

Christianity Seminar

A Report on the 2015 Fall Meeting

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This past November, the Christianity Seminar met in Atlanta in conjunction with the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting. Our goal was to deepen our understanding of the impact the two Roman-Jewish wars, in the late first and early second centuries, might have had on the texts of the New Testament and the landscape of what we call "early Christianity."

While there are no definitive answers about the precise causes of these wars to be found in our (relatively few) sources, both the first in 66–73 CE and the second in 132–135 CE (also called the Bar Kokhba Revolt) developed out of the pressured conditions of Roman colonization, and out of the desire on the part of some Judeans for more political and cultural autonomy. Certainly class tensions within Judea and Roman interventions into major symbols and centers of Jewish life (including the temple leadership) also contributed to the years of violent eruptions that, in the first war, culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, which would never be rebuilt.

As the Christianity Seminar has emphasized, the texts, figures, and phenomena typically associated with "early Christianity" were fully part of—in fact indistinguishable from—Judean culture and traditions. So the Roman-Jewish wars were of no small or incidental importance for New Testament literature and the people who wrote it. This is especially true of the first Roman-Jewish war. Not only did it occur before anyone had even uttered the term "Christian" (a term likely coined around 115–120 CE), but references to and imaginations of this event and its possible meanings are peppered throughout the New Testament. While the second war occurred after some people began understanding themselves as Christians, most if not all of these people considered themselves to have some relationship to Judean culture, texts, or history, if not to belong fully to the larger historical entity of Israel.

To make things a bit more tricky, since so much of the Jewish population was spread across the Mediterranean, some for many generations, not all people who understood themselves as "Judean" (belonging in some way to Israel) had the same relationship to the temple and Jerusalem, or even to the territory of Judea. Jerusalem and its temple might have been significant but distant symbols to some, marginal but idealized in their imagination. Judeans living outside of Judea might have travelled to Jerusalem for an annual pilgrimage, or they might have only heard stories

about Jerusalem and its temple, either about its grandeur or about its corruption by Rome. Those close by would have been more affected by the violence of the wars, but that may have given them a more nuanced or realistic picture of the complexity of relationships between the Romans and Judea as territory. So even though the people we call "early Christians" were thoroughly embedded in Judean culture and traditions, that does not necessarily mean the effects of the wars on them were obvious or straightforward.

The Christianity Seminar grappled both with very intricate historical questions about the wars and their ripple effects among people with a wide variety of relationships to Judea, and with broader questions about how people respond to colonial or imperial violence. In the case of the latter, Westar Fellows Lane McGaughey and Arthur Dewey proposed ways to understand "apocalyptic" texts and conceptualities in the first century. Is the vengeful violence of apocalyptic texts, as ideologically troubling as it is, a kind of consolation for people who have just experienced brutality? This is the suggestion of Lane McGaughey in his paper, "God, Retaliation, and the Apocalyptic Scenario." He also placed the rise of apocalyptic literature, during the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, within a larger history of creation/destruction narratives in the ancient Middle East. On the other hand, as Arthur Dewey claims in his paper, "Switchback Codes: Paul, Apocalyptic, and the Art of Resistance," perhaps apocalyptic language might be more of a statement of political resistance, an imagination of a new world order, that interrupts the relentlessness of Roman dominance. Through Dewey's reading of Paul's apocalyptic passages, the Seminar considered to what extent such bombastic language about a new world order should be taken seriously as a political program. Is such language really a subversive intervention? Is it the hailing of a new age or new way of being? Or is it does it act more as a murmur of discontent, flying under the radar rather than in the face of the powers-that-be? Whatever the case, these papers together provoked conversation about why so many images and experiences of Roman violence get incorporated into New Testament literature not (just) as the unsparing work of the Romans, but as the righteous works of God.

John Marshall (University of Toronto) and Heidi Wendt (Wright State University in Ohio) explored the possible impacts of the Jewish wars on and in concrete dimensions of social life around the ancient Mediterranean. Marshall's "Judean Diaspora, Judean War: Class and Networks" borrows from Martin Goodman's thesis, in his book *The Ruling Class of Judaea*, that the first Jewish war was a result of tensions between the lower classes and an exploitative ruling class that could not control resistant portions of the population. Marshall pushes back against the idea proposed by some scholars that those living outside of Judea were un-

touched by the wars. He points to Revelation and 6 Ezra (a work outside the biblical canon) as texts, emerging from locales other than the territory of Judea, that critique the social networks and alliances some Jews formed with Rome and wealthy Roman benefactors.

Heidi Wendt's "From the Herodians to Hadrian: The Shifting Status of Judean Religion in Post-Flavian Rome" offered a number of startling and productive historical proposals. For one, she suggests that despite the clear damage to Judean traditions, symbols, and social structures, the wars also increased the profile of Judean traditions and won new audiences for Judean scriptures/traditions and the freelance teachers and experts who interpreted them. There was of course an increasing diffusion and decentralization of Judean culture and tradition after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, and the field of self-proclaimed experts on Judean traditions suddenly became quite crowded. Not only crowded, but rife with disagreement about what constituted authenticity and authority relative to these traditions. And yet there was still a

certain suspicion around Judean-ness, perhaps even shame, especially following the wars. As Wendt points out, this is why we see increasingly heated rhetoric around authenticity and authority relative to Judean traditions, coupled with a fear of being too closely associated with Judean-ness, in New Testament and other literature of the late first and early second centuries.

All of the seminar papers illustrated how unpredictable the effects of violence can be. They also illustrated how felt attachments to, or disillusionment with, Judean-ness in the late first and early second century were not at all about "Judaism" as a monolithic category or "religion" as we know it. These responses are better understood as responses to concrete social, political, and geographic factors.

Finally, in each session, the Christianity Seminar worked over a different "big ballot" voting item. These ballot items were questions that got to the heart of the Seminar's work for the last several years. They generated hearty debate and pushed us further along in the quest to describe the land-

Fall 2015 Ballot Items

Diaspora theory provides a compelling framework for understanding the history of the Christ groups of the first two centuries.

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

"Belonging" and "identity" are more complex analytical categories, and offer more social traction, than "religion" and "faith" for describing the process and content of emergence of early Christianity.

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Red**

The apocalyptic scenario is a revenge narrative.

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

Jesus viewed himself as an apocalyptic prophet.

Fellows: **Gray** / Associates: **Gray**

Paul's letters are apocalyptic writings.

Fellows: **Gray** / Associates: **Gray**

Apocalypticism generated Christian theology.

Fellows: **Gray** / Associates: **Gray**

The expectation of an imminent end of history was the main issue in the formation of Christianity.

Fellows: **Black** / Associates: **Gray**

The context of freelance expertise furnishes a plausible setting for theorizing the gradual emergence and definition of "Christian" offerings within this wider class of religious activity.

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Rather than an era marked by strategic efforts to strike a blow against Judaism, the Flavian period might instead have contributed to the recognition and appeal of par-

ticular forms of Judean religion, names, ones purveyed by specialists.

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

Whether out of expediency or necessity, the Bar Kokhba Revolt intensified efforts to renegotiate the ethnic dimension of expertise in Judean religion, with emphasis falling increasingly on the interpretation of Judean texts.

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Pink**

The anti-Judean aspects of the Gospels—and maybe even the strong connection of Jesus and his disciples to Galilee, an area largely untouched by the revolt—make more sense in this this second-century ecology than they do as products of the Flavian era.

Fellows: **Gray** / Associates: **Gray**

Situating the discursive practices of Judean experts—including "Christians" as a subset thereof—among those of other self-authorized specialists localizes the former more exactly than studies that read second-century texts through the hazier lens of identity.

Fellows: **Pink** / Associates: **Red**

The Jewish War of 66–70 CE was a significant pressure in the lives of diaspora Jews.

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

Revelation and 6 Ezra show considerable hesitance to cultivate networks that would integrate Jews into civic life.

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Pink**

The epigraphic record indicates that numerous Jews and Jewish communities continued as active and integrated participants in civic networks.

Fellows: **Red** / Associates: **Red**

scape in which the New Testament emerges and to understand the eventual formation of Christian belonging. We asked whether or to what extent “religion” as a category is useful for our work, given that it tends to obscure the ways gods and cultic practices were fully cultural and ethnic enterprises rather than matters of individual belief or piety. This point was especially hotly debated, not because some of us thought that individual belief or piety was the best way to understand ancient devotion to gods, but rather because the term “religion” is too recognizable in the contemporary world to toss out.

On another big ballot question, we discussed the Seminar’s strong focus on diaspora and diaspora theories that seek to notice both the way imperial violence actually helps produce national collectives rather than shatter them and the ways fractured collectives produce and monitor their otherwise very hazy boundaries. We underscored the importance of these theories for understanding the intricacies and construction of Judean, and then Christian, belonging. But we also left room for other theories for un-

derstanding ancient social life to supplement the focus on diaspora theory.

Most apt to this particular meeting as well as our previous meeting in the Spring focusing on martyrdom, the Seminar asked whether it was possible to say if Roman violence was a primary and causal factor in the eventual formation of Christ groups. This question was quite tricky, and, perhaps surprisingly, evoked the most resistance from Seminar members. Many of us were worried about the implication that Christ groups were *especially* subject to Roman violence, because all historical evidence points to the contrary. Many Seminar members were also worried about the suggestion that Christ groups were generally at odds with Roman rule, since there are so many textual sources representing a wide variety of relationships to Rome. There was no question, however, that Roman violence was a mundane and considerable dimension of life across the ancient Mediterranean, and that this basic fact—as well as the unpredictable effects of violence—needs to be taken into account in our project of rewriting early Christian history. **4R**

March 16–19, 2016 WESTAR INSTITUTE Santa Rosa, CA

Academic Seminars

Counter-Cultural Families of Early Christianity

Christianity



Seminar

Culture wars are not a modern phenomenon. They are attested throughout history. At Westar’s Spring 2016 meeting, Fellows of the Christianity Seminar will explore creative, contentious, and regressive first- and second-century clashes over the meaning of family, including:

- Jesus’ attack on family bonding
e.g., Mark 3:35—“The ones who do the will of God are my brother and sister and mother.”
- post-Pauline support for patriarchal family codes
e.g., Eph 5:23—“The husband is the head of the wife ...”
- fictive families of so-called house churches
e.g., Acts 2:44, 46—“They held all things in common ... and broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.”
- women leading all kinds of supper clubs
e.g., 1 Cor 1:11—“It has been reported to me by Chloe’s group ...”
- audacious men and women leaping into celibacy
e.g., Acts of Paul & Thecla 5:2—“Blessed are those who observe purity in the flesh, for they will become a temple of God.”

The Promise of Paul after the Death of God

Today’s Radical Theology movement owes a debt to the 1960s Death of God movement, which both liberated theology from narrow-minded debates about the literal existence of a supernatural being and bridged the traditionally theist-atheist divide between theologians and philosophers. What may be surprising to many, however, is that the themes and concerns that arose after the death of God share common elements with themes and concerns of the Apostle Paul—not the Paul of traditional church lore but a new Paul who is emerging in light of recent scholarship. In ancient times, Paul heard the call of a God that was bigger than he had ever imagined. In modern times, following the disappearance of the God made small in light of science, only the God

Seminar on God



Human Future

who persists can promise a meaningful future. At its Spring 2016 session, with the help of guest scholars Bernard Brandon Scott of Phillips Theological Seminary and Richard Kearney of Boston University, the Seminar on God and the Human Future will explore the new possibilities raised by this exciting connection.

