
Jesus in Film
RELS 211
Fall 2024
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 60 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 videoconference; just email 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*, the University 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 receiving exam questions from students in previous sections of this course and giving exam questions to students in subsequent sections of this course. Most importantly, students must not communicate with each other while writing exams. Also, AI prompts such as ChatGPT should be avoided—mainly because they inevitably give students worthless information that results in a very low grade. When writing the final project, 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 exam or an 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 Texts:

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

Adele Reinhartz. *Jesus of Hollywood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. [Free library e-book]

Assessment:

Quizzes	40%	every couple of weeks
Midterm Exam	30%	week of September 30–October 4
Essay/Final Project	30%	Monday, November 25

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.

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.

If you become 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 sure that 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 (September 18) 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. Occasionally, however, there is no lecture, so just do the reading—for example, the fragmentary Gospels of the Hebrews, Ebionites, and Nazarenes on September 18.

Monday, Aug. 19

Welcome and Introduction

PART 1: INDIVIDUAL GOSPELS

Wednesday, Aug. 21 “Introduction” in Reinhartz, 3–20
handout on Blackboard—Basic Filmmaking Terminology
Recommended: *A Short Guide to Writing about Film* (on Blackboard)

Friday, Aug. 23 Gospel of Mark in Miller, *The Complete Gospels*
Recommended: Alex McCowan’s performance (1 hr. 45 min.)

Monday, Aug. 26 Gospel of Matthew in Miller, *The Complete Gospels*

Wednesday, Aug. 28 “Pharisees” in Reinhartz, 197–212

Friday, Aug. 30 Pier Pablo Pasolini, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 1964
Links are on Blackboard.

Monday, Sept. 2 **Labor Day: No Class**

Wednesday, Sept. 4 Gospel of Luke in Miller, *The Complete Gospels*

Friday, Sept. 6 John Heyman, *Jesus* (a.k.a. the Jesus film), 1979
Link is on Blackboard.

Monday, Sept. 9 re-read Matthew 9:1–8//Mark 2:1–12//Luke 5:17–26 (see Blackboard)
Goodacre on Synoptic Problem and Jesus Films (see Blackboard)

Wednesday, Sept. 11 Gospel of John in Miller, *The Complete Gospels*

Friday, Sept. 13 Philip Saville, *The Gospel of John*, 2003
Link is on Blackboard.

PART 2: GOSPEL HARMONIES

Monday, Sept. 16 Tatian’s *Diatessaron* (Arabic harmony selections, posted on Blackboard)

- Monday, Oct. 21 Dale Martin, "Jesus in Jerusalem: Armed and Not Dangerous,"
Journal for the Study of the New Testament 37 (2014): 3–24.
(on Blackboard)
*Upload to Blackboard a paragraph proposal for your final project.
- Wednesday, Oct. 23 W.E.B. DuBois, "Jesus Christ in Texas" (on Blackboard)
- Friday, Oct. 25 Mark Dornford-May, *Son of Man*, 2006
check Blackboard for access
- Monday, Oct. 28 "Pilate" in Reinhartz, 227–50
- Wednesday, Oct. 30 James Martin, SJ, "Reclaiming Jesus' Sense of Humor" (on Blackboard)
- Friday, Nov. 1 Terry Jones, *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, 1979
include with Netflix

PART 4: ANTIHERO

- Monday, Nov. 4 *Gospel of Judas* in Miller, *The Complete Gospels*
*Upload to Blackboard your notes/draft for your final project.
- Wednesday, Nov. 6 "Mary Magdalene" in Reinhartz, 125–49
- Friday, Nov. 8 Martin Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988
\$3.99 on Amazon Prime, but should be on Swank database
- Monday, Nov. 11 "Judas" in Reinhartz, 151–77
- Wednesday, Nov. 13 "God" in Reinhartz, 97–122
- Friday, Nov. 15 "Norman Jewison, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1973
\$3.79 via Amazon Prime, but should be on Swank database

- Monday, Nov. 18 ***Upload to Blackboard a draft of your final project.
- Wednesday, Nov. 20 For up to 6 bonus points on your final project, please respond to the 6 Colonnade learning outcomes; the prompt is on Blackboard and can be filled out there or uploaded as a Word or PDF file.
- Friday, Nov. 22 The Presence and Absence of Animal Sacrifice in Jesus Films
- Monday, Nov. 25 **FINAL PROJECTS ARE DUE ON BLACKBOARD BY 11:59 P.M.**
- Wed.–Fri., Nov. 27–29 **THANKSGIVING BREAK: NO CLASS**
- *There is no final exam for this class; your final projects are enough work!

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/>
 Oremus Bible Browser (concordance): <http://bible.oremus.org/>
 Bible Gateway (lots of translations): www.biblegateway.com

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://www.wku.edu/policies/docs/251.pdf>
<https://www.wku.edu/titleix/>

Barker—RELS 211—Final Project Assignment

Due date: Monday, November 25

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 extracanonical 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 21.

These projects should derive predominantly from your own reading of the Gospels and your own viewing of the films. You should also engage standard reference works in biblical studies, particularly commentaries and dictionaries. A number of helpful entries from the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* will be available all semester in a folder at the top of the 'Content' page of the course's Blackboard site. The previous page of the syllabus lists a few other resources.

For a research paper, then 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 BBC nativity and passion films with their Hollywood counterparts.

Between 8 & 12 pages double-spaced or 4 & 6 pages single-spaced (double-spacing between paragraphs) is a good amount for a finished project, and you should plan to spend around 25 hours total on this assignment; the page count for group projects may run a bit longer.

To help your writing process, there are a few checkpoint assignments on Blackboard. By Monday, Oct. 21, upload a paragraph describing your idea for a project; that way I can offer some suggestions. By Monday, Nov. 4, upload whatever notes—or even a rough draft—you've compiled thus far. By Monday, Nov. 18, upload a rough draft of your paper. The final project is due on Monday, November 25. Anytime from the beginning of the semester until the due date, I am happy to meet with you about the project, so please let me know how I can help.