

Rabbinical School
RB-BIBLE-416: The Prophets in Bible, Theology and Jewish Life
Nehemia Polen
2 graduate credits
Spring 2019
Wednesdays from 2-3:30 pm

Contact Information:

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Course Description:

This course will introduce the major literary prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Themes include ethics and concern for the poor and marginalized; attitudes toward Temple, ritual, and Torah; covenant, threat of exile, promise of restoration, the role of Jerusalem and the future of Israel; the marriage metaphor, messianic hopes, interplay of universalism and particularism, condemnation of idolatry and the promotion of worship of Israel's God; discernment and the issue of true vs. false prophecy; reception, rejection and eventual canonization of prophetic messages and texts. We will pay attention to lexical and structural matters, literary/ poetic style, aspects of persuasion and rhetoric. We will track prophetic personalities and careers, their sense of calling and vocation, their social location and theological concerns. We will look at prophets in canonical perspective and the trajectory of biblical history from tenth to fourth century BCE. Finally, we will be attentive to the tripartite division of Tanakh, and the role the prophetic books have played in later Jewish theology and liturgical life.

As we attend to conceptual and theological issues, our core aim in each class will be to read, study and absorb the words, phrases and larger units of the Hebrew text in their beauty and power. You will be asked to read with fluidity and confidence; to translate sentences and passages with attentiveness to ambiguity, polysemy and paronomasia (wordplays), and to address theological perspectives of the prophetic work.

Assessment:

Requirements: Your preparation for each class should include close attention to the rhythms and sounds of the Hebrew. Be ready to read with confidence and fluency, to declaim! For meaning and context, consult *Jewish Study Bible* (second edition), the relevant entries in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, *Da'at Miqra*. For those chapters that are Haftarot, give particular attention to Michael Fishbane's *JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot*.

In addition, you will be asked to give a class presentation introducing a prophet or theme, and write a final paper. You will be asked to commit selected prophetic passages to memory.

Course Structure (Dates, Topics, Readings and Assignments):

#1 February 6. Introduction: the role of prophets in Israelite society ('fourth estate'); the role of prophetic books in the Bible; the right and left hands of prophetic message (Reuther; Rorty). Introduction to Isaiah. The shape, context, style, theology.

Structure of the book: Isaiah 1-12; 13-23; 24-27; 28-33; 34-35; 36-39; 40-55; 56-66.

Arc of the prophetic writings: remembered ideal past, present crisis, future hope, restoration, hearing God's 'Yes'—Isaiah 1.21; Categories of religious leaders—**כהן נביא חכם**

Secondary readings for Isaiah: Heschel, *Prophets*, on Isaiah, pp. 61-97; Reuther, 'right hand and left hand' of the prophetic message; Rendtorff, Canonical-covenantal context; Fishbane, 'Biblical Prophecy' in *Jewish Spirituality*; Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*; Klawans, 'Rethinking the Prophetic Critique' in *Purity, Sacrifice and the Temple*

#2. February 13. Chapter 1. →see Rashi on Isaiah 1.3---why does Rashi mention **והאכלתים את המן** ? See Nehemia 9.20 **נתת להשכילם** ורוחך הטובה נתת להשכילם --child-raising into a culture of nobility, spirit, sublime heavenly wisdom.

→see Radak on 1.2 **בשכינת** ורוממתים בתורתך ורוממתים בתורתך

→**reversals**: see Qara on 1.4 **גדול גוי חוטא** --//כי מי גוי גדול

#3. February 20. Isaiah chapters 2-5. The ideal Jerusalem and the situation as Isaiah saw it.

Why war will be no more: Radak on 2.4 **ושפט--אמר, כי אם יהיה בין גוי לגוי מלחמה או תביעות** ביניהם...

Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* pp. 131ff on Isaiah 2.2-4 eschatological vision...

Parable of the vineyard. Reception history of the parable; Yerushalmi Hagigah.

#4. February 27. Chapter 6. The Glory. Prophetic purification and commissioning, vision of God. the meaning of **קדוש** –Rashi, Otto, Berkowitz.

Rashi on 6.3 **וקרא זה אל זה**

Transformative action of the Divine Presence/Glory **כבוד**. Moshe Weinfeld, 'Presence, Divine,' *EJ* vol. 13; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, 'The Name and the Glory: The Zion-Sabbath Theology and Its Exilic Successors,' *JNSL* 24 (1998)

#5. March 6. Chs 11, 25, 26-- Eschatological promise. Note especially 26.19

All-embracing blessing-- Ch. 18 –the embassy and gift of the Ethiopian delegation

19.19-25. . Destruction; saving of the remnant. Ch. 28. Note esp. 28.20. Chs. 30-32--

Rejection and eventual acceptance of the prophetic message. [Harold Fisch reading].

#6. March 13. Chs. 40-55 --Prophecies of return, restoration

#7. March 27. The fifty-third chapter--reception history. The identity and role of the servant.

#8. April 3. Jerusalem as Divine Mother, universal worship. [Callaway, Davis]

→See Malbim on Isaiah 40.5 **מבאר כי ההופעה האלו הית תתעלה לעתיד בשש מעלות על זמן העבר...**

#9. April 10. Resurrection, eschatology in Isaiah. The role of Isaiah in later Judaism and Christianity. Levenson, *Resurrection*

#10. April 17. Introduction to Jeremiah-- personality, vocation, message. Comparison of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Jeremiah chapters 1,2. Prophetic commission, symbolic visions, recollection of ideal relationship between Israel and God in wilderness period, marriage metaphor. Malbim on Jer. 2.2
מדמה תחלת דבר האלהי עם עמו כחבורי חתן וכלה ארוס וארוסה, ויציירהו כאיש אחד הבא מרחוק, ובת עשיר
היפה בנשים הכניסה אותו לבית אביה ועשתה עמו חסד....
Chapter 7. Jeremiah's sermon on false reliance on Temple and sacrifice devoid of ethical action.

11. May 1. Chapter 17-- עקוב הלב מכל....; Note the wordplay in v. 13—"מקוה"; Focus on Shabbat in vv. 19-27. What aspect of observance is highlighted? Compare Nehemia 13. 14-22. Note the list of sacrificial offerings in 17.26 as blessing and promise.
Ch. 18. God as potter.
Ch. 20. 7-18. Jeremiah's complaint over his prophetic mission.
Ch. 22. 13-15. Luxurious residences. Compare with Isaiah 4. 8-9.
Ch. 23. 9-40 True and false prophets. 'Divine Council' in 23.18.

#12. May 8. Ch. 24. Vision of the two baskets of figs. What are the implications for those who had endured exile, versus those who had stayed in the Land?
Ch. 26. Jeremiah's life in danger. Note the explicit quote of Micah 3.12.
Ch. 29. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles. Note especially vv. 5-7.
Ch. 31. Restoration and new covenant. Comparison to earlier biblical covenants, including the Covenant on the Plains of Moab.

#13. May 15. Ch. 32. Jeremiah commanded by God to redeem a family estate near Jerusalem;
Jeremiah's astonishment and God's reply
Ch. 34. Freeing slaves and the tragic reversal.

Ch. 35. The Rechabites. What is the meaning of this edifying example? Note that the Rechabites are not Israelite/Jewish.
Ch. 38. Jeremiah's imprisonment and narrow escape.

Contrasting visions of restoration: compare Jer. 31.8 *Behold I will bring them ... and with them the blind and the lame....* with Isaiah 35.5 *then the eyes of the blind shall be opened...*

Compare Jer. 31.34

Rabbi Bahya b. Asher's observations on Jeremiah 31. 34-39 *Kad ha Kemah* כד הקמה (ed. Chavel, Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, pp. 115-116 s.v. גאולה

Jeremiah, Second Temple Judaism, and the fate of prophecy. See Jeremiah 23.35-40; 28; 31.8;
Zechariah 13.1-6. Compare with Isaiah 59.20-21; Joel 3.1-2; Hosea 9.7-8; Ezekiel 21.5, 33.30-33
Does Jeremiah foresee the end of prophecy? Near-death of Jeremiah Jer 38 (compare 20.2; 26.19); cf. II Chronicles 24.21-22 stoning of Zechariah ben Yehoyada—death of the prophet at the hands of the people casts a pall over the people—but the prophet has failed as well!
Discernment and the difficulty of recognizing false prophets. Three types of false prophets in Jeremiah—Baal worshipers / positive thinkers/ the case of Hananya; → false prophets/ failed prophet
→Jeremiah—the first Rabbinic Jew?

Take delight in the privilege of savoring these amazing, deep, challenging texts!

Course Accommodations for Disabilities:

Hebrew College is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in programs. Accordingly, if a student has a documented disability, and as a result, needs a reasonable accommodation to attend, participate or complete course requirements, then he or she should inform the instructor at the beginning of the course as well as the Director of Student Support. For further information, see the Student Handbook at http://hebrewcollege.edu/sites/default/files/student_handbook.pdf.

If you require course accommodations because of a documented disability or an emergency medical condition, please email your instructor as soon as possible. We are happy to work with you on any issues you have to ensure that you can participate fully in the class and complete the course requirements. Please do not wait until the assignments are due for a retroactive accommodation, but discuss the situation with your instructor before you experience difficulty.