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TALMUD OVERVIEW

Introduction

The Talmud discussed and examined on this website will primarily be the Babylonian Talmud.

The Talmud is the pivotal text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law (Halakhah) and theology. Until the arrival of widespread Jewish emancipation, in almost all Jewish communities, the Talmud was the heart of Jewish cultural life and was foundational to Jewish thought, objectives and assisting as the guidebook for the daily life of Jews.

The Talmud has two elements:

- The Mishnah (c. 200 AD), a written collection of the Oral Torah
- The Gemara (c. 500 AD), an exposition of the Mishnah

The name "Talmud" may refer to either the Gemara alone, or the Mishnah and Gemara together.

The entire Talmud consists of 63 tractates. It is written in Mishnaic Hebrew and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and comprises of the teachings and opinions of thousands of Rabbis on a variety of subjects, including halakha, ethics, philosophy, customs, history, and folklore, and many other topics. The Talmud is the source for all codes of Jewish law and is widely quoted in Rabbinic literature.

Etymology

Talmud translates as "instruction, learning", meaning "teach, study".

Talmud or Torah?

From the Jewish perspective "Torah" primarily refers to the five books attributed to Moses in the Bible (aka. Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. "Torah" can also extend to the whole Tanach (rest of Bible Hebrew Scriptures). However, the term Torah is often used to define all Jewish scholarship, which includes the Talmud.

The Talmud can also be known by the name Shas. This is a Hebrew acronym for the expression Shishah Sedarim or the six orders of the Mishnah. The Talmud, from the Middle Ages can come to be also often referred to as simply Gemara.

History

Initially, Jewish scholarship was oral and transmitted from one generation to the next. Rabbis elaborated and debated the Torah (the written Torah expressed in the Hebrew Bible) and examined the Tanakh without the help of other written works other than the Biblical books.

Circumstances changed significantly due to the Roman destruction of the Jewish polity and the Second Temple in the year 70 and the resultant upheaval of Jewish social and legal norms. As the Rabbis were obligated to face Judaism without a Temple and complete Roman control over Judaea, there was a burst of legal discourse, and the old system of oral scholarship could not be retained. It is during this time that the oral law began to be written down.

Between the 2nd and 5th centuries AD these rabbinic discourses about the Mishnah were recorded in Jerusalem and later in Babylon. This was completed by the 5th Century CE. When the Talmud is mentioned without further clarification it is usually understood to refer to the Babylonian version which is regarded as having most authority.

The Rabbi most thoroughly related to the compilation of the Mishnah is Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (c. 135-219 AD). During his lifetime there were rebellions against Roman rule in Palestine. This resulted in the loss of life and the destruction of many of the Yeshivot (schools for the study of the Torah) in the country. This may have led him to be anxious that the traditional narration of the law from Rabbi to student was endangered and therefore motivated his project to write it down.

Structure

The structure of the Talmud shadows that of the Mishnah, in which six orders of general subject matter are divided into 60 or 63 tractates of more focused collections of topics, though not all tractates have Gemara. Each tractate is divided into chapters (perakim; singular: perek), that are given names, usually using the first one or two words in the first Mishnah. A perek may continue over several pages. Each perek will contain several mishna's.

Mishnah

The Mishnah is a collection of legal opinions and debates. Statements in the Mishnah are characteristically pithy, recording brief opinions of the Rabbis debating a topic; or recording only an unattributed decision, indicating a consensus view. The Rabbis recorded in the Mishnah are known as the Tannaim (literally, "repeaters", or "teachers"). These tanna'im, Rabbis of the second century AD, who formed the Mishnah, are identified separately from the Rabbis of the third to fifth centuries, known as amoraim (literally, "speakers"), who created the Talmud.

Baraita

In addition to the Mishnah, other tannaitic teachings were existing at about the same time or just after that. The Gemara often directs to these tannaitic statements to contrast them to those contained in the Mishnah and to support or refute the propositions of the Amoraim.

Gemara

In the three centuries following the editing of the Mishnah, Rabbis in Palestine and Babylonia examined, debated, and discussed that work. These conversations form the Gemara. The Gemara primarily focuses on interpreting and expanding the opinions of the Tannaim. These Rabbis of the Gemara are known as the Amoraim.

Much of the Gemara comprises of legal analysis. The starting point for the analysis is usually a legal statement found in a Mishnah. The statement is then analyzed and associated with other statements used in different approaches to biblical exegesis in Rabbinic Judaism (simpler interpretation of text) and the exchanges between two disputants, termed the "questioner" and "answerer". An additional central function of Gemara is to identify the precise biblical basis for a given law presented in the Mishnah and the logical process connecting one with the other.

Tana Or An Amora?

The term or title of Rabbi in ancient Israel was only applied to a Torah scholar who was deemed worthy of it in an ordination known as semichah ("rely on", in the sense of "lean on", or "to be authorized"; the literal meaning of semichah is "leaning of the hands").

Because the Babylonian sages did not live in Israel, they were not able to receive semichah and were thus simply known as rav so-and-so. So, when someone named in the Talmud is preceded by Rabbi you can assume he is either a tana or an amora from the Land of Israel. Contrarywise, if his title is rav, you know he is a Babylonian amora.

The Six Sections of the Talmud

The Talmud is divided into six sections, called sedarim ("orders"):

- Zera'im ("Seeds"), covering primarily agricultural laws, plus the laws of blessings and prayers
- Mo'ed ("Festival"), covering laws of the Sabbath and the holidays
- Nashim ("Women"), covering marriage and divorce (including marriage contracts)
- Nezikin ("Damages"), covering civil and criminal law, law courts, as well as ethics
- Kodashim ("Holy Things"), covering laws about the sacrifices, the Temple, and dietary laws
- Taharot ("Purities"), covering laws of ritual purity and impurity

Later Scholarship

Geonim

The initial Talmud commentaries were written by the Geonim (c. 800–1000) in Babylonia. Main knowledge of the Gaonic era Talmud scholarship, comes from assertions embedded in Geonic responsa that shed light on Talmudic passages. Also of importance are practical abridgments of Jewish law such as Yehudai Gaon's Halachot Pesukot, Achai Gaon's Sheeltot and Simeon Kayyara's Halachot Gedolot. After the death of Hai Gaon, however, the center of Talmud scholarship shifts to Europe and North Africa.

Halakhic and Haggadic Exegesis

One field of Talmudic scholarship developed out of the necessity to establish Halakha. Early commentators such as rabbi Isaac Alfasi (North Africa, 1013–1103) attempted to extract and establish the binding legal opinions from the vast corpus of the Talmud. Alfasi's work was influential and later served as a basis for the formation of halakhic codes. Another dominant medieval Halakhic work following the order of the Babylonian Talmud was "the Mordechai", a compilation by Mordechai ben Hillel (c. 1250–1298). A third such work was that of Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel (d. 1327). All these works and their commentaries are printed in the Vilna and many subsequent editions of the Talmud.

Pilpul

During the 15th and 16th centuries, a new demanding form of Talmud study arose. Complicated logical arguments were used to explain minor points of contradiction within the Talmud. The term pilpul was applied to this type of study. Usage of pilpul in this sense (that of "sharp analysis") heeds back to the Talmudic era and belongs to the intellectual sharpness this method demanded.

Pilpul practitioners conjectured that the Talmud could contain no redundancy or contradiction whatsoever. New categories and distinctions were therefore created, resolving seeming contradictions within the Talmud by unique logical means.

In the Ashkenazi world the originators of pilpul are Jacob Pollak (1460–1541) and Shalom Shachna. This kind of study reached its height in the 16th and 17th centuries when proficiency in pilpulistic analysis was considered an art form and became a goal in and of itself within the yeshivot of Poland and Lithuania.

Codification

Rabbi Maimonides (Rambam) compiled the Mishneh Torah which is the extraction from the Talmud of the code of Jewish Law and has come to be regarded by many as a primary source. Another codifying work from the Middle Ages is the Shulcan Aruch (laid table) by Rabbi Joseph Caro which is extensively referenced by Jews.

Why the Talmud Was Needed

The proposed *raison d'être* for the Talmud is that it explains particularly the frequent lack of detail and information in commandments in the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, where to cut when circumcising the penis or how to put on tefillin, or even what it is exactly.

The "Oral Law" is the guide for the written Torah. It is proposed that Moses on Mount Sinai was given both a written law and an oral law. Tradition says the oral law was transmitted from generation to generation, from Moses to Joshua and downwards through the leaders and sages until the destruction of the Second Temple from which time the Mishnah and Gemara were put into writing as explained above.