

The Emergence of Judaism: Introduction for Students

As you embark on this investigation of the emergence of classical rabbinic Judaism from its roots in biblical Israel, take a moment to look about you and reflect on the people with whom you will be studying. The modern American classroom in most colleges and universities, as well as high schools, is a remarkably diverse place. Students with radically different backgrounds and radically different levels and kinds of prior exposure to a subject join together for a few weeks or months in pursuit of deeper knowledge about that subject. In your classroom, there will be students with little or no familiarity with the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) or classical rabbinic Judaism. There will be students who have a great deal of exposure to the Hebrew Bible in a religious setting (Sunday school or Hebrew school) and others who have studied classical Jewish texts in a traditional manner. Some may even read or speak Hebrew. If you belong to the first group, you may feel yourself at a disadvantage. If you belong to the second group, you may wonder whether this course has anything new or different to offer you.

The Emergence of Judaism is designed for use in classrooms that feature precisely this kind of diversity. The main text provides essential information for students with no background in order to bring them up to speed as quickly as possible. Deeper investigations of important personalities, as well as analyses of important texts, are provided in sidebars to be consulted when the main contours of the chapter have been absorbed. Students with prior exposure to the Hebrew Bible and/or rabbinic Judaism will soon see that *The Emergence of Judaism* presents familiar materials in an entirely new light. They will be challenged and excited by the critical and academic analysis of ideas and texts that are treated in a very different way in traditional settings.

This course may be the first time you are studying religious texts and a religious culture in an academic or secular setting. You may feel ill-equipped for that task. After all, most American students 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. 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 more traditional or confessional mode of study. If you belong to the first group, rest assured that the academic study of religion requires *no more than* the critical thinking skills required in other courses in the humanities. If you belong to the second group, you need to know that the academic study of religion requires *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 you will need to set aside prior assumptions about the nature, purpose and composition of religious texts. You will need to look at them with completely fresh eyes in order to understand and appreciate what they have to offer scholars in their investigation of the past. What precisely is the nature of the sources available to us for historical reconstruction? What kind of writing is the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament)? When were the very many different books it contains written, and by whom? What were the various authors trying to say and why do they disagree with one another? How are we to use these

sources to understand a past culture? Similar questions apply to the classical rabbinic texts. These voluminous works contain materials from many centuries – law, legend and Scriptural exegesis intertwined. How do we make sense of these messy and complicated writings and how do we reconstruct the experiences and ideas of a past community on their basis?

Having the critical sensibility of a historian also means understanding that ancient sources represent points of view that may well have been contested both in their own day and later on. In the course of the last two millennia many claims have been made on behalf of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic sources that do not stand up to close scrutiny. The historian must be willing to set aside presuppositions about what the Bible and classical sources say, and look critically and objectively at the sources themselves. Most important, students must be ready and able to distinguish the god constructed by later western theology (driven by philosophical interests) from the character YHWH in the Hebrew Bible and from the depictions of Israel's god that appear in rabbinic writings. The historian will find that the sources do not always speak with one voice, nor do they always agree with later religious doctrine and teaching.

A historian also knows that writings from antiquity, just like writings in our own day, emerge from a particular viewpoint and represent one writer's or group's interpretation or construction of reality – an interpretation or construction that must be investigated and critiqued as objectively as possible. And finally, the historian knows that events have both causes and consequences that can be identified and explained. Historical and cultural developments are rarely inevitable and it is worth exploring how and by what means a culture evolved in the manner it did.

Prior experience with the study of history will help you in this course; but prior study of literature will also help you. In English classes you will have engaged in the close analysis of texts and the interpretation of literary works. Because the Jewish tradition is a fundamentally textual or literary tradition, you will find that the analytical and interpretive skills of the literary scholar are also essential to the reconstruction of the thought-world of ancient Judaism. This means understanding and appreciating the genre and literary conventions of the sources available to us. In certain basic ways, religious texts are no different from other texts. They are not exempt from analysis in literary terms and you will find your efforts amply rewarded if you pay attention to: the artful use of language; syntax and word choice; imagery, narrative viewpoint and irony; 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. Equipped with the analytical and interpretive skills of a literary scholar, you will consider why certain texts were composed, how they were read and interpreted in their own time and how they were re-read, re-interpreted and re-appropriated by subsequent generations. Most important, like a literary scholar, you will be aware of the fundamental instability of textual meaning over time even – or perhaps especially – in the case of texts deemed sacred by a given community.

In short, the skills of critical inquiry, analysis, interpretation and argumentation that you have acquired in your academic training to this point are all transferable to the academic study of religion and will serve you well in this course. In many ways, the study of religion is no different from the study of other humanities subjects and the goals are the same: to understand and learn from the views and experiences of other peoples and cultures, past and present.

Purpose of this Book

The Emergence of Judaism is designed as an in-depth introduction to the evolving religious tradition of Judaism, most (but not all) of the adherents of which are *ethnically* Jewish. As noted in the Preface, this book does not pretend to be a comprehensive study of the history and civilization of the entire Jewish people (the Jewish *ethnos*). Rather, its focus is on *Judaism* – the religious traditions, texts, practices, and ideas developed among and nurtured by Jews through late antiquity – with attention to the historical, cultural and ideological circumstances contributing to their emergence. For the purposes of this course, you may find that your notion of “religion” will need to be expanded considerably. “Religion” in antiquity connoted something quite different from what is generally meant by the popular understanding of the term religion today. Be prepared to learn about the entire way of life of an ethnically-defined community, rather than mere creeds or beliefs.

The period that saw the consolidation of the ethnic-religious tradition Judaism in its classical form runs from approximately 200 C.E. to the seventh century C.E. However, the roots of classical Judaism stretch back for more than a millennium before this period. The historical experiences and traditional literature of the ancient Israelites (ancestors of the Jews dating from approximately 1300 B.C.E.) are the well-spring from which classical Judaism emerged. Any study of classical Judaism must begin therefore with a survey of the religious practices, traditions, texts and ideas of the ancient Israelites and their relation to Ancient Mesopotamian civilization generally. These practices, traditions, texts and ideas are available to us primarily through an anthology of writings known as the Hebrew Bible (roughly corresponding to the Protestant Old Testament).

After surveying the biblical sources and related extra-biblical evidence (chapters 2 and 3), we will examine the development and transformation of that ancient Israelite heritage by a variety of Jewish groups in the centuries before the first century C.E. (chapter 4). This in turn will set the stage for an account of the gradual rise of classical rabbinic Judaism, which was to become increasingly influential from the fourth century C.E. on (chapter 5). By the end of our period (late seventh century C.E.), classical rabbinic Judaism – particularly as developed in Babylonia – had established itself as the normative tradition of the Jewish people (chapter 6). A final chapter surveys Judaism’s manifestations and transformations to the modern period.