

## HIST 320/JWST 331

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History of Christianity:  
Jesus to Constantine

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## Introduction to the Course

- Housekeeping: Syllabus, requirements, readings etc.
- Introducing Early Christianity

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## Housekeeping (i)

- Instructors
  - Professor: Hayim Lapin  
[hlapin@umd.edu](mailto:hlapin@umd.edu), 54296
  - TA: Elizabeth Conner  
[elizabethm32@yahoo.com](mailto:elizabethm32@yahoo.com)
- Syllabus: print and web
  - <http://www.history.umd.edu/Faculty/HLapin/Syllabi/HIST320.html>
  - **Correction:** units 2 and 3 have been switched

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## Housekeeping (ii)

- Readings
  - Books
  - Electronic reserves
  - Other electronic media
- Other Requirements
  - Exams (midterm, final)
  - Written assignments (aka papers)

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## Basic Concepts

- Geography: the Mediterranean world
- Chronology: Jesus to Constantine
  - **33 CE (AD) – 337 CE (AD)**
  - CE: Common Era
  - AD: *Anno Domini* (“In the year of our Lord”)
  - In practice we will have to explore the religious and social context before 33 CE and the development of Christianity well into the fourth century.

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## Introducing Early Christianity

- The Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians
- What if this letter were all we had?

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## Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess.)

- Apostle Paul d. after 60 CE
- Circulated among the cities of the eastern Roman empire, preaching (source: *Acts of the Apostles*)
- Maintained contact, followed up, with letters
- 1 Thess likely the earliest surviving Christian document

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## What if this letter were all we had?

A movement both **familiar and strange**

- ... to Jews
- ... Graeco-Roman cities
- ... to later Christianity

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## Familiar and strange to Jews

- 1 Thess. reflects Jewish beliefs
  - Believe in a Christ (= messiah, anointed one), a Jewish concept
  - Christ has been **resurrected** (resurrection, a Jewish expectation for **final judgment**)
  - Judaea is base and model
  - "Children of the light" as those to be saved known from other Jewish groups
- Yet Paul claims that the Judaeans (trans.: "the Jews") are opposed
- Jews did not generally expect the **messiah to come and die and be resurrected**

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## Familiar and strange to Graeco-Roman cities

- Seemingly not "Jews" but also not "gentiles"
- Seem like other voluntary associations, but with a sense of embattlement
- Language of a "kingdom" that may be politically suspect
- Expectation of a speedy establishment of this kingdom

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## Familiar and strange to later Christianity

- Provides the language and ideas for Christianity. Becomes **Scripture**
- Yet:
  - Christ's **death** is central, Jesus's **life** not
  - The expectation of Christ's coming **soon** (4:13ff)
    - The crisis: "Those who have fallen asleep"
    - The reassurance: "We who are alive " will be taken to heaven, but those who have died will rise first.

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## What if this letter were all we had?

- Whatever we know about Christianity, **we** live in a world in which Christianity is familiar
- Our first task is two-fold.
  - Understand that earliest Christianity was strange and threatening (else, why would Romans penalize its practice?)
  - But also understand that it does not develop in a vacuum: it is part of both the ancient Jewish and the ancient Roman world

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