The World To Come: Jewish Messianism from Antiquity to Zionism

NEJS 191b
(Preliminary Syllabus)

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Course Description

The messianic idea is an engine of history. In the Jewish context, it has been central to the thought of rationalist philosophers and mystical kabbalists. It has motivated social movements from ancient Jewish apocalypticism to modern Jewish nationalism. Its importance also reaches far beyond Judaism. Intellectual and social movements from Marxism to contemporary American politics have roots in the Jewish messianic idea. We will spend time in the course analyzing contemporary politics in this light.

This course will explore the messianic idea in Jewish history. We will focus on both the unfolding of the messianic idea in theory and also on the sects and movements that it spawned. The Jewish messianic idea has many varieties. We will trace its development from the Biblical Hebrew prophets, through the turbulent sectarianism at the time of Jesus and the quietisic response of the Talmudic period. We will then turn to messianic movements of Jews under medieval Islam and Christianity and its rational and mystical varieties before moving onto the pivotal moment of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the radically transformative movements of Sabbatianism and Hassidism. Finally, we will survey the ways in which the messianic idea continued to bear on modern Jewish history from 18th century Enlightenment to 19th century Emancipation movements and 20th century Zionism. Along the way, we constantly be thinking in broader conceptual terms about messianism and its manifestations.

Because of the wide historical scope of this course – we will cover over 2000 years of history – it will serve as a window onto Jewish history as a whole. It will also be a case study in the unfolding of a single idea in vastly different historical moments and social
contexts. It should therefore be relevant to anyone interested in comparative religion, intellectual history, religious anthropology, and the history of Judaism.

All required readings will be in English.

Grading

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<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Classroom participation and short response papers</td>
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<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Midterm essay (800-1000 words)</td>
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<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Take-home Final Exam (2000 words)</td>
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Class Conduct

Reading

All reading must be completed before the session to which it applies.

Technology policy

Cell phones and other electronic devices are never permitted in class.

The evidence increasingly suggests that most students produce better work and receive higher grades when taking notes by hand rather than using a laptop, and that sitting near students using laptops and other electronic devices has a negative effect on your grades even if you are not using such devices yourself. For these reasons, we strongly encourage everyone to leave laptops packed away.

Email is the best way that I have to communicate with you outside of class. Even if email is not your usual mode of communication, please make sure that you check it every day in case I need to get in touch with you. Similarly, please make check Latte frequently so that you are aware of announcements about the course.

Credit Hours

Success in this 4 credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class (readings, papers, discussion sections, preparation for exams, etc.)
Disabilities

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

Academic Integrity

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. Please consult Brandeis University Rights and Responsibilities for all policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Students may be required to submit work to TurnItIn.com software to verify originality. Allegations of alleged academic dishonesty will be forwarded to the Director of Academic Integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include failing grades and/or suspension from the university. Citation and research assistance can be found at LTS - Library guides.

Detailed Course Overview

The following is a provisional outline of the units of the course. The instructor will be as responsive as possible to the interests of the participating students and, to that end, readings and topics might be changed.

Unit 1. Introduction

Unit 2. The Hebrew Bible

“Eschatology”, Encyclopaedia Judaica


Historical Archetypes

Genesis 1-4
Exodus 19
Deuteronomy 29-30

Kingship

Deuteronomy 17:8-20
1 Samuel 8
2 Samuel 7

Prophecy
Amos 8:11-9:15
Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-16
Ezekiel 37-39

Unit 3. Second Temple Period and Late Antiquity

Apocalypse
Isaiah 52-53
Zechariah 13-14
Daniel 7-9; 12
Dead Sea Scrolls, selections

Jews Under Rome
Josephus, Antiquities 17.10.4-7; 20.5.1 and Wars of the Jews 4.9.3-12; 7.2.1. [Link]

Unit 4. Jesus and Early Christianity

Matthew 1; 16:13-20; 17:1-13; 27-28
Acts 2:11-24; 8:26-40
Revelation 19:11-21:4
Unit 5. Rabbinic Judaism

Bar Kochba
Lee I. Levine. “Judaism from the Destruction of Jerusalem to the End of the Second Jewish Revolt: 70-135 C.E.” [Link]

Rabbinical Literature
Babylonian Talmud 96-99
Midrash Eichah Rabbah 1:33

Unit 6. The Middle Ages

Maimonides
Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings (selections)
Epistle to Yemen
Essay on Resurrection


Mysticism, Spanish Expulsion and Lurianic Kabbalah

Lenowitz, The Jewish Messiahs Chapter 5.


Calculating the End

Unit 7. Sabbatianism and its Aftermath


Unit 8. Hasidism

Epistle of the Besht


Nahman of Breslow, selections

Unit 9. Chabad

Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, “Basi le-gani” (1951)


Unit 10. Emancipation and Religious Reform

The Pittsburgh Platform [Link]


Unit 11. Zionism 1 (Secular Messianism?)


Herzl, “The Jewish State”, extracts

Unit 12. Zionism 2 (Religious Zionism)

Avraham Isaac Kook, “Eulogy for Theodor Herzl”


Unit 13. Zionism 3 (Messianism in Israel Today)


Unit 14. Messianism and modern politics: Concluding thoughts