



FACULTY OF ARTS
CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



PRAGUE JEWISH STUDIES

Essential Trends in Jewish Studies: Middle-Ages and Early Modern Period Spring 2012 Pavel Sládek, Ph.D.

(Two 90 min. sessions per week)

Jewish Studies represent one of the most fascinating disciplines in contemporary humanities. On one hand, the research of Jewish history, culture and civilization is highly specialized, most importantly in its traditional requirement of philological tools (knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic but often also Arabic, Latin and other source-languages). On the other hand, the current state of knowledge in Jewish Studies enables and often even calls for the application of modern research methods borrowed from general historiography, sociology and especially from historical and contemporary cultural anthropology. During the past decades many of the essential and most pressing problems in Jewish Studies have been newly addressed from interdisciplinary perspectives and not surprisingly, a number of classical interpretations deemed up to recently inviolable, have been reconsidered.

The aim of the present course is to discuss some of the central themes of Jewish history, culture and civilization in the light of the contemporary research and to evaluate the way in which the recent research corrected the older traditional notions and interpretations.

The course proceeds chronologically and topically in weekly blocks. Chronologically, the emphasis is on Medieval and Early Modern period (1000–1800 CE). The course focuses on Jewish communities in Christian Europe.

Course Requirements

A mid-term and final quiz (15 + 15% of the final grade). A research-paper (50% of the final grade; min. 2,000 words). The project themes can relate both to the lectures or field trips. Students should discuss both the choice of a topic and appropriate reading with the lecturer. A presentation of the project (20% of the final grade). Students are supposed to do the designated readings before each class.

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Week 1

Introduction: Basics of Judaic religion – Jewish beliefs and values

(1) Judaic perception of time: Individual – family – community – nation; (2) religious beliefs and their manifestations in daily rituals, liturgy and festivals

Reading: The Shema and the Shmoneh Esre.

Week 2

Jews amongst Christians – perception of minority vs. perception of majority

Perception of the Jews by the non-Jews and vice versa: (1) Jan van Eyck, “The Miracle of the Lamb”; (2) *Toldot Yeshu* – a Jewish anti-Christian parody; (3) The Wandering Jew; (4) Polemics and dialogue.

Reading: *Toldot Yeshu* (English translation); Michael A Signer, “Polemic and Exegesis: The Varieties of Twelfth-Century Hebraism”.

Week 3

Jews in medieval state



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(1) State, Church, urban middle class and the Jews; (2) Legal position of the Jews under Christian rule and a brief comparison with the Islamic countries; (3) Jewish political thought and the notion of “*dina de-malkhuta dina*” (the law of the state is the law) in *Galut* (diaspora)

Reading: Marc R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross* (an excerpt; on the legal position of the Jews under Christian rule).

Week 4

Jews in medieval city

(1) Economy and societal patterns of medieval city; (2) Jews as professionals and craftsmen; (3) the charge of Jewish usury

Reading: Jacques Le Goff, “Town as an Agent of Civilisation”; Avigdor Qara, “Selihah Commemorating the Prague Easter Riot of 1389”; Leon J. Weinberger, *Jewish Hymnography* (excerpt).

Week 5

Early Ashkenazi minhag – the emergence of a civilization

(1) The notion of the *minhag* (local custom) in Babylonian Talmud and in the Geonic period; (2) local collective identity and religious authority, (3) collective memory and its manifestations; (4) the Maharil and ethiological narratives in the literature of the minhagim

Reading: Israel Ta-Shma, „Ashkenazi Jewry in the Eleventh Century. Life and Literature“.

Week 6

Jewish Study of Bible in Middle Ages and in Early Modern Period

(1) Bible versus Talmud; (2) Rashi and the Northern-French Exegetical School; (3) 16th C renewal of the interest in Bible and exegesis

Reading: Frank Talmage, „Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality“; Scholem, “The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism”.

Week 7

The “long” 16th C of Jewish history (1492-1648) – an overview

(1) Demographic shifts; (2) technological progress and the new science; (3) printing press; (4) spiritual innovations

Reading: David Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (excerpts); Pavel Sládek, “Prague Jewish Scholars of the Golden Age”.

Week 8

Jews, printed book, exclusiveness and tolerance

(1) Early Hebrew print and its impact on Jewish society; (2) new versus old library in Ashkenaz; (3) emergence of new communal structures; (4) anti-reformation, censorship of Hebrew books; (5) mutual exclusiveness

Reading: Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (excerpts); idem, *Tradition and Crisis* (excerpts); Benjamin Ravid, “All Ghettos were Jewish Quarters but not all Jewish Quarters were Ghettos”; Elhanan Reiner, “A Biography of an Agent of Culture: Eleazar Altschul of Prague and his Literary Activity”.

Week 9

Jews and the /New/ science



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(1) Judaism and science; (2) Ashkenaz versus Sepharad; (3) Jews and the New science

Reading: David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (excerpts); Noah Efron, "Irenism and Natural Philosophy in Rudolfin Prague: The Case of David Gans".

Week 10

The Khmelnytskyi Uprising and Jewish Historiography

(1) The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; (2) Political and economic tensions; (4) the Cossack massacres – reality and collective memory

Reading: Frank E. Sysyn, "The Khmel'nyts'kyi Uprising"; Nathan "Nata" Hannover, *The Abyss of Despair* (excerpts).

Week 11

Jewish Messianism in Early Modern Jewish Society

(1) Messianism and historiography; (2) Pseudo-Messianic Movements in 17th – 18th C

Reading: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Clio and the Jews: Reflections on Jewish Historiography in the Sixteenth Century"; Robert Bonfil, "How Golden was the Age of the Renaissance in Jewish Historiography?"; Alexandr Putík, "Prague Jews and Judah Hasid" (excerpts).

Week 12

Hasidism and Haskalah: On the threshold of modernity

(1) Polish Hasidism and transformations of Eastern-European communal life; (2) Hasidic ideological innovations and the mitnagedim; (3) Haskalah and the proto-Haskalah

Reading: Michael L. Miller, *Rabbis and Revolution. The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation* (excerpts); David Sorkin, "The Early Haskalah".

Week 13

Results; presentations of students' projects; finals and grading

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Bibliography

Bonfil, Robert, "How Golden was the Age of the Renaissance in Jewish Historiography?", in David B. Ruderman (ed.), *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, New York – London: New York University Press, 1992, p. 219–251.

Efron, Noah, "Irenism and Natural Philosophy in Rudolfin Prague: The Case of David Gans", *Science in Context* 10 (1997/4), p. 627–649.

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Qara, Avigdor, "Selihah Commemorating the Prague Easter Riot of 1389", in: Sládek, Pavel, "The Struggle for Beauty and Differentiation: Polemics Related to the Insertion of Liturgical Poetry



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- Ravid, Benjamin C. I., “All Ghettos were Jewish Quarters but not all Jewish Quarters were Ghettos”, *Jewish Culture and History* 10 (2008/2–3) p. 5-24.
- Reiner, Elhanan, “A Biography of an Agent of Culture: Eleazar Alschul of Prague and his Literary Activity”, in: Michael Graetz (ed.), *Schöpferische Momente des europäischen Judentums in der frühen Neuzeit*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2000, p. 229–247.
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- Sládek, Pavel, “Prague Jewish Scholars of the Golden Age”, in: Alexander Putík (ed.), *Path of Life Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (ca. 1525–1609)*, Praha: Academia–Jewish Museum in Prague, 2009, p. 160–197.
- Scholem, Gershom, “The Meaning of the Torah in Jewish Mysticism”, in: idem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, New York: Schocken, 1996, p. 32–86.
- Sorkin, David, “The Early Haskalah”, in: Shmuel Feiner–David Sorkin (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Haskalah*, London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2001, p. 9–26.
- Sysyn, Frank E., “The Khmel’nyts’kyi Uprising: A Characterization of the Ukrainian Revolt”, *Jewish History* 17 (2003/2), p. 115–139.
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- Ta-Shma, Israel, “Ashkenazi Jewry in the Eleventh Century. Life and Literature”, in: idem, *Creativity and Tradition: Studies in Medieval Rabbinic Scholarship, Literature and Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies, 2006, p. 1–36.
- Weinberger, Leon J., *Jewish Hymnography. A Literary History*, Portland (OR): Vallentine Mitchell, 1998.
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