

Near Eastern Studies 372 / Religion 307  
*Translating Babel: Scripture and Translation in Near  
Eastern Religious Traditions*



Princeton University, Spring 2014

**Instructor:** Daniel J. Sheffield

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**Course Meeting Time:** Tuesday 1:30-4:20

**Office:** Joseph Henry House 25A

**Office Hours:** Thursday 2:00-4:00

**Location:** TBD

**Course Description:**

This seminar explores the relationship between translation and religion, paying close attention to the religious traditions of the Near East (Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam). We will address a broad variety of themes in the religious history of the Near East, ranging from the development of monotheism to the miraculous inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ānic text to colonial attempts at scriptural translation and religion-making. We will examine themes in the comparative study of religion concerning the construction of canon, scriptural hermeneutics, vernacularity, cosmopolitanism, religious conversion. Over the course of the semester, we will also bring theoretical perspectives to bear on topics such as semiotics, epistemology, and mysticism.

**Course Requirements:**

The course will meet once a week. Students are expected to attend all course meetings. Reading and participation is mandatory. Students will be expected to complete approximately 150-250 pages of reading per week. In addition, the student must submit a weekly 2-3 paragraph critical response to the readings on the Blackboard website, no later than the Monday, 11:59 PM of each week before class. The course will have two mandatory papers. The first paper (5-7 pages), due on March 15, is intended to incorporate the theoretical models from our course readings with specific examples drawn from assigned primary texts. For the final research paper, students are expected to complete a 15-20 page paper based on independent research on a subject related to the themes of the course, chosen in consultation with the Instructor.

**Special Needs:**

Students must register with the Office of Disability Services (ODS) ([ods@princeton.edu](mailto:ods@princeton.edu); 258-8840) for disability verification and determination of eligibility for reasonable academic accommodations. Requests for academic accommodations for this course need to be made at the beginning of the semester, or as soon as possible for newly approved students, and again at least two weeks in advance of any needed accommodations in order to make arrangements to implement the accommodations. Please make an appointment to meet with me in order to maintain confidentiality in addressing your needs. No accommodations will be given without authorization from ODS, or without advance notice.

**Academic Integrity:**

Students must at all times adhere to the standards of academic integrity and honesty, as expressed in the Princeton Honor Code (<http://www.princeton.edu/honor/>) and elaborated in the booklet *Academic Integrity* (<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity>).

<b>Evaluation:</b>	Seminar Participation: 20%
	Weekly Reading Responses: 25%
	First Paper (5-7 pages): 20%
	Final Paper (15-20 pages): 35%

All work must be submitted in a timely fashion. Late assignments will be penalized by one degree of a letter grade per day (i.e., a B+ paper turned in two days late will receive a B-) late.

**Required Books (available at Labyrinth Books):**

1. Olender, Maurice, *The Languages of Paradise*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York, Other Press, 2003).
2. Law, Timothy, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013).
3. Gutas, Dmitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society*, (London, Routledge, 1998).
4. Zadeh, Travis, *The Vernacular Qur'an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis*, (London, Oxford University Press, 2012).

**All other readings will be made available on Blackboard.**

## Course Schedule

### Week 1 (02/04): Introduction

### Week 2 (02/11): Thinking about Translation

1. Benjamin, Walter, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, translated by Harry Zohn, (New York, Schocken Books, 1968), 69-82.
2. Derrida, Jacques, "Des Tours de Babel" in *Acts of Religion*, edited by Gil Anidjar, (New York, Routledge, 2002), 102-134.
3. Yelle, Robert, *The Semiotics of Religion: Signs of the Sacred in History*, (London, Bloomsbury, 2013), 61-91.

### Week 3 (02/18): Creation and the Problems of Human Language

1. Hiebert, Theodore, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, 29-58.
2. Olender, Maurice, *The Languages of Paradise*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (New York, Other Press, 2003).

### Week 4 (02/25): Polytheism, Syncretism, and the Old Testament

1. Assmann, Jan, "Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability," in *The Translating of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, ed. by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996), 25-36.
2. Smith, Mark, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 1-130.

### Week 5 (03/04): The Greek Septuagint and the Making of the New Testament

1. Law, Timothy, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013).

### Week 6 (03/11): *Dēn-ōšmurišn*: Revelation and Scripture in Iranian Religions

1. Stausberg, Michael, "The Invention of a Canon: The Case of Zoroastrianism," in *Canonization and Decanonization*, edited by A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, (Leiden, Brill, 1998), 257-277
2. Shaked, Shaul, "The Traditional Commentary on the Avesta (*zand*): Translation, Interpretation, Distortion?" in *La Persia e l' Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo* (Roma, Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1996), 641-656.
3. Reeves, John, "Manichaeans as *Ahl al-Kitāb*: A Study in Manichaean Scripturalism," in *Light against Darkness: Dualism in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and the Contemporary World*, ed. by Armin Lange et al., (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 249-265.
4. Selections from Zoroastrian and Manichaean Texts.

**FIRST PAPER DUE FRIDAY MARCH 14TH BY 11:59 PM.**

**NO CLASS ON MARCH 18 – SPRING BREAK**

**Week 7 (03/25): *Ijāz al-Qur'ān*: Scriptural Inimitability and Translation in Islam**

1. Zadeh, Travis, *The Vernacular Qur'ān: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis*, (London, Oxford University Press, 2012), 1-252.

**Week 8 (04/01): *Bayt al-Ḥikmah*: Imperial Translations in the House of Wisdom**

1. Gutas, Dmitri, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsīd Society*, (London, Routledge, 1998).
2. Selections from the *Fihrist of Ibn al-Nadīm*.

**Week 9 (04/08): Between Turk and Hindu: Religious Encounters in Islamicate South Asia**

1. Selections from al-Bīrūnī, *Tahqīq mā li'l-Hind*.
2. Flood, Finbarr, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and the Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009), 1-59.
3. Truschke, Audrey, "The Mughal Book of War: A Persian Translation of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31 (2011): 506-520.

**Week 10 (04/15): An Islamicate Cosmopolis**

1. Ricci, Ronit, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1-65, 153-182.
2. Pollock, Sheldon, "The Cosmopolitan Vernacular," *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 6-37.
3. Eaton, Richard, "Revisiting the Persian Cosmopolis," *Asia Times* July 19, 2013, accessible online at [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/SOU-01-190713.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/SOU-01-190713.html).

**THESIS STATEMENT AND BRIEF OUTLINE OF FINAL PAPER DUE BY FRIDAY, 04/18, 11:59 PM.**

**Week 11 (04/22): Reading the *Qur'ān* and Islam in Europe and the Colonial World**

1. Burman, Thomas, *Reading the Qur'ān in Latin Christendom*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1-122.
2. Tageldin, Shaden, *Disarming Words: Empire and the Seductions of Translation in Egypt*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011), 1-65, 276-288.

**Week 12 (04/29): Religion and Translation in Comparative Perspective**

1. MacCormack, Sabine, *On the Wings of Time: Rome, the Incas, Spain, and Peru*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007), 1-65.
2. Mandair, Arvind, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 2009), 1-105.
3. Josephson, Jason Ānanda, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2012), 71-131, 251-262.

**FINAL PAPERS DUE ON DEAN'S DATE (MAY 13)**