

Welcome to GESM 120g—*Christianity in the Roman Empire!*

The first week of classes will be online!

The air in the Los Angeles area is very unhealthy and I, like many other residents, are suffering allergic reactions to it. Students are also experiencing severe impacts from the wildfires, and I hope that by moving the class online for the first week it will be accessible to all students. Note only the class sessions on January 13 and 15 will be conducted through Zoom. In-person classes will resume on January 22 after the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday and remote learning provision will cease.

The course is now open on Brightspace where you will find in the Content section the syllabus, information about office hours as well as the readings outside the textbook and links to lectures on YouTube. Some of you will have not been on campus and therefore have not been able to purchase the textbooks. The reading for Wednesday's class will be available as an electronic reserve on Ares. I will go over all aspects of this course in our first class session on Monday. You will find *Christianity in the Roman Empire* a challenging course, but I am here to help you get the most out of the course.

Below is the critical information about the course that you need to know at this point.

IMPORTANT COURSE INFORMATION

You **must be able to take** the midterm exams during our class sessions on the following days (**February 5, February 26, March 26 and April 16**). If you cannot take an examination on any of these dates, don't take the course!

No electronic devices (laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.) can be used in the classroom except at specific and limited times allowed by the instructor.

Please, use only the editions of textbooks specified. **Do not use Kindle editions or ebook** formats. You will not be able to use them in the classroom and they are not exact equivalents of the print edition, especially in regard to page numbering.

GESM 120g—SECTION 35369

Spring 2025

Christianity in the Roman Empire

Instructor: Prof. Sheila Briggs

Place and Time: DMC 255, MW 2.00 - 3.20

Office Hours: M 12.45-1.45 (drop-in); W 12.45-1.45 (by appointment only). Students can meet with the instructor on Zoom during and outside of the stated office hours.

Contact Info: Email: sbriggs@usc.edu ; phone number (office): 213-740-0267

Course Description and Learning Objectives

In this course we study the development of Christianity in the ancient Mediterranean during the early centuries of the Common Era. You will read original texts, written not only by ancient Christians but also by adherents of other religious traditions in the Roman Empire. The goal of this course is to place early Christianity in its original historical context, i.e., as a Greco-Roman religion. We will explore the great diversity among and between early Christian groups and communities and the conflicts which this engendered. By the end of the course a comprehensive picture will have emerged of Christianity's place among and interactions with other Greco-Roman religions and of how Christianity and Greco-Roman religions in general were related to the society and culture of the Roman Empire.

In this course you will:

- Define the basic concepts of religion in the Roman Empire
- Identify how these basic concepts were translated into the practices, structures and institutions of religion in the Roman Empire
- Interpret what ancient texts about Christians and Christianity meant in their original context
- Compare the different forms of Christianity, represented in the ancient texts
- Distinguish later interpretations of these texts (including our own) from those of the original context.

- Analyze how modern scholars have interpreted texts and other evidence about ancient Christianity
- Critique modern scholarship on ancient Christianity and its texts

Assessment and Assignments

Cumulative mid-term examination (40% of the grade in total). These are four short exams that take place in-class on the following dates **February 5, February 26, March 26 and April 16**. This semester they will take place during our usual class session but online.

One **final examination** from 2-4 pm on **Monday, May 12**. It will carry 20% of the course grade.

One **research paper** of 8 pages that will carry 30% of the grade. This entails students doing their own research. The paper is due on **April 30**, our last class session. Further details for the preparation and submission of the paper will be given later in the semester.

All examinations (midterm and final) are open-book, which means that you can use textbooks, notes and other material, distributed in the course, in the exam. **But you cannot use material external to this course.**

Students should have completed the required reading, out-of-class exercises and listened to the lecture(s) by the session for which they are assigned.

Course attendance and participation make up 10% of the grade. Course participation will also be assessed by student's engagement in class discussions. Students are allowed **six** excused absences for any reason but these six also **include illness, personal emergency, or USC sporting or other events**. After that students will lose a course point (1% of the course grade) for each absence from class.

Detailed instructions will be given for each assignment.

Grading Scale

Grades in the course will be determined using the following scale

A	94-100
A-	90-93
B+	87-89
B	84-86
B-	80-83
C+	77-79
C	74-76
C-	70-73
D+	67-69

D 64-66
D- 60-63
F 59 and below

Required Reading

Please, use only the editions of textbooks specified. Do not use Kindle editions or ebook formats that are not exact equivalents of the print edition, especially in regard to page numbering.

J. B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007)
Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).
Didache: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, trans. and ed. Clayton N. Jefford (Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 2013).
Acts of Andrew, trans. and ed. Dennis R. MacDonald (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 2005).

Other readings from Pagan, Jewish and Christian sources and about their background will be made available through Brightspace.

Course Schedule

Readings outside of the textbooks (listed with their date to be discussed in class) can be found in the Content Section of Brightspace
Lectures (listed by the date for discussion in class and the link to them on YouTube) can be found in the Content Section of Brightspace

January 13: Introduction to the Course.

Religion in the Roman Empire

January 15: Identifying "religion" in the Greco-Roman world. Reading: Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, pp. 1-53. Lecture on YouTube: *How do we know what we know about the ancient past?*

January 20: Martin Luther King Day holiday

January 22: The diversity of religious traditions in the Roman Empire. Reading: Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, pp. 54-88. Lectures on YouTube: *A Quick History of the Ancient World: Part 1, The Hellenistic World* and *A Quick History of the Ancient World: Part 2, The Roman World*.

January 27: The gods and their communities. Reading: Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, pp. 89-131. Lectures on YouTube: *Were the Traditional Religions of the Roman Empire "Polytheistic"?* and *The Hierarchy of the Divine*.

January 29: Religion and empire; religious options. Reading: Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, pp. 132-181.

February 3: Roman religious policy; religious change in the empire. Reading: Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, pp. 182-210.

February 5: Midterm 1

Roman and Greek Attitudes to Christians in the First Two Centuries

February 10: Pliny: A Roman gentleman. Reading: Wilken, pp. 1-30; ancient source on Brightspace. Lecture on YouTube: *Ancient City*.

February 12: Christianity as a burial society. Reading: Wilken, pp. 31-47. The piety of the persecutors. Reading: Wilken, pp. 48-67; ancient sources, Christianity as “bad religion,” on Brightspace. Lecture on YouTube: *Ancient Magic and Early Christians*.

February 17: President’s Day Holiday

February 19: Galen: The curiosity of a philosopher Reading: Wilken, pp. 68-93; ancient sources Christianity as “bad philosophy” (Lucian of Samosata) on Brightspace. Lecture on YouTube: *The Ancient Mysteries and Early Christianity: Part 1*.

February 24: Celsus: A conservative intellectual. Reading: Wilken, pp. 94-125; ancient source on Brightspace. Lecture on YouTube: *The Ancient Mysteries and Early Christianity: Part 2*.

February 26: Midterm 2

Christianity and Judaism

March 3: Christians in the Jewish tradition. Reading: *Didache*, pp. 1-18. Lecture on YouTube: *How the Ways Parted: The Changing Boundaries of Jewish and Christian Identities in Antiquity, Part 1: Multiple Identities*.

March 5: Christians in the Jewish tradition. Reading: *Didache*, pp. 19-47. Lecture on YouTube: *How the Ways Parted: Changing Boundaries of Jewish and Christian Identities in Antiquity, Part 2: Networks*.

March 10-12: When and how did Jews and Christians part ways? Reading: Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (extract available on Brightspace). Lecture on YouTube (March 10): *How the Ways Parted: Changing Boundaries of Jewish and Christian Identities in Antiquity, Part 3: Lost Communities*.

Spring Break: March 17-19

March 24: The development of scripture in early Christianity. Reading: Martin, *Development of the Canon* (available on Brightspace). Lecture on YouTube: *Scripture in Early Christianity*.

March 26: Mid-term 3.

The Apocryphal Acts and Popular Christianity

March 31: Reading: *Acts of Andrew*, pp. 1-42. Lecture on YouTube: *Narratives of the Apostles*.

April 2: Reading: *Acts of Andrew*, pp. 43-115. Lecture on YouTube: *The Acts of Andrew: Reconstructing a Text from Fragments*.

Martyrdom in Early Christianity

April 7 Reading: “Blood of the Martyrs,” a chapter from: Gillian Clark, *Christianity and Roman Society* (available on Brightspace).

April 9 Jewish and Christian Martyrdom. Readings: 2 Maccabees 7, *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (available on Brightspace).

April 14: Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas. Reading: *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (available on Brightspace). Lecture on YouTube: *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*.

April 16: Mid-term 4.

The Transition to a Christian Empire

April 21: Porphyry: The Most Learned Critic of All. Reading: Wilken, pp. 126-163. Lecture on YouTube: *The Christianization of the Roman Empire: In Search of a Common Religion, Part 1.*

April 23: Julian the Apostate: Jewish Law and Christian Faith: Reading: Wilken, pp.164-196. Lecture on YouTube: *The Christianization of the Roman Empire: In Search of a Common Religion, Part 2.*

April 28: Winners and losers in the Christian Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Heretics. Reading: Wilken, pp. 197-205; the law codes of Theodosius and Justinian. (available on Brightspace). Lecture on YouTube: *The Christianization of the Roman Empire: In Search of a Common Religion—Constantine.*

April 30: The Christian suppression of pagan religions. (Reading available on Brightspace). Lecture on YouTube: *The Christianization of the Roman Empire: In Search of a Common Religion: Violence and Assimilation.*

COURSE POLICIES AND RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS

No electronic devices (laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.) can be used in the classroom except at specific and limited times allowed by the instructor. They are a distraction not only for the user but for those around them.

You can contact the instructor through email. If your email needs a response, you will receive one in 48 hours (except at weekends).

You will find this course more manageable if from the outset of your college career you develop good academic habits.

Don't cut class. You are expected to attend every session. If you miss class, then you are left to your own resources to make up the lost work.

Submit written assignments punctually. Late assignments may lose points or not be graded at all! If you are having difficulties completing an assignment, contact the instructor as soon as possible, before or by the time the assignment is due. It is always easier to accommodate student requests for time extensions on assignments, when these are presented *before* an assignment is due. The instructor must submit the final course grade soon after the final examination. The final course grade is precisely that. The instructor cannot alter it, and even students with compelling reasons for not completing the work on time have to undergo a long petition process, which is often unsuccessful.

This course requires substantial writing, but is not intended to offer instruction in writing. Many of you will find it hard to reach the standards of college-level writing. The **Writing Center** is there to help you. You can have up two 30-minute appointments per week depending upon availability. Writing Center consultants will help you develop ideas and arguments and revise rough drafts for the research paper you produce in the course. There are also workshops covering every aspect of writing where you can improve your skills in specific areas. The Writing Center can be found on the second floor of Taper Hall (Room 216) and appointments and sign-ups for

workshops can be made over the 'phone (213-740-3691). You can also try just walking in, but then you are not guaranteed an appointment, and the center at times will be very busy

All students are expected to know and follow USC's rules on **academic integrity**. Students must acknowledge all sources (books, journals, videos, web-based and electronic materials, etc.) used in an assignment, whether these are directly quoted, paraphrased or their main ideas summarized. Students should retain notes and any other material that can substantiate that they produced their work consistent with the rules on academic integrity. Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards"

<https://policy.usc.edu/student/scampus/part-b>.

Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a **disability** is required to register with the Office of Student Accessibility Services (OSAS) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from OSAS. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. OSAS is located in GFS 120 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for OSAS is (213) 740-0776 (email: osasfrontdesk@usc.edu).

If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, USC Emergency Information <http://emergency.usc.edu> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Brightspace, teleconferencing, and other technology.