

## **Jesus and the Games We Play (EMB 2951HF)**

Monday-Thursday 8-18 June 9:30-12:30

Room EM-205

Final Syllabus (8 June 2015)

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Office hours by appointment

### **Rationale**

In Mark 8:28, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Christians have answered this question in complex and often conflicting ways, leading to a variety of depictions of Jesus that often bear little resemblance to one another. This course will examine how Jesus comes to be understood as culturally significant in differing contexts, a “sticky” figure to whom various values and ideals become affixed. More precisely, this course will look at how Jesus is continually re-fashioned to advance specific social interests – how we see in Jesus what we want to see and consequently understand him to be on “our” side of a given debate.

### **Aims**

This course surveys a variety of Christian and some non-Christian understandings of Jesus to develop a framework for analyzing how conflicting – even contradictory – images of Jesus are upheld by different groups. This framework will also help to discern the underlying interests in a given depiction.

### **Outcomes**

By the end of the course, the student should be able to:

- articulate distinctive ways in which Jesus has been understood as culturally significant.
- describe the ways in which biblical interpretation factors into understandings of gender, race, politics, and economic policy.
- develop critical tools for assessing biblical interpretation in popular culture more broadly.
- discuss in greater depth one particular “fashioning” of Jesus and the interests advanced by it.

### **Methods of Instruction**

- Daily lectures
- Daily readings
- Small group discussion
- Written assignments

### **Required Textbooks**

- Academic Study Bible: EITHER *HarperCollins Study Bible* OR *New Oxford Annotated Bible*
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. 1999. *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Select chapters of Stern, Richard C., Clayton N. Jefford, and Gueric DeBona. 1999. *Savior on the Silver Screen*. New York: Paulist. [On Reserve at Emmanuel – see Movie Analysis assignment]
- All other readings will be available via Blackboard

### **Student Assessment**

- Movie Analysis assignment: 15%
- Prepared notes: 20%
- Research Paper: 50%
- Participation 15%

### **Advance Preparation**

- See Movie Analysis assignment

### **Accommodations**

Students with diverse learning styles are welcome in this course. If you have a disability/health consideration that may require accommodations, I invite you to approach the Accessibility Office as soon as possible.

### **Attendance Policy**

Quoted from *Emmanuel College Policies and Procedures*: “Academic credit for a course requires regular class attendance, unless otherwise indicated in the course syllabus. Attendance means being present in the class for the entire scheduled class meeting, not just part of it. In the event of absence for any reason including sickness, students are responsible for any information or class content missed. Students are expected to inform the instructor prior to class. The instructor may require additional work to make up for an absence. The instructor will be required to inform the Basic Degree Committee if students miss [two classes]. For students who miss [two classes], this may result in a lower grade or even a failing grade for the course. If attendance is poor due to extenuating circumstances, students may petition the Basic Degree Committee to drop a course without academic or financial penalty.”

## **Part I: Jesus Then and Now**

### **Session 1: Distinctive Understandings of Jesus**

- This session will cover the distinctive understandings of Jesus in the movies students watched, as well as the distinctive understandings of Jesus in the four canonical Gospels.
- Required Reading: See Movie Analysis assignment; Martin 2009
- **Movie Analysis due**

### **Session 2: The Jesus of Classical Antiquity**

- This session will involve discussion of the way in which the figure of Jesus acted as a way of establishing Christian identity vis-à-vis Roman religion. This session will also devote attention to 21<sup>st</sup> century characterizations of Jesus’ teaching as the culmination of ancient wisdom.

- Required Reading: Pelikan 21-45, 57-70; Vergil *Eclogues* 4; Eusebius *Oration of Constantine* 19-21

**Session 3: A Reasonable Jesus for Reasonable Thinkers**

- This session will involve discussion of philosophical debate about the miraculous in 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment-era and resulting attempts to separate the “historical Jesus” apart from the “Christ of faith.” This session will also devote attention to the Jesus Seminar as a more recent interlocutor in the question of miracles.
- Required Reading: Pelikan 182-193; Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar 1-8; excerpts from *The Jefferson Bible*

**Session 4: The Masculine Jesus of Muscular Christianity**

- This session will involve discussion of gender roles in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Christianity and the reimagining of Jesus in such terms. This session will also devote attention to some of the Jesus Seminar’s critics and their understanding of Jesus’ gender.
- Required Readings: excerpts from Barton; Schaberg 48-64

**Part II: Contemporary Concerns about Jesus**

**Session 5: “Jewish, But Not *That* Jewish”**

- This session will involve discussion of Jesus’ Judaism. Two diametrically opposed approaches will be considered: a) Nazi scholars of the Third Reich and b) more recent scholarship emphatically situating Jesus within Judaism.
- Required Readings: Gerdmar 531-576

**Session 6: Jesus the Liberator**

- This session will involve discussion of contrasting liberatory depictions of Jesus and their relationship to the authors’ political struggles.
- Guest Lecture: Benjamin Lujan
- Required Readings: Pelikan 206-219; Gutiérrez 194-197, 206-211; Gandhi; King

**Session 7: Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism**

- This session will involve discussion of distinctions drawn between Jesus’ spiritual and political interests and overlap between the two. In other words, how do some people understand Jesus as a person who worked against the insincere politics of “organized religion”?
- Required Readings: Martin 2014: 91-106; excerpts from Moore

**Session 8: Jesus in an Age of Terror**

- This session will involve discussion of how the War on Terror has influenced the depiction of Jesus’ opponents, particularly with the popularization of Islamophobic stereotypes.
- This session will also cover the basics of scholarly research and expectations regarding the Research Paper.
- Required Readings: Arnal 1-7, 78; Jennings 131-144

## Research Paper due Two Weeks after Session 8 (July 6)

### Assignments

#### Movie Analysis

Please note that this assignment will require work before the course begins. Select ONE movie from the list that will serve as the basis for the assignment:

- *The King of Kings* (1927)
- *King of Kings* (1961)
- *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (1964)
- *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965)
- *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973)
- *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977)
- *Monty Python's The Life of Brian* (1979) – substitute “Brian” for “Jesus” where necessary in the assignment
- *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)
- *Jesus of Montreal* (1989)

All of these movies should be available to check out from the Roberts Library Media Commons or St. Michael's College Library. Before viewing the movie, read pages 1-28, the relevant chapter, and appendix entry in Stern, Jefford, and DeBona, *Savior on the Silver Screen*. This book is on reserve at the Emmanuel College Library.

Write a 3 page movie analysis (double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman, one inch margins). Drawing upon the reading, the paper should address the following questions:

- To whom is the movie addressed (e.g., liberal Protestants, non-Christians, conservative Catholics)? How is this indicated in the movie?
- What scenes are particularly important for the movie's understanding of Jesus? How does this scene relate the relevant New Testament passage (e.g., verbatim, loose paraphrase, complete transformation)?
- What Gospel passages are conspicuously missing (or downplayed) in the movie? What does this indicate about the movie's understanding of Jesus?
- What does the director want the viewer to take away from the movie – that is, how is Jesus made meaningful for the movie's context? [Note: You will find the “Lens Three” section of the *Savior on the Silver Screen* chapter particularly helpful here]

Please note that this is not a movie *review*, so there is no need to discuss the film's aesthetic merits.

#### Prepared Notes

For sessions 2-8, you will need to turn in one page of notes on the readings from class. These notes do NOT need to be formal and should NOT take long to write; they will primarily serve as your reference for in-class discussion. These will be collected at the end of class and returned the following session. The notes should do the following:

- Briefly summarize the reading content, making particular note of items you found interesting or surprising. In the process it would be helpful to note the interpretive strategies used to link Jesus to the writer's context (following Martin 2009).
- Address the following questions: Does Jesus seem to endorse one side of a debate occurring in the *author's* context? What is the debate and what is the opinion Jesus

seems to endorse? What biblical passages are used to support this understanding of Jesus? What biblical passages would create difficulty for this understanding?

- Conclude by articulating at least one question you have about the reading(s).

### **Research Paper**

There are MANY fascinating depictions of Jesus that we will not be able to discuss in class: the sublime Jesus of 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism, the Elder Brother of Mormonism, the C.E.O. Jesus of big business, the Jesus of queer liberation, and so on. In consultation with the instructor, select one book exemplifying this Jesus that will serve as the object of your analysis and compose an 8-10 page paper (double-spaced, 12 point Times New Roman, one inch margins) describing its relevance to the author's context. This paper will bring together the various tools you developed in this course to address the following questions.

- To whom is the book addressed and what is the author trying to persuade the reader of? In other words, how does Jesus relate to the author's context and how does he "matter"?
- What interpretive strategies does the author employ (following Martin 2009)? Use specific examples and explain why they are significant.
- What biblical passages are central to the argument? What passages are downplayed or omitted that might create problems for this depiction? What reasons, if any, are given for minimizing the significance of some passages and emphasizing others?
- What are the consequences if the depiction of Jesus is taken as persuasive?

Please note that consultation with the instructor is **required**. This paper will be due on 2 July 2015.

### **Bibliography of Required Readings**

- Arnal, William E. 2005. *The Symbolic Jesus: Historical Scholarship, Judaism and the Construction of Contemporary Identity*. Religion in Culture: Studies in Social Contest & Construction. London: Equinox.
- Barton, Bruce. 1925. *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Funk, Robert W., Roy Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar. 1993. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*. London: Macmillan.
- Gerdmar, Anders. 2009. *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann*. Studies in Jewish History and Culture 20. Leiden: Brill.
- Gandhi, Mohandas. 1941. "What Jesus Means to Me." Online at <http://practicalspirituallife.com/jesus-means-mahatma-gandhi/>
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. 1996. *Essential Writings*. London: Orbis.
- Jefferson, Thomas. 1820. *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. [also known as *The Jefferson Bible*]. Online at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/JeffersonBible/the-book/>
- Jennings, Theodore W., Jr. 2003. *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament*. Cleveland: Pilgrim.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. 1950. "The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus." Online at [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_500215\\_008/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_500215_008/)

- Martin, Craig. 2009. "How to Read an Interpretation: Interpretive Strategies and the Maintenance of Authority." *Bible and Critical Theory* 5/1: 6.1-26.
- . 2014. *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Moore, Christopher. 2002. *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. 1999. *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schaberg, Jane. 2006. *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*. Expanded Twentieth Anniversary Edition. Classics Reprints. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix.
- Stern, Richard C., Clayton N. Jefford, and Gueric DeBona. 1999. *Savior on the Silver Screen*. New York: Paulist.