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# Jews and Judaism in British History, Film, and in the Qur'an

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Mosaic continues to stimulate informed debate in the community

## A varied programme

Mosaic continues to thrive and offer a varied programme. It is nothing if not diverse: the autumn witnessed an intellectually stimulating, challenging, energetic and entertaining series of presentations from Dr Gavin Schaffer (Department of History, University of Birmingham) on *Are Jews Different? A British Historical Perspective*. The first session

focused on past and present debates over Jewish origins and types, particularly whether there is a 'Jewish gene'. The second provocatively asked *Are Jews Cleverer than Us?*, whilst the third considered whether Jews make decent soldiers by looking at Jews in the British Army from 1899-1948. This was followed in the spring by a series of three films – *The Syrian Bride* (dir Eran Riklis, 2004), *Lemon Tree* (dir Eran Riklis, 2008), and *Kike Like Me* (dir Jamie Kastner, 2007) – which were introduced by Mosaic stalwarts Dr Joe Newman and Professor Tony Travis. Each film, in a different way, prompted varied responses

resulting in a lively discussion.

Most recently Dr Holger Zellentín, Lecturer in Jewish Studies at the University of Nottingham, presented a series of two lectures on the topic of *Rabbinic Judaism in Dialogue with other Religious Traditions*.

## Narratives of the destruction of the Temple

Dr Zellentín's first lecture explored Rabbinic and Christian narratives of the destruction of the Temple. After some brief references to the response to the destruction of the First Temple in the *Book of Lamentations*, Zellentín elaborated on the work of the first century CE Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, whose name and work are attested in the writings of the early church. The rabbis of the 3rd and 4th centuries, by contrast, never mention Josephus. The particular focus of the presentation was, however, the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era, the period during which *Lamentations/Ekha Rabbah* was composed. The key thesis proposed by Zellentín was that even though *Lamentations Rabbah* never once mentions Josephus by name, a good case can be made that the author of this midrash was familiar, in essence, with Josephus' account of the events leading up to the destruction of the Second Temple. Zellentín drew a number of intriguing parallels between the role of Josephus in his own account and that attributed to Yohanan Ben Zakkai in *Lamentations Rabbah*. While not doubting the historicity of Yohanan Ben Zakkai, the suggestion was rather that the latter's role was playfully modelled on Josephus' self-portrayal. In a very lively and engaging discussion that

followed Zellentín's presentation, he was able to clarify that he envisages the subtle influence of Josephus on the work of the rabbis to have taken place largely on an oral level. Various narratives about the destruction of the Jewish Temple were circulating in Christian circles that would probably have been familiar to the rabbis who chose to ignore them for some centuries. A change in attitude appears to have occurred in the wake of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire under Constantine and the extensive church building activity that followed. From this period onwards a number of rabbinic authors appear to offer subtle and skilful responses to Christian narratives about the destruction of the Temple and begin to take control of this important narrative.

## Judaism in the Qur'an

Dr Zellentín's second lecture turned to the depiction of contemporary rabbis and Judaism in the *Qur'an*. By looking closely at a number of examples, Zellentín argued that rather than being ill informed the portrayal of Israel in the *Qur'an* displays some wilful, at times even satirical, distortions of rabbinic discourse, which suggests a rivalrous but surprising 'intimate discourse' between the *Qur'an* and the rabbis in the 7th century CE. This playful interchange wanes by the 8th century when a distancing can be witnessed between the Islamic movement and the Jewish and Christian background from which it emerged. In summing up, Dr Zellentín noted the clear evidence of anti-rabbinic and anti-Jewish polemic in the *Qur'an* but stressed once more the proximity and detailed knowledge of Talmudic discourse reflected in the ways in which the polemic is couched.

Both lectures were well attended and stimulated lively discussion, thus offering a very fitting finale to the Mosaic programme for the academic year.

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