E.B. DuBois, “Jesus Christ in Texas” (on Blackboard)
Friday, Oct. 29	Mark Dornford-May, <i>Son of Man</i> , 2006 stream via the WKU library’s Kanopy database
Monday, Nov. 1	“Pilate” in Reinhartz, 227–50
Wednesday, Nov. 3	James Martin, SJ, “Reclaiming Jesus’ Sense of Humor” (on Blackboard)

Friday, Nov. 5 Terry Jones, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, 1979
included with Netflix

PART 4: ANTIHERO

Monday, Nov. 8 *Gospel of Judas* in Miller, *The Complete Gospels*
*Upload to Blackboard a one-paragraph proposal for your final project.

Wednesday, Nov. 10 "Mary Magdalene" in Reinhartz, 125–49

Friday, Nov. 12 Martin Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988
stream via the WKU library's Swank database
Recommended: "The Last Temptation of Christ" in *Scorsese on Scorsese*,
ed. Ian Christie and David Thompson (rev. ed.; London: Faber and Faber,
2003), 116–45. (link to books.google.com on Blackboard)

Monday, Nov. 15 "Judas" in Reinhartz, 151–77
*Upload to Blackboard a rough outline and notes for your final project.

Wednesday, Nov. 17 "God" in Reinhartz, 97–122

Friday, Nov. 19 "Norman Jewison, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1973
stream via the WKU library's Swank database

Monday, Nov. 22 The Presence and Absence of Animal Sacrifice in Jesus Films
*Upload to Blackboard a draft of your final project

Wed.–Fri., Nov. 24–26 **THANKSGIVING BREAK**

Mon.–Wed./Nov. 29–Dec. 1 to be announced

Friday, Dec. 3 **FINAL PROJECTS ARE DUE ON BLACKBOARD BY 11:59 P.M.**

Additional Jesus films:

Cecile B. DeMille, *The King of Kings*, 1927

LeRoy Mervyn, *Quo Vadis*, 1951

Nicholas Ray, *King of Kings*, 1961

David Greene, *Godspell*, 1973

Franco Zeffirelli, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1977

Cyrus Nowrasteh, *The Young Messiah*, 2016 (available via Swank)

Library Resources Online:

- Aharoni, Yohanan, et al. *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*. 3rd ed. London: Macmillan, 1993. (available online)
- Berlin, Adele, editor. *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. (articles are available via the Oxford Reference Premium Online database)
- Cross, F. L., and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. (articles are available via the Oxford Reference Premium Online database)
- Curtis, Adrian, and Herbert G. May. *Oxford Bible Atlas*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. BS 630.O96 (available online)
- Hornblower, Simon, and Anthony Spawforth, editors. *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3rd rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. (articles are available via Oxford Reference Premium Online)

Other Online Resources:

- Bible Odyssey (Society of Biblical Literature): <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/>
- Early Christian writings (canonical and extracanonical): <http://earlychristianwritings.com/>
- Early Jewish writings (canonical and extracanonical): <http://earlyjewishwritings.com/>
- Mark Goodacre, *Celluloid Jesus: The Christ Film Web Pages*: <https://sites.duke.edu/jesusfilms/>
- Mark Goodacre, *New Testament Gateway*: <http://www.ntgateway.com/>
- Oremus Bible Browser (concordance): <http://bible.oremus.org/>

WKU is committed to supporting faculty, staff, and students by upholding the University's Title IX Sexual Misconduct/Assault Policy and Discrimination and Harassment Policy:
<https://wku.edu/eoo/documents/titleix/wkutitleixpolicyandgrievanceprocedure.pdf>
<https://www.wku.edu/policies/docs/251.pdf>

This final project comprises 30% of your grade for the semester, and it is due on Blackboard on the last day of class. Students may work individually or in groups for this research project. Be sure to engage the canonical and extracanonial Gospels we've read as well as the films we've screened; for technical terms, refer to my 'basic filmmaking terms' handout and/or the selection from Timothy Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, both of which are posted on Blackboard on August 25. These projects should derive predominantly from your own reading of the Gospels and your own viewing of the films. The previous page of the syllabus lists helpful resources for your research.

For a research paper, you may want to scrutinize a particular theme such as anti-Judaism in the Gospels and Jesus films; something like this would then need to be narrowed quite a bit. As a simpler option, you could either analyze characters as portrayed in the Gospels and in films (like Adele Reinhartz does) or explain how putting together a modern Jesus film can illuminate the ways ancient Gospel writers edited their source texts (like Mark Goodacre does). Another approach would be to explain how a film like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* or *The Last Temptation of Christ* was adapted from a novel—how the film is similar and different from the book *and* from the Gospels. You could also compare the 2016 film *The Young Messiah* (available via Swank) with the ancient Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which is included in Miller's *Complete Gospels* and available via earlychristianwritings.com.

Between 8 & 12 twelve pages (double-spaced) is a good amount for a finished project, and you should plan to spend at least 20 hours total on this assignment; group projects may run a bit longer. To help your writing process, there are a few checkpoint assignments on Blackboard. By Monday, November 8, upload a few sentences describing your idea for a project; that way I can offer some suggestions. By Monday, November 15, upload whatever outline or notes you've compiled thus far. By Monday, November 22, upload a rough draft of your paper. The final project is due on Friday, December 3. I am happy to meet with you virtually almost anytime, so please let me know how I can help.