

**The Emergence of Judaism**  
**How to Teach this Course/How to Teach this Book**

Challenges

Teaching a course on the emergence of Judaism from its biblical beginnings to the end of the Talmudic period poses several challenges. First, the chronological range of the subject requires a deep familiarity with several fields of study – the Hebrew Bible, Second Temple and Hellenistic Judaism, and rabbinic Judaism. These enormous fields and their concomitant literatures are rarely mastered by a single individual and yet those interested in tracing the trajectory of Judaism in its first millennium and a half will have to acquire a good working knowledge of the methodologies, texts, and current scholarship in all three. The Teaching Tips document on this website lists important reading in each of these areas.

Second, instructors must accommodate students with very different levels of prior exposure to the subject matter and, more important, very different assumptions and presuppositions about Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. It may be wise to emphasize that while the course assumes no prior knowledge, students familiar with the basic contours of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic Judaism will not be bored; they will be challenged by both the critical approach of the course that views familiar material in a radically new light as well as by the opportunity for deeper exploration of select topics.

Third, American students often arrive at college with no experience in the academic study of religion. High school courses in science, math, history, English literature and languages set the stage for continued and college level study in those disciplines, but many students have taken no high school course in religion. Often, a student's only encounter with the Bible and/or Jewish tradition is in a religious setting (Sunday school or Hebrew school) that has not emphasized critical thinking. Some students will feel that they do not know how to study religion in an academic setting while others will resist the transition from a confessional mode of study. It is therefore important to assure students of two points early on.

(1)The academic study of religion requires no more but also no less than the critical thinking skills required in other courses in the humanities. So for example, the critical sensibility of the historian is essential to any reconstruction of the history of the Jewish community. This means

- \*understanding and appreciating the nature of the sources available to us for historical reconstruction – their possibilities and their limitations;
- \*understanding that ancient sources represent points of view that may well have been contested in their own day and should be critically assessed by the modern scholar;
- \*understanding that ancient sources often adopt an interpretive and constructive posture that must be investigated and critiqued;
- \*understanding that events have both causes and consequences that must be identified and explained.

Similarly, the analytical and interpretive sensibility of the literary scholar is essential to any reconstruction of the thought-world of ancient Judaism because the tradition is a fundamentally textual one. This means

\*understanding and appreciating the genre and literary conventions of the sources available to us;

\*respecting the literariness of the sources by attending to the artful use of language, syntax, word choice, imagery, narrative viewpoint, irony, dialogue, parallelism and the many other techniques and literary devices deployed in order to create meaning, to persuade, to provide aesthetic pleasure, and to invite the reflection and participation of a reader;

\*understanding why these texts might have been composed, how they were read and interpreted in their own time and how they have been re-read, re-interpreted and re-appropriated by subsequent generations;

\*understanding the fundamental instability of textual meaning over time even, or perhaps especially, in the case of texts deemed sacred by a given community.

Likewise, the critical, analytical and argumentation skills acquired in the study of philosophy, anthropology or cultural studies are all transferable to the academic study of religion. Students will be reassured (or surprised and unsettled) to learn that the study of religion is no different from the study of other humanities subjects and that the skills they have developed and exercised in the study of history (whether social, political, cultural or intellectual history), literature, anthropology, philosophy and cultural studies will serve them well in this course.

(2) The critical-historical study of the formative period of a religious tradition seeks, in large part, to understand that tradition in its own time and on its own terms. This is a fundamentally respectful thing to do. Some students may find it difficult to accept the highly contingent nature of a religious tradition's formation, or to grant ancient peoples and ancient texts the ideas and views they had. Nevertheless, tracing the historical, social, cultural and intellectual processes by which religious traditions came to take the forms they did reflects the core mission of the humanities generally, which is to understand and learn from the views and experiences of other peoples and cultures, past and present.

### How to Proceed

As an important first step, the instructor must address the subject matter of the course and the textbook. The course and/or textbook is not a course/textbook on Jewish history but on *Judaism* and thus some working definition of Judaism is must be essayed. Most students will think of Judaism as a "religion" and many will subscribe to popular definitions of "religion" as a set of beliefs and practices involving a deity or deities. It is important to establish the inadequacy of such a definition for the study of Judaism. The instructor may want to familiarize him- or herself with some classic works in the study of religion in order to advance a more suitable theoretical framework for the study of early Judaism (see the readings suggested in the "For all Instructors" section of the Teaching Tips included on this website).

Theories most compatible with the implicit approach of *The Emergence of Judaism* view religions as cultural systems, or frameworks that shape the entirety of life. To this basic understanding of religion, it must be added that Judaism is the cultural system and way of life of a distinct people or *ethnos*. This is not true of Christianity for example, or even Islam, whose adherents do not all claim membership – whether real or mythic -- in a particular ethnic group sharing a common history in the past. Jewish ethnicity is and always has been a central aspect (thought not a *sine qua non*) of Judaism and Jewish identity. The idea of Judaism as an *ethnic-*

religious culture needs to be raised at the start of the course and should be returned to repeatedly as notions of Judaism and Jewish identity undergo change throughout the period under study.

The instructor should set out the parameters of the course so that students know where they are headed. Chapter 1 of *The Emergence of Judaism* provides an overview of the chronological frame for the course, outlining the major periods, events, characters and cultural developments that will be developed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Thus, chapter 1 is a useful way to establish a common background and to orient students to the larger picture before filling in the details.

The instructor will need to deal with the nature of the sources at our disposal for studying biblical Israel, and Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism. The textbook does this explicitly but briefly and there is much more that can be said on the question of ancient historiography, the various literary genres found in biblical and rabbinic writings (myth, narrative, poetry, cultic texts, law, exegesis, legend), and the varied functions of these materials at the time of their composition and/or adoption by the community. How does the historian of religion work with such material? The best way to answer this question is to expose students to excellent scholarly analyses of classical texts, such as Jeffrey Rubenstein's essays in *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition and Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) or Galit Hasan-Rokem's *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). The relevant chapters in Barry Holtz's *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* (New York: Summit, 1984) can quickly orient students to various classic texts and how to read them.

Many students will be interested in the question of historical verifiability of the persons and events that populate biblical and rabbinic sources. *The Emergence of Judaism* addresses this question explicitly and implicitly on more than one occasion (pp. x-xi, 8-9, 95-101). While acknowledging that scholars hold radically opposed views on the historical usefulness of biblical and rabbinic traditions, the text emphasizes that historical verifiability of central persons and events in biblical and rabbinic tradition is often not possible. (For this reason the "Personalities in Judaism" sidebars focus on the *literary representations* of key figures and their importance in post-biblical and classical rabbinic tradition). It may be useful to discuss with students whether resolving the historical question is important for the purposes of a course interested in tracing the formation of the cultural system known as Judaism.

Students often forget that cultural formations are not inevitable and that things might have been otherwise. *The Emergence of Judaism* emphasizes the constructive interpretive choices that contributed to the formation of biblical religion as well as classical rabbinic Judaism. Instructors are encouraged to ask students to imagine alternative interpretive choices in order to highlight the extent to which all cultural systems, including Judaism, emerge from an intriguing combination of accident and conscious choice. What if the Deuteronomistic historian had failed to produce an explanation of the nation's destruction as just punishment for national sin by a faithful god in control of history? Would the Judean exiles have continued faithful to Yahweh or would they have adopted the worship of the conquering god Marduk? What if the ancient prophets had insisted on the primacy of cultic worship and the impossibility of worshipping Yahweh outside his land? What if the rabbis of 2<sup>nd</sup> century Judaism had advocated unending

rebellion against Roman hegemony? By imagining alternative responses to the events of Jewish history students can better understand the critical importance of those responses that did prevail and that proved decisive in the continuing story of Judaism's emergence.

### Supplementing the Textbook

*The Emergence of Judaism* can serve as the basic text for a semester long course that traces the development of rabbinic Judaism from its biblical roots. The text should be supplemented with articles and readings that offer an in-depth exploration of specific topics of interest and by investigation of primary source materials. The following division is recommended for a 13-week semester: Chapter one – week 1; Chapters 2-6 -- two weeks each; Chapter 7 – one week; in-class tests and quizzes at various points take up an additional week. Students can read and discuss each chapter, answer study questions and use additional class time for discussion of supplemental materials: articles and additional readings and/or primary sources, either from the textbook or introduced by the instructor. Useful anthologies of primary sources, some with commentary, include:

Bialik, Hayyim Nahman, ed. *The Book of Legends: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*. Translated by William G. Braude. New York: Schocken, 1992.

\*Rubenstein, Jeffrey L., and Shaye J. D. Cohen. *Rabbinic Stories (Classics of Western Spirituality)*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002

\*Schiffman, Lawrence, H. *Texts and Traditions: A Source Reader for the Study of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*. Hoboken: Ktav, 1997.

Students with no background may feel overwhelmed by the mass of material to be absorbed in a semester long course that covers both biblical Israel and the formation of classical rabbinic Judaism. For this reason it is probably better to conduct ongoing assessment (shorter tests administered with some frequency rather than a mid-term and a final).

*The Emergence of Judaism* can also serve as the basic text for a single module within a course that embraces more than the formation of early Judaism, such as a course on World Religions or an Introduction to Judaism. For the purposes of such a course, little or no supplementation of the base text is needed. For assessment purposes, a first test might be administered after chapter 3 (covering the biblical period), a brief quiz after chapter 4, a second test after chapter 6 (covering the rabbinic period) and a second brief quiz after chapter 7. On this website you will find a sample syllabus for a single semester course utilizing the textbook, as well as tests covering chapters 1-3 and chapters 5-6 and quizzes for chapters 4 and 7. These tests and quizzes will likely take a week's worth of class time to administer. On the assumption that most semesters run approximately 13 weeks and that the quizzes will occupy the equivalent of a week's sessions, the syllabus covers 12 full weeks of instruction.

For a variety of supporting materials (including primary sources) you may wish to consult:

(1) **Internet Jewish History Sourcebook** (site maintained and edited by Paul Halsall) at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/jewishsourcebook.html>

This site provides links to secondary research articles, reviews, discussions, and pictures (2ND) as well as to megasites of web resources (MEGA) and websites focused on specific issues (WEB). The site focuses on providing access to full-text primary historical documents. The contents, listed by topic, are divided into four historical periods: The People of Israel; The Emergence of Judaism; The Jewish Middle Ages; and Jewish Life since the Enlightenment.

**(2) Jewish History.com (Center for Online Judaic Studies) at**

<http://jewishhistory.com/>

This site provides materials to support teachers and for individual learning on a range of topics covering the span of Jewish History. For each section overview information is provided as well as primary and secondary sources, bibliographies, newspaper articles, videos, images, maps, artifacts and websites. Topics include: Jews and Judaism in the Greco-Roman Period; The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000-1500; Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism; Jews in the Early Modern Period, 1450-1750 and more.