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HIS 311
Spring 2024
Powdermaker 115
Tues/Thurs 1:40-2:55

Jewish Society in Islamic Lands, 632-1517

Course Description

This course will explore the political, cultural and religious history of the Jews in the Islamic world, from the rise of Islam to the 16th century. Topics to be covered include the historical relationship between Judaism and Islam, the organization and structure of the Jewish community, and developments in Jewish law, philosophy, religious writing and literature. Particular attention will be given to points of contact between the two societies and how the Jewish experience was shaped by the surrounding Islamic environment.

Textbook and Required Readings

- Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Jewish Publication Society, 1998)
- Additional required readings consisting of primary and secondary sources

All readings are posted on Blackboard according to the week of the semester.

Assignments and Percentages of Final Grade:

- **Attendance and Participation (10%)**. You are expected to arrive to class on time, having completed the assigned reading listed under that day's heading and ready to participate in class discussions.
- **Homework (10 x 2% = 20%)**. You are to complete ten (and only ten!) of the homework assignments. **Everyone must complete Homeworks 2, 4, 8 and 12; students are free to choose from among any of the other Homeworks to make up the remaining six.** Typically, you should have to write only one or two sentences per question. Homework assignments are to be submitted via the "Assignments" tab on Blackboard by 1 PM on the day under which they appear. Answers should be in your own words and demonstrate an understanding of the question. Extraneous information may lower your grade. Each assignment is graded out of 2 points.
- **Quizzes (2 x 10% = 20%)**. See below for dates.
- **Writing Assignment (25%)**. See below for instructions and due date.
- **Final (25%)**. A comprehensive exam on the material covered in the course.

Objectives and Learning Outcomes

This course will introduce students to the process of cultural exchange by way of a careful study of the interactions between Jewish and Islamic societies in the Middle Ages. Students will learn to identify such interactions and will develop ways of conceptualizing their significance. The quizzes and a question on the final exam will assess progress towards achieving this curricular goal.

Expectations and Policies

On-time attendance and active participation in class are mandatory and constitute a significant component of your grade.

Readings are to be completed *before* the date under which they are listed.

Queens College regards acts of academic dishonesty (e.g., plagiarism, cheating on examinations, obtaining unfair advantage, and falsification of records and official documents) as serious offenses against the values of intellectual honesty. The college is committed to enforcing the CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity and will pursue cases of academic dishonesty.

Schedule of Classes

Class 1: Thursday, January 25
Introduction

Class 2: Tuesday, January 30
The World of Late Antiquity

- Egger, 1-20

Homework 1
What religious issue became a focus of political dissent in the Byzantine Empire? What were the two main positions embraced by Christians in the Middle East?
How was the population of the Sasanian Empire different from that of the Byzantine Empire? And what was the impact of that?
What was the religious tradition of most of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period? What other religions were present in Arabia?

Class 3: Thursday, February 1
Muhammad and his Message

- Three versions of the flood story from the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Old Testament and the Quran

Homework 2 – Required for ALL
Students will be responsible for one of the three versions: if your last name begins with the letters A-F, answer the questions below for the Gilgamesh story; G-N, answer for the Hebrew Bible; O-Z, answer for the Qur'an. Provide a quote from the text to support your answer. (Not every question has a clear answer in each of the texts – if that's the case for you, just note that.)

Why does the flood occur?
How is the Noah/Nuh/Utnapishtim character described or presented in the text?
Who gets saved on the boat/ark?

Class 4: Tuesday, February 6

Muhammad and the Jews of Medina: Take I

- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 3-21
- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 122-23 ("The Affair of the Banu Qaynuqa")

Homework 3

According to tStillman, in what context did Muhammad have the opportunity to learn about the basic tenets of Judaism and Christianity?
Give two reasons why the Jewish scholars of Medina would have been a nuisance to Muhammad.
What military event emboldened Muhammad to expel the Banu Qaynuqa from Medina?
Extra credit: How long was this after Muhammad's arrival in Medina?

Class 5: Thursday, February 8

Muhammad and the Jews of Medina: Take II

- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 115-18 ("Muhammad's Ordinance for Medina")
- Michael Cook, "Muhammad"

Homework 4 – Required for all

Why is it striking that Waqidi had such detailed information about the death of Muhammad's father, 'Abdallah?
According to the author what are the two positions regarding the narrative sources for Muhammad's time and their chains of authorities (see pages 64-65)?
How might Cook's conclusions about the hadith sources change our picture of what happened between Muhammad and the Jews of Medina?

Class 6: Tuesday, February 13

Jewish Reactions to the Conquests

- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 22-29, 154-155 ("Umar Permits the Jews to Return to Jerusalem")
- "The Prayer of Rabbi Simon"

Class 7: Thursday, February 15

Dhimmi Status and the Pact of Umar

- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 157-161 ("The Pact of Umar" and "How the Jizya is to be Collected")

Class 8: Tuesday, February 20

The Abbasid Empire

- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 30-39
- Egger, 114-122, 219-223

Homework 5

On what kinds of legal sources did qadis initially rely when issuing rulings?

Who were the ulama, when did they appear, and how did they change the legal system that was in place?
What is a madrasa? When did the institution emerge, and how was it supported financially?

Thursday, February 22 – Monday Schedule, No Class

Class 9: Tuesday, February 27
Quiz 1

- Available under "Assignments" on February 27 at 1 PM
- Due on February 28 at 1 PM

Class 10: Thursday, February 29
The Office of Gaon

- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 178-179 ("A Caliphal Proclamation of Appointment for a New Gaon")
- Barnavi, "The Period of the Geonim"
- Barnavi, "In the Abbasid Empire"

Homework 6
What were the responsibilities of the *gaon*?
Identify the two institutions with which the Babylonian *geonim* (plural of gaon) competed and over which they eventually triumphed.
Identify the two disputes that the gaon Saadiah ben Joseph was involved in.

Class 11: Tuesday, March 5
Saadiah ben Joseph: A Radical Traditionalist

- Selections from Saadiah ben Joseph Gaon

Class 12: Thursday, March 7
Saadiah Gaon, continued

Class 13: Tuesday, March 12
The Karaite Challenge

- Daniel Lasker, "Karaism"

Homework 7
On what major point do Karaite Jews disagree with Rabbanite Jews?
In which field did Jacob al-Qirqisani excel?
What is the source of the majority of Karaite prayer texts?
Extra credit: Which popular Jewish holiday do Karaites not observe?

Class 14: Thursday, March 14

The Karaites, continued

- Selections from Salmon ben Yeruham
- Letter of Sahl ben Masliah

Class 15: Tuesday, March 19

Shifting Westward

- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 40-63

Class 16: Thursday, March 21

Hebrew Poetry

- Masha Yitzhaki, "Arabic Ars Poetica"
- Barnavi, "Men of Letters in Medieval Spain"
- Selections of Medieval Hebrew Poetry

Homework 8 – Required for ALL

Students will be responsible for one of the assigned poems. If your last name begins with the letters A-F, answer the questions below for "Drink, He Said" – note that this poem continues on the following page; G-N, answer for "Love in Me Stirs"; O-Z, answer for "I Quartered Troops for the Night."

What idea or feeling do you think your poem is trying to convey?
Can you detect any change or development from the beginning of the poem to the end?
Is there anything about this poem that marks it as "Jewish"?

Class 17: Tuesday, March 26

Hebrew Poetry, continued

Class 18: Thursday, March 28

Aristotelian Philosophy and Moses Maimonides

- Herbert Davidson, "The Study of Philosophy as a Religious Obligation"
- Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, 226-228 ("A Medieval Curriculum")

Homework 9

According to Davidson, how did medieval religious philosophers prove for themselves the existence of God?
Provide an example of a biblical verse that would have seemed to encourage or required reliance on philosophic demonstration for knowledge of God's existence?

Class 19: Tuesday, April 2

Philosophy, continued

- Excerpts from the *Guide for the Perplexed*

Class 20: Thursday, April 4
Opposition to Philosophy

- Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, excerpts

Class 21: Tuesday, April 9
Opposition to Philosophy, continued

Class 22: Thursday, April 11
Quiz 2

- Available under "Assignments" on April 11 at 1 PM
- Due on April 12 at 1 PM

Class 23: Tuesday, April 16
Jewish Pietism

- Elisha Russ-Fishbane, "Situating Egyptian Pietism"

Class 24: Thursday, April 18
The Cairo Geniza and Records of Daily Life

- Marina Rustow, "The Cairo Geniza"
- Link to VR tour of the Ben Ezra Synagogue (where the Geniza was discovered)

Homework 10
Explain the difference between the literary texts and the documents from the Cairo Geniza.
What period is best illuminated by the Geniza records?
Why is that (the time period covered) fortunate for historians?

Tuesday, April 23 – Spring Break

Thursday, April 25 – Spring Break

Tuesday, April 30 – Spring Break

Class 25: Thursday, May 2
The Cairo Geniza, continued

Class 26: Tuesday, May 7

Persecution and Polemics

- Mark R. Cohen, "Persecution, Response, and Collective Memory"
- Poem of Abu Ishaq of Elvira
- Al-Maqrizi

Homework 11

How were reactions to the Black Death different in Christian and Islamic lands?
According the author, what difference in thinking about Jews explains the fact that there was significantly more anti-Jewish persecution in medieval Christian Europe?
How did Jews in Christian and Islamic lands respond differently to instances of persecution?

Class 27: Thursday, May 9

History and Politics

- Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross*, chapter 1

Homework 12 – Required for ALL

Who "invented" the view that Jews and Muslims lived harmoniously in the Middle Ages?
Why did those historians adopt that view?
What circumstances led to the spread of the opposite view?

Class 28: Tuesday, May 14

TBD

Final Paper Instructions
Due: Tuesday, May 14 at 5 PM
Length: 4 pages

Read Mark Cohen, "Under Crescent and Cross, ch. 1" and Maria Menocal, "Culture in the Time of Tolerance" (both on Blackboard under "Readings Class 27"). What are the two historiographical views that Cohen discusses, and how does he explain their emergence? Make a case for which view most accurately describes Menocal's work. Pay attention to the evidence she presents, the evidence she omits, the way she presents her evidence, and the summary comments she throws out – these are all useful in terms of assessing where she lies on the spectrum. And be careful to acknowledge counterevidence. In other words, if it's in the gray zone, but arguably closer to white or to black, say that; don't pretend it's all one or the other and ignore the stuff that doesn't seem to fit. But I do want you to pick a side!