

“But the Bible says...”: Teaching Israel Studies in the Christian South

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Teaching about Israel in the American South presents its own unique challenges and rewards. This paper will detail the author’s experiences constructing and teaching Israel Studies (and Jewish Studies) courses to almost exclusively Protestant students at a mid-size, public, urban research university.

By way of background, I teach in the Judaic Studies Department at the University of Memphis (UM). Although we are a small department, consisting of 3 full-time faculty members, students can major in Judaic Studies (through University College) or choose a minor concentration. While we have few majors, our courses are popular and are generally fully subscribed. UM is a public research university with an enrollment of 22,421, including 17,510 undergraduates,¹ and is part of the Tennessee state system of Higher Education under the auspices of the Tennessee Board of Regents.² Largely a commuter school, UM’s students come predominantly from the City of Memphis and the immediate surrounding counties of the tri-state area of western Tennessee, north-western Mississippi, and east-central Arkansas, collectively known as the ‘mid-south.’³ While, many students arrive espousing staunchly pro-Israel sentiments and able to quote both the old and new testaments, chapter and verse, their knowledge of the history, politics, culture, and demography of Israel (ancient and modern) is generally quite

¹ Figures from Office of Institutional Research, University of Memphis. For more on enrollment see: oir.memphis.edu/webreports/enrollmentprofiles/EnrollmentByTerm/fall10/EM10fsection18.PDF.

² For all higher education institutions under the TBR see: www.tbr.state.tn.us/.

³ Memphis, with a population of 646,889, is the largest city in Tennessee and the 20th largest city in the United States. It has a small but active and highly affiliated Jewish community of roughly 8500 members that encompasses 4 orthodox synagogues, 2 conservative congregations, 1 large reform temple, a Jewish Federation, Vaad, JCC, and weekly newspaper. The Jewish community maintains an orthodox K-12 school, which includes separate yeshivot for high school boys and girls, as well as a K-8 school affiliated with the conservative movement. Most Jewish Memphians leave the area for college. Memphis Jewish population figures are taken from the National Jewish Population Survey of 2000-01 at: www.ajcarchives.org/ajc_data/files/2003_6_usdemographic.pdf. For Memphis population information see: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_United_States_cities_by_population.

limited. Modern Israel and Israelis, in all their diversity, are an unknown quantity, as are actual Jews and modern Judaism. Students have no interest in/or awareness of the boycott-divestment-sanctions issue that currently plagues many other universities. Their pre-class knowledge of Israel is mostly drawn from their eschatological beliefs, coupled with a vague notion of current conditions in the Middle East, and this greatly complicates the process of teaching them to think critically about Israel and Israelis from a secular scholarly perspective. Also, although the Israel Studies courses offered through the Judaic Studies Department and cross-listed with Anthropology and Political Science are upper division, there are no enrollment prerequisites. This adds another substantial challenge in course construction and teaching, as many of the students have no background in the history or politics of religion, Europe, or the ancient Near East/modern Middle East.

Currently, Judaic Studies offers several courses that deal either exclusively or substantially with aspects of the history, religion, politics, and culture of Israel in its modern or classical incarnations. I regularly teach three of these courses: *History and Politics of Israel*, *Israel: Antiquity in Modernity*, and *History of the Jewish People*. *History and Politics of Israel* covers the period from the late 19th century to the present including the rise of Zionism, birth of the state, emergence of Palestinian nationalism, and Israel's future in the Middle East. The *Antiquity* course is considerably more ambitious in scope, focusing on the creation and re-creation of national history and culture, as well as the shaping of collective memory in a European and Middle Eastern nation-building project of the 19th and 20th centuries. The course crisscrosses continents and millennia tracing the history and deliberate re-constitution of an ancient people as a modern nation. Finally, the *History of the Jewish People* begins with an exploration of Israelite origins and ends in the 20th century after the devastation of the Holocaust

and the emergence of the American Jewish community and the Arab-Israeli conflict. All three courses have a moderate to heavy reading load and a sizeable writing component. Whenever possible, students are directed to read primary sources, and are encouraged to use documentary evidence in their writing. This promotes critical historical thinking and also moves students away from scriptural explanation for historical events and developments.

As noted, many students arrive with a wealth of misperceptions and incomplete information about Israel, both ancient and modern. My sense of this derives from a couple of basic exercises conducted with the students. On the first day of classes, after discussing the syllabus and giving some introductory remarks, I have students break into groups of four or five and interview each other. They take individual ‘histories’ asking questions about religion, family, educational background, political leanings, and anything else they think germane to such an exercise. They then write this information on the board for all to see. A pattern quickly emerges. Students are graduates of public high schools, almost exclusively from the mid-South region, college juniors and seniors, overwhelmingly Protestant, and about 50% first generation college attendees.⁴ Seeking further information, I also ask for a show of hands from those who have previously taken a college course in modern European history or political science. Less than half of each class has done so.

As a follow-up exercise, I have the students write a one to two paragraph statement that evening on: What is Israel? or What is meant by the ‘history and politics of Israel’? or What is meant by ‘the Jewish people’? I direct them to simply write what comes to mind, as this is a non-graded assignment that will be returned to them the last day of class so they can see what

⁴ This fits with the university’s official enrollment profile. As per the Office of Institutional Research Undergraduate Profile (fall 2010), of 17,510 undergraduates, 16, 747 were drawn from in-state or border counties. 44% were first generation college students and an additional 31.6% had only one parent who had attended college. Also, only 2,403 students live on campus. See: oir.memphis.edu/WebReports/ProfilesandFactbooks/UndergraduateProfile2010.pdf

they have learned and if their thoughts have changed over the course of the semester. They hand in these brief essays the second day of class and I review them that evening.

Taken together, these exercises, along with early student comments in class, enable me to loosely gauge the basic knowledge, writing ability, and educational backgrounds of the students. They also provide a strong indication of student religiosity, which, as it turns out, colors the ability of some to think critically about course topics and material. The majority of students in my classes are Southern Baptist Convention or adherents of other evangelical Protestant groups, in keeping with the religious makeup of the mid-south region.⁵ Many of the students who adhere to evangelical Protestantism tend to concentrate on ‘scripture’ and biblical command or exhortation as explanation for historical events and developments, particularly when these events involve the Jewish people. They also have difficulty conceptualizing, or discussing in neutral terms, eschatological frameworks different from their own. As but one example, three months into the *Antiquity* course, after having read and extensively discussed Aviezer Ravitsky’s *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (1996), as well as other relevant readings on Zionism and Jewish messianism, a student wrote “if [the Messiah] comes by natural means with no ornate indication from God, how will we know it’s the Messiah, or Jesus born again? What...evidence will be provided that the Messiah has returned and its [sic] not some nut job simply claiming to be Jesus/the Messiah in order to get TV time?” His comments indicate he registered that his Jewish instructor did not use the term ‘Christ’, but he completely missed the

⁵ In 2000, there were 2.1 million evangelical Protestants in Tennessee, including 1.4 million members of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Evangelical Protestants comprised roughly 72% of all religious adherents in the state among Whites (SBC were 49%) with 63.8% of state residents adhering to a religious group. For the same year, Mississippi reported 1.13 million evangelical Protestants and Arkansas reported 1.15 million. 81.9% of Mississippi’s population affiliates religiously, as do 71% of Arkansans. African American churches were not included in the 2000 survey. See Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA), State Membership Reports, Denominational Groups, 2000 at www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/state/47_2000.asp for Tennessee data, www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/state/28_2000.asp for Mississippi, and www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/state/05_2000.asp for Arkansas data. For general information on religion and denomination in America see: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, hrr.hartsem.edu.

essence of the class discussions on the differences between Jewish and Christian understandings of the Messiah and messianism. He was not the only student to do so.

Relatedly, I should note that early every semester there are students who raise the issue of ‘messianic Jews’ or ‘Jews for Jesus’ asking “are they Jewish?” This is quite useful as it precipitates a brief discussion on the fundamental Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus and gives provides me with an unforced opportunity to point out a fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism. By the end of this discussion, students clearly accept that a belief in the divinity of Jesus is a hallmark of Christianity and that ‘Jews’ who accept this belief have become Christian, regardless of what they may call themselves or any continued adherence to traditionally accepted Jewish practices.

Student writing assignments demonstrate that at least 25% of the 3 classes mentioned above consistently grapple with their own religious beliefs while thinking through class exercises.⁶ Some students manage to check their beliefs at the classroom door for the duration of the semester, while others seem incapable of doing so. For example, in the *History of the Jewish People* course when asked to discuss the Babylonian Exile and later the destruction of the Second Temple several students stated, this happened “because the Jewish People ignored God” or because “the Jews angered the Lord.” When I gently pointed out that the military might of Neo-Babylonia or Rome might have had something to do with these ‘tribulations’ I was assured that these empires were “God’s messengers.” For some of my students locating ‘God’s message’ in history is an integral part of their worldview.⁷ Thus one of my tasks is to encourage them to

⁶ Jonathan Goldstein discusses this issue in his insightful article “Teaching about Israel in the Bible Belt: An Experimental Course in the American South”, *Covenant: Global Jewish Magazine*, 2(1) May 2008. See: www.covenant.idc.ac.il/en/vol2/issue2/teaching-about-israel-in-the-bible-belt.html. Goldstein also notes that he has to “regularly...deflect questions about why I have not accepted...Christ as my...Lord and Savior.” This is something I have never encountered at the University of Memphis.

⁷ I should note this is a Christian variation on the outlook of many traditional Jews, particularly those in the ultra-Orthodox camp.

hold their beliefs in check while crafting their academic essays and remarks. I stress to them, both in class and in comments on their written material, that I am not asking them to change their beliefs but rather to temper them in the classroom. I draw their attention to the fact that UM is a public academic institution and not a theological institute and, as such, they must learn to ‘secularize’ their work and to look for non-religious empirical explanations.

Student religious interpretations are not relegated to the patriarchal and temple periods of Jewish history. When discussing the Arab-Israeli or Palestinian-Israeli conflicts and competing nationalist movements in the *History of Israel* class some students refer to the “Abrahamic promise” or “God’s promise to Abraham” as proof/evidence of the modern state of Israel’s right to exist, and justification for Israel’s claim to any land it deems part of “biblical Israel.” This “promise” is also stretched to cover any actions Israel deems necessary to maintain its hold. Again, I stress to them that they must leave these biblical justifications outside the classroom and look for historical and/or primary source material to bolster arguments they seek to make.⁸ I also make clear to them, particularly in the *Antiquity* class where the issue arises repeatedly in the early weeks of the course, that the bible should not generally be treated as a primary source. We also discuss why it is problematic as an historical source. Eric Cline’s volume, *Jerusalem Besieged: From Ancient Canaan to Modern Israel* (2004), the first book students read, is quite helpful in making this point, as he includes archaeological evidence in much of his early discussion.

What has become clear in teaching these courses is that a segment of my students, influenced by their evangelical beliefs, have difficulty accepting ancient Israelites, historical

⁸ Students are directed to primary sources online when appropriate including: the Avalon Project at Yale Law School and the Internet Modern History Sourcebook. They are also encouraged to read an Israeli newspaper online several times a week as well as the Palestinian news in English. URLs are provided for multiple news sites in course syllabi.

Jews, and modern Jews and Israelis as human actors who pursue statecraft, experience religious change and development and are, like their Christian counterparts, motivated by general human desires, goals, and concerns. They seem to view the Jewish People as frozen in primordial amber, placed there by the God of the Old Testament. By extension, they view modern Israelis as connected to ancient Israel, albeit in a vaguely understood post-biblical fashion.

Beyond these religious issues, many students also arrive unprepared for rigorous upper level courses in Israel and Judaic Studies. In addition to (for about a third of each class) the troubling issue of very poor writing ability, the initial problem is that few possess any real background in modern European, Middle Eastern, or world history. More specifically, many students have only the haziest notions of the powerful political, economic, and ideological forces operating in the 19th and 20th centuries. They are only slightly familiar with World War I, including its antecedents and results and have no knowledge of the Ottoman Empire or the conditions of Jewish life in Europe. Mass culture is an unknown quantity as are nationalism and its roots, imperialism, social Darwinism, eugenics, antisemitism, fascism, liberalism, and ideology, more generally. Many of these terms are familiar, but when pushed, most cannot give concrete definitions for them. They fare little better in defining Jews or Judaism, viewing both in exclusively religious or racial terms. Most students have little religious or cultural awareness beyond the horizons of their own American Southern Protestant denominationalism. Also problematic is that many students have no conception of race beyond the black/white divide and have given no thought to ethnicity.⁹ Thus, at least part of our of class time is spent providing them with the factual and conceptual material they need to successfully undertake upper division study of the history of Israel and/or the Jewish People.

⁹ These are merely observations and not condemnations, as these students, like most people, are products of the region/area in which they have been raised.

My first task is to provide students with a basic background in relevant historical developments. Course textbooks are chosen for their ability to at least begin this process. Students in *History and Politics of Israel* read Howard Sachar's *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (2007 edition), in *Antiquity*, as mentioned, they start with Cline's *Jerusalem Besieged*, and in the *History of the Jewish People* they begin with Raymond Scheindlin's *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (1998). For various reasons, none of these volumes is entirely satisfactory, but each provides at least some of the missing background information. Lecture and class discussion, as well as assigned articles, are used to cover additional gaps. For example, in the *History of Israel* class, before reading Theodor Herzl's *The Jewish State*, we spend two lectures on the development of European nationalism, anti-Semitism, political emancipation, social Darwinism, race science, and eugenics. More specifically, we also cover the rise of 'blood and soil' nationalism in much of central Europe, the belief in the racial un-assimilability of the Jews, and modern politically and racially-based antisemitism in late 19th century France (via Drumont, Dreyfus, et al.) This is done to give the students a sense of the forces in play at this time as well as to bring home to them the very real differences between accepted perceptions and beliefs in the pre-World War II world and the one in which they live.

Throughout the semester I also give mini-talks within the scheduled larger class lectures on assorted topics as needed. For example, in the *History of the Jewish People* while discussing medieval Christian-Jewish relations, it became apparent that many of the students knew nothing about Catholicism. Several went so far as to state in class that "Catholics aren't Christians!" This, I have found, is a deeply and dearly held prejudice in the mid-South. In response, we did a thirty-minute review of the Protestant Reformation with a reminder that the Catholic Church was

Protestantism's parent church. This discussion was also linked to our earlier lectures on anti-Judaism. We had covered Martin Luther's "On the Jews and Their Lies" in those discussions because many of the students made clear through their questions and statements that they held Catholicism historically responsible for anti-Jewish activity in Europe. In the mini-lecture on Catholicism we were able to refer back to Luther's pamphlet, concretely providing evidence that no religion, or its adherents, has a monopoly on hateful statements or behavior.

As the semester progresses, in the *History of Israel* course students begin to understand and accept that modern Israel and Israelis are as much a product of their times and experiences as any other modern state and people. However, they still have difficulty conceptualizing 'real' Israelis. I have found that having them read and discuss Donna Rosenthal's *The Israelis: Ordinary People in an Extraordinary Land* (2008 edition) helps dispel some of this difficulty as does showing the film *No. 17 is Anonymous*. The film, in particular, seems to resonate with students and brings home to them the incredible cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic diversity of Israelis.

A similar process of acceptance and awareness unfolds in the *Antiquity* and *Jewish People* courses during the semester, as the more students are familiar with and regularized to thinking about Jews, Judaism, Israelites, Israel, and Israelis in light of lecture and readings, and outside of a religious context, the more capable they are of moving beyond a narrow denominational view. In *Antiquity*, a critical movie review paper of 2 films chosen by each student from the *Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive* seems to serve the purpose that Rosenthal's work does in *History of Israel*, allowing students to 'see' Jews/Israelis in all their diversity. Students seem particularly taken by the propaganda element of many of these films,

not having conceived of this type of approach outside of major American or European military events/conflicts.¹⁰

Religious issues aside, I have repeatedly wondered how students arrive in upper division courses without basic knowledge of the previous centuries' major events and developments. My questioning has led me to explore the general education requirements of the University of Memphis. A quick search of these requirements indicates that undergraduates who are non-history majors need only take 6 credit hours in history (2 courses). Of the 12 courses that fulfill this requirement only 8 are actually history courses and only one might conceivably cover topics such as modern European history: HIST 1120, *World Civilization II*. The remaining general education courses cover various aspects of American history, law, thought, culture, and ethnic relations.¹¹ There is no university-wide modern world history or modern European history requirement. Also, as noted, none of the three courses mentioned here, JDST/POLS 4820, *History and Politics of Israel*, JDST/ANTH 4860, *Israel: Antiquity in Modernity*, or HIST 3275, *History of the Jewish People*, have prerequisites. Thus students can conceivably enroll in 3000 or 4000 level courses having last been exposed to World history or European history in high school. Unfortunately, they will have no further background in any of these topics unless they individually choose to pursue it, as the University of Memphis does not require their study.

This is not intended to be an indictment of UM. However, I would like to make some suggestions for improvement. On the university level, general education should require students to complete a two semester Western Civilization sequence, or, at the very least, a survey course in modern European history or world history in the 20th century. Alternatively, a 20th century European literature or art course could be required. The point is to expose students to the major

¹⁰ See: www.spielbergfilmarchive.org/il.

¹¹ For the university's general education requirements see: Memphis.edu/ugcatalog/graduation/gened.php.

ideological, political, cultural and historical forces of the period. Additionally, the writing component of general education must be strengthened as some students arrive in class at the end of four years of college unable to express themselves coherently on paper.

One final observation should be made. The panel title for this session is: Teaching Israel on the Periphery. From my perspective, and I daresay from the perspective of those who live outside the major East and West Coast Jewish population centers, this is a Judeo-centric and/or coastal-centric (for lack of a better term) view of Israel and Jewish studies and their reach. There is tremendous interest in Israel and Jews in the American South, albeit driven initially, at least for some, by eschatology. The bulk of students in courses on Israel and Jewish history in the region are Christian. Implying that they or the region in which they reside is peripheral can be conceived as insulting. In fact, these students are lifelong supporters of Israel and are interested in Jews and Judaism. The existence of Israel Studies courses such as those offered through Judaic Studies at the University of Memphis and at other colleges and universities in the South present students with the opportunity to move beyond religious belief to a deeper intellectual understanding of Israel, Jews, and Judaism. This is vital if Israel Studies is to move beyond its narrow coastal, Ivy League, and R1 university base.¹²

¹² See Ilan Troen's comments on the home institutions and religious affiliations of the faculty attendees at Brandeis's Summer Institute for Israel Studies, "Roundtable on Teaching Israel" in *Sh'ma: a Journal of Jewish Responsibility*, February 2008 at: www.shma.com/2008/02/roundtable-on-teaching-israel/. The R1 or Research 1 designation comes from the Carnegie Foundation 'Classification of Institutions of Higher Education'. It designated the top tier of academic research institutions in the United States. Although the Carnegie Foundation abandoned the R1 classification in 2000, it is still used by many university faculty and administrators, see: classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/downloads/rethinking.pdf.