

M I D R A S H:

Scripture Reimagined

RE 330-01

Fall 2009

classroom: Tisch 208

meets: Tues & Thurs 3:40-5:00

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Tues 10:00-11:00,

or by appointment.

Course Description

This course introduces the fascinating blend of critical and creative readings that constitute *midrash*, the meta-genre of Jewish exegesis. “Midrash” is what Jews have been doing with the Bible for millennia: retelling it and rereading it, effectively reinventing their sacred traditions (and in the process inventing what comes to be called “Judaism”). Reading primary texts in English translation, we will survey some of the vast and varied corpus of Jewish literature produced after the Bible. Ranging widely across rabbinic commentaries, homilies, parables, fables, folktales, martyrologies, apocalypses and kabbalistic secrets, we will sample the pious fictions and fantastic stories that animate Jewish thought and practice. As religious texts are engaged deeply, and their prior meanings expanded upon, the closed canon is ingeniously reopened, requiring us to rethink our very notions of what is “Scripture.” We will also become acquainted with some recent trends in literary theory, such as Reception and Response Criticisms and post-structuralist notions of indeterminacy and intertextuality, and compare them with rabbinic ideas.

There is no prerequisite, although the instructor does recommend either some prior knowledge of the Bible or some background in the Jewish tradition.

Course Materials

The Classic Midrash: Tannaitic Commentaries on the Bible, translated by Reuven Hammer.

Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature,
edited by David Stern and Mark J. Mirsky.

Additional required readings will be made available as a Course Reader and as handouts. You will also need to have handy your own copy of the Hebrew Bible. *The Jewish Study Bible* (eds. Berlin, Brettler & Fishbane) is the one I recommend for courses focusing on Jewish Studies, and so that edition is presently for sale through the Skidmore bookstore.

What We'll Be Doing

First, this course is conducted as a seminar, so let me address my general expectations for such a format: students will take the lead in asking questions, proposing answers and steering discussions. Our term “seminar,” indicating an intimate class focused on close readings and collaborative efforts, comes from the Latin *seminarium*, literally a “seed-plot,” a small area to plant ideas and watch them grow, the place where one nurtures intellectual habits of thought. The analogy of academic development to gardening may seem quaint, but those familiar with gardening will recognize that the analogy is demanding real commitment and critical rigor, just as gardening requires regular attention and honest labor. The seminar format means that you must engage each other, and not just the instructor; it means that it is *you who will be doing the talking*, by asking each other questions and working through the answers together.

Second, by studying midrash in translation we are attempting something that some people contend can't be done. *Let's prove them wrong*. But let's also be clear on what are some of the potential pitfalls. Midrashic reasoning can be quite dense, even in the original, and reading it in translation often leaves points obscured. You will struggle at first to figure out what is going on. So in the beginning of the course we will inspect small textual units, *which you will probably have to read several times over*, and gradually build up to tackling larger portions of midrashim. You'll have to do some detective work as you read, actively looking for clues and puzzling them over, and do this as they turn up and not simply wait to have the case solved in class. (Of course I will explain whatever needs explaining). Or, to revert to my prior analogy, you have to commit to doing the “spade work”: looking up lots of biblical verses and carefully reading the notes prepared by the translators. (Reuven Hammer often adds some commentary at the end of each section in The Classic Midrash, and it would probably help to read his explanation before you turn to the translation, and then review it again after.)

Seminars are always reading intensive, but as an introductory study of midrash is all about comprehending how the rabbis read and reread Scripture, reading here becomes our central concern and our own critical practice. There will be fewer pages assigned than in other seminars, but still plenty of work. I have tried to set a productive pace for the semester, but it is more important to me that we find the right rhythm for our seminar than we cover everything in the syllabus. And while it behooves us to attend to details and wrestle with difficult passages, ultimately we are trying to see how these texts connect to larger patterns of Jewish thought, practice and history. Midrash does not present a systematic theology, but instead offers a voluble chorus of voices, not always in harmony, speaking about God and Israel (and a host of other matters) in ways that enrich our understanding and prompt us to rephrase our own concerns.

In sum, I believe you'll find the study of midrash very rewarding, and even enjoyable -- just never easy. It requires your sustained effort and the mutual support of your class-mates, and I hope that you are as excited as I am by the challenges it poses.

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	10 %
Preparing Questions	10 %
Midterm	25 %
In Class Presentation	20 %
Research Paper	35 %
Total	100 %

A few words are in order, at the outset, about some of these components:

Attendance is mandatory. You can miss two classes, no questions asked. After that, you lose points. If you miss seven or more, you'll fail.

While participation is contingent upon attendance, as a distinct component of your grade it involves much more than just showing up. Participation requires active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of the classroom conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity. We are going to think through some difficult materials together, and I expect each and every one of you to have something to contribute. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about our topic, and this will not be achieved through dispirited or half-hearted attempts. *Real education can not be a spectator sport.*

Preparing Questions: For each class you should prepare a minimum of two questions, along with your own (tentative) answers, that you could ask the other students with the express purpose of facilitating classroom discussion. (You may have additional questions for the instructor). In preparing these questions, you are not trying to stump your classmates; rather you are trying to direct the conversation to some of the more salient points from the readings. Your questions should thus be carefully chosen and thoughtfully worded. I will collect your questions at the end of each class session; unless I make an exception, I will not be accepting them electronically.

The midterm will be a take-home assignment, involving essay writing. Closer to the time of the midterm, I will spell out in greater detail my expectations as to what makes a good essay.

Research paper: At the end of the semester you will hand in a fully cited and well-crafted paper, approximately 15 pages in length, as well as give an oral presentation on your topic to the class. Your paper should focus on a biblical figure or specific episode from scripture that intrigues you, and trace some of its post-biblical developments. When and how did these interpretations arise, and how have they changed over time? You are free to focus on ancient, medieval or modern periods, and may even investigate contemporary sources (for example, songs by Leonard Cohen or Bob Dylan that rework scriptural imagery, or film versions of biblical stories). *While the original material has to be drawn from the Hebrew Bible, the later interpretations or versions of*

the story you research do not necessarily have to be Jewish. I do ask that you consult with me before deciding on your topic. I want to give you maximal leeway in picking a topic that interests you, but I also want to make sure it is researchable -- that it is a worthwhile project you can start and finish in one semester. So come talk to me *sooner rather than later* about picking and defining a research topic. I will be asking for a written proposal by Oct 13.

Late work will be marked down. I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. All papers and exams must be submitted in hard-copy form.

So, here's the tally: you have to come to class, you have to do *all* of the readings, and you have to consistently participate in discussions. You also have to be motivated to conduct research on your own, outside of class (although I will always be available for guidance). So that's the kind of effort you have to make, or it's not really worth your taking the class -- aside from getting an ugly grade. Clearly I expect you to do work; but it is also my hope that we will have quite a bit of fun doing so.

On Reading

Reading is a deceptively simple act, often identified with simple literacy and presumed to be entirely passive. Yet in order for you to retain what you read and to respond critically, you will need to cultivate the habits of an *active reader*, and play a more aggressive role when reading. On the practical side, I suggest that you take notes while reading, utilizing a dictionary if necessary, and even compiling key terms into your own glossary. More theoretically, your recognition of reading as an active process should find some striking parallels with the rabbinic modes of engaging the text about which we are learning.

There are two basic components to good reading skills: comprehension and critique.

i.) *Comprehension* measures how well the reader understands the information being imparted and the opinions being expressed. To test your own comprehension of any reading, you may ask yourself the following questions: what new terms (foreign words, or new English terminology) did I encounter? Do I have a basic command of the historical data contained in the reading? What evidence is provided? (Pay attention to what types of sources are cited: are they primary or secondary?) Is there a main thesis to the reading? What is being argued for or argued against, either implicitly or explicitly, i.e., what point of view is the author articulating?

ii.) *Critique* describes how well the reader can engage a text -- not only in terms of what it says, but what it leaves unsaid or might fail to discuss. To test your own powers of critique, you may ask yourself the following questions: do I agree or disagree with what is being said? *Why?* What should we focus our class discussion on, i.e. what in the text merited the greatest attention and further comment? What was left out yet should have been included, or which we should be sure to bring up?

On Writing

Writing helps a person to formulate ideas, in that one strives to express oneself *clearly* and *concisely*. Forego fancy words and convoluted constructions and tell us what you have to say in a straightforward manner. As stated above, when the midterm approaches I will have more to say about effective writing.

Classroom Civility

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, but not an entire meal.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students or to the instructor will not be indulged.

Honor Code

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

Partners in Learning

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. I hope that at the core of this agreement we discover a mutual desire for understanding and an increased appreciation for respectful disagreement. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail or phone, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

REL 330-0 / MIDRASH Class & Reading Schedule

Please Note: *you should have the assigned readings done **before** you come to the class for which they have been assigned.*

Sept 10. Introduction: Reimagining Scripture. Expectations for the Course.

Sept 15. Introduction: Halakhah.

Against literalism: the example of *lex talionis*. Reading 1.

Sept 17. Introduction: Aggadah. Filling in gaps: re-reading Cain and Abel. Reading 2.

Rosh ha-Shanah begins on Sept 18.

Sept 22. The Blood of Sacrifice. Reading 3.

Sept 24. Miracle, Manna & Faith. Reading 4.

Yom Kippur begins on Sept 27.

Sept 29. Sinai. Reading 5.

Oct 1. Zion. Reading 6.

Sukkot begins on Oct 2.

Oct 6. Love & Suffering. Reading 7.

Oct 8. Miriam & Aaron. Reading 8.

*Shemeni Atzeret begins Oct 9,
followed by Simhat Torah on Oct 10.*

Oct 13. Joseph's Bones & Moses' Grave. Reading 9.

Oct 15. "It is like a king...": Teaching with Parables. Reading 10.

Oct 21. Talk by Joel Kaminsky:
"Envisioning the Other: Does The Bible Promote Intolerance?"
8 pm in Davis Auditorium.

Oct 20. Before Creation, Torah. Reading 11.

Oct 22. After the Destruction, Weeping. Reading 12.

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Class & Reading Schedule,
continued

Oct 27. Rabbinic Authority. Reading 13.

Oct 29. Fictions & Fables. Reading 14.

Nov 3. Midrash on the Ten Commandments. Reading 15.

Nov 5. The Legend of the Ten Martyrs. Reading 16.

Nov 10. *No class: American Academy of Religion Meeting.*

Take this time to work on your research.

Nov 12. The Alphabet of Ben Sira. Reading 17.

Nov 17. Sefer Toledot Yeshu: A Jewish Life of Jesus. Reading 18.

Nov 19. Sefer Zerubavel: A Jewish Apocalypse. Reading 19.

Nov 24. Mystical Midrashim. Reading 20.

Nov 26. *No class: Thanksgiving break.*

Dec 1. Big Scriptures: Mikra'ot Gedolot. Reading 21.

Dec 3. A Paradise of Texts. Reading 22.

Dec 8. Student presentations.

Dec 10. Student presentations, *continued*. Conclusions.

Dec 11 is the first night of Hanukkah.

Dec 16: Research Paper due.

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Reading Assignments

- Reading 1. Handout on *lex talionis*. Holtz, “Midrash,” to top of p. 186.
- Reading 2. Handout on Cain & Abel. Conclude Holtz, “Midrash.”
- Reading 3. Classic Midrash, pp. mid 56-mid 58, 86-91, bottom 216-mid 217, and 316, first paragraph. Kugel, “Two Introductions,” sections i-iii.
- Reading 4. Classic Midrash, pp. bottom 96-mid 99, 124-top 125, 128-top 129, and 269-mid 270. Conclude Kugel, “Two Introductions.”
- Reading 5. Classic Midrash, pp. 140-mid 149, and 167-top 168. Halbertal.
- Reading 6. Classic Midrash, pp. 59-61, 286-288, and mid 326-mid 328. Holtz & Iser.
- Reading 7. Classic Midrash, pp. mid 310-very top 316. Handout: Spinner. Eagelton.
- Reading 8. Classic Midrash, pp. 122-mid 123, and 252-264. Barthes & Handleman.
- Reading 9. Classic Midrash, pp 72-mid 76, 333-mid 335, and that last paragraph on 379- top 382. Stern, “Midrash and Hermeneutics,” part i.
- Reading 10. Rabbinic Fantasies, ch.1. Stern, part ii.
- Reading 11. Handout. Classic Midrash, pp. 127-top 128, 158, and 292-top 293. Stern, part iii.
- Reading 12. Rabbinic Fantasies, ch 2.
- Reading 13. Handout. Conclude Stern’s essay.
- Reading 14. Rabbinic Fantasies, ch 3.
Selections from Berekhiah ha-Nakdan & Isaac Ibn Sahula.
- Reading 15. Rabbinic Fantasies, ch 5.
- Reading 16. Rabbinic Fantasies, ch 7.
- Reading 17. Rabbinic Fantasies, ch 8, plus bottom p. 358-363.
Handout: Short selection from the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.
- Reading 18. Handout: *Toledot Yeshu*.
- Reading 19. Biale, “Counter History.” Rabbinic Fantasies, ch 4.
- Reading 20. Rabbinic Fantasies, chs 9 -11. Focus on the first of these three chapters, (dealing with *Sefer ha-Bahir*, *Sefer Hasidim* and the *Zohar*, respectively), but at least review the other two, as we want to have an overall sense of how esoteric and pietistic literature develops in the Jewish Middle Ages.
- Reading 21. Handout. Greenstein, “Medieval Bible Commentaries.”
- Reading 22. Talmage, “Apples of Gold” & Fishbane, “The Notion of a Sacred Text.”