

NT 3P1380/5P1340
The Many Faces of Jesus Christ:
The Synoptic Gospels

McMaster Divinity College
Jan 11–April 16, 2027
In-Person/Live-Stream
Monday 4:00–5:50pm

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Office Hours:
Tuesday 10:00-11:50pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The New Testament opens with three accounts of the story of Jesus that appear remarkably similar yet contain significant textual and theological divergences. Known as the “Synoptic Gospels” (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), these texts share a common narrative outline and substantial source material. If the purpose of the gospel were solely to provide a historical record of the life of Jesus, why does the canon preserve three similar versions? How do these accounts differ, and what unique theological portraits does each evangelist present?

Traditional scholarship often approaches the Synoptic Gospels through a purely historical critical lens. This perspective frequently reduces the narratives to matters of contradiction, source reconstruction, or apologetic defense against perceived errors. While these issues are vital, they can sometimes overshadow the theological richness of the texts themselves.

This course offers a comprehensive examination of the historical, literary, and theological dimension of the Synoptic Gospels. Through comparative and close readings of the texts, our goal is to (re)discover Christ within each unique narrative. By integrating three critical perspectives, students will develop a nuanced understanding of how these gospels function as canonical witnesses:

1. The World Behind the Text: Investigating historical contexts and source relationship without reducing the text to mere historical data.
2. The Shape of the Text: Analyzing the literary structure, storytelling techniques, and synoptic parallels that define each gospel’s unique voice.
3. The Word “In Front of” the Text: Exploring hermeneutical approaches that apply these ancient narratives to contemporary faith and practice.

Our goal is to appreciate the distinct portrayal of the person and work of Christ in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Ultimately, this course seeks to demonstrate how the Synoptic Gospels continue to speak to the Church today, shaping both our theological understanding and our lived Christian faith.

SPECIALIZATIONS

Biblical Studies (BS)

Students taking this as a Biblical Studies course will be encouraged to explore the historical, cultural setting and theological emphasis of the Synoptic Gospels, as well as scholarly debates concerning the interpretation of the contents.

Church & Culture (CC)

Students taking this as a Church and Culture course will be encouraged to explore the various portrayals of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels within its historical and culture setting and compare to the many representations of Christ in the contemporary world.

Pastoral Studies (PS)

Students taking this as a Pastoral Studies course will be encouraged to explore how the ideas and exhortations in the Synoptic Gospels are relevant to the Christian faith and practices in the contemporary world.

Advance Degree Students (MA, DPT, PhD)

Advance degree students who wish to apply for this course as an Advanced Elective for their degree program must consult with their primary supervisor for approval. They should then contact the course instructor to develop an Advanced Elective approach to the course that fulfills the specific elements required by the program. Students are responsible for creating a syllabus for the course and submit to the student records office (divreg@mcmaster.ca) **BEFORE** the start of the course.

Language Option

Students taking this course with the biblical language option will be encouraged to practice the responsible use of their existing Greek language skills and will undertake translation and exegetical assignments accordingly.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Knowing:

- To become familiar with the historical context and the text of the Synoptic Gospels for use in teaching and preaching ministry
- To appreciate the literary and theological characteristics of the Synoptic Gospels
- To discern major themes and issues in the Synoptic Gospels and to consider their significance for the contemporary church

Being:

- To gain a positive appreciation of theological unity and diversity in the Bible
- To become sensitive to the historical and cultural environment of the early church
- To allow the Synoptic Gospels to motivate, form, and transform our faith, worship, and Christian way of life

Doing:

- To develop skills in interpreting the Synoptic Gospels in terms of their theological, historical, and social contexts
- To explain key topics related to the Synoptic Gospels
- To articulate a detailed outline of at least one of the Synoptic Gospels

TEXTBOOK AND MATERIALS

Students are required to possess the following:

Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.

Watson, Francis. *The Fourfold Gospel: A Theological Reading of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. (For book report, see below)

- The English Bible (modern versions such as NASB, NRSV or NIV)
- The Greek New Testament (for those with Greek competence).
- Synopsis of the four gospels (E.g. www.StepBible.org) or a hard copy (MDC Library)

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, students may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to complete the following assignments. All written assignments should be uploaded in PDF format to the designated Avenue to Learn (A2L) course folder. No unfinished assignments are permitted. See below for late submission policy.

The course material is divided into three modules, each with specific tasks designed to develop different analytical skills. Students are expected to complete these tasks independently. All deadlines occur at the end of each week according to the course schedule (see below).

1. Module 1: Before the Gospels (15%)

Duration: Week 1–4

Components: Assigned Readings, Class Participations, Summative Quiz

Learning Objectives: This module addresses the historical-critical issues surrounding the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. These topics provide essential groundwork for developing reading strategies in the next module.

Tasks:

Students are required to read assigned sections of the textbook (Blomberg, 2022) and materials posted by the instructor on A2L according to the schedule below. Students should come to class having read the assigned readings in its entirety and should prepare to contribute to class discussions. There will be a short quiz on the content covered in this module in class on **Week 4** (Feb 1). Students must also read the Synoptic Gospels in full no later than the beginning of **Week 6** (Feb 21).

The overall grade for this requirement will be determined by (1) completion of assigned readings **before each class**; (2) quality of participation in class discussion; and (3) short quiz (Feb 1) on module 1 content.

2. Module 2 – Within the Gospels (65% total)

Duration: Weeks 5–11

Components: Weekly Exegetical Reports and Lesson Plan Reports

A. Exegetical Reports (45%)

Starting Week 6 (Feb 22), students will spend two weeks studying each gospel using two distinctive reading strategies. There will be three reports in total for 45% of the final grade (15% each).

Vertical Reading Exercise

Students are to select one episode in the gospel under study and analyze the text from a “vertical” reading perspective. You should pay attention to the relations with the surrounding episodes (repeated words, ideas, scenes, characters, etc.) and address how the story progresses within its literary context. The goal of this exercise is to help you appreciate the evangelist’s storytelling techniques and develop a reading strategy that pay close attention to the details in individual episode without losing sight of the bigger picture. This report should not be longer than 2 pages (point form or paragraph). It should outline the core message of the episode and connective elements binding it to the overall narrative plot.

Horizontal Reading Exercise

Students are to select a pericope with parallel accounts (either in double or triple tradition) and analyze the similarities and differences between them. This can be the same text you picked for the vertical reading exercise if parallel accounts exist. Students should identify narrative and textual elements unique to each account (e.g. distinct wordings, unique details, etc.). Explain how these differences reveal theological nuances unapparent in other gospels. The report should not be longer than 2 pages (point form or paragraph). The whole report for each gospel should not be longer than 4 pages.

You should consult at least three resources (commentaries, journal articles, technical monograph, etc.) per report. Footnote all insights from external sources and include bibliography at the end of each report. While the grading of these lists will not require strict adherence to MDC style, a 5% bonus (half a grade) will be added to any assignment that perfectly adheres to MDC style. You need to submit the report before the start of the next gospel (Monday at 4, see schedule below).

B. Lesson Plans (20%)

On **Weeks 7, 9, and 11** we will spend half of our class to focus on specific historical or theological topics related to that week’s gospel. Students must prepare a lesson plan for one of the three available topics (10% each, 20% total). This assignment is the **ONLY** course task where use of generative AI chatbot is permitted.

Lesson Plan Topics:

Mark: Is the Messianic Secret motif a legitimate theme in Mark? What is its function? Why would the evangelist portray Jesus as someone who wants to keep his divine identity secret?

Matthew: Can we do what Matthew did with the Old Testament in the fulfillment formulae? How would you characterize this kind of exegetical practice? Can we use this kind of hermeneutics today? Why or why not?

Luke: In what way are the infancy narratives in Luke different from those in Matthew? Is this a matter of history of theology? How much of these differences could be explained as different renditions of historical happenings verses the evangelist’s creative (and theological) license?

Lesson Plan Requirements (2-3 pages):

1. Short introduction to the topic (background information, relevant texts, key questions)
2. List of major scholarly opinions
3. Your formulated opinion with supporting reasoning
4. At least three discussion questions
5. Recommended further reading materials (minimum five sources)

Post-Plan AI Reflections (1–2 pages)

In addition to the lesson plan, document your experience using generative AI for research. Include the following:

1. Summary of conversation with AI chatbot
2. Key insights gained from the conversation
3. Strategies used to ensure information reliability
4. Methods for identifying incorrect information
5. Remedial actions taken when encountering inaccurate information

3. Module 3 – In Front of the Gospels (20%)

Duration: Week 12–13

Component: Book Report and Class Discussion

Students are required to read Francis Watson’s *The Fourfold Gospel: A Theological Reading of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016) and submit a written response answering the following reflection questions. Although questions can be answered independently with separate headings, thoughts must be well-organized and clearly presented in full paragraphs (formal responses required). The entire reading response should be at 3-4 pages long (1000 words max) and must follow the “MDC Style Guidelines for Essays and Theses.” We will discuss Watson’s proposal in class on **week 13**. The report is due before class (April 12).

Reflection Questions:

1. Which statements in the book were the most significant to you personally? Select five quotations from the book that made you pause and think. Briefly explain your reasons for each choice.
2. How has this book deepened your understanding of the function and purpose of the Synoptic Gospels as a part of the Christian canon? Provide specific examples.

3. Do you agree with Watson’s proposal? Provide two examples of agreement and two examples of disagreement, with reasoning for each.

SCHEDULE

Week	Class Date	Class Topics	A2L Reading Materials	Assignment Due
1	Jan 11	Course Introduction/Library Resources What is a Gospel?	“Gospel Genre”	

Module 1: Behind the Synoptic Gospels

2	Jan 18	The origins and purposes of the Synoptic Gospels	“Form Criticism” “Written and Oral Traditions”	Reading Completion
3	Jan 25	The relationships between the Synoptic Gospels	“Source Criticism” “The Synoptic Problem”	Reading Completion
4	Feb 1	The Roles of the Evangelists: Editor, Theologian, and Story Tellers	“Redaction Criticism” “Narrative Criticism”	Reading Completion Summative Quiz

Module 2: Within the Synoptic Gospels

5	Feb 8	Within the Gospels: Horizontal and Vertical Readings	“Gospel Hermeneutics”	
	Feb 15	READING WEEK		
6	Feb 22	Reading Mark Introduction and Vertical Reading	“Gospel of Mark”	Reading Completion
7	Mar 1	Reading Mark Horizontal Reading and Distinctive Themes	Thematic Presentation: Mark	Lesson Plan (Mark)*
8	Mar 8	Reading Matthew Introduction and Vertical Reading	“Gospel of Matthew”	Exegetical Report (Mark)
9	Mar 15	Reading Matthew Horizontal Reading and Distinctive Themes		Lesson Plan (Matthew)*
10	Mar 22	Reading Luke Introduction and Vertical Reading	“Gospel of Luke”	Exegetical Report (Matthew)
11	Mar 29	Reading Luke Horizontal Reading and Distinctive Themes		Lesson Plan (Luke)*

Module 3: In Front of the Synoptic Gospels				
12	April 5	The Theology of the Synoptic Gospels: Unifying Themes of the Gospel Story	“Synoptic Theologies”	Exegetical Report (Luke)
13	April 12	Conclusion: Reading (and Living) the Gospels Canonically and Theologically	“Gospels and the Canon”	Book Report

* ONE OUT OF THREE (SEE COURSE REQUIREMENT ABOVE)

REFERENCES

Synoptic Gospels

- Baker, James W. *Writing and Rewriting the Gospels: John and the Synoptics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2025.
- Black, David Alan, and David R. Beck, eds. *Rethinking the Synoptic Problem*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Bauckham, Richard. *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Jesus and The Gospels: An Introduction and Survey*. 3rd Ed. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2022.
- Burridge, Richard A. *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020.
- Dungan, David Laird. *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999.
- Gathercole, Simon J. *The Gospel and the Gospels: Christian Proclamation and Early Jesus Books*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.
- Goodacre, Mark, and Nicholas Perrin, eds. *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique*. Downers Grove, IL : IVP, 2004.
- Hays, Richard B. *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014.
- Hengel, Martin. *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*. London: SCM, 2000.
- Klink III, Edward W., ed. *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*. New York: T&T Clark, 2010.
- Linnemann, Eta. *Is there a Synoptic Problem? Rethinking the Literary Dependence of the First Three Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.
- Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012.

- Perkins, Pheme. *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.
- Porter, Stanley E., and Bryan R. Dyer, eds. *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016.
- Sanders, E. P. and Margerat Davis. *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*. London: SCM Press, 1989.
- Stein, R. H. *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Bakers, 1987.
- Strauss, Mark L. *Four Portraits, One Jesus: A Survey of Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd Ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020.
- Talbert, C. H. *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977.
- Watson, Francis. *The Fourfold Gospel: A Theological Reading of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016.
- . *What is a Gospel?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022.
- Wright, N.T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996.
- . *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003.

STYLE

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the **McMaster Divinity College Press Style Guide** <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>. Failure to observe appropriate form will result in grade reductions.

LATE SUBMISSION POLICY

All assignments must be submitted on or before the due date, unless other arrangements are made in advance. A late penalty of 2% per day will be applied to all assignments submitted after the deadline, unless an extension has been obtained from the instructor prior to the deadline. Assignments cannot be submitted after **April 16, 2027** without written permission from the Office of the Registrar (mdcreg@mcmaster.ca).

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresenting the authorship or ownership of written work through deception or other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include copying or using unauthorized aids during tests or examinations; plagiarism, that is, presenting another person's (or generative AI's) words, ideas, data, or creative work as one's own without appropriate acknowledgement and citation; or submitting work for credit in more than one course without instructor permission.

A special note about Generative AI: Students are expected to do their own thinking and write their own papers and assignments. Generative AI is not to be used to do this work. The use of AI to produce content that is then submitted as though it were the student's own work constitutes plagiarism and is a violation of the Academic Honesty Policy. While AI tools may be used to correct errors in English grammar, usage, and mechanics, Generative AI must not be used to translate assignments from a student's native language into English. All degree programs at MDC are taught in the English

language. Students are expected to be sufficiently proficient in English to engage fully in academic discourse in these programs.

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), McMaster Divinity College (MDC) is committed to supporting a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. Students who require academic accommodations to participate fully in this course must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS) (<https://sas.mcmaster.ca/>) of McMaster University. SAS will work directly with the MDC Registrar to ensure reasonably appropriate accommodations are in place. Students with accommodations must use the SAS portal to activate the accommodations relevant to each course at the start of each term in which they are enrolled. Please note that accommodations must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation. Accommodations are not retroactive and will not be applied to coursework or activities that have already concluded.

Contact Information:

- **Student Accessibility Services General Inquiries:** sas@mcmaster.ca
- **Roksana Sobota (SAS Representative for MDC):** sobotar@mcmaster.ca
- **MDC Registrar:** mdcreg@mcmaster.ca

GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that student will use inclusive language in all MDC assignments. When referencing biblical texts, students should preserve the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God while using gender-inclusive language when referring to human beings. Biblical quotations should be taken from a gender-inclusive translation such as: NRSVue (2022), NIV (2011), CEB (2011), NLT (1996), or CEV (1995)

ONLINE SYNCHRONOUS COURSE POLICY

Technology Requirements

- A reliable internet connection (tested before class time),
- A device with audio and video capability
- The correct video conferencing platform installed (e.g., Zoom, Teams).

Webcam & Environment

- Students must keep their microphones muted except when speaking to minimize background noise.
- Students must keep their webcams on throughout the class session.
- Students must dress appropriately.
- Students must ensure their surroundings are free from unnecessary distractions. Professional virtual backgrounds are permitted.

DISCLAIMER

This syllabus is the property of the instructor and is prepared with currently available information. The instructor reserves the right to make changes and revisions up to and including the first day of class.