

## NMC277

### Topics in Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations: Sexual Ethics, Identity, and Family Law among Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians (Third to Eighth Centuries CE)

#### Syllabus

**Description:** The third to Eighth centuries in Middle Eastern intellectual history is marked with intense interactions among various neighboring religions and cultures, most notably, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Syriac Christianity. Arguments over what constitutes decent sexual behavior form a main part of this trend of multi-lateral interactions. These arguments chiefly appear in the form of polemics against the sexual ethics of the other cultures. In these polemics, each of these cultures tend to take its own sexual ethic as symbolic of a distinguishable identity. This process leads to the birth of three deeply interconnected but technically distinctive family laws. The course would comparatively study this process through reading (in translation) respective passages in the *Babylonian Talmud*, Syriac law codes and polemics, and Zoroastrian legal literature.

**Purpose:** The course provides students with basic knowledge of the history of the development of three main legal traditions in question in order to have a better understanding of actual intellectual life in the late antiquity Middle East. In the end, the students will be able to contextualize historical texts in their original setting and to read the texts critically through an intertextual method.

#### Evaluation:

- Preparation and active class participation, could be a very short oral review of the reading material in the beginning of each session (10%)
- Two short reviews on the reading materials (only secondary sources), 350-500 words each, to be submitted in sessions 3 and 9 (each 15%)
- A short historical and/or comparative analysis of one or two primary sources (in English translation), 750-1000 words, to be submitted by the session 12 (20%) **NOTE:** The selected text(s) must be confirmed by the instructor by the session 6.
- Final paper on a topic related to the course, must include some historical and/or comparative analysis of one or more primary source(s), 3000-4000 words including bibliography, (40%) **NOTE:** The topic must be approved by the instructor by the session 8, the deadline will be 2 weeks after the end of the course (the exact date TBA).

**Office Hours:** Via Zoom or Skype. Please email me to arrange a meeting.

#### NOTE:

- **A handout including an outline of the session, primary sources and link to some of the secondary sources will be provided for each session.**
- **This syllabus is subject to change.**

Session 1

The Context: Religious Dynamics and Interactions among Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism

**Required reading:** Shai Secunda, “Chapter 5: In Iran: Reading the Talmud in Its Iranian Context,” in *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in its Iranian Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) 110-143.

**Recommended readings:** Geoffrey Herman, “The Syriac World in the Persian Empire,” in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (London and New York: Routledge, 2019) 134-145.

Reuven Kiperwasser and Serge Ruzer, “[Syriac Christians and Babylonian Jewry: Narratives and Identity Shaping in a Multi-Religious Setting](#),” in *Patristic Studies in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. B. Bitton-Ashkelony et al (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n. v., 2015), 421-440.

Tal Ilan and Reuven Kiperwasser, “[Virginity and Water: Between the Babylonian Talmud and Iranian Myth](#),” in *A Thousand Judgments: Festschrift for Maria Macuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019), 193-208. [Here](#) (Academia page of the author).

Session 2 Rabbinic Sexual Ethics in Context 1:

**Required Reading:** Yishai Kiel, *[Sexuality in the Babylonian Talmud: Christian and Sasanian Contexts in Late Antiquity](#)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 31-56. **NOTE:** This source includes several primary sources that students must read critically as the primary sources for the session.

**Recommended reading:** Daniel Boyarin, “Chapter 4. Engendering Desire: Husbands, Wives, and Sexual Intercourse,” in *[Carnal Israel Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture](#)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 107-133

Session 3 Rabbinic Sexual Ethics in Context 2:

**Required Reading:** Yishai Kiel, *[Sexuality in the Babylonian Talmud: Christian and Sasanian Contexts in Late Antiquity](#)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 75-93 and 101-114. **NOTE:** This source includes several primary sources that students must read critically as the primary sources for the session.

**Recommended reading:** Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Chapter 7: Sanctify Yourself: Rabbinic Notions of Holiness and Sexuality,” in *[Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community](#)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 211-238.

**NOTE: Students must submit their first review on reading materials in this session.**

Session 4 The Origins of Sexual Ethics in the Eastern Christianity: An Overview

**Primary source:** 1 Corinthian 7

**Required reading:** Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: 2004, Second Edition), 207-219 (will be available on Quercus).

**Recommended readings:** Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: 2004, Second Edition), 105-220 (will be available on Quercus).

Daniel Boyarin, “Brides of Christ: Jewishness and the Pauline Origins of Christian Sexual Renunciation,” in *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 158–179.

Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Chapter 3: Holiness Perfected: Pauline Constructs of Holy Community,” in *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 77-96.

Michael Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Confession of the Flesh* (vol. 4), trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021). Especially part II.

## Session 5

A Rabbinic Polemic against Celibacy

**Primary source:** *The Babylonian Talmud*, Kiddushin 81b 2-4 Available here: <https://www.sefaria.org/Kiddushin.81b?lang=bi>

**Required reading:** Adiel Schremer: “[Anti-Ascetic Legacy of Talmudic Judaism.](#)” in *Gender Relationships in Marriage and Out*, ed. by Rivkah Blau (New York: The Yeshiva University Press, 2007) 35-63.

**Recommended reading:** Shlomo Naeh, “Freedom and Celibacy: A Talmudic Variation on Tales of Temptation and Fall in Genesis and its Syrian Background,” in *The Book of Genesis in Jewish and Oriental Christian Interpretation*, ed. by J. Fisherman and L. Van Rompay (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 73-89 (will be available on Quercus).

## Session 6

Aphrahat: Defending Virginity and Celibacy 1

**Primary source:** Aphrahat, Demonstration 18: Against the Jews, concerning Virginity and Holiness in Adam Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 385-396 (will be available on Quercus).

**Required reading:** Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Chapter 5: Wedding Garments and Holy Yokes: Celibacy and Holiness in Aphrahat, the Persian Sage,” in

[Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 129-173.

**NOTE: The selected text(s) for the historical and/or comparative analysis must be confirmed by the instructor by this session.**

Session 7

Aphrahat: Defending Virginty and Celibacy 1

**Primary source:** Aphrahat, Demonstration 18: Against the Jews, concerning Virginty and Holiness in Adam Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), 385-396 (will be available on Quercus).

**Required reading:** Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “Chapter 6: Zipporah’s Complaint: Moses Is Not Conscientious in the Deed! Exegetical Traditions of Moses’ Celibacy,” in [Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 175-209.

Session 8

Zoroastrian Family Structure

**Primary source:** Maria Macuch, [“The Pahlavi Marriage Contract in the Light of Sasanian Family Law,”](#) in *Iranian Languages and Texts from Iran and Turan, Ronald E. Emmerick Memorial Volume*, edited by Maria Macuch, Mauro Maggi, and Werner Sundermann, 183-204. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007.

**Required reading:** Maria Macuch, [“Zoroastrian Principles and the Structure of Kinship in Sasanian Iran,”](#) in *Religious Themes and Texts of Pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia*, ed. Carlo G. Cereti et al (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2003), 232-245.

**NOTE: Students must discuss and confirm the topic for their final paper by this session**

Session 9

Zoroastrian Marriage with Close Relatives

**Required reading:** Yishai Kiel, [Sexuality in the Babylonian Talmud: Christian and Sasanian Contexts in Late Antiquity](#) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 149-170 and 212-220. **NOTE:** This source includes several primary sources, students must read them critically as the primary sources for the session.

**Recommended reading:** Maria Macuch, [“Incestuous Marriage in the Context of Sasanian Family Law,”](#) in *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies: Proceedings of the Sixth European Conference of Iranian Studies*, edited by Maria Macuch, Dieter Weber, and Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 33-48.

**NOTE: Students must submit their second review on reading materials in this session.**

Session 10

From Barṣauma to Narsai: The Creation of Family Law in the Church of the East

**Primary sources:** The Canon Three of the Synod of Mār Acacius and fragments of Barṣauma’s Synod; Narsai’s *Statute of the School of Nisibis* (canon 3) (will be available on Quercus)

**Required reading:** Nima Jamali, “The Origins of the Legal Tradition in the Church of the East, 450-550 CE,” forthcoming (will be available on Quercus).

Session 11

From Mar Aba to Ishō‘-bokht: Theological Foundations of family law

**Primary sources:** Leviticus 18 and 20; Mar Aba’s *Treatise of Marriage*; Mar Aba’s canon 38; Mar Joseph’s canon 10; Mar Giwargis’s canon 13 (will be available on Quercus)

**Required reading:** Richard Payne, “Chapter 3: Christian Law Making and Iranian Political Practice: The Reforms of Mar Aba,” in [\*A State of Mixture: Christian, Zoroastrian and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity\*](#) (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015) 93-126.

**NOTE: Students must submit their third review on reading materials in this session.**

Session 12

Ishō‘-bokht: Against the Jewish and Zoroastrian Traditions

**Readings:** Ishō‘-bokht’s *Corpus Juris*, Chapter 2 and 3; Deuteronomy 25:5-10 will be available on Quercus)

**NOTE: Deadline for submitting the historical and/or comparative analysis of the selected primary source(s)**