SC-540 THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS
SYLLABUS

Shanell T. Smith, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins

Class Meets: Tuesdays 4:30 - 7:30 p.m.
Office Hours: Tuesdays and Wednesdays 9:00-11:30am

Email is the best form of communication: ssmith@hartsem.edu

Please note: I will use your official HartSem student email addresses for course communication. Be sure to check it regularly.

I. Course Description

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are the earliest surviving accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. This course will provide a detailed examination of these texts, paying special attention to the distinctive portrait of Jesus that each gospel presents. Some topics of study will include (but are not limited to): various theories regarding the so-called “Synoptic Problem”; the relationship of the Synoptics to non-canonical texts; and a general introduction to critical methods in Gospel analysis such as literary, redaction, socio-historical, and tradition-critical.

II. Objectives

To help students:
- Gain an in-depth comprehension of the Synoptic Gospels
- Explore the historical and social background from which each Synoptic derives
- Articulate the similarities and differences among the various portraits of Jesus in the Synoptics
- Critically evaluate secondary scholarship (monographs, articles, essays, commentaries, etc.) by asking questions and challenging arguments based on the student’s own biblical analysis
- Discover that “context matters,” and in the process, learn how to read the Synoptics with theological and ethical sensitivity

III. Required Texts


**IV. Recommended Texts**

*The following books, all of which feed into different parts of the course, are recommended. Students may wish to purchase them for their personal libraries.*


**V. Course Requirements and Grades**

*Regular attendance and active participation in all class sessions are expected.* If you are unable to attend a class session, please notify the professor in advance or at the earliest opportunity. Please plan to arrive promptly to class, and stay for its duration. *It is also important that students return promptly after class breaks.* Your presence is necessary and important for maximal learning for everyone. *Missing two sessions will result in an automatic lowering of your final grade by 10%. Missing three sessions will result in an automatic lowering of your final grade by 20%. Missing four or more sessions will result in automatic failure of the course.*

Be ready to ask questions and participate in discussion in a positive and constructive way. Please also be mindful of your less talkative colleagues so that everyone gets an opportunity to engage.
A. Six Critical Analyses: 45% of Final Grade

Students will critically analyze and evaluate primary and secondary literature. These analyses should be two (2) double-spaced typed pages (375 – 500 words) in length. Please proofread. They will be used for classroom discussion and collected for assessment. Value of assessment will progressively increase (first analysis 5%; second 5%, 7%, 8%, 9%, last 11% = 45% total)

This writing task will include the following:

For Primary Literature (Mark, Matthew, Luke):

- Who is Jesus in this particular gospel?
- Isolate the distinctive features of the portrait of Jesus being considered. (This task may get more challenging after you write on the first gospel. Be especially alert to differences of emphasis among the different portraits.)
- How does the historical context affect the author’s presentation (rhetorical appeal)? (Use Strauss for background information.)
- What is the author’s overall message?
- Evaluate the source. Does the author’s presentation/storytelling (what he said and did not say, his underlying assumptions, his descriptions, his plot, etc.) coalesce well? Why or why not? (e.g. What’s missing? What doesn’t make sense? What did Jesus do that you find hard to believe?)

For Secondary Literature:

- A short paraphrased recapitulation of the author’s main argument/thesis (no more than 3-4 sentences)
- An examination of the presentation of information (rhetorical appeal)
- Consideration of any underlying assumptions
- Are you convinced? Do you agree with the work (based on the above assessments)? Why or why not? Stake out your own position in relation to it.

AVOID PLAGAIRISM. Use footnotes¹ and/or parenthetical citations (e.g. Straus, 207), to acknowledge your debts to the scholarly literature on which you draw. Keep direct quotations to a minimum, however. It’s your voice that I want to hear in these analyses. Include scriptural references when referring to specific parts of the primary text.

B. Major Presentation and Handout: 35% of Final Grade

Students will do a 15-20 minute thesis-driven presentation on a topic as outlined on the syllabus. These presentations may be done at the beginning of class as a way of opening up discussion. See handout, “Major Presentation Guidelines,” for additional instruction.


¹ Shanell T. Smith, This Is Just an Example on How to Footnote (Hartford, CT: Synoptic Gospel Press, 2015), 15.
Miracles in the Synoptics”; “The Women at the Tomb in the Synoptics”; “The Forgiveness of Sins in the Synoptics” (to name a few).

Each class presentation is to be accompanied by a handout. The handout and presentation should facilitate the discussion of the class as a whole; each is worth 50% of the grade for this assignment. The best presentations encourage discussion, and the most helpful handouts offer resources for further study. In other words, an effective presentation does not involve reading a lengthy handout to the class. Be creative with these presentations, and have fun!

A sign-up sheet will be distributed at the start of the semester.

C. Final Reflection Paper: 20% of Final Grade

Students will write a 1000-1250 word essay (4 to 5 pages) that will consider the following question:

“Diversity is a given – a fact of life. Thus, how we view it (productive, harmful, difficult to overcome, fecund, etc.) is the question. Generally speaking, and from your own interreligious context, how (can) the study of the Synoptic Gospels, with their presentation of various portraits of Jesus, inform how we do interreligious dialogue? How does it affect how you engage with others of various religious affiliations? Does difference hinder or help dialogue? What are some lessons to be learned in multiplicity?”

Due Date: Friday, May 8, 2015 by 11:59pm. Students should email their papers to Professor Smith by that time.

VI. Learning Resources and Expectations

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism will not be tolerated in student written work. You are expected to put your ideas in your own words. When the thoughts, ideas, or words of other persons are used, whether written or verbal, credit should be given by using quotations and proper citation. Proper documentation should also be included for sources used but not quoted verbatim. In addition, when you include small amounts of your own material from a previously submitted work, that work should be referenced appropriately. Although the latter is not “technically” plagiarism, it is treated in the same manner at this institution. For the policy and guidelines for avoiding plagiarism, see the Academic Policies for Graduate Programs section of the Catalogue or the Student Handbook.

Lateness Policy

All due dates are real. Please meet them. If you expect to miss a deadline, please contact the professor before the due date, in order to negotiate a new due date. This new date becomes firm. Any assignments turned in after this new agreed-upon date will be docked 5 points per 24 hour period.
Language Issues

Good communication is crucial for ministry, scholarship, and collegiality. Students are encouraged to have their writing assignments reviewed by a writing consultant as needed. These services are offered at no additional cost to graduate program students (see Student Handbook for details). Students are also expected to use inclusive language in this course as stipulated by the Hartford Seminary Catalogue.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

**Please note that all readings are subject to change. Students will be notified in advance.**

Week 1 - Tuesday, January 20

- Introduction to the Course

- Why All the Hoopla about Gospels? (Strauss, Four Portraits, pp. 23-42)

- Jesus: A Plurality of Interpretations (Interview Results)

Week 2 – Tuesday, January 27

- What Was Happening – Historically, Religiously, Socially and Culturally? (Strauss, pp. 93-122, 123-148, 149-167 Do not be alarmed! There are lots of charts and pictures!)

- Forms of the Gospels (Strauss, pp. 43-46, 55-65)

- The Gospel as Story (Strauss, pp. 67-89)

Week 3 - Tuesday, February 3: The Gospel of Mark I

**Critical Analysis of the Gospel of Mark due at the beginning of class. Submit a hardcopy.**

- What’s this Gospel’s Story? (plot, characters, setting, rhetoric, etc.)
  - Read the entire Gospel of Mark (preferably in one sitting). It’s the shortest gospel!
  - Strauss, Four Portraits, pp. 171-211.

- The Progression of Discipleship?
- The Messianic Secret
- Theology of the Gospel of Mark

Student Presentation: “The Disciples in Mark” or “The Messianic Secret”

Week 4 – Tuesday, February 10: The Gospel of Mark II

**Critical Analysis of Gench’s essay due at the beginning of class. Submit a hardcopy.**

- Thinking Historically about Jesus and the Temple

- A Hemorrhaging Woman and Jairus’s Daughter
  - Re-read Mark 5:21-43

- An Analysis of the Ending(s) of Mark

Student Presentation: “Jesus and the Jerusalem Temple in the Gospel of Mark”

Week 5 - Tuesday, February 17: The Gospel of Mark III

- Mark and Empire
  - Re-read Mark 12

Student Presentation: “The Poor Widow of Mark 12”

- The Synoptic Problem
  - Strauss, Four Portraits, pp. 46-55.
Week 6 - Tuesday, February 24: The Gospel of Matthew I

**Critical Analysis of either Saldarini or Luz due at the beginning of class. Submit a hardcopy.**

- **What’s this Gospel’s Story?** (plot, characters, setting, rhetoric, etc.)
  - Read the entire Gospel of Matthew (preferably in one sitting)

- Theology of the Gospel of Matthew

- “The Jews” in Mathew’s Gospel and An Exercise in the Rhetoric of Social Identification

*(Students will be assigned one of the two.)*

*Student Presentation: “How Jewish is Jesus in Matthew?”*

Week 7 - Tuesday, March 3: The Gospel of Matthew II

**Critical Analysis of the Gospel of Matthew due at the beginning of class. Submit a hardcopy.**

- Jesus and “the Law”
  - Re-read Matthew chapters 5-7:29

- Jesus as Teacher of Righteousness

*Student Presentation: “Jesus – the Teacher in Matthew”*

- Analyses of the Canaanite Woman
  - Re-read Matthew 15
Week 8 - Tuesday, March 10: The Gospel of Luke I

**Critical Analysis of the Gospel of Luke due at the beginning of class. Submit a hardcopy.**

- **What’s this Gospel’s Story?** (plot, characters, setting, rhetoric, etc.)
  - Read the Gospel of Luke (preferably in one sitting)

- Theology of the Gospel of Luke

- Structural Feature: The Travel Narrative (Luke 9-19)

*Student Presentation: “Material Possession in Luke”*

Week 9 - Tuesday, March 17: The Gospel of Luke II

**Critical Analysis of Hornsby’s article due at the beginning of class. Submit a hardcopy.**

- “The Good Samaritan,” and the Parables of “the Lost and the Found”
  - Re-read Luke 10:25-37; chapter 15

*Student Presentation: “The Prodigal Son: A History of Interpretation & Future Perspectives”*

- The Gospel of Luke and Women
  - Be prepared to discuss which one(s) intrigued you the most and why.

*Student Presentation: “Mary and Martha of Luke 10:38-42”*

Week 10 - Tuesday, March 24: Synoptic Analyses I

*In these class sessions (“Synoptic Analyses”), students are expected to do a comparative analysis of the texts. Students will write down the similarities and differences between the synoptic passages, and note the significance of their findings. (You may find it helpful to print out the parallel passages and use color pencils to note distinctions.*)

- Infancy Narratives and the Miracles of Jesus
Re-read all the relevant synoptic passages pertaining to the Infancy Narratives (e.g. Matthew 1:1-2:23 and Luke 1:5-2:52) and the Miracles of Jesus.


**Student Presentation: “Jesus’ Miracles in the Synoptics”**

- The Death of Jesus, Empty Tomb, and Resurrection Narratives

- Re-read all the relevant synoptic passages pertaining to the Death of Jesus, Empty Tomb, and Resurrection Narratives


**Student Presentation: “The Women at the Tomb in the Synoptics”**

**March 31 - Reading Day – No Classes**

**Week 11 - Tuesday, April 7: Synoptic Analyses II**

*Each student will be given the opportunity to present to the class their findings on the similarities, differences, and the significance thereof, between the synoptic passages. As students will not know which passage they will be asked to explicate, they are encouraged to be prepared to discuss them all.*

**Topics and Texts:**

- Forgiveness of Sins (Mark 2:1-12 and //s)
- Eating with Sinners (Matthew 9:9-13 and //s)
- Fasting (Luke 5:33-39 and //s)
- Picking Grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28 and //s)
- Jesus’ Family (Mark 3:20, 31-35 and //s)
- Washing before Eating (Mark 7:1-23 and Matthew 15:1-20)
- Asking for a Sign (Mark 8:11-13 and Matthew 16:1-4)
- Children (Luke 18:15-17 and //s)

**Student Presentation: “The Forgiveness of Sins in the Synoptics”**

**Week 12 - Tuesday, April 14: Synoptic Analyses III**

*Follow the directions as explained under Week 11.*

**Topic and Texts:**

- Wealth (Luke 18:18-30 and //s)
• Power (Mark 10:35-45 and //s)
• Authority (Matthew 21:23-27 and //s)
• Taxes (Luke 20:20-26 and //s)
• Divorce (Mark 10:2-12 and Matthew 19:1-12)
• The Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-34 and //s)
• The Son of David (Matthew 22:41-46 and //s)
• The Anointing of Jesus (Luke 7:36-50 and //s)

**Student Presentation: “The Anointing of Jesus in the Synoptics”**

**Week 13 - Tuesday, April 21: Jesus at the Movies!**

In today’s class the students will use a different part of their brains to engage the Synoptic Gospels – through film! We will watch (no, no, no….You’ll have to wait and see…) for the first part of class, and then discuss it in the second half of class. This will include exercises such as deconstructing the movie into its various parts and determining from which gospel it originates, and highlighting the ways in which Hollywood “beefs up” certain parts of the gospel for audience appeal.

**Week 14 - Tuesday, April 28:**

- **The Quest for the Historical Jesus and Whose Jesus Is Found?**
  - Strauss, *Four Portraits*, pp.347-382

- **Synoptic Gospel Take-Away Messages**

  *Each student will pick a card that has one of the Synoptic texts on it. You will then have 5 minutes to prepare a two-minute elevator-speech about a major theme of the text, what you found most intriguing and enlightening about the text, etc.*

- **Jesus: A Plurality of Interpretations – Reflections** (first class interviews flashback)

- **Course Conclusion**

  *Your final reflection papers are due on Friday, May 8, 2015 by 11:59pm.*