

Topics in Early Judaism and Christianity: **Jews, Christians, and the Roman Empire**

Instructor: Prof. Mira Balberg

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Office: H&SS 6073

Office Hours: Thursdays 1-3

Class time and place: Tuesdays 1-3.50, H&SS 6008

Description and goals

The Roman Empire — its political and military forces, its civic and local customs, and its traditions and cultures — was the context in which both Judaism and Christianity emerged and developed in the first four centuries of the Common Era. In this colloquium, we will examine how Roman imperial forces engaged with and responded to Jews and Christians, how Jews and Christians thought of and engaged with the Roman empire as a concept and as a lived reality, and how Jews and Christians defined themselves in relation to each other against a Roman imperial background.

In this class, you will:

- 1) Become familiar with key events, people, concepts, and themes that pertain to the history of Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World.
- 2) Learn to think critically about the history of religion.
- 3) Hone your craft as historians by learning how to work closely with primary sources (which are sometimes uncertain, unreliable, or sparse) and how to evaluate and utilize secondary sources.
- 4) Develop your analytical writing skills.
- 5) Acquire experience in conducting independent research and forming a historical argument.

Requirements and evaluation

Required materials:

All course readings are posted online (on Canvas) or distributed in class. Note that a reading is assigned for the first class.

Evaluation:

You will be evaluated based on two short written assignments and a final paper. The steps you will take as you craft your final paper (bibliography, outline, etc.) will also count toward your final grade. In addition, your attendance, participation, and contribution to class discussion constitute a significant part of your grade.

Preparation, participation, and attendance (15%)

This class is fundamentally a conversation: a conversation amongst ourselves and a conversation between us and the texts and authors we will be reading. Therefore, the class crucially depends on your preparation: you are asked to read the texts assigned for every class so as to be thoroughly ready to engage in conversation about them in class and to make a substantial contribution to the discussion. You may use laptops in class to access the readings, but please limit your use of them to a minimum. If possible, print the readings instead and avoid all electronics in class.

You are expected to attend every class from beginning to end, and if for some reason you cannot attend you must (1) let me know in advance, providing a solid reason for your absence and (2) submit written

work to make up for your absence. Any unexcused absence will automatically mean a decrease of 20% of your participation grade (=3% of your final grade).

Discussion points. Before class you are asked to post 2–3 bullet points on the class discussion board, in line with guidelines provided on the discussion board. Those have to be posted at least 2 hours before class. During the class you are expected to engage in the discussion and offer significant and thoughtful responses to questions and ideas brought up in the course. Please note that your participation grade is assessed not only based on your own contributions, but also on your respectful engagement with others' comments.

Assignments 1 & 2. Assignments 1 and 2 are meant to serve as exercises in analytic and synthetic reading that will be crucial for your final paper. In assignment 1, you are asked to read four primary sources and draw historical conclusions. In assignment 2 you are asked to read two secondary sources that engage with the same topic from different angles.

Please note that assignments are not accepted after the deadline, except in a case of family or medical emergency.

Also, Please remain aware that every written work you submit must be authored by you and you only, and any suspicion that this is not the case will lead to further investigation. Any source you use must be properly cited.

Final paper. For your final paper, you are to pick a topic that is of interest to you and explore it using primary and secondary sources. Your topic and research question must be chosen in consultation with me. To make sure that your process of working on the paper is constructive and paced, you will develop the paper in several stages:

By week 5, you will need to choose your topic, your primary text(s), and your research question, and submit a one-paragraph proposal.

By week 9 you will have read at least three academic secondary sources (articles, book chapters) related to the topic and submit a short summary of these sources and a comment on their usefulness to your paper.

By week 10 you will submit a full outline of your paper (2-3 pages)

The final grade will be calculated in the following way:

Participation (including discussion points) and attendance	15%
Assignment 1 (due week 4) [3-4 pages]	15%
Assignment 2 (due week 7) [2-3 pages]	10%
Proposal, bibliography, and outline for final paper	10%
Final paper [12-15 pages]	50%

Topics and assigned readings for each class

Week I (January 7)

Setting the stage: Romans, Jews, and Christians

- John Scheid, *Roman Religion*, 18–29
- Excerpt from Cicero, *Pro Flacco*

Week II (January 14)

The first century between Rome and Judea, or: are Jews ungovernable?

- Excerpts from Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*
- Peter Schafer, *The History of the Jews in the Graeco-Roman World*, 114-129
- Seth Schwartz, *The Ancient Jews from Alexander to Muhammad*, 72-89

Week III (January 21)

The first century between Judea to Rome, or: did Jesus lead an anti-Imperial movement?

- Gospel of Luke (Chapters 1-24)
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=luke+1&version=NRSV>
- Acts of the Apostles (Chapters 1-28)
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+1&version=NRSV>

Week IV (January 28)

Religion and “Superstitio” – the terms of the debate

- Theophrastus, from *Characters*
- Plutarch, from *Moralia*
- Tacitus, from *Histories*
- Minucius Felix, from *Octavius*

Assignment 1: due Monday, January 27 by 10 pm (recommended length: 3-4 pages. Submission via Canvas)

1. How do we usually use the term “superstition” in our own time, and how do Theophrastus and Plutarch use it? Is there a difference between them?
2. Tacitus and Minucius Felix describe Jews and Christians, respectively, as superstitious. Does their description of Christian and Jewish beliefs and practices correspond with Theophrastus’s and Plutarch’s definitions of superstition? Or do these texts suggest a different approach to superstition?

Week V (February 4)

The second century: the making and unmaking of communities

- Ralph M. Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, 43-54
- The Epistle to Diognetus
- Schwartz, *The Ancient Jews*, 89-97
- Primary sources on Bar Kokhba

Final paper proposal due Monday, February 3 by 10 pm [topic+ research question + primary sources] (Canvas)

Week VI (February 11)

Martyrdom accounts between literature and history

- The Martyrdom of Polycarp
- Letter from Vienna and Lyons
- Three Talmudic martyrdom narratives

Week VII (February 18)

Rethinking “the parting of the ways”

- Annette Yoshiko Reed and Adam Becker, “Introduction: Traditional Models and New Directions”
- Daniel Boyarin, “Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism,” 577–615

Assignment 2: due Monday, February 17 by 10 pm (recommended length: 2-3 pages. Submission via Canvas)

1. What is Daniel Boyarin’s overall argument regarding the relations between Judaism and Christianity in the first centuries of the common era? With what positions or views is he arguing?
2. How is Boyarin using rabbinic accounts of martyrdom (specifically, the story of R. Eliezer and the story of R. Akiva) to support his greater argument regarding the relations between Judaism and Christianity? Do you find the way he is analyzing these accounts to be persuasive? If so, why? If not, why not?

For this assignment, you do not need to write an introduction and a conclusion, nor do you need any references. Simply answer the questions above (all the questions above) as best and as concisely as you can. Don’t worry if you feel like you are not covering every aspect of the argument – focus on the big picture.

Please note: this is not an easy article to read and digest. I advise you to read it slowly and to mark for yourself the argument of every paragraph, then the argument of every subsection, then the overall argument. Also make note of things you do not understand or questions that remain unresolved.

Week VIII (February 25)

The third century: Between public and private

- Watch: The Crisis of the Third Century <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTqmIFEx72E>
- Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, 120–134
- selections from Tertullian, *De Idolatria* and Mishnah *Avodah Zarah*

Week IX (March 3)

The fourth century: “In this sign, conquer”

- Excerpts from Lactantius, *On the Death of the Emperors*
- Excerpt from Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*
- Edward Watts, “Christianization”

Annotated bibliography for final paper due by Monday, March 2nd by 10 pm (Canvas)

Week X (March 10)

The fourth century: “When the Empire became Heresy”

- Excerpts from Julian, *Against the Galileans* and *Letters*
- Selections from the Theodosian Code
- Ambrose’s Letter to Theodosius

Outline for final paper due by Monday, March 9th by 10 pm (Canvas)

Tuesday, March 10th at 5 pm: guest lecture by Ellen Muehlberger – “Recognition in Late Antiquity”

Written reflection on the lecture for 3% extra credit

Final paper due Tuesday, March 17 by 2 pm (Canvas)