

Rachel Fulton Brown
Department of History
The University of Chicago

HOW TO READ THE GOSPELS

Autumn 2023



What kind of texts are the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John? Modern readers tend to approach the Gospels primarily as sources of biography for the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, but ancient and medieval readers saw in them something rather different. History, but also revelation. This course takes readers on a journey from the origins of the Gospels in oral storytelling through their basis in the ancient Temple tradition of prophecy to their patristic and medieval reading as a quaternity all pointing to the Majesty of the Lord. We will read commentaries by Origen, Bede, Rupert of Deutz, and Hildegard of Bingen to discover the way in which their reading of the Gospels was informed by their experience of liturgy and prayer, as well as the way in which the Gospels themselves informed their vision of Jesus as Christ. Course requirements will include writing model commentaries on the texts as well as the opportunity to create works of art (music, images, architectural plans). There will also be a final research paper on a particular commentator or theme.

BOOKS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT THE SEMINARY CO-OP BOOKSTORE

Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels Book One: Advent to Lent*, trans. Lawrence T. Martin and David Hurst, Cistercian Studies 110 (Athens, OH: The Liturgical Press, 1991) ISBN 978-0-87907-710-5

The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel, trans. G. Ronald Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) ISBN 978-0-19-507376-2

St. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of Divine Works*, trans. Nathaniel M. Campbell, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018) ISBN 978-0-8132-3493-9

Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1-10*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001) ISBN 978-0-8132-1029-2

Anthony Esolen, *In the Beginning Was the Word: An Annotated Reading of the Prologue of John* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2021) ISBN 978-1-62138-797-8

Werner Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) ISBN 978-0-8006-1355-6

Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) ISBN 978-1-107-40707-7

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This course is designed as a research colloquium, meaning a seminar intended to help you develop questions and gather materials for your research. The study of the Gospels crosses multiple academic disciplines, including history, theology, musicology, art history, literature, literary criticism, philosophy, philology, religious studies, rhetoric, media studies, and more. Each of these fields has its own methods and theories of inquiry, often at odds with each other in their evaluation of the stories the Gospels tell. One of the main goals of this course is to make you aware of these differences by reading comparatively across different analytical modes.

Surprisingly, given the importance of the Gospels throughout the history of Christianity, their interpretation and use in the early Middle Ages (roughly, through the early twelfth century, prior to the birth of scholasticism) is relatively understudied, and/or simply subsumed into the history of biblical commentary more generally. This is the more surprising given the centrality of devotion to Christ in his humanity that developed during the later Middle Ages and on which the Reformers including Luther based their criticisms of the way the scriptures had been read. To test our own assumptions about the way in which the Gospels “ought” to be read, we need to take seriously this earlier tradition, while at the same time becoming mindful of the way our assumptions shape the arguments that we make both about the history of Christianity and the meaning of Christ.

Given the exploratory nature of our quest, the main requirement for the quarter is careful reading and participation in our discussions. Additional practice assignments will be given as the scope of our inquiry develops, with the goal for the quarter of producing a

substantial proposal for future research. This proposal should take the form of a final paper (12-15 pages, double-spaced, with bibliography), due **December 8 by 11:59pm**, on Canvas.

READING AND DISCUSSION ASSIGNMENTS

September 28 The Triumph of Jesus in a White Nightie

Meredith Veldman, *The British Jesus, 1850-1970* (London: Routledge, 2022), pp. 9-36 (“1. The Victorian Jesus and the German Challenge”), 336-77 (“10. Jesus on the BBC”)

Examples—pick two to present and analyze in class

David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. from the 4th German Edition by George Eliot, 3 vols. (London: Chapman, 1846), Introduction, sections 15-16, vol. 1, pp. 85-95 [Hathi Trust]

Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. Charles E. Wilbour (New York: Carleton, 1864), Introduction, pp. 9-50 [Hathi Trust]

James Tissot, *The Life of Christ* [Wikimedia Commons:
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=the+life+of+Christ+by+James+tissot&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image>]

Dorothy Sayers, *The Man Born to Be King: A Play-Cycle on the Life of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (London: V. Gollancz, 1943), Introduction, pp. 9-27

Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice, *Jesus Christ Superstar: A Rock-opera* (1970)

Franco Zeffirelli, *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977)

October 5 How to read the Scriptures

Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*

Beryl Smalley, “Some Gospel Commentaries of the Early Twelfth Century,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 45 (1978): 147-80

Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catherine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) pp. 71-88 (“5. Sacred Learning”)

Rachel Fulton Brown, “How to Read the Gospels: A Tale of Two Commentators,” *Quaderni di storia religiosa medievale* 25.2, ed. Atria Larson (2022): 207-36

October 12 The Oral and Written Gospels

Kelber, *Mark’s Story of Jesus*

Margaret Barker, *King of the Jews: Temple Theology in John’s Gospel* (London: SPCK, 2014), pp. 1-19 (Introduction), 23-33 (“The Jews in John’s Gospel”), 105-44 (“The king in the New Testament”), 147-97 (Introduction to Part 2, John 1, John 2)

October 19 “In the beginning was the Word”

Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Introduction and Books 1-2, trans. Heine, pp. 3-157

Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Volume I: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 161-224, 377-422 (“4. The Latin Origen”)

“Matthew, Gospel of: II. Christianity,” *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (EBR) 18 (2020): cols. 129-34

“Mark, Gospel of: II. Christianity,” EBR 17 (2019): cols. 927-36

“Luke-Acts: II. Christianity,” EBR 17 (2019): cols. 150-57

“John, Gospel of: II. Christianity,” EBR 14 (2017): cols. 518-30

October 26 Bede, the Four Fathers, and the Temple Tradition

Bede, *Homilies on the Gospels: Book One*, Homilies I.1-8, on Advent and Christmas, trans. Martin and Hurst, pp. 1-84

Bernice Kaczynski, “Bede’s Commentaries on Luke and Mark and the Formation of a Patristic Canon,” in *Anglo-Latin and its Heritage: Essays in Honour of A.G. Rigg on his 64th Birthday*, ed. Siân Echard and Gernot R. Wieland (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), pp. 17-26

Celia Chazelle, *The Codex Amiatinus and its “Sister” Bibles: Scripture, Liturgy, and Art in the Milieu of the Venerable Bede* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 311-97 (“5. The Preliminary Gathering and the Painting of the Glorified Christ”)

Peter Darby, “Bede, Iconoclasm and the Temple of Solomon,” *Early Medieval Europe* 21.4 (2013): 390-421

November 2 The Heliand in Majesty

The Heliand, trans. Murphy

Jennifer O’Reilly, “Patristic and Insular Traditions of the Evangelists: Exegesis and Iconography,” in *Le isole britanniche e Roma in età romanobarbarica*, ed. A.M. Luiselli Fadda and É. Ó Carragáin (Rome: Herder, 1998), pp. 49-94

Dorothy Shepard, “The Latin Gospelbook, c. 600-1200,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible from 600 to 1450*, ed. Richard Marsden and E. Ann Matter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 338-62

Herbert Kessler, *The Illustrated Bibles from Tours* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 36-58 (“The Gospel Frontispieces”)

Beatrice Kitzinger, “Framing the Gospels, c. 1000: Iconicity, Textuality, and Knowledge,” in *The Visualization of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Marcia Kupfer, Adam S. Cohen, and J. H. Chajes (Turnout: Brepols, 2020), pp. 87-114

November 9 Dreaming the Word

John Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 95-134 (“Scriptural Theologian”) and 335-69 (“The Benedictine Theologian”)

Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Birth of the Author: Pictorial Prefaces in Glossed Books of the Twelfth Century* (Toronto: PIMS, 2021), pp. 181-212, 253-59 (5. “Behold the Dreamer!”)

Jay Diehl, “The Grace of Learning: Visions, Education and Rupert of Deutz’s View of Twelfth-century Intellectual Culture,” *Journal of Medieval History* 39.1 (2013): 20-47

Abigail Ann Young, *The Commentaria in Iohannis Euangelium of Rupert of Deutz: A Methodological Analysis in the Field of Twelfth-century Exegesis* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1983), pp. 71-112 (Overview and Themes) [via ProQuest]

Karl Fredrick Fabrizio, *Rupert of Deutz on Matthew: A Study in Exegetical Method* (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 1994), pp. 66-100 (Rupert’s autobiography and visions), 113-23 (Introduction to Matthew Commentary) [via ProQuest]

November 16 “And I saw...”

Hildegard of Bingen, *The Book of Divine Works*, trans. Campbell, pp. 3-25 (Introduction), 29-31 (Prologue), 130-263 (Part One, Vision Four)

Barbara Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen: Commentary on the Johannine Prologue,” *Theology Today* 60 (2003): 16-33

Bernard McGinn, “Hildegard of Bingen as Visionary and Exegete,” in *Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld*, ed. Alfred Haverkamp (Mainz: Trierer Historische Forschungen/P. von Zabern, 2000): 321-50

November 23 THANKSGIVING—NO CLASS

November 30 The Poetry of the Word

Esolen, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, pp. xvii-xxvii, 1-42, 87-122