

Gender and Judaism

CAS-RN337/637

Tuesday/Thursday 12:30-2:00, CAS315

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Course Description

1. Background

The nineteenth-century discovery of matriarchy gave rise to many lively speculations on the origin of societal order. As part of nineteenth-century feminism, the debate on the role of biblical religion in bringing down the primordial religion of mother earth was part of a radical critique of the "male" order and its guardians, the patriarchal state and its institutions (church, schools, the home). The recent boom of gender studies shows that this question is far from settled. Yet it casts the question in a different light, fuelled by different interests. The question of gender has penetrated virtually every aspect of the Humanities, from literature to religion, where it has become an important tool for examining common assumptions about social, cultural, and political modes of expression such as religion, art, and philosophy. The character of seemingly universal means of ordering the phenomena we perceive, the very "we" or "I" of perception, is revealed in its gendered perspective. Even the standard of objectivity of historiography and critical philosophy has come under attack as a form of "male gaze."

Religion, as a traditional form of social ordering, is a pertinent subject for gender critique. Religion enforces different roles for men and women by means of establishing ritual, mythological, and socio-political order as well as providing an agency of perpetuation of power relationships. On the other hand, religious sources may also serve to justify and support radical change in the self-determination and formation of women and men.

The monotheistic tradition of Israel, a formative element of Western culture, provides a fertile area for the study of gender relations. Monotheism itself is a critical statement against the gendered deities of the Ancient Near East and thus deeply involved and implicated in the making of gender identity in the West. Furthermore, Judaism (in its various manifestations), Jewish literature (in its many languages), and Jewish societies (in their various cultural contexts) provide an interesting case for the complexities of gender, especially in light of recent revisionary studies informed by feminism and gender theory.

2. Course Objectives

"Gender and Judaism" introduces to the interface between the biblical monotheistic revolution (often cast as a revolt of patriarchy against preceding matriarchal societies), its subsequent Judaic interpretations (where tension exists between the image projected by religious literature composed by male authorships and the often matriarchal social reality), and modern critical approaches to the historiography and practice of Judaism. The latter aspects (historiography and liturgical practice) speak to the current cultural debate of modernism vs. postmodernism. The course also serves the interest of introducing to strategies of text interpretation that are generally relevant to an understanding of Judaism and other scripture based traditions.

3. Teaching Style

The class is run as a seminar. Readings must be completed in advance of the relevant session so students' participation will not only be lively but also based on sound information. Student will be required to present frequent summaries of assigned readings or independent research in form of presentations to the class.

3. Prerequisites

4. Grading

Brief in-class presentations and general participation (50%). Presentation on a "female voice" (last week of classes) (25%). Term paper: Reflections on Gender and Judaism: What have I learned? (25%)

The following titles are recommended for purchase and available at the BU bookstore:

David Biale, *Eros and the Jews. From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York, Basic Books, 1992).

Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel* (University of California Press, repr. edition. 1995).

Please make sure to own an edition of the Hebrew Bible.

Recommended edition: *Tanakh. A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (ed. Jewish Publication Society, 1985). A New Testament may also come in handy but generally biblical texts can easily be found on the web and downloaded, printed, etc. (E.g., <http://jewishhistory.huji.ac.il/links/texts.htm>)

Course Schedule

0. Intro

Sept 4

What is Gender?

I. The Absence of the Goddess and the Worship of One God Alone

Sept 9 - 18

Source Texts:

Gen 1; Psalm 104, Isa 45, Job 38-42, Deuteronomy 6 and 12, 2. Kings 22-23, Nehemia 8:1-8

Ancient Near Eastern myths and hymns. The library has several copies (in MUGAR and School of Theology library) of *The Ancient Near East*. Edited by James B. Pritchard [abbr. ANET]. Where possible I indicate versions available on-line:

[Enuma Elish](#) (Akkadian creation epic)

Inanna and the King (ANET, 640-641)

[Inanna and Dumuzi](#) (various poems). See also ANET, 639-40.

[Inanna and Dumuzi's wedding](#).

Poems about Baal and Anat (ANET, 129-135, 138-142)

Secondary Lit.:

Caroline Walker Bynum, "Introduction" in: *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press), [pp. 1-20](#)

Rita Gross, *Feminism and Religion* ([Defining Feminism, Religion, and the Study of Religion](#))

Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation" in Koltun, [pp. 217-240](#)

STUDY QUESTIONS

II. The Female Voice as a Male Invention

Sept 23, 25

"Adam and Eve"

Source Texts:

Gen 2:4b-4

[Vita Adae et Evae](#) (Life of Adam and Eve), on-line version of the text prepared by Gary Anderson and Michael Stone.

For [Eve's Tale of the Fall and Eve's Confession](#) (neither one is contained in the Latin *vita*) read pericopes nr. 17-27 and 29 of the on-line version according to the Armenian, Georgian, Greek, or Slavonic manuscripts.

Secondary Lit.:

Reuven Kimelman, ["The Seduction of Eve and the Exegetical Politics of Gender."](#)

Sept 30-Oct 2

"Women in the Bible"

Source Texts:

Patriarchal stories in Genesis, Book Ruth, Selections from Judges and the Books of Samuel and Kings

Secondary Lit.:

Frymer-Kensky, "[Gender and Its Image: Women in the Bible](#)" in *In the Wake*, pp. 118-143

As a source of comparison: Look at women in Assyrian codes of law. ([Use this Link](#))

Oct 7-16

"Covenant and the Male Imagery of Love"

1. *Da'at*, *Ma'at*, and the Carnality of Knowledge

Texts: Gilgamesh, Greek lit. on male homoeroticism and initiation, Books of Samuel and Kings (David, Solomon: wisdom and male prowess), Egyptian *ma'at* literature (follow the links listed [HERE](#))

2. *B'rith*, or: Covenant and Love

Texts: Hosea, The Book of Deuteronomy,

Lit: Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake*, ch. 12 "[The Wanton Wife of God](#)" pp. 144-161

Yochanan Muffs, [Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel, selections](#)

3. Taboo: Licit and Illicit Sexual Relationships in Biblical Law

Texts: selections from Exodus, Numbers, and Leviticus

Lit: Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (NY: Schocken, 1984), ch. 7 "Sexuality Outside of Marriage" [pp. 175-197](#)

Oct 21-30

"The Judaism of the Male Householder: Women in the Mishnah"

Source Texts:

Selections from the Mishnah

Secondary Lit.:

Judith Romney Wegner, *Chattel or Person*, [ch. 1, pp. 10-19](#), ch. 7 [The Anomaly of Women in the Mishnah](#)

Rachel Adler, "Tumah and Taharah: Ends and Beginnings" in [Koltun, 63-71](#)

Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law*, ch. 1 ["Women and the Mitzvot"](#), ch. 6 ["Niddah"](#)

David Biale, *Eros*, Ch. 2

Nov 4-6

"Mythological Woman as a threat to (male) order: Lilith, Eve and Satan"

Source Texts:

Selections from Midrash literature (Ginzberg, [Legends](#), and Bialik/Ravitzky, [The Book of Legends](#)) and [Vita Adam et Evae](#)

Secondary Lit.:

Aviva Cantor, ["The Lilith Question"](#) in S. Heschel (ed.), *On Being a Jewish Feminist. A Reader* (Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 40-50 and cf. [Lilith](#) (journal, 1976)

Dame/Rivlin/Wenkart, *Which Lilith?* ([Introduction](#))

Web resources on Lilith: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~hummm/Topics/Lilith/lilith.html>

Nov 11-13

"The Male Brotherhood: From Pharisees to Kabbalists"

Source Texts:

Serekh ha Yahad (1QS), the Zaddokite Document, Selections from rabb. lit.

Secondary Lit.:

Martin Jaffee, selections from *Early Judaism*, on ["Social Foundations of Early Judaic Worlds"](#)

Elliot Wolfson, *Circle in the Square. Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (SUNY Press, 1995), [pp. 79-121](#)

David Biale, *Eros*, ch. 3 and 5

Oct 18-20

"Feminine traits of the Israelite Male (as defined by the Israelite Male)"

Source Texts:

Secondary Lit.:

Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct. The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*

David Biale, *Eros*, ch 7 and 8

Oct 25

"The Colonized Female: Women Adopting Male Views of Women"

Source Text:

Memoirs of Glueckel of Hameln (Schocken 1988)

Secondary Lit:

Natalie Z. Davis, *Women on the Margins*, pp. 5-62: "[Glikl bas Judah Leib](#)"

Ruth Wise, "Women as Conservative Rabbis?" in *Commentary* 68/4 (Oct. 1979), p. 59

Dec 2-4

"The Gender of Desire: Platonism and Its (Ill) Effects (From Philo to Maimonides)"

Readings:

Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel. Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (UCPress, 1993)

Susan Shapiro, "A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy" in: Naomi Zack (et al.), *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions* (Blackwell, 1998), [pp. 212-226](#)

Frymer Kensky, "Gifts of the Greeks" in: *Wake of the Goddess*, 203-212

David Biale, *Eros*, ch. 4

III. Recovering the Female Voice

Dec 9-11

Presentations on Contemporary Female Voices

The following are possible base texts for presentations, whereby some of the titles contain a whole range of texts. There are other appropriate sources, and you are encouraged to find your own.

Cynthia Ozick, "Notes Towards Finding the Right Question" in S. Heschel (ed), 120-151

Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (Harper, 1991), ch. 4 "Reimagining the Unthinkable" [pp. 121-169](#)

Judith Hauptmann, *Rereading the Rabbis* (Westview Pr, 1998)

Ellen Umansky, *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992)

Evelyn Torton Beck (ed.) *Nice Jewish Girls. A Lesbian Anthology*. Watertown/MA: Persephone Press, 1982. Second Edition Trumansburg/NY: Crossing Press, 1984. Third ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989

Batya Baumann, "Women-Identified Women in Male-Identified Judaism" in Heschel, pp. 88-95

General reading (required for everyone): David Biale, *Eros*, ch. 9