

The New Fellow in Jewish-Muslim Relations

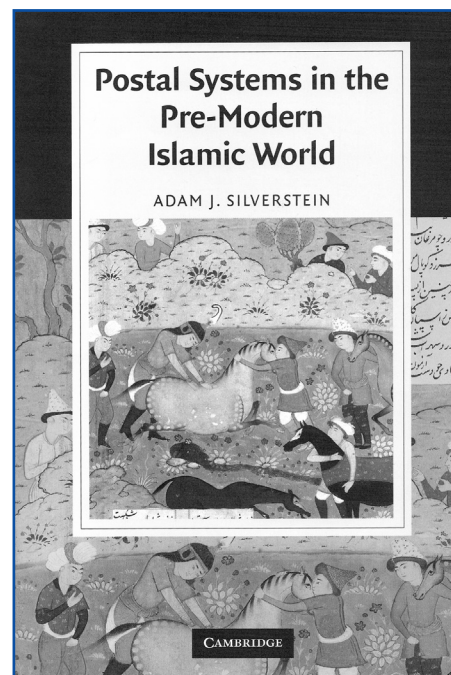
DR ADAM SILVERSTEIN, who has joined the Centre as Fellow in Jewish-Muslim Relations, is American by birth and British by academic training, having studied at an Israeli secondary school along the way. He and his wife Sophie, who is a GP, have two small children.

He describes his decision to concentrate on Islamic studies as a rebellion against his parents' view that he should become a lawyer. Their agreement that he could study Arabic provided he gained a place at Cambridge gave him the incentive to excel, and he was duly accepted at Cambridge in 1995 to read Arabic and Persian. After moving on to a PhD and a three-year post-doctoral fellowship funded by the British Academy (both also at Cambridge), he came to Oxford initially to take up a two-year lectureship in Islamic History. In 2007 he was appointed to a University Research Lectureship in Oriental Studies along with the post at the Centre, where he succeeds Ronald Nettler.

Dr Silverstein's doctoral thesis was, rather startlingly, on postal systems between the time of the biblical book of Esther, the plot of which turns on the sending out of royal edicts, and the Islamic world of the ninth century. It has

been published as *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World* (Cambridge University Press 2007). Such systems were set up by rulers in order to maintain control over vast tracts of land long before steam-engines or cars made possible the swift transportation of everything from letters, people and horses to exotic fruits and ice. As the correspondence often included confidential reports from a ruler's provinces, postal services doubled as espionage-networks carrying news to the authorities quickly enough for them to suppress revolts. Since roads needed to be policed, they in turn provided a focus for maintaining public order. Jewish culture, incidentally, was diffused by means of correspondence between rabbis in the form of responsa, and even the first prayer-book (that of Amram Gaon) was written in response to an inquiry about how to pray correctly.

Dr Silverstein's current research falls into two areas. The first involves a biography of Haman, the anti-hero of the book of Esther. The historicity of this senior Persian minister who suffered disgrace and was executed with his sons is hard to establish. His appearance in Islamic texts as an embodiment of evil raises interesting questions about both the Jewish and the Islamic traditions.



Adam's second research project is to examine the extent to which the Babylonian Talmud, a staple of rabbinic thought, forms a bridge between the Ancient Near East and Islamic culture. While the version of the Talmud edited in the Holy Land – the Jerusalem Talmud – focuses largely on matters of law, the larger and more authoritative Babylonian text seems to be a compendium of all that was known at the time. Its arguments are constantly interrupted with information concerning everything from medicine and cookery to superstitions and swearwords, digressions that probably reveal more than the authors and editors usually intended. The place and date of its redaction – the region of present-day Iraq immediately prior to the birth of Islam – make it a diagnostic text for revealing how differences of language and faith cannot obscure the common traditions shared by all Mesopotamian cultures of the region. Rereading the Talmud in this way shows that, when one returns to roots, more unites than separates the Muslims, Jews, Christians and others of ancient Iraq.



Dr Adam Silverstein with his newborn daughter Zara.

Peter Oppenheimer: Post-presidential Reflections

MY EIGHT-AND-A-HALF YEARS AS OCHJS president has (for me!) passed with astonishing speed – so I’ve evidently enjoyed it, occasional anxieties notwithstanding. Of course such a period is not self-contained. Important developments previously initiated came to fruition. Difficulties that arose could not all be resolved and must, alas, be bequeathed to my successors and colleagues.

The overarching point is that Hebrew and Jewish Studies has slowly but perceptibly strengthened its position at Oxford; and this has happened through the combined and cooperative efforts of the University and the Centre whose academic integration has in the process become more complete.

The Centre’s Annual Report for 2007-8, forthcoming in a couple of months’ time, will contain an article by Hugh Williamson, ‘The Centre and University Teaching’. Hugh came to Oxford as Regius Professor of Hebrew in 1992, and has been one of just two postholders funded by the University in the Jewish Studies field. Martin Goodman, Professor of Jewish Studies, is the other. From October 2008 there will be a third, in the shape of a Modern Hebrew Language instructor – an appointment agreed by the Faculty in response to increasing student demand. But the demand itself owes a good deal to the fact that, throughout this period, a further ten or so academic staff have been provided by the Centre, which has thereby made possible a notable widening of the range of courses on offer at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Altogether, Professor Williamson finds that in the past year Oxford’s combined academic staff in Jewish Studies (grouped together in the Hebrew and Jewish Studies Unit at the Oriental Faculty) ‘have been responsible for at least 65 students in terms of relevant degrees, while aggregate numbers whom we have been teaching in some shape or form have been around the 100 mark’. Lest anybody think this is crowing, Williamson immediately adds: ‘There is undoubtedly room for expansion at all levels, so we should not be complacent’.


The same comment applies very much to the Centre’s financial foundations. Significant new assets have been acquired since the turn of the millennium. In 2001 the anonymously donated ‘MCA Fund’, together with an element of associated fundraising which I had sheer good fortune to accomplish, added over £4.5 million to the balance sheet. The years 2005-7 saw conspicuous

improvements in the Centre’s physical estate at Yarnton, notably the conversion of derelict buildings into new residential accommodation and a major library annex (to house some of our greatly expanded special collections). At the end of 2007 we received from the Polonsky Foundation a donation of shares worth approximately £1.5 million.

But this still leaves the Centre’s capital endowment at well under £10 million; and funding its annual outgoings of around £1.9 million (including accommodation for graduate students and for visiting academics) is a strain. Founder-president David Patterson built the Centre in the 1970s and 1980s with multi-year current donations from external governors and their contacts among charitable foundations. This basically remains the pattern, with a variety of supplements including some notable gifts solicited personally by individual Fellows. The Centre has not hitherto felt able to afford professional fundraising staff; and substitute attempts to induce serious fundraising by external sympathisers on a commission basis have proved ineffective.

In continuing the quest for a capital base proportionate to its academic contribution, the Centre should not fail to point out that it operates a good deal more cost-effectively than the University at large. To endow a senior post in Jewish Studies directly in one of the University’s faculties, the University now demands a sum of £2.4 million. Through the OCHJS the cost will be 30 percent less – between £1.6 and 1.7 million. Much of the difference reflects the expense of an inflated bureaucracy imposed on the University during the past decade in a drive for more top-down control of academic structures and policies. As one of the University’s Recognized Independent Centres – indeed, as the template for this new species – OCHJS represents the worthier Oxford tradition of creativity from the grass-roots.

That said, were the Centre to succeed in lifting its endowment capital to, say, £40 million (in today’s prices), it might be tempted to surrender independence in return for the University’s ring-fencing that £40 million for Jewish Studies. I have no doubt that under David Ariel’s leadership the Centre will be well able to face this or other dilemmas, and I wish all my colleagues – governors, fellows and lecturers, as well as administrative and domestic staff – continuing progress and good fortune in the years ahead.



Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine

THE PROCEEDINGS are in the process of being published of a conference of historians and other specialists in rabbinic Judaism which took place in London in March 2008 under the auspices of the British Academy. The conference was convened by the Centre's Professor Martin Goodman and by Professor Philip Alexander, a former President of the Centre. Twenty-seven scholars from the United States, Israel, Austria, Germany, Holland and the UK gathered in the Academy's premises in 10 Carlton House Terrace to clarify issues that face historians in understanding these texts, and thereby to encourage more sophisticated and wide-ranging use of rabbinic materials.

Jews living in the Roman province of Palestine between the revolt of Bar Kokhba (132–135 CE) and the establishment of Islamic rule in the Land of Israel in the mid-seventh century produced a huge corpus of literary works: legal discussions, biblical commentaries, poetry and other genres. Some of these, such as the Mishnah, Palestinian Talmud and Amoraic midrashim, have profoundly influenced the development of rabbinic Judaism, yet they have been insufficiently mined as evidence for the political, cultural, social and religious history of late-Roman Palestine. Classicists face difficulties in tackling Hebrew and Aramaic literature, especially of so allusive and complex a kind, and a fundamental question has been dating its composition. Because surviving manuscripts are all medieval, some texts may reflect the views of later copyists. Also, since rabbinic culture was, or claimed to be, to a large extent oral, thinking of these collections as 'texts' of any kind may be an error.

The conference set out to highlight current approaches and to explore their strengths and weaknesses. In the first of two evening debates open to the general public Professor Peter Schäfer (a Senior Associate of the Centre) and Professor Chaim Milikowsky revisited their celebrated exchange, originally published in the Centre's *Journal of Jewish Studies* in the 1980s, on the best way to edit late-antique rabbinic texts. Schäfer upholds the 'democratic' virtues of presenting a synopsis of the different manuscripts, while Milikowsky argues that editors should guide readers towards the 'best' reading, on the assumption that such a reading was preferred by someone in late antiquity, even if there was no single original author.

In the second debate, Professor Seth Schwartz argued

that archaeological evidence reveals a type of Judaism culturally different from that described in rabbinic texts, while Professor Fergus Millar (Senior Associate of the Centre) asserted that inscriptions with the title 'Rabbi' and other similarities encourage us to read the archaeological evidence through rabbinic lenses.

The main sessions of the conference were devoted to discussing papers submitted in advance. Professor Fergus Millar described late-Roman Palestine as reflected in non-rabbinic sources - a world of Greek cities, Roman bishops, churches, Church councils, monks, Samaritans and Saracens - even though this impinged little on rabbinic texts.

Participants considered texts ranging from legal ones (*halakhah*) to exegesis (*midrash*), poetry (*piyyut*) and Aramaic translation (*targum*). Of particular interest was Peter Schäfer's contention, followed up in his Catherine Lewis lectures in Oxford, that one cannot trace Jewish mysticism from the Dead Sea Scrolls through to the medieval Heikhalot texts. Philip Alexander and Rachel Elior have recently argued on differing grounds for a continuous mystical tradition from Qumran to the Middle Ages.

The final day was dedicated to discussing the relationship between 'rabbinic culture' and that of the wider Roman world. Lecturers assessed the role of archaeology in interpreting rabbinic texts, and the value of rabbinic texts as evidence both for the development of rabbinic Judaism and for the co-existence of rabbis with other forms of Judaism. Papers were delivered on rabbinic understandings of Jesus and Jewish early Christians, and on how to elicit new information by reading rabbinic stories against the background of other sources about provincial administration. Economic and social history, including trades, markets, social groupings of different kinds and the use of different currencies, can be illuminated with the help of rabbinic texts, as well as of coins, documentary papyri and Roman legal codes.

The attitudes of participants towards using rabbinic texts for history veered from optimism to extreme scepticism, but a cautious consensus emerged. The value is clear of a mass of material whose basic origins in Palestine in the third to seventh centuries CE are undisputed, even if their precise form in this period is uncertain. One should nonetheless be aware of the fluid nature of the manuscript traditions and of the rabbis' rather blinkered view of the multicultural world of Palestine. (MG)

Dr Raffaella Del Sarto, Pears-Rich Fellow in Israel Studies

DR RAFFAELLA A. DEL SARTO is the Centre's new Research Fellow in Israel Studies, a joint post with the Middle East Centre of St Antony's College, reestablished with the generous support of the Pears Foundation and the Marc Rich Foundation.

Dr Del Sarto came to Oxford from the European University Institute in Fiesole, a research institution housed in a medieval former monastery on a hillside overlooking Florence, Italy, where she was a Jean Monnet Fellow and subsequently a Marie Curie Research Fellow. She had earlier lectured on international relations at the University of Bologna. Despite her Italian name and origins, she deeply regrets not speaking English with an Italian accent, but explains that she has been exposed to several other linguistic influences.

She lived in Israel for some years, receiving her PhD in International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2003, and initially working at the Israel Democracy Institute in Talbiyeh in West Jerusalem. Her doctoral research investigated the impact of domestic factors on Euro-Mediterranean regional relations, and involved field research in Israel, Egypt and Morocco.

While pursuing her doctoral studies she was also employed as a project manager with a German foundation in East Jerusalem for two years – her 'German connection' having begun when she lived in Germany, obtaining a Master's degree in Political Science at the University of Freiburg. Her main task in East Jerusalem was to set up local management structures for a German government fund supporting Palestinian civil-society projects. Carrying out research for a PhD at the Hebrew University while working with Palestinian civil society during the years of

the Oslo process, in the late 1990s, gave her an opportunity to become acquainted with political realities on both sides of the conflict – as well as frequent headaches, she adds.

Dr Del Sarto's research interests very much reflect her personal journey and experiences. They include Euro-Mediterranean and EU-Israeli relations, Middle East politics and, obviously, the politics and society of Israel itself. She belongs, she says, 'to that group of strange people who like theory – International Relations theory in my case'. Within that area she is particularly interested in the relationship between identity and security as well as in the domestic-foreign-policy nexus. Her passions for Karate and sushi, on the other hand, have very little to do with Europe or the Middle East. But practising Karate furthers her serenity and peace of mind, she says, and this is much needed in dealing with a troubled area – and occasionally also in responding to critics!

During her Fellowship she is teaching a postgraduate course entitled 'Israel: State, Society, Identity'. Her conscious aim is to assist students who want to deepen their knowledge of modern Israel and engage in research on this topic. Reflecting her interest in Euro-Mediterranean affairs, she is also involved through St Antony's European Studies Centre in the RAMSES network of Research Centres on the Mediterranean Area. Her own research project explores the contributions—and failures – of International Relations theory in explaining the persistence of the Arab-Israeli conflict – 'theory meets practice', as she puts it.

Dr Del Sarto finds her Research Fellowship in Israel Studies challenging for at least two reasons. First, specialization on modern Israel puts her somewhat on the fringe of both the institutions with which she is associated. 'At OCHJS', she explains, 'I am the only one concerned with the politics of modern Israel, and at St Antony's, again no one else specializes in the Middle Eastern "cousin"...'. Secondly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel's relations with Europe are emotionally laden subjects, which lend themselves to biased arguments and polemics of different flavours. But she argues that political realities are far more complex than that. Therefore, the main goal she wishes to achieve during her Fellowship is quintessentially academic: to advance knowledge. For this there is no alternative to informed research guided by the benchmark of objectivity.

Dr Raffaella Del Sarto



Published by the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies
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Edited by Dr Jeremy Schonfield
Produced by John Saunders
Printed in Great Britain

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