

Context

Curriculum Overview

Year One: Jewish Texts and Interpretations

The Bible

The Bible, or Tanakh, is the central text of ancient Israel and the foundational text for Judaism. This semester balances an overview of the Bible with focused discussion of core texts, such as the Creation narrative, the Exodus, the Revelation at Sinai, and the prophetic books. You will examine various biblical genres, structures, and concepts and explore the historical and religious experience of ancient Israel. You will also analyze core biblical texts through different lenses: literary, historical-comparative, and rabbinic. This in-depth exposure to less familiar texts and different modes of reading will challenge you—and may even lead you to reconsider some long held views.

Rabbinic Texts

The rabbinic period—from the Second Temple to the completion of the Babylonian Talmud (500 BCE to 500 CE)—refers to the emergence of new Jewish leaders, Sages, and Rabbis. They developed a new vision of Judaism, grounded in learning, and a legal system that has shaped the contours of Jewish community, culture, and behavior for the past millennia. This semester, you will explore the Jewish encounter with empires of the ancient world, become familiar with the main rabbinic texts and how to read them, and explore thematic readings that convey how the Rabbis grappled with urgent theological, ethical, and communal issues. When examined in conjunction with biblical texts, these readings will help you to understand how certain beliefs and practices changed over time.

Year Two: Jewish Cultures and Communities

Jews in the Medieval World

Jewish life during the Middle Ages (roughly the seventh century through the seventeenth century) built upon earlier rabbinic foundations and generated what the Rabbis of the Talmud had only begun: the construction of a rabbinic Jewish civilization, with distinctive approaches to communal life, social norms, beliefs, and values. During this semester, you will encounter core texts that highlight key dynamics of the Middle Ages, including Jewish political and cultural relations with their Islamic and Christian host societies; the creation of new modes of community in the Diaspora; and the vast expansion of Jewish culture in the realms of philosophy, mysticism, liturgy, and biblical and Talmudic commentary.

Jews in the Post-Enlightenment World

Beginning with the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, modernity posed a significant challenge to traditional Jewish culture, community, and identity, generating new social and economic opportunities but also threatening traditional Jewish values and society. As in each of the previous eras, modern Jews engaged with sacred texts, suggesting that however great the impact of rupture and discontinuity, the Jews passion for reading and interpreting served as a source for modern Jewish creativity and thought. During this semester, you will delve into core philosophical, political, and literary texts that reflect a continued engagement with the Jewish past as well as profound interaction with and involvement in non-Jewish culture and life.

Each of the four semesters is taught by an instructor who is an expert in his or her field. The above is a framework for your studies; each instructor will prepare a unique syllabus for his or her course.

Context is the flagship program of the Institute for Jewish Learning of The Jewish Theological Seminary.