RS 375 Classical Jewish Texts  
Fall semester, 2013  
Sierra Hall 314, MW 12:30 - 1:45 p.m. and online

RELIGION AND VIOLENCE,  
RELIGION AND HOLY WAR

Professor Jody Myers  
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Office hours: Mondays 11:15 – 12:15, Wednesdays 2-3 p.m., and by appointment.  
Course website will be in Moodle: http://moodle.csun.edu/

Course Description
The theme of this course is religious texts that promote, permit, limit, or discourage warfare in the name of religious goals. Reading religious texts is unlike other reading, and this course aims to introduce you to skills and approaches involved in reading religious texts. We focus on Jewish texts in translation (from ancient Hebrew and Aramaic) written from about 1000 BCE to 1100 CE, and we see how they are applied to real life or imagined situations right up to the present time. These texts include Bible, Mishna and Talmud (Jewish law, mixed in with religious discussions), prayer, and Midrash (biblical commentary).

Student Learning Outcomes
By the end of this course, students will be able to
1. demonstrate knowledge of the genres of major Jewish classical texts, including the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and biblical commentaries;
2. show familiarity with some major themes in classical Jewish texts;
3. demonstrate knowledge of the historical, geographical, social, and political context in which classical Jewish religious texts were constructed; and
4. recognize and articulate the difference between academic approaches and personal, devotional approaches to Jewish religious texts.

Bibliography
2. The Jewish Study Bible, featuring the Jewish Publication Society translation (this is the preferred edition of the Hebrew Bible, but other versions are permitted)  
3. Primary texts and background reading posted on Moodle

Written and Oral Work
Every week you will receive questions to use to guide your reading, and at the beginning of the following week you will write short answers to some of these questions at the start of class (notes permitted, but no books, articles, or computers). There are also three take-home midterms consisting of your reflection on an actual historical war (of your choosing) and how
or whether it would be justified or reported according to the religious texts we have studied. There is no paper and no cumulative final.

**Evaluation**

Regular writing assignments = 55%  
Late assignments are not accepted.

Three take home essays = 45%  
Late assignments are not accepted.

Near perfect attendance is required for adequate learning. After two absences, your course grade will be lowered 2% for each day’s absence.

Make-ups will be granted only in the cases of extreme emergencies, which include severe illness requiring doctor's visit or hospitalization, death in the family, and college-excused events (which must be approved ahead of time). All emergencies must be documented in writing. No computer excuses for late submission will be accepted (system crash, lack of lab seating, lost files or passwords, etc.). All students are subject to the University policy on Academic Honesty. Plagiarism and/or cheating will have serious grade consequences and will be reported to the Office of Student Affairs.

**Grading Criteria**

Grading scale

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All writing prepared outside of class must credit sources and to be free of capitalization errors, spelling errors, and incomplete sentences. Grades will reflect this expectation.

**Email Communication**

Your email communication should be done in a professional manner. Emails should begin with “Dear Dr. Myers” and include a brief message that begins with your primary reason for contacting the instructor; not include shorthand, slang, or unnecessary abbreviations (e.g. plz); and be signed with your full preferred name (e.g. – James Smith).

**Official Syllabus**

The course Moodle is the official syllabus. This means that this written syllabus cannot be relied upon for accuracy in terms of reading assignment and due dates.
Reading Assignments (to be completed before the class meeting)
*unless noted, every week begins with a reading quiz*

1. Monday, Jan. 25 & Wednesday, Jan. 27
Introduction to the theme of the course and to reading sacred texts, and Jewish texts in particular.

READING: Read "War and Warriors: An Overview" from *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Bring a bible to class.

2. Monday, Feb. 1 & Wednesday, Feb. 3
One particular ideology of war in the Hebrew Bible is "war as 'the ban,' or God's portion," meaning that the war is commanded by God and must result in total destruction of the enemy and enemy's property.

READING: *Bible*: The biblical law of the "ban" (God's portion): Leviticus 27 and Numbers 18. A biblical story of this applied law is I Samuel (the first book of Samuel) 14; and a biblical story showing the terrible personal consequences of this ban is found in Judges 11. *War in the Hebrew Bible*, Chapter 1, "The Ban as God's Portion" 
EXTRA: Read Genesis 22, the story of the binding (and sacrifice?) of Isaac.

3. Monday, Feb. 8 & Wednesday, Feb. 10
Continue discussing "war as 'the ban,' or God's portion," and start with "war as 'the ban' that is God's justice." This is an outlook found in Deuteronomy and related biblical texts, and it justifies total destruction only when there are human moral considerations.

READING: *Bible*: The biblical law is found in Deuteronomy 7, 13, and 20. A biblical story of this applied law is about Joshua and the battle of Jericho, Joshua 2 and 6-7. Another story is I Samuel 15, the story of King Saul and King Agag. An awful perversion of this law is found in the story of the Levite’s concubine, Judges 19 - 21. *War in the Hebrew Bible*, Chapter 2, "The Ban as God's Justice"

4. Monday, Feb. 15 & Wednesday, Feb. 17
We turn to "the priestly ideology of war." This is an outlook that justifies certain wars to protect the purity of the nation, and it regards foreign women as seducers and virgins.

READING: *Bible*: The biblical story of the foreign seductress is Numbers 25, and the commanded war is Numbers 31 (more background on this is Numbers 22-24, the foreign prophet Balaam). A biblical law on "corpse impurity" is Numbers 19. The law for how to deal with a captured, foreign woman is in Deuteronomy 21:10-15. *War in the Hebrew Bible*, Chapter 3, "The Priestly Ideology of War"
5. **Monday, Feb. 22 & Wednesday, Feb. 24**
What about war and warriors as a subject for art and entertainment? Here the previously studied war ideologies are abandoned in favor of other concerns.

**READING:** *Bible:* The biblical story of David versus Goliath in I Samuel 17-18, and the biblical story of war as good sport in II Samuel 1-2. *War in the Hebrew Bible,* Chapter 4 "The Bardic Tradition of War." The biblical story of warfare tricksterism in response to the rape of Dinah is Genesis 34, and the story of the trickery of Yael is in Judges 4-5. *War in the Hebrew Bible,* Chapter 5, "The Ideology of Tricksterism"

6. **Monday, Feb. 29 & Wednesday, March 2**
Finally: Biblical texts that criticize unbridled warfare and advocate peace.

**READING:** *War in the Hebrew Bible,* Chapter 6, "The Ideology of Expediency" and Chapter 7, "Toward an Ideology of Non-Participation." *Bible:* Judges 18, I Samuel 27, II Samuel 5:6-10 in contrast to I Chronicles 11:1-10 (different versions of David’s conquest of Jerusalem), I Chronicles 22. If you have The Jewish Study Bible, read the introduction to Chronicles. Otherwise, read the section called "Aim and Purposes of the Book" that is contained within the pdf of the "Book of Chronicles" article on Moodle.

Submit first midterm essay on Moodle.

7. **Monday, March 7 & Wednesday, March 9**
Now in the post-biblical era, we are introduced to the anti-militaristic approach of the rabbis, and their description of the previous war of the Maccabees and the holiday of Hanuka: a human victory or a divine miracle?

**READING:** To learn about the rabbis and their literature, read Reuven Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism,* Chapter 4, pp. 67-76 (on Moodle). Then turn back to learn about the pre-rabbinic war waged by the Maccabees and the later descriptions of it is in Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism,* Chapter 2 (on Moodle).

8. **Monday, March 14 & Wednesday, March 16**
The Great Revolt (67-70 C.E.) and the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135 C.E.) in fact and in the rabbinic texts Talmud and Midrash (where anti-militarism and moral issues dominate)

**READING:** Rabbinic texts are supplied on Moodle: *Avot deRabbi Natan* and *Lamentations Rabbah.* Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism,* Chapter 3 (on Moodle).
9. **Monday, March 28 & Wednesday, March 30**  
The rabbinic categories of war (commanded wars, obligatory wars, and discretionary wars) are examples of legal texts. We also look at war and national power in prayers.

**READING:** *Holy War in Judaism*, Chapter 5, pp. 77-89 only. *Bible:* Deuteronomy 20. Rabbinic texts are supplied on Moodle: Mishnah Sotah 8; Babylonian Talmud Sotah 44b (start with 43 for the context); and important daily prayers (Grace after Meals, the Daily Amidah, and Shema).

10. **Monday, April 4 & Wednesday, April 6**  
According to rabbinic teachings (in the Talmud and beyond, God imposed "the 3 Vows" upon the Jews preventing them from reclaiming national sovereignty through war.

**READING:** *Holy War in Judaism*, Chapter 5, pp. 90-98, discusses the 3 Vows. *Bible:* Song of Songs (in Bible), chapters 1 and 2 (notice 2:7); also Song of Songs 3:5 and 5:8. See the Talmudic text of this on Moodle in Talmud Ketubot 110b (the URL starts at Ketubot 110a).

11. **Monday, April 11 & Wednesday, April 13**  
The 3 Vows (cont'd) and the rabbinic teachings about Amalek and the 7 Nations.

**READING:** *Holy War in Judaism*, Chapter 6. *Bible:* Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 15:13-19 (both deal with war against Amalek); also Numbers 33:50-34:12 and Deuteronomy 7 (these deal with war against the Canaanites). Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, "Amalek and Israel" (on Moodle).

12. **Monday, April 18 & Wednesday, April 20**  
Medieval biblical commentary of Rashi on the religious violence against Amalek, the Moabites, and the Midianites.

**READING:** "Midrash and Jewish Interpretation" essay found in The Jewish Study Bible, pp. 1863-1900. Commentary of RASHI on Exodus 17 and Numbers 25 (link on Moodle)

Submit second midterm essay on Moodle.
13. **Monday, April 25 & Wednesday, April 27**
From 1800 until just before the Holocaust of WWII: How Jews influenced by modern culture challenged the older Jewish restrictions on warfare and national passivity. Zionists (Jews who want Jewish political sovereignty in Palestine) are our focus here and through the end of the semester.

**READING:** Excerpt from David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (on Moodle). Other texts posted on Moodle.

14. **Monday, May 2 & Wednesday, May 4**
Responding to the Holocaust and the nationalist struggle in the Middle East: the rejection of older anti-militaristic ideas.

**READING:** Excerpt from David Biale, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History* (on Moodle). Other texts posted on Moodle.

15. **Monday, May 9 & Wednesday, May 11**
Wrapping up the course. Third and final midterm due.