

## ***RELIGION 345 WRT — THE ETHICS OF JESUS***

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### ***I. Course Description***

Religion 345 is a “Ways of Inquiry” introduction to the academic study of the historical Jesus and the ethical teachings found in authentic Jesus traditions, one in which students’ own investigations of/in the historical method take priority. Students thus will explore the topics, approaches, and nature of an academic study of the quest for the historical Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth with a central focus on the ethics of Jesus in its first century contexts.

In brief, the course will examine Jesus’ simultaneous roles as an apocalyptic prophet of Jewish restoration theology and as a prophet of social and economic justice for an oppressed people. Although Jesus’ actions and teachings do not give evidence of a coherent ethical system, ethical issues pervade his teachings. Inquiries about such ethical questions include Jesus’ enigmatic relationship with Jewish law (e.g., his prohibition of oaths and divorce) and how Jesus was immersed in the halakhic (legal) debates of his fellow first-century Jews by his concern with Mosaic Law and the questions of practice arising from it (e.g., Sabbath and purity rules). A primary focus will be how early Jesus traditions vigorously critiqued the first-century political economy of the Roman Empire and proposed a vision for a radical reordering of material human economic relationships (e.g., through vertical generalized reciprocity). What we will learn is that Jesus’ teachings (e.g., on the Sabbath) in many ways represent a “voice from below,” a humane, commonsense approach of a first-century Jewish non-elite (“peasant”).

### ***II. Texts***

*The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, by Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz.

*What Are They Saying About the Historical Jesus?* by David B. Gowler.

*Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, by K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman.

*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (NOAB) in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The abbreviations for the various books of the Bible can be found in NOAB, p. xxv; the pages where each book can be found are listed in NOAB, p. xxiii. Details on chapter and verse citations can be found in the second full paragraph on p. xiv (I will use the colon to separate chapter and verse, instead of a period). In addition, as we go through the course, please feel free to ask questions about any subject with which you are unfamiliar. Other students will likely have the same questions.



### III. Goals of the Course

By the end of this course, you should be able to discuss (a) the emergence of the Jesus movement within the contexts of first-century CE Judaism and the rest of the Hellenistic-Roman world; (b) the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth; (c) the basic ethical teachings contained in the earliest Jesus traditions. An overarching goal is to achieve the goals of the course more successfully—and to improve your synthetic, critical, and creative thinking skills—by means of writing-intensive assignments.

### IV. Course Requirements

- A. **Academic Journal** (15%): The academic journal, besides being a repository of your work, also serves as a developmental record of your reflections on the implications of what we read. Class discussions will follow the lead of your journal entries, so write with your fellow class members in mind. The success of this class, to a large extent, depends on your journal entries and your willingness to dialogue about them with other class members.

We will use the blog function on Blackboard for many of these written responses, including a weekly blog entry on topics essential to the ethical teachings of the historical Jesus. A rough guide is that each blog entry should be approximately 750 words, and blog entries (except for the first week) are due before 5:00 pm on Fridays.

- B. **Tests** (40%): There will be two tests during the semester. The focus of these tests will be two-fold: (1) the history of Jesus research and (2) the teachings of Jesus in their first-century social, cultural, political, and economic contexts.
- C. **Book review** (10%): The book review will be on a volume selected from the “For Further Reading” section of the book, *What Are They Saying About the Historical Jesus?* (pp. 183-190). The book review will include a brief summary, but the heart of the review must be a critical evaluation of the important issues covered by the book (including, for example, the author’s assumptions, methodology, major conclusions, and central thesis). Those students who select a parable for their exegetical paper (see below) may instead choose a book listed in the annotated bibliography of *What Are They Saying About the Historical Parables?* by David B. Gowler (pp. 139-147).
- D. **Exegetical Paper** (25%) – One of the goals of the class is to enable you to interpret the ethical teachings of Jesus within their first-century contexts. This exegetical paper, therefore, will focus on a passage from the Gospels (including extracanonical, if applicable), evaluate its “authenticity,” and interpret the passage in its first-century setting.
- The paper will be due in the following stages, all of which will be subject to instructor review. The fifth stage is subject to peer review as well: (1) selection of a passage; (2) gathering of resources; (3) research of “authenticity” that includes three varying perspectives from historical Jesus scholars; (4) research of first-century contexts; (5) completed paper; (6) revised paper. Each stage will be included in the calculation of the overall grade, as will your peer review of another student’s completed paper.

- E. ***Final Examination*** (10%): The final exam will consist of two parts: (1) a revision of your paper and (2) a “How My Mind Has Changed” essay: your assessment of what you have learned over the course of the semester.
- F. ***Class Attendance and Participation (included in Academic Journal grade)***: Class attendance and participation are essential to the learning process and to your grade. You are expected to attend each class session, to be on time, and to be prepared to interact in detail with the subject matter. You are allowed two absences without academic penalty. For additional absences, three points will be subtracted from your final numerical average *for each absence*. Borderline grades will be determined on the basis of class attendance and participation.

## V. *Appointments*

My office hours are Mondays 10:00-12:00 and Tuesdays 2:45-4:45. Since I also have a faculty position at the Center for Ethics, I will sometimes be on the Atlanta campus, but I am always available via e-mail. Please don't hesitate to contact me. If you cannot meet with me during my office hours, please see me to arrange a mutually convenient time.

## VI. *Course Philosophy*

This class will engage in the *academic* study of the historical Jesus, which means that we all must be open to the contemporary methods of the scholarly study of the New Testament texts and their contexts. We will focus on the interpretation of these texts and the historical Jesus in their ancient settings, not their direct value for the life of religious communities today. Whether you think you know a lot or a little about Jesus of Nazareth, prepare to be surprised, because this famous figure remains elusive and enigmatic in many ways. In addition, his ethical teachings might be more controversial and less relevant to contemporary society than you might imagine.

An essential element of our semester together is the ability to trust each other. All of us at Oxford College live by the standards set forth in the Honor Code, which includes the “responsibility for maintaining standards of unimpeachable honesty in all academic work.” Oxford College takes this honor code very seriously, as do I, and penalties for violations are severe. Please read the Honor Code carefully; I will trust you to conduct yourselves accordingly. The Honor Code may be found at:

[http://oxford.emory.edu/audiences/current\\_students/Academic/academic-success/student-honor-code/](http://oxford.emory.edu/audiences/current_students/Academic/academic-success/student-honor-code/)