

Beyond the Book: Judaism as a Non-Biblical Religion

AAR Member Contact:

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Abstract: We are seeking seed funds to start a regional workshop series that offers a space to disarticulate the study of premodern Judaism(s) from the study of Bible. We hope that our regional workshop series will encourage the spread of this agenda in the scholarly community more broadly by providing materials for a series of thematic panels on the issue at regional and national meetings of the AAR.

Project Description:

Background. In both scholarly analysis and the popular imagination, premodern Jewry is often envisioned as the people of the Book par excellence—a community in which both practice and belief emerge from the interpretation of Scripture.¹ As a practical consequence, the study of premodern Judaism(s) has largely been relegated to the Society of Biblical Literature and cognate organizations—which has, in turn, subtly reinforced this trend by disproportionately promoting work on early Judaism that coincides with the Society of Biblical Literature’s charge to advance biblical studies.

From a religious studies perspective, the intellectual implications of this categorization have not been entirely benign. The Bible continues to be shrouded in an aura of sui generis in a great deal of contemporary scholarly discourse. As a result, the traditional portrait of classical Judaism as the religion of the Hebrew Bible has often led researchers to treat premodern Judaism(s) as somehow exempt from the comparative observations that have come to structure the study of other religions in the academy. Indeed, the very notion that early Judaism was primarily an exegetical-textual movement places it virtually in a category of its own among historical religious communities. For over the course of the past twenty five years, it has become increasingly clear that religious

¹As Geza Vermes has put it, classical Judaism is a religion “in which practice and belief derived from the study and interpretation of Scripture.”” *Post-biblical Jewish Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 59.

practitioners engage with written scripture in many different ways—only a very small number of which approach sacred texts as communicative documents and a practical source of information.²

² For a general treatment of this topic, see James Bielo (ed.), *The Social Life of Scripture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicalism* (Rutgers University Press: Piscataway, 2009). It has long been acknowledged, for instance, that lay practitioners have not always been able to read the biblical text for themselves (For a book-length treatment of this topic in relation to ‘diaspora’ Christianities, see Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora/Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially 123-162 and the scholarly literature cited there). It is similarly accepted that in some communities the Bible may be embraced more as a talisman than as a communicative document. (For an extended reflection on this phenomenon see Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and the literature cited there.) Others have documented the diverse ways in which Christian communities have used the Bible as an oral tradition. For an extreme example of this phenomenon, see Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2007), as well as the literature cited in that work).

For work on this topic as it relates to the Vedas, see David Carpenter, “The Mastery of Speech: Canonicity and Control in the Vedas” in *Authority, Anxiety, and Canon: Essays in Vedic Interpretation*, ed. Laurie Patton (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 19-34, Wendy Doniger, “Fluid and Fixed Texts in India,” in *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Joyce B. Flueckiger and Laurie Patton (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 31-42, William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 68-69, especially the scholarly literature cited in note 3, Barbara Holdrege, *The Veda and the Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), and Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Other Peoples’ Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 58-61.

On this question in the context of other sacred literature from the Indian cultural sphere, see Bijoya Baruah Rajkhowa, “Oral Tradition of the Ramayana in North East India,” in *Critical Perspectives on the Ramayana*, ed. Jaydipsinh Dodiya (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2001), 131-147, Saria Priyadarshini Bose, *A Woman’s Ramayan: Candravati’s Bengali Epic* (New York/London: Routledge, 2013), 1-51, Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text: Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 30-60, Phillip Lutgendorf, “Ram’s Story in Shiva’s City: Public Arenas and Private Patronage” in *Culture and Power in the Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment*, ed. Sandra Freitag. (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1989), 34ff, R. Narasimhan, *Characterizing Literacy: A Study of Western and Indian Literacy Experiences* (New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London: Sage Publications, 2004), especially 168-188, McComas Taylor, “Empowering the Sacred: The Function of the Sanskrit Text in a Contemporary Exposition of the Bhagavatapurana,” in *Literacy and Performance in the Ancient World: Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World*, ed. Elizabeth Minchin (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 129-150, and Wendy Doniger, “Fluid and Fixed Texts in India,” in *Boundaries of the Text: Epic Performances in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Joyce B. Flueckiger and Laurie Patton, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 1991), 31-42.

On Buddhist use of sacred text as a ritual artifact, see Jinah Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 2013), 23-72 and Gregory Schopen, “Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahayana” in *Figments and Fragments of Mahayana Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers*, ed. Gregory Schopen (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 25-62.

On the “displacement of the written Quran by the spoken one” (As William Graham puts it in William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 110), see Fredrick Mathewson Denny, “Qur’an Recitation: A Tradition of Oral Performance,” *Oral Tradition* 4 (1989), 5-26, Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur’an in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), William Graham, *Islamic and Comparative Religious Studies: Selected Writings* (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 141-162, Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 153-187 and Lauren Osborne, “From Text to Sound to Perception: Modes and Relationships of Meaning in the Recited Qur’an” (PhD diss.: University of Chicago, 2014). (This bibliography was drawn

An emerging body of new research, however, has begun to bring the study of premodern Judaism(s) back in line with the study of other religious movements in this regard, by revealing that early Judaism was not always as Bible-centric as the traditional scholarly portrait suggests. Or at least, this work draws our attention to the fact that premodern Jews did not always engage with the biblical tradition in the ways that we have come to imagine that religious practitioners will relate to this canonical text.³

Agenda. To encourage new work on this emerging trend, we established a colloquium series at the University of Michigan in January 2016, titled *Beyond the Book: Thinking Biblically without the Bible*. This series has been soliciting works-in-progress that look at moments in early Jewish history in which the idea of the Bible was not an organizing category of knowledge for Jewish practitioners. The first semester of the series focused on the problem of categories—asking what constituted a sacred text in the ancient world, evaluating whether the Hebrew Bible fit this definition in the early periods of Jewish history, and asking us to reflect on the historiographical forces that originally led classical Judaism to be categorized as a biblical religion in the scholarly discourse. In coming semesters, we hope to move on to studying particular historical examples—looking more closely at the ways in which various late antique and medieval Jews have expressed lack of interest in (or even resistance to) the Bible as a text or have engaged with the Biblical tradition in ways that differ from contemporary expectations about how religious practitioners will interact with this canonical text.

We suggest that the colloquium should continue to be hosted primarily by the University of Michigan in 2016-2017 since the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Michigan has the unique advantage of housing the only advanced institute for visiting scholars in Jewish Studies in the Midwest. Hosting the series primarily at the Frankel Center will thus expand the reach of our collaboration beyond the Midwest while still keeping our work firmly rooted in the region. We propose, however, to hold additional sessions of the colloquium series at other universities next year in the hopes that we can tempt colleagues from more distant institutions to participate in the workshop. We expect to hold one session of the series at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to bring our work to the western part of the region, one or more sessions at the University of Notre Dame to introduce our work our colleagues in the southern portions of the Midwest, and one session at the University of Chicago to allow us to converge in a central metropolitan location.

For each session, we would invite two scholars from regional institutions other than the hosting institution to present draft papers on a topic of shared interest and ask a scholar from the hosting institution to act as respondent. Collaborators from other institutions would also be offered a small travel subsidy to attend these meetings whenever possible, since our experiments with remote digital

from Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg, “The Dangers of Reading as we Know It,” forthcoming in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.)

³ A small selection of this work includes: David Lambert, “How the “Torah of Moses” Became Revelation: An Early, Apocalyptic Theory of Pentateuchal Origins” forthcoming in the *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (OUP: 2016), Seth Sanders, “The Interpretation of Revelation in the Book of Daniel and the Origins of Early Jewish Hermeneutical Techniques,” forthcoming in *Prooftexts*, and Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg, *The People of the Book Without the Book: Classical Rabbinic Ambivalence Towards the Biblical Text* (Phd Thesis: University of Chicago, June 2015).

participation last year were not entirely successful in promoting a more robust collaboration. Students and faculty from the hosting institution and neighboring schools would be encouraged to attend the sessions and meet with the visiting scholars during their stay.

As we imagine it, the formal workshop portion of the meeting would last around two hours. To extend the reach of the collaboration, we would also include an overnight stay for the visitors and both a breakfast and a lunch meeting at which a rotating selection of faculty members and graduate students from the host institution would have a chance to speak at length with the visiting scholars. We expect that these arrangements will encourage collaboration between the speakers, other visiting scholars, and members of the host institution. We also hope that the pleasant atmosphere cultivated by these leisurely visits and informal discussions around meals will encourage scholars working in cognate areas to consider how they might expand their own work in ways that would make it relevant to the series. In this way, we hope to expand the interest in this growing trend in the region as a whole.

Contributions to the AAR. We expect our efforts will indirectly encourage scholars of premodern Judaism to engage more actively with the AAR by demonstrating that the traditional portrait of early Judaism as a biblical religion needs to be destabilized and showing that the AAR provides a natural home for this project.⁴ We expect the series to promote engagement with both the regional and national branches of the AAR more directly by promoting scholarly connections among likeminded individuals within the region, which will generate AAR panel proposals on the topics and themes that emerge from the workshop. We expect this project to be widely reproducible and have already begun recruiting collaborators in the West Coast and Mid-Atlantic regions to expand the collaboration to those areas.

Collaborators:

Simeon Chavel, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible, University of Chicago

Rachel Neis, Jean and Samuel Frankel Chair of Rabbinic Judaism, University of Michigan

Tzvi Novick, Abrams Chair of Jewish Thought and Culture, University of Notre Dame

Jordan Rosenblum, Belzer Associate Professor of Classical Judaism, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Devorah Schoenfeld, Associate Professor of Theology, Loyola University-Chicago

Abraham Winitzer, Associate Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Languages and History and Jordan H. Kapson Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies, University of Notre Dame

Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg, Assistant Professor of Judaic Studies, University of Michigan

A spreadsheet budget will accompany this application.

⁴ While this project can (and will) also be advanced under the auspices of the Society of Biblical Literature, the comparative examples provided by research on similar issues in other religions in AAR meetings and publications would provide a particularly fertile context for this work that could not help but advance this work in new directions.

This proposal was prepared by Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg (contact information provided above).