

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY READING GROUP –
PRE-CONVENTION MEETING

Topic: Freedom, Faith, and Law in Two Rabbinic Texts
 Conveners: Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University
 Daniel P. Scheid, Duquesne University
 Moderator: Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Seton Hall University
 Presenters: Bethany Slater, Denison University
 Andrew Massena, Loras College

The purpose of this meeting is to bring theologians together who wish to explore the practice of comparative theology through guided readings of texts from a non-Christian tradition. This meeting invites someone to select short texts from the other tradition and prepare some introductory commentary. The texts along with the commentary is circulated ahead of time. At the breakfast, following introductory explanations of key terms by the presenter, the group engages in an interreligious, close reading together as a community so that fresh theological insights may be encountered.

This year, Bethany Slater, visiting assistant professor in the department of religion at Denison University, and Andrew Massena, assistant professor of Biblical Studies at Loras College, collaborated in presenting two Rabbinic texts. They also provided some biblical texts to facilitate comparisons with the Christian tradition, along with introductions to both texts and some guiding questions. The goal was to think about the conference theme of “Freedom” in conversation with the Jewish tradition and to bring new insights to familiar concepts, such as Torah, Law, faith, works, and obedience.

The first rabbinic text, provided by Andrew Massena, comes from the *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael* (or “The Tractates of Rabbi Ishmael”), a tannaitic *halakhic* commentary on the Book of Exodus. This is a verse-by-verse, sometimes word by word, commentary on Exodus, collating the midrashim of rabbis from the first two centuries of the common era, and concentrating especially on the legal material of Exodus. The specific text provided for discussion was a commentary on Exodus 20:2 in the form of a *mashal* (rabbinic parable). According to the parable, God is a king before approaching Israel, and yet God asks to be Israel’s king. This raises the question of *over whom exactly* God had been king heretofore. More interestingly, if Israel were to deny God’s offer, would God be divested of kingship? The parable gives no definitive answer to either question, but only hints at the reality that God’s own identity is at stake in the entire exodus and Sinai affair. The reader is invited to discover and interrogate more ambiguities in the text. During the discussion, questions about freedom—to say yes or no to God—were interrogated and how the reception and refraction of Jewish sources in both the Christian traditions and later Rabbinical traditions conceptualized the people’s relationship to God: *quid pro quo?* Unconditional surrender? Earned or unearned kingship? Etc.

The second rabbinic text, provided by Bethany Slater, comes from the Babylonian Talmud and is part of a longer conversation about how many commandments God gave to the Jewish people (613). The text then moves to bring voices of Sages who quote passages from the Hebrew Bible that they each claim offer summary statements of all the commandments. Each verse is said to be that on which all the other commandments

are established, as if the commandments are built on the foundation of these teachings. Slater provided Galatians 3:10-11 alongside Habakkuk 2:2-3a as a prologue to ground the rest of the comparative theological discussion. During the discussion, it was noted that following the 613 laws is presumed in both Habakkuk and the selection from the Talmud, and yet Paul divorces this presumption in Galatians. Resonances with how Jesus often summarizes the law in the gospels were also noted. Attendees learned a great deal about the relationship between faith and the law in Rabbinic thought; it also allowed many to reassess how Paul understands the law and faith in Galatians 3:10-11.

There are too many takeaways to recapitulate. However, one overarching insight—or affirmation—was related to the ongoing scholarship on how Jesus, along with the early Jewish Jesus movement, the New Testament Gospels, letters, and epistles (especially Paul’s), relate to intra-Jewish debates in the first and second century CE. These debates continue in Rabbinic Judaism, as evidenced by the texts provided for discussion. These insights demand comparative theologians carefully and critically reflect on how boundaries are setup between religious traditions generally, and between Jewish and Christian traditions specifically. It also allowed us to reimagine how we employ terms such as “faith” and “the Law” in our own scholarship and in the classroom. Finally, the question of freedom as a theological and anthropological category was engaged: how free are we in the face of God?

Many thanks to Bethany Slater and Andrew Massena for allowing us to use their summary handouts in this report.

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