

Announcement of a conference on the topic:

## **Philosophical Investigation of the Hebrew Scriptures, Talmud and Midrash**

The Hebrew Bible occupies an anomalous position on the contemporary academic landscape. The field of biblical studies produces a steady stream of works on the compositional history, philology, and literary character of the biblical texts. But the *ideas* that find expression in the Hebrew Scriptures – the metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and political philosophy of the biblical authors – have seldom been explored by the field of biblical studies in a systematic fashion. At the same time, philosophers, political theorists, and historians of ideas, who see the study of ideas as the principal interest of their work, tend to assume that the biblical texts fall outside the scope of their disciplines. The result is that despite general agreement that the Bible has had an unparalleled significance in the history of the West, its ideas have remained, until recently, largely beyond the reach of sustained academic investigation.

Much the same can be said about the other classical Jewish sources as well: The Talmud and Midrash seem frequently to explore subjects of intrinsic philosophical interest. Yet these texts remain all but unknown to philosophers, political theorists, and historians of ideas.

The ongoing neglect of the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and Midrash by philosophers is especially striking given the rapidly growing interest in theological questions in philosophy departments throughout the English-speaking world. Over the last generation, Christian philosophers have labored successfully to introduce “philosophical theology” (or, more recently, “analytic theology”) into philosophy departments at leading universities. In keeping with longstanding Christian philosophical tradition, this discipline has focused on a priori argumentation concerning the concept of God as “perfect being,” and has usually been conducted with little reference to the Bible. As a consequence, philosophical theology has until now continued the larger pattern of academic neglect of the ideas of the Hebrew Scriptures and other Jewish sources. This has also meant that philosophical theology has been of only very limited relevance to Jews, whose tradition of philosophical and theological speculation is largely text-based.

This is unfortunate because philosophy as a discipline could contribute much to the elucidation of the Hebrew Scriptures and classical rabbinic texts. The law-oriented emphasis of much traditional rabbinic exegesis has meant that these texts have not usually been investigated using philosophical tools and with an eye for philosophical questions. So we can ask what do philosophical questions and the answers that have been given until now teach us about the Bible and Talmud? What, for example, does the nature of the mind or language, reality or morals, as understood by philosophers, have to offer us in enhancing or extending the insights from these traditional sources?

In Fall 2010, the Shalem Center in Jerusalem, with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation, has launched an initiative aimed at developing a Jewish “philosophical theology” that will seek to advance the study of the ideas of the Hebrew

Scriptures, the Talmud and Midrash in the academic setting. This initiative is part of a broader “Analytic Theology” project of the Templeton Foundation, which will also support Christian centers for philosophical theology at the University of Notre Dame and the University of Innsbruck, Austria. The Jewish component of the project envisions the development of a uniquely Jewish discipline that will use philosophical tools and methods for examining classical Jewish sources. The project is open to Jewish and non-Jewish scholars interested in the philosophical elucidation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Talmud and Midrash.

In the context of this project, the department of Philosophy, Political Theory and Religion (PPR) at the Shalem Center in Jerusalem invites submissions for an interdisciplinary conference on “**Philosophical Investigation of the Hebrew Scriptures, Talmud and Midrash,**” to be held in Jerusalem on **June 26-30, 2011.**

Invited speakers: Lenn Goodman, Jacob Howland, Joseph Isaac Lifshitz, Alan Mittleman

This will be the first in a series of three annual conferences. For the 2011 conference, the organizing committee will give priority to papers exploring metaphysics and God’s nature. This topic is intended to address questions of what human beings can know about the fundamental nature of reality. Subjects for discussion will include the nature of reality and being, and the relationship of this reality with truth and with goodness. Particular attention will be paid to the question of what can be known about God, including questions of whether God can in fact be considered to be in some sense a being, his attributes, and his relationship to the world.

However, superior papers will be considered on all subjects relating to the philosophical investigation of the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and Midrash.

**Abstracts of no more than 1,000 words should be submitted together with a current cv by January 15, 2011.**

An overview of the “Jewish Philosophical Theology” project at the Shalem Center is available [here](#).

A Select Bibliography of relevant scholarship is available [here](#).

A limited travel fund will be available to assist scholars and students wishing to attend the conference. Conference papers will be considered for publication in a forthcoming anthology of papers.

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