

**De/Colonizing Jesus: New Testament Christologies Against the Backdrop of the Roman
Empire
NT 611/711
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Purpose

Drawing on recent scholarship applying post-colonial studies to the interpretation of biblical texts, this course will approach New Testament understandings of Jesus, his mission, and the communal identities that arose around his memory to relate emergent Christian identity to the questions of empire, domination, and resistance. The oddly expressed “de/colonizing” in the course title expresses an overarching aim of the course to attend to ways in which biblical christologies themselves have been depoliticized (i.e. *colonized*) in the history of Christian interpretation by hiding or reconfiguring their politics so as to make them more conducive to the practices of empire. The course will attend to the contemporary liberationist hermeneutical task of recovering those political dimensions so as to *decolonize* New Testament texts and to explore their importance for faithful contemporary witness. At its most general level the course intends to deepen understanding of various Christologies as they are found in the New Testament and related literature from the first and second centuries, and their background in Hebrew Bible, Inter-testamental, and Hellenistic Literature, especially as they relate to the political context of the Roman Empire and the imperial cult of the divine emperor. More particularly, however, exegetical focus will be on the political dimensions of New Testament christologies as they relate to life in the Roman Empire and second on the narrative dimensions of New Testament christologies as a means of engaging the epic narratives of Roman imperial propaganda. The course will increase participants' awareness of the social, cultural and historical forces that contributed to the formation of early Christian Christology, and how early Christian christologies can be used as a resource for engaging contemporary societal challenges and political ideologies of domination. Through a close reading of representative New Testament and early Christian texts students will develop exegetical skills, develop their awareness of key critical exegetical issues in the interpretation of biblical Christological texts, be exposed to a variety of critical approaches to New Testament Christology alongside post-colonial interpretations, grow in their ability to evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of various Christologies from differing contemporary perspectives, explore Christology as a means of engaging contemporary issues of domination and oppression, and consider the call of contemporary religious communities to be embodied gatherings of religious engagement with forces of economic and political power. Where appropriate, reference will be given to the history of interpretation of select passages in the early Christian debates of the first 5 centuries and how texts were used to support various christological positions, and the ways in which Christology was both colonized and again decolonized as Christianity moved from the margins of imperial society to its centre.

Competence Objectives

1. A developing awareness of the contemporary exegetical debate concerning the validity of the motif of “Empire” in the interpretation of NT texts.
2. Facility in the use of post-colonial study in the interpretation of early Christian texts.
3. An ability to identify and discuss critically the main contours of the imperial cults of the emperor and their possible influences on the shape and content of early Christian literature and culture.
4. Demonstrated ability to exegete a passage, theme, or motif from a New Testament or early Christian text from the perspective of ancient imperial location.
5. An ability to relate an ancient Christian text from the first two centuries to an issue relevant to contemporary political identity.
6. An ability to write a brief essay to encourage class discussion that focuses on themes of imperial and religious identity as these arise from given New Testament texts.

Format

One 3-hour class weekly, 1.5 hours lecture and 1.5 hours of class seminar on assigned readings and presentations. In addition to these lecture-seminars, a series of meetings will be given over to discussion of assigned texts and books. At the conclusion of each week groups, in rotation, will prepare a written response (2-3 double spaced pages), copied to the whole class, to a set question for discussion the following week at the start of class.

Content

Following a discussion of the historical Jesus in the context of Roman Palestine and his teaching as resistance to domination, the course will turn to political considerations of the various titles and narratives used to worship and acclaim Jesus in earliest oral traditions and in New Testament texts.

Evaluation

***If you don't bring your Bible, do not come to class!**

1. Weekly seminars and discussion groups. Each week there will be 1.5 hours set aside for student led seminar discussion of secondary readings and exegetical work students are preparing for their papers.
2. An exegetical paper that relates a text, theme, or motif from the New Testament era to Roman imperial culture, especially as it relates to aspects of the imperial cult, religious identity in the Roman Empire, issues of politics and domination, and so on. Full details will be distributed the first day of class. Students may elect to work on teams to offer a more synthetic project that includes development of a WIKI site, with resources relevant to a critical treatment from an imperial perspective. Students electing this option will state their intention within the first month of the semester.
3. Depending on class numbers, an oral presentation of insights to date on the assigned paper.

MDIV: 3750-5000 words/15-20 pages

Research depth: 10 entries beyond course texts for final paper as applicable

MATS: 5000-6250 words/20-25 pages

Research depth: 15-20 entries beyond course texts for final paper as applicable

Th.M.: 7500-8750 words/30-35 pages

Research depth: appropriate for Advanced Degree

10 item annotated bibliography

VST requires students to adhere to the stylistic protocols outlined in Kate L. Turabian, et al., eds. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Seventh Edition: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers (Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Bibliographies that do not conform to that or another recognized format will be returned for correction.*

Deadlines: Friday, 5 December, for MDIV and MATS; Friday 19 January for Th.M. (see the paper guide distributed at the beginning of the term for details). Email submissions are preferred; hard copy submissions only with permission of the instructor. Only PDF or Microsoft Word versions will be accepted.

These are strict deadlines.

Students are required to attend **at least** 80% of classes. Students who miss more than 2 or more than part of 2 sessions will fail the course. In the case of absences, students will be required to write a 2 page single-spaced précis of the week's lecture.

Prerequisites

NT 500, 501

Required Texts

A study-edition Bible, translation of choice, but no paraphrases and no pocket-sized versions and preferably a Greek-English edition (for example, *Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament*, 28th Edition [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013—ISBN 978-3438051622] Jay P. Green, Sr., *The Interlinear Hebrew-Greek-English Bible*, Baker Books, 1996 – ISBN 978-0801021381. If KJV, the student is obliged to bring another translation as well.

Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Book of Revelation: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). ISBN 978-0195188219

Harry O. Maier, Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles (London/New York: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2013) ISBN 978-0567059956

Douglas Oakman, The Political Aims of Jesus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) ISBN 9781541424317

Michael Peppard, The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Recommended

Paul Zanker, The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990) ISBN 978-0472081240