



East-West, No Bible is Best

Thursday, September 22nd, 2016: 11:30am-1:30pm

Institute for the Humanities Common Room, Room 1022 South Thayer Building, 202 S Thayer

The research presented in this colloquium paints a new picture of ancient Mediterranean Judaism in which the Bible was not the center of Jewish religious life.

Nicola Denzey Lewis, Brown University

Reconsidering the Jews of Ancient Rome

At least since the pioneering work of Harry Leon, Rome's Jewish catacombs have been used as a data set to recover the contours of the city's Jewish community in the Late Empire. The subsequent work by scholars including Tessa Rajak, Leonard Rutgers, and David Noy, reinforce the notion of a shared Jewish identity that constellated through Roman Jews' use of particular symbols such as the menorah, their references to local synagogues, and their preference for separate burial grounds from pagans and Christians. However, a close analysis of the Jewish catacombs reveal that they are not as they at first appear; in fact, they are a creation or invention born of early modern understandings of Judaism. I argue that the nature and type of "community identity" that we can find in Jewish material culture and archaeology challenges the model of

“normative” late antique Judaism and leads us into a very different (and virtually unrecognizable) Roman Jewish community that existed well “Beyond the Bible.”

Nicola Denzey Lewis is currently Visiting Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Brown University. A social and cultural historian who specializes in the religious environment(s) of Rome from the second through the fifth century, Denzey Lewis is currently at work on her fifth book, *The Early Modern Invention of Late Antique Rome*. Denzey Lewis spent 2015-2016 at Princeton University as an ACLS fellow and continues this year at Brown as a 2016-2017 NEH recipient.

Michael Legaspi, Penn State

Aristobulus and the Hellenistic Argument for Judaism as Philosophical Piety

Fragmentary writings from the decades immediately following the conquests of Alexander shed valuable light on Greek perceptions of the Jewish people. Theophrastus, the famed student of Aristotle, praised the Jews as a “nation of philosophers.” Others from roughly the same time period (for example, Clearchus, Megasthenes, Hecataeus) joined him in describing the Jews favorably, as a group distinguished for its wisdom. Corresponding to this outsiders’ view were various attempts by Jewish authors in the Hellenistic period to commend Judaism to educated Greeks in precisely this way. The Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Aristobulus, who flourished in the middle of the second century BCE, is among the earliest examples of an elite, educated Jew attempting to ‘modernize’ Jewish belief in this way. A close analysis of Aristobulean fragments suggests an attempt not merely to coordinate the Bible to Greek *paideia* but rather to articulate a common philosophical source for both. In this way, Aristobulus goes ‘beyond the Bible’ in identifying the ancestral way of life with a philosophically eclectic form of piety.

Michael Legaspi is an associate professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and Jewish Studies at Penn State (University Park), where he teaches courses in biblical studies, ethics, and the historical backgrounds of Judaism and Christianity. He earned a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible from Harvard University in 2006, writing his dissertation on biblical criticism in the German Enlightenment. This formed the basis for his 2010 book entitled *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford University Press). He has also written on topics in biblical studies, theology, and the study of the Bible in early modern Europe. At the moment, he is working on a book-length study on the concept of wisdom in biblical and classical traditions.

Respondent: Celia Schultz, Professor of Classical Studies, University of Michigan.

This session is cosponsored by the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies, the American Academy of Jewish Research, the American Academy of Religion, the LSA Dean’s Office, UMOR Small Grants to Support Major Conferences, and the Rackham Dean’s Strategic Initiative Fund.

If you have any questions or you would like to receive the rest of the 2016-2017 calendar for the Beyond the Book speaker series, contact Rebecca Scharbach Wollenberg (rwollenb@umich.edu).