

# What Didn't Make it into the Bible.

M/W/F 1:00pm-3:15pm

**Maria E. Doerfler, J.D. Ph.D.**

[maria.doerfler@yale.edu](mailto:maria.doerfler@yale.edu)

(919) 564-5582<sup>1</sup>



**DESCRIPTION:** Over two billion people alive today consider the New Testament to be sacred scripture. But how did the books that made it into the bible get there in the first place? Who decided what was to be part of the bible and what wasn't? How did these decisions affect the structure of nascent Christian communities, their relationship to surrounding Greco-Roman and Jewish society, and the subsequent development of Christian churches? How would the history of the world's largest organized religion look differently if a given book didn't make the final cut and another one did?

Hundreds of ancient Christian texts are not included in the New Testament. “What Didn't Make It into the Bible” focuses on these excluded writings and uses them to help reconstruct the earliest Christian communities. We will explore Gnostic gospels, hear of a five-year-old Jesus throwing temper tantrums while killing (and later resurrecting) his classmates, peruse ancient Christian romance novels, tour heaven and hell, read the garden of Eden story told from the perspective of the snake, and learn how the world will end.

The seminar assumes no prior knowledge of Judaism, Christianity, the bible, or ancient history. It is designed for students who are part of faith traditions that consider the bible to be sacred, as well as those who are not. The only prerequisite is an interest in exploring books, groups, ideas, and communal structures that eventually lost the battles of history and to keep asking the question "why." In critically examining these ancient narratives and the communities that wrote

---

<sup>1</sup> **Want to connect with me?** Drop me a line by e-mail or text and set up an appointment! I'd be truly delighted to meet with you.

them, you will learn about the content and history of the New Testament, better appreciate the diversity of formative Christianity, understand the historical context of the early church, examine the earliest social forms of Christianity, and explore the politics behind what did and did not make it into the bible.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES:** Related to the course's content are four educational goals. These objectives served as the criteria for designing the syllabus and they will help guide our class discussions and facilitate our progress throughout the semester. This course aims:

- To examine and historically contextualize a number of early Christian writings that did not make it into most modern bibles.
- To explore how these works both reflected and were shaped by their literary, cultural, political, and historical milieu.
- To investigate the early development of Christian communities with a particular emphasis on the social structures of ancient churches and how these influenced the subsequent development of Christianity.
- To introduce you to a number of methodological tools that are useful for exploring a wide range of textual, historical, political, and social phenomena.

**ASSESSMENT:** Assessment is based on:

1) **Class Participation** (20% of your final grade). To achieve a good grade you are required to have near perfect attendance, to read all assignments prior to the class period for which they were assigned, to turn in any short written work due that day, and to provide informed answers for in-class questions that I may ask. You must also regularly, actively, voluntarily, and collegially initiate and engage in interactive conversations with me and with your peers.

2) **Written Assignments** (80% of your final grade). You will write **two reading responses**, the first be 2-3 pages in length (due on June 7, at 5:00pm ET), the second due will be 3-4 pages in length (due on June 19, at 5:00pm ET). These will constitute 20% and 25% of your final grade respectively.

The remaining 35% of your grade will come from a **final project** of ca. 8-10 pages in length, developed in consultation with the instructor (due on the final day of Summer Session A).

If your reading responses represents a good-faith effort (that is, it was turned in with full page count and reasonable content) but you are dissatisfied with the resulting grade, within three weeks of when it was handed back to you, you may rewrite it and return it. If the rewrite is graded higher than the original, its grade will replace the earlier grade.

**REQUIRED READINGS:** There are two **required books** for this class:

- *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, Marvin Meyer, ed. (New York, Harper Collins, 2007).
- *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity*, Bart D. Ehrman, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[Please note: you do **not** have to purchase these books through the Yale Bookstore -- feel free to use your favorite local shop or online retailer.]

Most of this class is now on-line via the campus's course program "**Canvas.**" You must become familiar with this resource as it is the way to access many of the class readings. It also contains copies of all class handouts and PowerPoint presentations.

Note that a number of these readings come from the **New Testament**. If you already have a Revised Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, or New Jerusalem translation of the New Testament, you do not need to print the versions on Canvas; simply use your own Bible. If you have any other translations (e.g. NIV, Good News, King James) you will need to print out copies of the New Testament texts that we will read from Canvas or obtain an RSV, NRSV, or New Jerusalem translation of the Bible.

**CLASS PREPARATION:** This class is based on an agreement that by signing up for the course you will **complete all of the class readings prior to the class in which those readings are discussed**. An in-depth reading of these works is essential for success in this course. Our class will be run in a very interactive format. This will include both class wide and small group discussions of each of the reading as well as other text based exercises.

Failure to do the readings in their entirety – carefully and demonstrably – will lead to a failing participation grade. In other words, if you do not plan to do all of the readings, all of the time, this is not the class for you. The reward, however, for fully participating in the class is a solid introduction to the early history of Christianity, to the formation of the biblical canon, and to the context out of which later Christianity emerged. It will also provide you with an in-depth exploration of many influential texts that eventually did and, in many cases, did not make it into the bible.

Part of both demonstrating your preparation and allowing you to think more deeply on them will be your **contribution to jointly annotating a part of our readings [via the Perusall web app](#)** prior to every class meeting, beginning with our second seminar session on Wednesday, May 29. In it, you will choose a paragraph, sentence, word, etc., that you have found interesting, puzzling, funny, infuriating, etc., and offer a brief (ca. 1 par) reflection on it. You will also respond to one comment made by another student — perhaps on "your" passage, perhaps on another. Your mini-reading response will be **due by 12pm ET** on the day of the class for you which you are preparing the readings.

**TECH:** This course will be meeting via Zoom and can be accessed either via the Canvas Zoom tab, or directly from the Zoom app. Throughout our class, unless you have been instructed otherwise or have made other arrangements with me, I ask that you use Zoom from your computer, keep your camera on, and use only programs that are relevant to your performance in this course, including, e.g., a program in which to take notes or a PDF viewer for assignments.

**ACCESSIBILITY:** Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the **Resource Office on Disabilities (ROD)**. Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation,

recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the ROD as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The ROD is located at 35 Broadway (rear entrance), Room 222 (phone: 203-432-2324, URL: <https://rod.yale.edu/>).

# **SYLLABUS:**

## **PART I: The Earliest Christian Communities:**

**Our first few classes will focus on the emerging structure of the earliest churches. Of particular import is a methodological question that will remain central throughout the quarter: How does a historian responsibility move from ancient textual and material cultural artifacts to hypotheses about the structures and beliefs of the communities that produced them? In these opening classes, we will be particularly attentive to how surviving texts witness a relatively unstructured religious movement quickly developing internal hierarchies, formalized rituals, and radically reformulated relations to their contemporary society.**

### **1. Monday, May 27. Christianity and the Greco-Roman World**

Pliny, *Letter to Trajan* (distributed in class).

Review the Course Syllabus.

### **2. Wednesday, May 29. First-Century Christianity: Growing Pains.**

Whitney Cox, "[Dear Professor: Is this Class Going to Challenge my Faith and Make Me Uncomfortable?](#)"

Bart Ehrman, "Introduction" in *Lost Christianities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-7.

Paul, *1 Corinthians* in Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 199-211.

*The Didache* in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, 313-317.

### **3. Friday, May 31. Second- & Third-Century Christianity and the Routinization of Charisma.**

Nicola Denzey Lewis, "The Roman Empire: Religious Landscapes" and "Christianity in the Second-Century Empire" in *Introduction to "Gnosticism"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28-51.

John Gager, "The Quest for Legitimacy and Consolidation" in *Kingdom and Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 67-76.

Ignatius, *Letter to the Romans* in *After the New Testament*, 31-33.

*The Apostolic Tradition* (selections) in Gregory Dix, *The Apostolic Tradition* (Ridgefield: Morehouse Publishing, 1992), 1-3, 13-43, 61-72.

#### 4. Monday, June 3. What makes a text *real*?

Bart Ehrman, “A World of Deceptions and Forgeries,” in *Forged: Writing in the Name of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 13-42.

Galen, *On My Own Opinions* in *Galen: Selected Works*, P.N. Singer transl. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-4.

*Didascalia*, Chapters 24-26 (selections) in A. Stewart-Sykes, *The Didascalia apostolorum: An English Version with Introduction and Annotation* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 2009), 229-237, 257-258.

*Secret Gospel of Mark* in Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 446-447.

Ehrman, “The Forgery of an Ancient Discover? Morton Smith and the *Secret Gospel of Mark*” in *Lost Christianities*, 67-91.

[“The Curious Case of Jesus’s Wife”](#) (*The Atlantic*).

["The Unbelievable Tale of Jesus's Wife"](#) (*The Atlantic*).

#### **Part II: Competing Churches: The Nag Hammadi Library and So-Called “Gnostic” Christianity.**

The course’s second section focuses on how a chance archeological find in 1945 completely changed our impressions of the social, theological, and political trajectories of early Christianity. After 1945 we suddenly had access to a wide array of texts from the “losers” of history. That is, instead of reading writings only from the groups that eventually coalesced into modern branches of Christianity, we now have direct access to “heretical” texts. Modern scholars are still reeling from this discovery and how diverse it proves early Christians really were. Much of our time will be spent examining various sociological models put forward to better reflect such diversity and discovering that even these more recent paradigms often fail to do justice to the radical variance found between different early Christian communities.

#### 5. Wednesday, June 5. The Archeological Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library.

Ehrman, “The Discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library” in *Lost Christianities*, 51-54.

*Thunder* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 367-378.

*The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 361-366.

*The Revelation of Adam* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 247-356.

## 6. Friday, June 7. Jesus' Life in the Gospel of Thomas.

Denzey Lewis, "The Thomas Literature: The *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Book of Thomas the Contender*," in *Introduction to "Gnosticism"* 100-117.

Genesis 1-3 in *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 5-10.

*Gospel of Thomas* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, Marvin Meyer, ed. (New York, Harper Collins, 2007), 133-153.

Adam Sternbergh, "[Do Characters Belong to Their Fans or Their Creators?](#)" (*Vulture*).

## 7. Monday, June 10: Valentinian Communities.

Denzey Lewis, "Valentinus and the Valentinians," in *Introduction to "Gnosticism,"* 63-74.

Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora* in *After the New Testament*, 376-381.

*Gospel of Philip* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 157-186.

## 8. Wednesday, June 12. Competing Revelations: The Politics of Heavenly Visions.

*Gospel of Mary* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 737-748.

*The Testimony of Truth* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 613-628.

Rodolphe Kasser, "The Story of Codex Tchacos and the Gospel of Judas" in *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2006), 47-76.

*Gospel of Judas* in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 755-770.

## PART III: Apostolic Romances: Debates surrounding Sexual Renunciation.

Our third unit focusses on a specific genre of ancient literature—romance novels—and its relation to a specific social institution—marriage. In particular, we will explore how early Christian communities modified this prevalent Greco-Roman literary form to advocate (ironically, considering its original content!) for sexual abstinence. For many early Christians this was not simply a thought experiment but rather a way of life, a way of life that at least some felt was a prerequisite for anyone to become Christian in the first place. Embraced by many different groups of early Christians, this preference for chastity forever changed the structure of Christian communities and continues to be a key point of contention within and between many twenty-first century churches. It also had implications for early Christians' speculations about Jesus's family history – aspects of which continue to shape the popular imagination.

**9. Friday, June 14. Harlequin Romance Novels and the Acts of the Apostles.**

Xenophon of Ephesus, *The Ephesian Tale* in B.P. Reardon, *Collected Ancient Greek Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 128-169.

*Acts of the Apostles* 1-5, 26-28 in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, 145-151, 172-176.

Richard Pervo, “The Ancient Novel becomes Christian,” in *The Novel in the Ancient World*, edited by G.L. Schmeling (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 685–714.

**10. Monday, June 17. Chastity and Killer Seals: Gender, Sexuality, and Materiality.**

*Acts of Thecla* in Ehrman, *After the New Testament*, 478-484.

Tertullian, *On Baptism*, Chapter 18 in Ernest. Evans, *Tertullian's Homily on Baptism Edited with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (London: S.P.C.K., 1964), 35- 37.

Elizabeth Castelli, “The Materiality of Memory: The Art of Representing Thecla” in *Martyrdom and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 157-171.

**11. Wednesday, June 19. Pearls, Flute Girls, and Heavenly Palaces: Otherworldly Priorities and Worldly Politics in the Acts of Thomas.**

*Acts of Thomas* Books 1-2, 9-martyrdom in Harold Attridge, *The Acts of Thomas* (Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2010), 17-38, 70-123.

**PART IV: Eschatology, Apocalypticism, and Last Things.**

The final section of our course will – perhaps appropriately – deal with early Christian ideas of “last things”: their expectations of the end of time, anticipated to arrive quite shortly, and the events that would precede it. To do so will require us to engage with the literary genre of the apocalypse, one that has both inspired and confused contemporary readers and writers. Some of these narratives appear as part of the NT canon, even part of the gospels, although as we will see not all early Christians embraced them with equal enthusiasm. Others, as we will see, enjoyed great popularity while ultimately being excluded from most canons. We will focus on the question of the function visions of the endtimes and the afterlife serve in small, frequently marginalized communities, and their transformation in light of Christianity’s ascendancy to the status of a majority religion in later centuries.

**12. Friday, June 21. Anticipating the End: The Apocalyptic Imagination.**

Bart Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 490-509.

*The Apocalypse of John* in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, 369-385.

**13. Monday, June 24. Narrating the End: The Shepherd of Hermas.**

*The Gospel of Mark*, chapter 13 (“The Little Apocalypse”).

*The Shepherd of Hermas* in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, 386-406.

**14. Wednesday, June 26. Visions of the Afterlife: The Apocalypses of Peter and Paul.**

*The Apocalypse of Peter* in *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, 407-.

*The Apocalypse of Paul* .

**15. Friday, June 28. Forming a Proto-Orthodox Canon: The Politics Behind the Bible.**

Third-Century Canon Lists in *After the New Testament*, 365-370.

Fourth- and early Fifth-Century Canon Lists in *Christianity in Late Antiquity*, 419-427.

Ehrman, “The Invention of Scripture: The Formation of the Proto-orthodox New Testament,” in *Lost Christianities*, 229-246.

David Brakke, “Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria’s Thirty-Ninth *Festal Letter*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87.4 (1994): 395-419.

**FINAL PROJECT DUE on the last day of Summer Session A, June 28, at 5:00pm ET** by e-mail to [maria.doerfler@yale.edu](mailto:maria.doerfler@yale.edu). I will confirm receipt of your assignment within 1 hour of its due-date. If you do not hear from me by then, it is incumbent on you to re-send or otherwise make contact with me.