Featured Faculty

Timothy Beal is the Florence Harkness Professor of Religion at CWRU and is editor-in-chief of the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and the Arts (in progress). He has published thirteen books and many scholarly articles on the cultural history of the Bible, religion and popular culture, and relations between critical theory and academic religious studies. “I was born in Hood River, Oregon, and grew up in Alaska,” he states on the Religious Studies website. “I spent my youth hiking and hunting and messing around in the forests and foothills of the Chugach Mountains. I feel deeply connected to Alaska although I rarely have the opportunity to visit. My family has five acres on a small pond called Loon Lake in a wilderness area about 60 miles south of the Alaska Mountain Range, near Talkeetna. I dream of building a cabin there one day.”

Professor Beal’s courses encourage students to investigate thoroughly and think critically. His inspired teaching, and concern with the quality of biblical sources were undoubtedly instrumental in his becoming one of the leading scholars contributing to Bibleodyssey.org (http://bibleodyssey.org/), a newly launched website, four years in the making. The Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), founded in 1880 to foster biblical scholarship, received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to create this extraordinary resource. “A big priority of the NEH is making scholarship available to everyone,” Beal recently told the Plain Dealer. “Unlike some other websites, Bible Odyssey doesn’t promote any religious point of view. It’s strictly scholarly. A lot of people are looking for something they can trust as academically reliable, and it’s really hard to find.” Collaboration between scholars, the NEH and the SBL finally created this beautifully illustrated, easily accessible and reliable resource.

The website, titled “Bible Odyssey: People, Places and Passages” allows visitors to explore all three categories by entering from the homepage. Click on “People” and a comprehensive name-list appears; by clicking on a name, visitors can go deeper into different aspects of the biblical personality they want to explore. Click on Alexandria under “Places,” and you come upon a city in which Greek and Jewish cultures intermingled, with profound impact on the development and interpretation of biblical text. Similarly, “Passages” will carry you from First Creation onward, guiding you with in-depth explanations. Still have questions? These are welcomed; the website offers an “Ask a Scholar” option.

For serious students, as well as anyone who is simply curious, the website is an unmatched asset that informs fully and clearly without trying to affect or direct anyone’s religiosity. Educators teaching courses that focus on the Bible, or that refer to it over the semester, can enrich their course syllabi. “Oftentimes,” Beal said recently, “there’s not any concrete reference to biblical text. It’s ‘the Bible says this’ and ‘the Bible says that.’ This is about trying to make available someplace where people can go to read the evidence, and think for themselves.”

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The Lovely and the Legal: The Dual Nature of the Illuminated Ketubah

Recognition for Outstanding Achievement

Jeremy Frank

It is difficult to think of two domains more diametrically opposed than the legal world and the art world. Legal documents have a factual and binding purpose, while works of art evoke fanciful flights of imagination. Interestingly, the Jewish marriage contract, called a ketubah, has historically functioned as a legal document, but also as a work of art, evident in its elaborate illuminated designs. Although an artistic legal document seems like an oxymoron, the ketubah is not a patchwork of incongruous parts. Rather, it is a careful design in which aesthetic appeal is used to help ensure the legal document achieves its purpose.

In order to understand why the artistic aspects of the ketubah are so important, it is essential to first understand its legal purpose. The ketubah’s main role is to describe the obligations that a husband has toward his wife, and vice versa (Radford 2000). This is not a mere marital formality, as the ketubah has historically been a legally binding document treated with the same gravity as any other contract. But as a testament to the importance of this contract, Jewish law requires the display of the ketubah within the home (Moskow 2003). This law may be one explanation for the ornate illustration of many ketubbot; if the document must be displayed in the home, then it makes sense that its owners would want it to be pleasantly adorned. This is a satisfying explanation, but a more interesting possibility presents itself when we reverse the logic of the statement. If a ketubah is pleasantly adorned, then its owners will likely want to display it more prominently. Thus, the design of the ketubah itself encourages adherence to the law.

This is not the only way in which the ketubah’s aesthetic enhances its legal purpose. The obligations outlined in a ketubah are expected to be remembered and upheld, not just read out once on the day of the wedding. Yet in the tumult of daily life, even important things can sometimes be forgotten. At such times the attractive design of the ketubah plays a crucial role. By drawing the eye to the document, the ornamentation of the ketubah text helps remind the husband and wife of the obligations they promised to uphold. The design of the ketubah is also intended to ensure that these important obligations cannot be changed, because no additions can be made to the text if all the empty space is filled with illumination (Rabbi Simon ben Zemah Duran, cited in Nahson 1998). In these ways, the design of the ketubah becomes just as important to the preservation of marital obligations as the text itself.

The ketubah obviously plays an aesthetic and legal role in the home of a married couple, but it is also intended to serve a broader purpose. Historically, the ketubah was read aloud to those assembled at a wedding, making public the husband’s financial obligations to his wife, including the amount he was to leave her in case of his death, or if he decided to divorce her (Kofsky cited in Radford; Radford 2000). An ornately adorned ketubah was logically more expensive (Nahson 1998), thus a more elaborate document broadcast to those assembled that the husband was capable of meeting his financial obligations. Similarly, as a home furnishing intended for display, the ketubah was likely to be placed in a part of the house where “the family represents itself to the world” (Teske 1979: 24), serving both as home décor, and as a status symbol.

The ketubah is fascinating because of the seeming incongruity of its combination of art and law, but also because it is the only Jewish document that features this fusion. The Talmud, which serves as the main codex of Jewish law, may be elaborately bound but the text inside is never adorned in the same way as a ketubah. Likewise, the Torah scroll may have a beautiful cover, but to decorate its text would be unthinkable. Why is the ketubah the lone ornamented legal document? One likely reason is that the ketubah is a very different sort of document than texts intended for rigorous study, for which artistic designs would be thematically inappropriate, as well as...
distracting. The ketubah, on the other hand, is a document tied intimately to the joyous occasion of marriage. The legal obligations it records are to be taken seriously, but the document is also a reminder of the loving relationship between husband and wife, and an expression of hope that the new family will grow. This hope is expressed in fertility symbols that frequently adorn ketubbot; symbols like blossoming trees, vines, and paired love birds (Ungerleider Mayerson 1986). Lions of Judah (tigers of Judah in India) are straightforward emblems of sovereignty, but some images are more subtly layered. According to Khaimovich, the motif of two fish facing each other follows the zodiacal motif of Pices, standing for the month of Adar when Purim celebrates the redemption of Israel; he suggests a symbolic association between redemption, and Messianic hope, in the two fish (2011: 163-64). Clearly, the ketubah is a legal document with significant meaning outside of its legal context, and its unique artistic character reflects this.

The ketubah is an intriguing part of legal history as well as art history. These two aspects combine to make it a uniquely interesting object of study. The ketubah’s legal purpose informs our study of its design, and its design informs our study of its legal purpose. To properly understand the ketubah, we must embrace its dual nature. Much like a marriage, a ketubah can only work through the complimentary aspects of binary opposites.

References Cited


Israel Journal 2014 - Lila Robinson

Israel was always a “life dream” trip for me and I guess I actually felt it would never happen in my life. A full-time Dept. Administrator here at CWRU, I am also a part-time undergraduate student majoring in Religious Studies after a 37 year break in my college studies! In 2014, my opportunity to see Israel was with an Interfaith Study Tour which included my Rabbi and a group of people of different faiths going to Israel for their very first trip. Here are a few highlights from my Israel Journal.

In the heart of Jerusalem, pre-Shabbat shopping at the Mechane Yehuda Market brought to life all the colors and scents and sounds of Israel, everyone scurrying to finish up their chores before settling in for Shabbat. This is a most alive place filled with market stalls and shoppers and everyone in a hurried frenzy to finish up before sundown!

The desert landscapes on this trip were so exciting! One day our guide stopped the bus and we exited into barren wilderness. It was when he told us we were overlooking the valley of Elah—the place where David slew Goliath—that the Bible stories of my youth meshed with my studies at CWRU, and I really felt the true sense of where I stood.
Sunrise at Masada is like no other experience. It’s miraculous in itself how anyone could have ever lived this high up, carting water and supplies uphill—even today the birds flying and living at Masada defy logic. There is no visible means of sustenance here, yet the birds abound. Note the bird that flew into the viewfinder at the same moment of snapping a sunrise picture!

We stopped at the burial site of David Ben Gurion, one of the founders of modern Israel and the first Prime Minister. The site gave us an overview of the wilderness of Zin, where ibex roam now, as they did in biblical times. At the end of the day we looked out over the Ramon Crater, which is not actually an impact crater, but a geological landform (makhtesh) unique to the Negev. We saw ibex there as well, along with beautiful wilderness fauna and flora, and a desert sunset.

My travels through Israel went so quickly and not a minute of it was wasted! My Judaic Studies classes enhanced my curiosity and appreciation for all that I experienced. Bringing history and the Bible to life was an experience I will never forget.

LET’S HEAR FROM YOU! postit@case.edu
Courses of Interest for Spring 2015

JDST/RLGN 208
INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN RELIGIONS
Peter Haas

Basic introduction to the three great monotheistic religions of the Western World: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. All three of these religious traditions trace their roots to the faith of biblical Israel as revealed by a series of prophets including Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Each absorbed the philosophy and science of the Greco-Roman world and went on both to influence and struggle with each other. Many of the religious problems of the contemporary world, from Afghanistan to the Middle East to Yugoslavia, can be traced to tension within and between these religious groups.

JDST/RLGN/HSTY/ETHS 254
THE HOLOCAUST
Jay Geller

This class seeks to answer fundamental questions about the Holocaust: the German-led organized mass murder of nearly six million Jews and millions of other ethnic and religious minorities. It will investigate the origins and development of racism in modern European society, the manifestations of that racism, and responses to persecution. An additional focus of the course will be comparisons between different groups, different countries, and different phases during the Nazi era.

JDST/RLGN/WGST 268
WOMEN IN THE BIBLE: ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO RITE AND RITUAL, STORY, SONG, AND ART
Judith Neulander

From Ishtar to Esther, the Christian Marys, to the Muslim Mary, we will examine ways in which biblical texts reflect and reinforce the spirit and mentality of the times in which they were written. We will explore the strategic and creative ways that women in the Bible shaped, and were shaped by, changing values over time and across space. Using folkloristic theory and ethnographic method students will come to understand how these various views of women inform, reflect and challenge gender roles in modern society.

JDST/RLGN 314
MYTHOLOGIES OF THE AFTERLIFE
Judith Neulander

The course provides a multidisciplinary approach to the idea of an afterlife, and its manifestation in diverse cultures. We will explore ways that varying views of the afterlife influence religion, popular culture and palliative care, and how human creativity has shaped the heavens, hells, hauntings and holidays of diverse populations over time and across space. Students will come to see the afterlife as an integral part of lived experience, not only because it helps us to die with better hope, but because it helps us to live more richly.

For courses in Hebrew and Arabic visit the Modern Languages and Literatures website:
http://www.case.edu/artsci/dmll/
Sampling of Final Paper Titles

A sampling of titles for final research papers in Jewish Traditional Art and Architecture JDST 220 reflects the diversity of interests in a typical JDST classroom

Tchotchkes: Communicating Jewish Culture
Yueer Su

The Architecture of Space and Time: Cosmology of the Wilderness Tabernacle
Joey Rooney

American-Jewish Female Artists: A Fight for Creative Expression
Ilakkia Thanigaivelan

Whoever Heard of Marcus Rothkowitz?: Jews, Acculturation and the Avant Garde
Jeremy Frank

Moritz Oppenheim: Where Art and the Functions of Folklore Collide
Aria Bredt

Oranges, Cups and Car Décor: Stability and Change in Jewish Ceremonial Art
Sun Kyung Kim

Marc Chagall: Painting from the Palette of Shtetl Life
Jonathan Meckler

Judy Chicago: Inspiring Feminism through Vaginal Imagery
Jordan Trump

Kinetic Art: Contributions of Yaacov Agam
Shaun Howard

Happy Winter Break!
From the JDST eJournal
By bringing a variety of fields and disciplines to bear on its subject, the Judaic Studies Program at Case Western Reserve University conveys to students the complex interaction of forces that create Jewish ethnic identity. Students completing the program will have a broad knowledge of the field along with the tools necessary for continued academic study of Jewish civilization in all its manifestations.

Support the Program in Judaic Studies

Please consider supporting the Program in Judaic Studies as we continue building on our achievements. You can contribute to our success by making a gift to the College of Arts and Sciences. Your gift allows us to continue to offer opportunities for our students to excel academically and to conduct important research. You can give online at:

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