Introduction to Rabbinic Judaism


As part of the Erasmus cooperation between the Theological Faculty at the University of Greifswald, Germany, and the School of Mission and Theology Dr. Daniel Stein Kokin, Professor for Jewish Literature and Culture at the Faculty in Greifswald, will visit the MHS during the period April 29 – May 8, 2013, and deliver lectures on the topic “Introduction to Rabbinic Judaism”.

Schedule for Dr. Kokin’s lectures:
Monday April 29 12:15–14:00
Tuesday April 30 12:15–15:00
Thursday May 2 12:15–14:00
Friday May 3 12:15–15:00
Monday May 6 12:15–15:00
Tuesday May 7 12:15–15:00

The teaching program for each session is presented below.
It will be possible to attend Dr. Kokin’s lectures without officially registering for the course “Innføring i rabbinsk jødedom”. Those who will attend without registering and without intending to take the course exam, are not obliged to read the prescribed course books and articles.

Course Description

While Judaism regards the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible as its holy Scripture, as lived and practiced today Judaism is largely the product of the rabbinic movement and rabbinic interpretation as they emerged and coalesced in the early centuries of the Common Era (A.D. or C.E.). To understand Judaism is thus to engage directly with the first generations of rabbinic sages: to recreate the world in which they lived, to read closely the texts which they wrote, and to consider carefully the challenges they faced and the manner in which they addressed them. This course offers a general introduction to the rabbinic movement, the main genres of rabbinic texts, and the key concepts which guided the rabbinic interpretation of the Bible. Special stress will be placed on rabbinic hermeneutics, rabbinic concepts of argument and discussion, and rabbinic attitudes towards various categories of "others."

Goals of the Course

Students will be exposed to the major developments, personalities, concepts and textual genres of Rabbinic Judaism in the early centuries of the Common Era. They
will gain basic familiarity with the reading of rabbinic texts (e.g. Mishna, Talmud, and Midrash), and will develop a general understanding of rabbinic ways of thinking, in particular the rabbinic approach to the interpretation of Scripture. They will come to appreciate the tremendous impact rabbinic literature has had upon Judaism down to the present as well as some of the critical responses it has provoked from within the Jewish world.

**Main Texts**


As one can see from the course description in the Theology Study Program, pp. 63–65, these three books make up the main part of the reading curriculum of the course “Innføring i rabbinsk jødedom”. In the presentation of the teaching sessions below there are references both to these books and to other literature. Most of the other titles referred to are also listed in the course reading curriculum and will be made available in a compendium.

**Session I**

**Monday, April 29, 12:15–14:00**

*Introduction: The Emergence and Development of the Rabbinic Movement*

**Key Topics:**

Overview of Jewish history from the Second Temple through the Gaonic eras

Priests, Prophets, Pharisees, and Rabbis: typologies of Jewish leadership in the late and post-biblical world

From Tannaim to Geonim: the periodization of early Rabbinic Judaism

The Places and Institutions of Rabbinic Judaism (e.g. Yavneh, Sepphoris; Sanhedrin, Patriarchate, Beit Midrash)

Rabbinic Judaism as response to the destruction of the Temple

*Text study:* "Ethics of the Fathers" ("Pirkei Avot"), opening; Bar Kamza; and Rabbi (R.) Johanan b. Zakkai and Vespasian: A Founding Myth of Rabbinic Judaism?

**Readings:**

Secondary Sources:

As general historical background for the course, I suggest reading as much as possible of Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition*, Chs 1-9 (1-176), and certainly: Ch.3 ("Judaism in the Persian Period," 33-59), Ch. 6 ("Sectarianism in the Second..."
Commonwealth," 98-119), and Ch. 9 ("Revolt and Restoration," 157-176), and all chapter summaries (Chs. 1-9).

Primary Sources:
"Ethics of the Fathers" ("Pirkei Avot"), 1-2 (2 pages)
Rubinstein, *Rabbinic Stories*, 38-54

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**Session II**
**Tuesday, April 30, 12:15–15:00**
*Rabbinic Hermeneutics*

Part I: "Torah she ba'al pe": The Rabbinic Conception of the Oral Torah  
Part II: The Technologies of Rabbinic Interpretation  
Part III: The Culture of Rabbinic Study

**Key Topics:**
The relationship between the written and oral Torah  
The nature and scope of key texts and genres: Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud, Midrash  
Key concepts: Rabbi, Torah, Mitzvah, Halakha, Aggada, Hefuta, etc.  
The relationship between rabbinic biblical interpretation and ancient Greek text interpretation and early Christian biblical interpretation  
Midrash, Gematria, Notarikon, and other rabbinic interpretative strategies and approaches

**Text study:** Moses encounters R. Akiva; R. Johanan and Resh Lakish

**Readings:**
Secondary Sources:  

2) "Talmud" in Holtz, *Back to the Sources*, 129-158, 163-167

Primary Sources:  

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**Session III**
**Thursday, May 2, 12:15–14:00**
*The Midrashic Imagination*

Part I: Midrash Halakha  
Part II: Midrash Aggada
Key Topics:
The history and development of Midrash
The role of Midrash in the development and explanation of rabbinic law
The role of Midrash in the interpretation of biblical stories
The goals and purpose of Midrash

Text study: Midrash and Exodus; a kid in its mother's milk; Midrash on the creation of the world and of man

Readings:
Secondary Sources:
"Midrash" in Holtz, *Back to the Sources*, 177-204
David Stern, "Midrash and Jewish Interpretation" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, 1863-1875 (copied in the compendium)

Primary Sources:
Selections from Midrash Genesis Rabba and from Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sotah (appx. 10 pages)

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**Session IV**
**Friday, May 3, 12:15–15:00**
*Hevruta and Mahloket: The Role of Discussion and Argument in Rabbinic Judaism*

Key Topics:
Rabbinic conceptions of diversity and tolerance, and their limits

Text study: the calendar dispute; the oven of Akhnai

Readings:
Secondary Sources:
Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 45-54 (copied in the compendium)

Primary Sources:
Rubinstein, *Rabbinic Stories*, 80-87 (plus notes, 266–269)

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**Session V**
**Monday, May 6, 12:15–15:00**
*The Rabbis and their Others*

Part I: Rabbinic attitudes towards women
Part II: Rabbinic attitudes towards heretics
Part III: Rabbinic attitudes towards non-Jews
Key Topics:
The status, obligations, and exemptions of women in Jewish law
Beruriah: A female rabbinic sage?
Rabbinic definitions of heresy
Elisha ben Abuyah: rabbi turned heretic?
The Noahide Laws
Restrictions on gentile Torah observance, the Torah as intended for all mankind

Readings:
Secondary Sources:
Rachel Biale, "Women and the Mitzvot" in Women and Jewish Law, 10-43 (copied in the compendium)
Christine Hayes, "The 'Other' in Rabbinic Literature," in The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature, 243-269 (copied in the compendium)

Primary Sources:
The Noahide Laws (1 page)
Passages from Talmud on gentile study, observance (1 page)
Rubinstein, Rabbinic Stories, 139-145, 151-153, 169-175 (plus notes, 288-290), 229-244

Session VI
Tuesday, May 7, 12:15–15:00
Conclusion: The Legacy of the Rabbinic Revolution or Rabbinic Jewish Civilization and its Discontents

Key topics:
Brief historical overview: the Gaonic period and beyond
The "Rabbinization" of the Jewish world, the "canonization" of the Talmud
The emergence of responsa literature and law codes
The Karaite movement and other critical Jewish responses to Rabbinism
At very end: Rabbinic Judaism in the early 21st Century

Readings:
Secondary Sources:
Talmud, in Holtz, Back to the Sources, 158-163
Moshe Halbertal, People of the Book, 72-81 (54-72 for people who are really interested; partly copied in the compendium, copies of the rest will be made available)
Primary Sources:
Karaite sources (4 pages) (copies will be made available)
Maimonides, Thirteen Principles (1 page) (copied in the compendium)
Responsa (from Heritage) (2 pages), plus from Maimonides (ditto) (1 page)
(copied in the compendium)
Shulkhan Arukh excerpts (from The Jew in the Medieval World) (4 pages) (copies
will be made available)