

The Rise of the Rabbis

Full Syllabus

This course is divided into the following three parts:

1. Part One: *From the Aftermath of the Bible to First Century Judaism (Modules 1-3)*
2. Part Two: *The Rabbis and the Development of Oral Torah (Modules 4-6)*
3. Part Three: *Special Topics on the Rise of the Rabbis (Modules 7-10)*

Part One: From the Aftermath of the Bible to First Century Judaism (Modules 1-3)

The three modules in Part One cover the Second Temple period, from roughly 520 BCE (the rebuilding of the Second Temple) to 70 CE (the destruction of the Second Temple). These modules survey the many transformations and developments that took place between the end of the biblical narrative in the early Second Temple period and the rise of the rabbis after the destruction of the Second Temple.

Module 1: From Ezra to the Maccabees

Taught by Jonathan Klawans, Ph.D., Visiting Faculty, Hebrew College and Professor of Religion, Boston University.

This module transitions from earlier biblical history with a chronological review of the First and Second Temple periods and a brief examination of the return from Babylonian exile. It explores the emergence of “Judaism” in the early Second Temple period from the earlier “Israelite” tradition of the First Temple period. It then considers the end of prophecy and the canonization of Torah. Finally, the module focuses on the rise of Hellenism in the ancient world and the Maccabean conflict that gives rise to the holiday of Hanukkah.

Video Segments

1. Historical Overview
2. The Return from Exile
3. From Israelites to Jews
4. Prophecy to Canon
5. Continuities
6. Hellenism and the Maccabees

Learning Goals

1. Understand the transition from earlier biblical history
2. Understand terminological and historical developments, from Israelites to Jews
3. Explore the end of prophecy and the canonization of Torah
4. Explore Hellenism and the rise of the Maccabees
5. Examine the tensions between cultural absorption and resistance, as seen by Maccabees

The Rise of the Rabbis **Full Syllabus**

Thought Questions

1. What are the major religious and cultural changes of the early Second Temple period?
2. What does the transition from “Israelites” to “Jews” signify?
3. What Jewish texts do we have from the Second Temple period, and why?
4. What is the impact of Hellenism on the Jewish community of Israel and beyond?
5. Were the Maccabees Hellenized?

Readings

1. Core - Hebrew Bible
 - Second Chronicles 36:22-23 (Edict of Cyrus)
 - Esther 2:5-8 (Mordecai’s lineage)
 - Ezra 7: 1-10 (Ezra’s resume)
2. Core - The “Apocrypha”
 - First Maccabees 1 (the beginnings of the Hanukkah story)
 - First Maccabees 9 (death of Judah Maccabee)
3. Secondary Readings
 - Lawrence Schiffman, *Understanding Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 3-29, 39-62, 197-213.

Module 2: Jewish Sectarianism

Taught by Jonathan Klawans, Ph.D., Visiting Faculty, Hebrew College and Professor of Religion, Boston University.

This module introduces the various groups, sometimes called “sects,” that flourished in the late Second Temple period (especially from c. 100 BCE to 70 CE). These groups include the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes, as well as Samaritans and early Christians. Much of what we know about these groups is through the writings of Josephus, a first century CE Romano-Jewish scholar. This module considers the major theological disputes between these groups and the challenges of labeling these groups as “sects.” The module concludes with a discussion on ways in which contemporary Jewish diversity compares and contrasts with what we find in the ancient world.

Video Segments

1. Josephus
2. Groups and Definitions
3. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes
4. Complexities and Conclusions

The Rise of the Rabbis

Full Syllabus

Learning Goals

1. Introduce Josephus and his testimony about ancient Jewish groups
2. Consider the meaning of “sectarianism” and other group-related terms
3. Appreciate the complexity of ancient Jewish diversity/sectarianism
4. Discuss major theological disputes and developments: life after death, fate and free will; scripture and tradition

Thought Questions

1. Why was Josephus so important?
2. What is sectarianism? What is a “sect”? What are the challenges of the term “sect” when studying Jewish groups of the late Second Temple period?
3. What sectarian groups arose at the end of the Second Temple period, and how do we know about them?
4. Who were the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes? What do we know about the Dead Sea group?
5. Who were the early-Christians?
6. Is there something that unifies Judaism in this era?

Readings

1. Core: Selections from Josephus in above (Schiffman’s *Understanding Second Temple and Rabbinic Literature*)
2. Secondary: Lawrence Schiffman, *Understanding Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 150-196.
3. Bonus: Shaye Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, chapter 5 (Sectarian and Normative)

Module 3: Seventy CE and Beyond

Taught by Jonathan Klawans, Ph.D., Visiting Faculty, Hebrew College and Professor of Religion, Boston University.

This module evaluates 70 CE—the date of the destruction of the Second Temple—as a watershed event in Jewish history. It examines the many changes that took place at that time, as well as continuities that can be traced, such as the connections between the Pharisees and the rabbis. It also considers how contemporary attitudes toward catastrophe and sacrifice can influence our understanding (or misunderstanding) of this important event.

Video Segments

1. Rabbis and the Rabbinic Period
2. 70 CE as a Watershed
3. Understanding 70 CE
4. A Rabbinic Response to 70 CE
5. Pharisees to Rabbis
6. Three Periods, Two Canons

The Rise of the Rabbis **Full Syllabus**

Learning Goals

1. Appreciate what is known (and not known) about 70 CE
2. Evaluate 70 CE as a watershed event, akin to 586 BCE
3. Review breakdown of Jewish history into three periods: Israelite, Second Temple, Rabbinic
4. Examine sample scholarly approaches to 70 CE
5. Look at a rabbinic response to 70 CE
6. Trace evolution from Pharisees to Rabbis

Thought Questions

1. Was the destruction of the Second Temple a watershed event in Jewish history? Why/why not?
2. What issues impact on or interfere with our understanding of 70 CE?
3. Why was the Temple destroyed? What were responses to this destruction? How do rabbinic texts reflect on the question of life after the Temple?
4. What was the impact of 70 CE on the various Jewish groups/sects?
5. What is the relationship of the rabbis to the Pharisees?

Readings

1. Core
 - a. Destruction Traditions (PDF)
 - b. M. Avot 1.1
 - c. M. Ta'anit 4.6
2. Secondary Readings: Schiffman, *Understanding*, pp. 254-291.
3. Bonus Reading: Klawans, "Josephus, the Rabbis, and Responses to Catastrophes Ancient and Modern," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100.2 (2010): 278-309

The Rise of the Rabbis **Full Syllabus**

Part Two: *The Rabbis and the Development of Oral Torah (Modules 4-6)*

Who were “the Rabbis”? Where did they come from, and what did they seek to accomplish? In these three modules, we will introduce the primary genres and works of rabbinic literature and consider their influence on later Judaism.

Module 4: The Rise of the Rabbis and the Development of the Mishnah

Taught by Rabbi Micha’el Rosenberg, Ph.D., Faculty, Hebrew College.

In this session, we introduce the primary genres of rabbinic writing and focus on one work in particular: the Mishnah, the foundational text of rabbinic culture. What does the Mishnah look like? How does one find one’s way in it? Using what we have learned about the Mishnah, we then consider the origins and agendas of the Rabbis: were they dogmatic exclusivists, or precursors to pluralistic, “big-tent” Judaism?

Video Segments

1. Defining Terms
2. The Mishnah
3. Whence the Rabbis?

Learning Goals

1. To understand what the Mishnah is and how it is structured
2. To achieve a sense of what mishnaic discourse looks like
3. To have a sense of where the Rabbis fit in relationship to the varieties of Second Temple Judaism that preceded them

Thought Questions

1. What makes text “argumentative”? Is the Mishnah a text interested in debate?
2. Who were the rabbis? What is the relationship of the rabbis to the Pharisees? How do the Rabbis relate to other (kinds of) Jews?
3. What are the earliest written redactions of oral law (the Mishnah and Tosefta)? What forms do the Mishnah and Tosefta take? From where do they get their authority? How do they relate to us today?
4. What does the Mishnah and Tosefta teach us about the rabbinic mind? What are the deeper messages found in Mishnah beyond the legal discussions?

Readings

1. Core: Shaye Cohen, “The Significance of Yavneh”
2. Bonus: Boyarin, *Border Lines*, Chapter Seven

The Rise of the Rabbis

Full Syllabus

Module 5: A Tale of Two Talmuds

Taught by Rabbi Micha'el Rosenberg, Ph.D., Faculty, Hebrew College

In this session, we look at the two Talmuds—one from the Land of Israel, and the other from Babylonia. How are these two Talmuds different from each other? How do they reflect their respective times and places? And why did the Babylonian Talmud become “the” Talmud?

Video Segments

1. Defining Terms
2. The Yerushalmi
3. The Bavli

Learning Goals

- To understand the relationship of the Talmuds to the Mishnah
- To understand the relationship of the Talmuds to each other
- To appreciate the unique voice of the Babylonian Talmud and how it differs from other Rabbinic works

Thought Questions

- ❑ What is the Talmud? What is its relationship to Mishnah? Why are there two of them? How do they compare?
- ❑ What role does questioning and argumentation have in the Talmud? What constitutes a valid or persuasive argument in the Talmud?
- ❑ How pluralistic were the Rabbis of the Talmuds? How do the Rabbis in the two centers of Palestine and Babylonia compare?

Readings

1. Core: None
2. Recommended
Daniel Boyarin, “Hellenism in Jewish Babylonia,” in *Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*
3. Bonus: Jeffrey Rubenstein, *Talmudic Stories: Narrative Art, Composition, and Culture* (1999).

The Rise of the Rabbis

Full Syllabus

Module 6: Midrash

Taught by Rabbi Jane Kanarek, Ph.D., Faculty, Hebrew College

This module explores a central genre of rabbinic literature: midrash (biblical interpretation). In this module, we will define the word midrash, speculate about the beginnings of midrash, and learn about various midrashic genres and techniques. We will see that midrash enables the rabbis to be imaginative, daring, and sophisticated as they remake the TaNaKh (Hebrew Bible) into a living document, a book of complex narratives and of rich rabbinic law. Through midrash, the rabbis teach us that one of the things it means to be a Jew is to learn how to read like the rabbis.

Video Segments

1. Introduction
2. Defining Midrash
3. The Beginnings of Midrash
4. Genres of Classical Midrash
5. Midrashic Techniques
6. Midrash Reads Scripture

Learning Goals

1. To be able to define the word midrash
2. To be able to list some of the major works of classical rabbinic midrash
3. To begin to understand some of the ways that midrash re-reads the Hebrew Bible
4. To understand midrash as a central expression of rabbinic culture

Thought Questions

1. What is midrash? Midrashic thinking?
2. What is the function of midrash halakhah? Midrash aggadah?
3. What is its relationship of midrash to scripture?

Readings

1. Core
 - Barry W. Holtz, "Midrash," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts* ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984) 177-211.
 - David Stern, "Midrash and Jewish Interpretation," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 1863-1875.
 - James L. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 77-103.
2. Recommended
 - Benjamin D. Sommer, "Inner-biblical Interpretation," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

The Rise of the Rabbis
Full Syllabus

1829-1835.

- Dina Stein, “Rabbinic Interpretation,” in *Reading Genesis: Ten Methods* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 119-135.
- David Stern, “Midrash and the Language of Exegesis,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 105-124.

3. Bonus

- Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990).
- Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood: Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
- Saul Lieberman, “Rabbinic Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary, 1994) 47-82.

The Rise of the Rabbis

Full Syllabus

Part Three: *Special Topics on the Rise of the Rabbis (Modules 7-10)*

These four modules address special topics in classical Rabbinic Judaism, from roughly the first century CE (following the destruction of the Second Temple) to the seventh century CE (the close of the Babylonian Talmud). Module 7 focuses on the various ways the rabbis understood gender and how we grapple with these rabbinic understandings in the modern world. Modules 8-10 focus on the rabbis' development and transformation of biblical and Israelite tradition in response to shifting historical circumstances and in dialogue with broader cultural currents of the late ancient Mediterranean world, resulting in the formation of a rich and multi-vocal tradition that would nourish Jewish life for centuries to come.

Module 7: Gender in the Talmud

Taught by Rabbi Micha'el Rosenberg, Ph.D., Faculty, Hebrew College

Rabbinic texts were produced in a clearly patriarchal cultural setting. Given that, what forms do patriarchal attitudes take in Rabbinic literature? And how have feminist scholars grappled with the modern engagement with these texts? We also engage in a case study, treating Rabbinic attitudes towards marital sex: were the Rabbis “sex-positive”?

Video Segments

1. Varieties of Patriarchy
2. Were the Rabbis “Sex Positive”?
3. Who Made Patriarchy?

Learning Goals

1. To recognize the challenge Rabbinic texts pose to contemporary, feminist readers
2. To appreciate a variety of approaches modern scholars have taken and how they relate to each other
3. To think about Rabbinic attitudes towards sex

Thought Questions

1. What does it mean to study texts that, at least at times, treat women as property? How does one responsibly study such a text, remaining both critical and engaged?
2. How do Hauptman's and Fonrobert's approaches differ? How are they similar?
3. How might we account for differing attitudes towards sex and gender articulated by different rabbis, and in different Rabbinic works?

Readings

1. Core: Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice*, Introduction
2. Recommended:
 - a. Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender*, Introduction
 - b. Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis* (the rest)
3. Bonus: Calderon, *A Bride for One Night: Talmud Tales* (recently translated, whole book—make sure that library has)

The Rise of the Rabbis **Full Syllabus**

Module 8: The Rabbinic Conception of Divine Law

Taught by Christine Hayes, Ph.D., Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University.

In late antiquity, the confrontation between two radically distinct conceptions of divine law – the universal and unwritten Greek natural law grounded in reason and the particular and written biblical law grounded in revelation -- created a cognitive dissonance that reverberates to the present. Ancient Jews – both rabbinic and non-rabbinic – resolved this dissonance in dramatically different ways. This module examines an array of ancient Jewish sources with special emphasis on the rabbinic construction of a conception of divine law that defied prevailing Greco-Roman norms.

Video Segments

1. Introduction – A Divine Law Cognitive Dissonance
2. Divine Law in Biblical Tradition/ Divine Law in Greco-Roman Culture
3. Jewish Responses I – Bridging the Gap
4. Jewish Responses II – Minding the Gap
5. Jewish Responses IIIa– The Rabbis: The Torah and Truth
6. Jewish Responses IIIb – The Rabbis: The Torah and Reason
7. Jewish Responses IIIc – The Rabbis: The Torah and Immutability

Learning Goals

1. Understand the difference between Greco-Roman and biblical notions of divine law
2. Understand how this difference generated a cognitive dissonance for ancient Jews whose divine law did not match the conception of divine law in the broader culture
3. Understand how this cognitive dissonance was resolved in very different ways by different groups of ancient Jews
4. Explore the rabbinic conception of divine law, which rejects the prevailing cultural expectation that divine law is an unwritten, universal, immutable, and true rational order
5. Consider the theological implications of the unique rabbinic conception of divine law

Thought Questions

1. How would a Stoic answer the question “What makes divine law divine?” How would someone grounded in the biblical tradition answer the same question?
2. Why did Greco-Roman definitions of divine and human law pose a problem for ancient Jews?
3. How did ancient Jews deal with the fact that their divine law did not possess the features that Greco-Roman tradition ascribed to divine law?
4. Why did the rabbinic conception of divine law appear scandalous to some?

The Rise of the Rabbis **Full Syllabus**

Readings

1. Primary Sources: We will examine together a wide range of Greco-Roman, Second Temple, Hellenistic Jewish and Rabbinic sources.
2. Core: Christine Hayes, "Law in Classical Rabbinic Judaism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Judaism and Law*, pp. 116-124
3. Bonus: Dov Weiss, *Pious Irreverence: Confronting God in Rabbinic Judaism*, chapters 4, 5 and 6

Module 9: In the Image of God: Human dignity in Rabbinic Sources

Taught by Christine Hayes, Ph.D., Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University.

This module traces the rabbinic development of the biblical conception of the creation of humans in the image of God. In rabbinic sources, creation in the image of God is understood to have implications for a wide range of ethical issues that are as pertinent today as they were in the Talmudic period, including: humanity's relationship with the natural environment, the integrity and care of the body), immunity from abuse, the value of life, and human dignity.

Video Segments

1. Humanity's Relationship with Creation (Adam I and Adam II)
2. Integrity and Care of the Body
3. The Value of Life
4. Human Dignity: Situational or Intrinsic? Alienable or Inalienable?

Learning Goals

1. To explore the meaning of the biblical representation of humans as created in the image of God – both within the Bible and within later rabbinic tradition
2. To trace the impact of the concept of human creation in the image of God on a number of ethical questions
3. To contrast the rabbinic understanding of human dignity and creation in the image of God with alternative understandings, both ancient and modern

Thought Questions

1. Humans alone are said to be created in the image of God. How does this unique status affect our relationship with the rest of creation (the natural environment and animals)?
2. What does it mean to be created in the **image** of God? What do the rabbis of rabbinic times understand to be God's **image** in us and what ethical duties -- towards others and towards ourselves -- follow from being created in the divine image?
3. How do distinctions and honors based on social class, gender or other factors stand in tension with the idea of an intrinsic human dignity?
4. How should human dignity rank in our scale of values?
5. Do we have the right to waive our human dignity -- for others? for ourselves?

The Rise of the Rabbis

Full Syllabus

Readings

1. Primary Sources: We will examine together a wide range of biblical and rabbinic sources.
2. Core: Yair Lorberbaum, “Imago Dei in Judaism: Early Rabbinic Literature, Philosophy and Halakhah” in Koslowski P. (eds), *The Concept of God, the Origin of the World and the Image of the Humans in the World Religions*, pp. 57-74
3. Bonus: Michael Y. Barilan, “From Imago Dei in the Jewish-Christian Traditions to Human Dignity in Contemporary Jewish Law” *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 19:3 (Sep 2009): 231-59

Module 10: Models of Jewish Identity in Classical Rabbinic Sources

Taught by Christine Hayes, Ph.D., Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University.

This module takes up the complex question of Jewish identity as it developed from biblical to rabbinic times. Close examination of the ancient sources reveals the multi-dimensional nature of Jewish identity, the multiple sufficient conditions for laying a claim to Jewish identity, the practical distinction between the Jewish identity of individuals and the Jewish identity of the collective, and diverse attitudes to intermarriage and conversion. While some advocated an impermeable boundary between Jews and non-Jews and others sought to transcend such distinctions, the rabbis of the Talmudic era forged a middle path, imagining diverse modes of Jewish belonging and Jewish community.

Video Segments

1. In the beginning...
2. Memory
3. Covenant
4. Qedushah
5. Response to Crisis: Between Radical Exclusion and Radical Inclusion
6. Imagining Community

Learning Goals

1. Understand the complex and multi-dimensional character of Israelite and later Jewish identity
2. Understand the distinction between individual Jewish identity and communal Jewish identity
3. Appreciate diverse attitudes towards intermarriage and conversion over time and across different Jewish subgroups
4. Understand rabbinic conceptions of community and the porousness of community boundaries

Thought Questions

1. What are the various ways a person might lay claim to Israelite, and later Jewish, identity? Are these identical to the ways a person might lay claim to membership within the Jewish community?

The Rise of the Rabbis
Full Syllabus

2. Does the Bible contain a blanket prohibition on all intermarriages?
3. How was Ezra's policy definition of Jewish identity (and his attitude to intermarriage and conversion) a radical break with tradition and did it succeed?
4. How did the rabbis forge a middle path between radical exclusivism and radical inclusivism?
5. What models of community are imagined in rabbinic sources?

Readings

1. Primary: We will examine together a wide range of biblical and rabbinic sources.
2. Core: Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, pp. 1-11, chap 3
3. Bonus: *ibid.*, chapters 4, 5, and 8.