Jesus and the Philosophers:
The Nazarene’s Way among the Ancient Schools
NT5350g
Austin Graduate School of Theology
Fall 2015

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Class: Monday 1-3:40pm (Note: No class 19 October. This will be a reading week.)

Course Description:
The early Christians (from the late 1st through the 3rd century), when asked what they were by their Greco-Roman contemporaries, identified themselves as a philosophy – the philosophy of Jesus. Of course, Jesus of Nazareth was certainly more than a philosopher. The central argument of this course, however, is twofold – one historical and one concerning our lives today.

First, I argue that Jesus’ early followers did not mistranslate Jesus’ teachings or significance when they identified themselves as a school of philosophy. Of course, substantiating this claim requires a nuanced and coordinated knowledge of three intersecting fields. 1) We must clarify what philosophy is in the ancient world. 2) We will develop an appreciation for the early Christians’ understanding of Jesus and of philosophy in context. 3) We must revisit Jesus’ own teachings with bi-focal lenses and read them both in terms of his Jewish context and in terms of how they might be faithfully translated into the categories of Greco-Roman philosophy. Therein we will consider how Jesus’ teachings present genuine, substantial gains in the quest for a fully flourishing life. We will pursue each of these objectives in turn. As a sub-theme, we will observe the ways in which descriptions and instructions for Jesus’ way of life provide a core continuity and coherence between those writings of his early followers that we call the New Testament and the early Church fathers.

Second, I argue that by focusing on the experiential basis and ethical texture of Jesus’ way, this angle of vision brings to light those elements that are most winsome and needful in our own day. Most churches have long since abandoned their call to offer a coherent and healthful way of life to a world that desperately craves it. My prayer and expectation is that this course will contribute to changing that situation in the specific places and times to which God has appointed us.

Learning Objectives:
- Students will develop a deeper understanding of Jesus’ teachings concerning the kingdom of God and the fundamental experiences correlated with participating in God’s reign.
- Students will be capable of elucidating the Hebraic origin and early Christian developments of the ‘walking with God’ metaphor cluster, including ‘converting’, the ‘Two Ways’, and ‘the Way’.
- Students will be able to describe the fundamental meaning of philosophy in the ancient world and distinctive twists the various schools applied to that meaning.
• Students will be ready to explain why the second-century followers of Jesus consistently presented ‘the Way’ as the true philosophy.
• Students will be capable of discoursing, with clarity, precision and grace, on the ethical texture of life within the kingdom of God and the exegetical roots of Jesus’ teaching thereof.

Course Requirements and Means of Evaluation:
• Regular attendance, reading of required texts and full participation in all classes is mandatory. Excessive tardiness or more than one absence may result in a deduction of up to 20% from your final grade.
• A final exam will be offered on 7 December 2015. The exam, which will contain both short answer and essay questions, will cover the content of the lectures and the primary source materials assigned. This exam will comprise 25% of your final grade.
• A book review of Pierre Hadot, What is Ancient Philosophy? will be due at the beginning of class on 26 October upon return from reading week.
• A final written project will comprise the other 50% of your final grade.
  o The student must submit an academic research paper (not to exceed 10 pages) on some topic related to Jesus’ gospel and/or ethics and their appropriation in the early church. The student must gain the instructor’s approval for the text and topic in advance.
  o For those taking this course as an exegetical intensive, the student must follow Austin Grad’s Guide for Writing an Exegesis on a Biblical Passage, which is available on our website here: http://austingrad.edu/images/Resources/student/Exegesis_Guide.pdf
  o The research paper will be due on 30 November 2015.

Required Readings:
Required Primary Texts:
• Four canonical gospels (various translations)
• The Isaiah Targum, trans. Bruce Chilton. Aramaic Bible Vol. 11. Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minn. (Selections, on reserve in library)
• Philo, On the Decalogue (Selections, on reserve in library)
• Pirke Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers (various translations)
• Other short primary readings may be assigned as needed throughout the semester.

Required Secondary Texts:
• Brad Young. 2007. Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought and Teachings of Jesus. Baker Academic

Tentative Schematic of Course Content:
• Orientation: What We are Doing and Why It Matters (in the Church and in the Academy)
  • Peering through a Second Century Lens: Why Jesus’ Way was a Philosophy
  • Living with Integrity and Distinction: Philosophy and Her Ancient Schools
• Apprenticeship among the Rabbis and the ‘Holy Men’ of Second Temple Judaism
• Early Depictions of ‘the Way’: Fulfilling Hebrew and Hellenistic Aspirations
• Jesus on Reality: The Availability of God’s Activity Here and Now
• Obediential Knowledge: The Seminal Word and Jesus’ Theory of Knowing God
• (R)evoking Elijah and Elisha: Jesus’ Moral Transformation of Prophecy
• The Way: Finding Wisdom beneath the Second Tablet of the Torah
  • Ethical Texture of Kingdom Living 1: Beyond Anger and Contempt
  • Ethical Texture of Kingdom Living 2: Beyond Distorted Desires and Cultivated Lust
  • Ethical Texture of Kingdom Living 3: Beyond Verbal Manipulation and Deceit
  • Ethical Texture of Kingdom Living 4: Beyond Superiority and Pride
• Apprenticeship: Exercises for Training in Jesus’ Way
  • Saying Abba: Jesus’ Teachings on Prayer
  • Positioning before the Father: Solitude, Secrecy in Good Deeds, and Intentional Vulnerability
  • Kingdom Economics: Persons, Resources, and Relying on What cannot be Controlled
  • Going to your Brother: Communal Exercises in Transparency and Correction


Bibliography


