

Topics in Rabbinic Judaism: Midrash

RS-744; McMaster University, Term I, 2004/2005 – Tuesdays, 12:30 to 2:30 pm, Room TBA
[Annette Y. Reed](#) (Dept. of Religious Studies; UH 110; 905-525-9140 ext. 24597)

This seminar will explore classical Rabbinic biblical interpretation in its socio-historical, literary, and theological contexts. We will consider the emergence of a distinctively Rabbinic approach to exegesis and the development of literary forms for its expression, while also investigating the place of Torah in the ideology of Rabbinic Judaism and in the evolving self-conception of the Sage. We will focus on primary sources, reading selections from a variety of late antique and medieval midrashim, but we will also touch on some trends in recent scholarship, including comparisons with Second Temple Jewish and early Christian exegesis as well as theoretical discussions about indeterminacy, intertextuality, and the nature of interpretation.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students can choose to take this seminar with or without the Hebrew language component. Successful completion of this component can be used to fulfill the Hebrew language requirement for Early Judaism majors as well as minors. Even those who do not need to fulfill this requirement are encouraged to take this component, if at all possible; for – as we shall see – to an even greater degree than other forms of ancient literature, Midrash is best understood in its original language. The different requirements for the two streams are as follows:

1. Seminar with Hebrew Language Component

- a. Presentation = 15% - Students should choose one book from the below list on which orally to present a book-review (20 min.), surveying and critiquing the book with special attention to issues of method and approach. In addition, they may be asked to do several shorter (5 min.) informal presentations, such as summaries of assigned articles.
- b. Hebrew language component = 45% - This component will involve in-class translation (15%) as well as two quizzes (10%) and a final test (20%). I will distribute more precise information about assignments once I get a sense of how many students in the class will be taking this component and their present skill-levels in Hebrew. Especially insofar as the final test will consist of translating an unfamiliar passage (with the aid of the below listed lexical and grammatical resources), students are strongly encouraged also to participate in the informal “Mishnah Lunch.”
- c. Final Paper = 40% - For the final paper (15-20 pp), students should choose a passage from one of the midrashic collections surveyed in the seminar and pursue a close analysis of it, focusing on the hermeneutical methods by which the biblical basetext is interpreted and the message thereby communicated, as they relate to Rabbinic Midrash in general and the particular aims and tendencies of the collection in which the passage is found. Attention to (and discussion of) the original Hebrew is critical. Students should thus arrive at their own translation, although consulting multiple translations is encouraged, if possible. Efforts should also be made to engage modern scholarly discussions and to bring in parallels and comparisons from other midrashim. Students who wish to pursue a different topic (e.g. comparing different versions of the same tradition or surveying different interpretations of the same biblical basetext) or who wish to consider a passage from a midrashic text not surveyed in the seminar should consult with me well in advance.

2. Seminar without Hebrew component

a. Presentations, short papers, and class participation = 60% – Students should choose two books from the below list on which orally to present book-reviews (25 min.), surveying and critiquing the book with special attention to issues of method and approach. The short papers (two; 5-7 pp. each) can consist of expansions and developments of these presentations or selected themes therein, bringing in both primary and secondary literature. In addition to preparation of assigned readings and participation in class discussions, students will be assigned several shorter (5 min.) informal presentations, such as summaries of assigned articles.

b. Final paper = 40% – For the final paper (15-20 pp.), students should choose a passage from one of the midrashic collections surveyed in the seminar and pursue a close analysis of it, focusing on the hermeneutical methods by which the biblical basetext is interpreted and the message thereby communicated, as they relate to Rabbinic Midrash in general and the particular aims and tendencies of the collection in which the passage is found. Students should engage the original Hebrew to the maximum degree that they are able. Those unable to read the texts in the original should make special efforts to engage modern scholarly discussions and to bring in parallels and comparisons from other midrashim. Students who wish to pursue a different topic (e.g. comparing different versions of the same tradition or different interpretations of the same biblical basetext) or who wish to consider a passage from a midrashic text not surveyed in the seminar should consult with me well in advance.

REQUIRED READINGS

The following books have been ordered from Titles:

- H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. Markus Bockmuehl (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991)
 - Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic literature* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).
 - Miguel Pérez Fernández, *An introductory grammar of Rabbinic Hebrew*, trans. John Elwolde (Leiden: Brill, 1997).
 - M. H. Segal, *A grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2001)

All students should purchase Strack and Stemberger's *Introduction*, if they do not already own it – not only will there be many readings from this book but it is an invaluable resource for further study. Those completing the Hebrew component should have their own copy of Jastrow's Dictionary (now handily reprinted!) as well as the two grammars.

For primary readings, see the [list of recommended editions and translations](#). Additional secondary readings, as listed in the [schedule of assignments](#), will be made available for xeroxing; those marked by an asterik (*) are available on-line.

BOOKS FOR PRESENTATION

- Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana

UP, 1990).

- Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).
- Jay M. Harris, *"How Do We Know This"? Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994)
- Galit Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life: Folklore and Midrash in Rabbinic Literature*, trans. Batya Stein (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000)
- Marc Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996)
- David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern UP, 1996).
- Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004).

**[Topics in Rabbinic Judaism: Midrash](#) | [Schedule of Readings](#) | [Editions and Translations](#) | [On-line Resources](#)
Annette Yoshiko Reed - [Email](#) | [Homepage](#)**