

PROMOTION RECOMMENDATION  
The University of Michigan  
College of Literature, Science, and the Arts

Rachel Neis, assistant professor of history, and assistant professor of Judaic studies, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, is recommended for promotion to associate professor of history, with tenure, and associate professor of Judaic studies, with tenure, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

Academic Degrees:

Ph.D.	2007	Harvard University, Jewish Studies
M.A.	2001	Boston University
LL.B.	1995	The London School of Economics

Professional Record:

2007 – present      Assistant Professor, Department of History and Jean and Samuel Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, University of Michigan

Summary of Evaluation:

Teaching – In an impressive array of undergraduate classes that range from “Law in the Pre-Modern World” to “Jewish Visual Culture,” Professor Neis has been a highly successful teacher. Student comments are enthusiastic and emphasize the analytical skills they have been able to develop in Professor Neis’ classes. Professor Neis also advised undergraduate theses and served on Ph.D. committees. She has been critical in reshaping the curricula in Judaic Studies and has played a key role in making Michigan a leading center for the study of ancient religion and cultures.

Research – As a scholar of late antiquity Judaism, Professor Neis brings a broad and penetrating knowledge to her research of the rabbinic textual corpus and of its material culture and historical context in both the Greco-Roman and Persian worlds of antiquity. Her recently-published book addresses multiple audiences and challenges accepted understandings of the rabbis through persuasive new readings of rabbinic texts. Her four substantial articles published in leading Jewish studies journals demonstrate her mastery of Jewish mystical texts as well as charting key components of her future research on the spatial orientation of Jewish bodies.

Recent and Significant Publications:

The Sense of Sight in Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Ways of Seeing in Late Antiquity, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

“Pilgrimage itineraries: Seeing the past through Rabbinic eyes,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 19, 2012, pp. 1-33.

“Objectionable objects: Rabbis and ‘idols,’” *Frankel Institute Annual*, 2010, pp. 6-8.

“Embracing icons: Byzantine Jewish iconophiles,” *Images: A Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture*, 1, 2007, pp. 36-54.

Service – Professor Neis has served on important committees in History and Judaic Studies, including her role on the Executive Committee of the joint doctoral program in Anthropology

and History (2010-present). She has also been a faculty mentor to LGBT students (2007-present). Nationally she has served on the Steering Committee of the Art and Religion panel of the Society for Biblical Literature (2009-present) and as a member of the editorial board of *Fragments: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Ancient and Medieval Pasts* (2009-present).

External Reviewers:

Reviewer (A)

“Her book is a significant contribution, and in addition, she has written four substantial articles in four highly regarded peer-reviewed journals. I would also note that the articles demonstrate a range of expertises [sic], beyond that of rabbinic literature. I was impressed by her engagement with mystical sources in the Hekhalot literature in her article ‘Embracing Icons: The Face of Jacob on the Throne of God.’ She handled this obscure and difficult corpus with impressive expertise, in spite of its many technical demands. Her article on pilgrimage itineraries is another example of wide-ranging interests and expertise.”

Reviewer (B)

“In my estimation, Neis is among the top few scholars of her generation working in the history of late antique Jewish culture and rabbinic literature. Neis’s [sic] work as a scholar is distinctive for its combination of traditional erudition, historiographic sophistication, and theoretical refinement, qualities that place her among the ranks of already established scholars...”

Reviewer (C)

“The book, I have no doubt, will be extremely well received in the arenas. In this context it should be emphasized what an accomplishment it actually is that her book is part of the Cambridge series of Greek Culture in the Roman World. Generally, it is very difficult for scholarship on rabbinic culture to be readable in an interdisciplinary field (beyond Jewish Studies), so this in and of itself is a significant accomplishment.”

Reviewer (D)

“I cannot overstate the qualities that Dr. Neis brings to her research. To begin, she is clearly at home in a variety of disciplines: Her control of rabbinic literature is impeccable, she is an accomplished artist and brings insights from that arena into her scholarship, and she also has the incisive mind of one trained in legal studies. ... But none of this diminishes her talents as a historian of Late Antiquity, and her article ‘Embracing Icons’ is a wonderful example of the contextualization of Jewish mystical texts (*Hekhalot Rabbati*) into the iconoclastic debates and anxiety felt by the Christian church in the Byzantine period.”

Reviewer (E)

“...the book is an achievement, the most substantial work on the theme of Rabbinic visuality conceived in wide theoretical and historical contexts and based on extensive text readings of the relevant sources. ... Neis is an excellent scholar and well deserves the promotion to Associate Professor with tenure at the Department of History and the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies...”

Reviewer (F)

“I regard her as a rising academic star, whose publications demonstrate a profound understanding of the relationships between Jews and the ambient cultures in the Greco-Roman and Persian

worlds... Rachel's publications demonstrate her expertise in the difficult field of the study of the Babylonian Talmud, an area that scholars of Palestinian genres of rabbinic literature tend to studiously avoid. Her book is at the cutting edge of research into the Jews, Christians, pagans, and Zoroastrians of late antiquity, in part because she is one of very few scholars conversant in the Graeco-Roman and Persian cultural contexts..."

Reviewer (G)

"From this it should be clear that Rachel Neis has set her own standards, well above most of her peers in her chosen discipline of Judaism in late antiquity. She masters all the relevant methodological tools (philology, literary analysis, history) with full competence and yet broadens the perspective into much neglected or even uncharted territory. Her book and her 2007 article 'Embracing Icons' would definitely be on my list of the most significant publications to appear recently in her field."

Reviewer (H)

"The focus on vision was, in my view, a brilliant stroke since it allows Neis to engage issues of gender, religious experience, ritual, domination and its resistance, spatiality, and many other topics at the center of the field of rabbinics today but infrequently brought into conversation with each other."

Summary of Recommendation:

Professor Neis has produced innovative and important scholarship. She is an outstanding teacher and a valued colleague. The Executive Committee of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts and I recommend that Assistant Professor Rachel Neis be promoted to the rank of associate professor of history, with tenure, and associate professor of Judaic studies, with tenure, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.



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Terrence J. McDonald  
Arthur F. Thurnau Professor,  
Professor of History and Dean  
College of Literature, Science, and the Arts

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