

UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINS OF THE TALMUD

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the origins, structure, and significance of the Talmud, one of the important texts in Jewish tradition. Drawing on a range of historical and cultural sources, the article explores the key events and figures involved in the creation, content, and canonisation of Talmud. From the early oral traditions and commentaries that formed the foundation of Talmudic tradition, have emerged its interpretation and reinterpretation over centuries and the article provides a detailed account of its role in shaping Jewish identity and practice. In addition to tracing the historical and cultural context, the article examines the significance of this text in contemporary Jewish thought and practice, highlighting the ways in which it shaped the traditions of scholars and practitioners today. As a historical document and a legal text, the Talmud remains an important part of Jewish belief, reflecting the ongoing conversation and interpretation that lies at the heart of Jewish culture and identity.

Keywords – Talmud, Mishnah, Judaism, Holy Scriptures, Religious History

Introduction

The Talmud is a central text of Rabbinic Judaism, and its origins and development have been a topic of scholarly investigation for centuries.

Rabbinic Judaism was developed after the fall of the Temple of Jerusalem (70 CE). It originated in the work of some rabbis who set up a mode of worship and a life discipline that were to be practiced by Jews. Hebrew term 'rabbi', (my teacher) is a person qualified by academic studies of the Hebrew Bible (and the Talmud) to act as religious teacher in a Jewish community.

Hebrew term Talmud (study or learning) refers to a compilation of ancient teachings regarded as sacred and normative by Jews from the time it was initiated (70 CE) until modern times.

Talmud is a set of books consisting of (i) the Mishna (repeated study), (ii) the Gemara (an Aramaic term, meaning completion), and (iii) certain secondary materials. The Mishna is a

collection of oral laws, and the Gemara is a collection of commentaries on and elaborations of the Mishna.

In this article, we will delve into the origins of the Talmud and examine the key events and people involved in its writing and canonisation across centuries.

One of the crucial questions that we will explore in this article is the role of human agency in the creation of the Talmud. We will examine this question from a variety of perspectives, including religious, philosophical, and historical. Through this exploration, we aim to shed light on one of the most significant texts in Jewish history.

Distinguishing the Talmud from the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible)

The Tanakh and the Talmud are two essential texts in Jewish tradition, but they differ in terms of their content, purpose, and historical context.

The Tanakh, also known as the Hebrew Bible, is the primary sacred text of Judaism. It consists of three main parts, (i) the Torah, (ii) the Prophets (Nevi'im), and (iii) the Writings (Ketuvim). The Torah contains the foundational narrative and laws of Judaism, and the Prophets and Writings expand on this narrative and provide insights into Jewish history and ethics. The Tanakh is considered an authoritative text of Judaism which is studied and interpreted by Jews.

The Talmud is a complex collection of Jewish legal and ethical teachings, commentaries, and discussions. As we have described, it comprises two main parts, (i) the Mishnah and (ii) the Gemara. The Mishnah is a compilation of Jewish oral law, which was codified in the 2nd century CE, while the Gemara is a commentary on the

Mishnah, which was written over several centuries in the 3rd to the 5th centuries CE. The Talmud also contains stories, legends, and other forms of Jewish literature.

The Talmud is studied by Jews worldwide and provides a framework for understanding Jewish law, ethics, and customs. It also provides insights into Jewish history and philosophy.

The two versions of the Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud are two main versions of the Talmud, each with its distinct origins, features, and historical context.

1. Origins and Historical Context

The Jerusalem Talmud, also known as the Palestinian Talmud, was compiled in the 4th century CE when Jerusalem was under Roman rule. It was written in Hebrew and reflects the legal and ethical teachings of the Jewish communities in Palestine at that time. The Jerusalem Talmud was likely compiled by the Jewish scholars in the Yavne Academy, led by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai who lived in first century CE. He is known to be the primary contributor to the core text of Rabbanic Judaism, the Mishna.

The Babylonian Talmud was compiled in the 5th century CE in Babylonia, which is modern-day Iraq. It was written in Aramaic and reflects the legal and ethical teachings of the Jewish communities in Babylonia at that time. It was compiled by two Babylonian Rabbis, Rav Ashi and Ravina II, in Sura and Pumbedita academies during 375-427 CE. The work began by Rav Ashi and was later completed by Ravina II.

2. Differences in Content and Style

The Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud differ in their content and style of presentation. The Jerusalem Talmud focuses primarily on Jewish law and legal discussions, often in the form of brief, concise statements. It includes commentaries on the Mishnah and discussions on various Jewish legal topics, such as ritual purity, agricultural laws, festivals, etc. It

is less comprehensive than the Babylonian Talmud, with fewer commentaries and discussions.

The Babylonian Talmud is more extensive and comprehensive which contains more commentaries, discussions, and stories, and it covers a broader range of topics, including Jewish law, ethics, philosophy, etc. It is written in a more narrative style, with discussions and debates often presented in an extended and detailed format.

3. Influence and Significance

Both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud have had a significant influence on Jewish law, ethics, and culture. The Jerusalem Talmud was primarily used in Jewish communities in Palestine and was influential in shaping Jewish law and customs in that region.

The Babylonian Talmud became the standard Talmudic text which was studied and used by Jews worldwide.

The current state of Israel generally follows the Babylonian Talmud as the authoritative version of the Talmud.

An overview of the structure of the Talmud

Both versions of the Talmud share the same basic structure, which includes the Mishnah, Gemara, and commentaries. However, the specific commentaries, discussions, and legal rulings found in each Talmud are different, reflecting the unique historical and cultural context of the Jewish communities in Babylonia and Palestine.

The structure of the Talmud is intricate and can be challenging to understand for those unfamiliar with its organization.

1. The Mishnah

The Mishnah is the first part of the Talmud, and it consists of six sequences / orders (Sedarim) subdivided into tractates (Masechtot). The six orders are as follows:

- *Zera'im (Seeds)* - This order deals with agricultural laws and contains 11 tractates.
- *Mo'ed (Festival)* - This order deals with the Jewish festivals and contains 12 tractates.
- *Nashim (Women)* - This order deals with laws related to women, marriage, and divorce and contains 7 tractates.
- *Nezikin (Damages)* - This order deals with civil and criminal law and contains 10 tractates.
- *Kodashim (Holy Things)* - This order deals with laws related to the Temple and sacrifices and contains 11 tractates.
- *Tehorot (Purities)* - This order deals with laws of ritual purity and contains 12 tractates.

Each tractate contains several chapters (Perakim), and each chapter contains several Mishnayot (individual teachings). The Mishnah serves as the foundation for the Talmud's legal discussions and forms the basis for much of Jewish law.

2. The Gemara

The Gemara is the second part of the Talmud, and which is a commentary on the Mishnah.

The Gemara contains discussions, debates, and commentaries on the Mishnah, exploring and expanding on its teachings. It also includes additional legal and ethical teachings and stories and legends.

The Gemara is organized by tractate, corresponding to the Mishnah's organization, and each page (Daf) of the Gemara contains the Mishnah text with commentary and discussions. The Gemara's structure is highly interconnected, with each discussion and commentary relating to previous and subsequent discussions, forming a complex web.

The Canonization of the Talmud

The Canonization of the Talmud was a long and complex process that spans across centuries. It can be briefly summarised into the following 7 stages.

1. Compilation of the Mishnah

The origins of the Talmud can be traced back to the Mishnah, a compilation of Jewish laws and customs that was compiled in the 2nd century CE by Rabbi Judah the Prince in the Land of Israel. The Mishnah served as a concise summary of the oral traditions of Jewish law and custom that had been passed down for generations, and it became a central text for Jewish scholars to study and interpret.

2. Commentaries and Discussions

After the compilation of the Mishnah, Jewish scholars continued to study and interpret its contents. They engaged in discussions and debates over the meaning of the Mishnah, and they began to write commentaries and explanations to clarify its teachings.

3. Compilation of the Jerusalem Talmud

The commentaries and discussions were compiled into Jerusalem Talmud, which is also known as the Palestinian Talmud in 4th Century CE. The Jerusalem Talmud contains commentaries and discussions on the Mishnah by Jewish scholars who lived and worked in Palestine.

4. Compilation of the Babylonian Talmud

In Babylonia, Jewish scholars also studied Mishnah and interpreted it as per their own understanding and compiled the Babylonian Talmud, in the 5th century CE.

5. Debates and Disagreements

The process of canonization involved debates and disagreements among Jewish scholars over which commentaries and interpretations should be included in the Talmud. Some scholars favoured the Jerusalem Talmud, while others favoured the Babylonian Talmud. Jewish communities in different parts of the world also had their own preferences and traditions.

6. Acceptance of the Babylonian Talmud

Over time, the Babylonian Talmud became the more widely accepted and authoritative version of the Talmud. It was studied and accepted by Jewish communities around the world, and it became the standard text for Jewish legal and philosophical discussions.

7. Recognition by Maimonides

In the 12th century, the Talmud was officially recognized as a central text of Judaism by Moses ben Maimon (1138–1204), known as Maimonides, who emphasized the importance of studying and interpreting Talmudic teachings.

The canonization of the Talmud was a gradual process that involved the contributions of many Jewish scholars over many centuries.

Multiple authors across several centuries

The Talmud was not authored by a single individual or even a group of individuals with specific biographical details that can be traced. Rather, it was compiled over many centuries by numerous rabbis and scholars who contributed their own interpretations, commentaries, and discussions on the Mishnah.

The following are brief biographical details of some of the prominent rabbis who contributed to the development of the Talmud.

1. Rabbi Judah the Prince (135 - 217 CE)

He is the compiler of the Mishnah, which served as the basis for the Talmud.

2. Rabbi Akiva (50-135 CE)

He was a prominent rabbi who lived in the 1st century CE and was one of the most important contributors to the development of the Mishnah. He is credited with establishing the principles of rabbinic interpretation of Jewish law.

3. Rav Ashi (352–427)

He was the final editor of the Babylonian Talmud.

4. Ravina - li (died 420 CE)

He was a Babylonian rabbi who was one of the major contributors to the Babylonian Talmud along with his teacher Rav Ashi.

5. Rabbi Meir (139-163)

He was a student of Rabbi Akiva and contributed several interpretations to the Mishnah.

6. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai

He was a 2nd-century rabbi and a disciple of Rabbi Akiva. He is the author of the Zohar, a central text in Kabbalah.

7. Rabbi Yosef Karo

Born in Spain in 1488, he moved to Turkey and became involved in Kabbalah. He was strongly influenced by Solomon Alkabetz, another Kabbala Rabbi. He also wrote the Shulchan Aruch, a code of Jewish law.

8. Maimonides (1138-1204)

He was a Jewish philosopher and rabbi who wrote extensively on Jewish law and philosophy. He was an important advocate for the study and interpretation of the Talmud.

An important thing to note is that the contributions of individual rabbis to the Talmud were often made anonymously or under fictitious names, and many of their biographical details are not well-documented.

Talmud - A human intellectual effort

The Talmud is traditionally understood by Jews to be a humanly authored work, in the sense that its contents represent the collective intellectual efforts of generations of Jewish scholars. However, within the Jewish tradition, there is a belief that the study and interpretation of the Talmud can be guided by divine inspiration or insight, and that the Talmud itself contains layers of meaning and significance that go beyond its human origins.

For example, some Jewish mystics have interpreted the Talmud as a manifestation of divine wisdom and have seen its teachings as a way to connect with the divine. However, the

Talmudic tradition itself encourages a process of ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation, in which new understandings are constantly being generated by scholars and practitioners.

Critical scrutiny of Talmud

As has been described, Talmud consists of 63 tractates, and in the standard print, called the Vilna Shas, there are 2,711 double-sided folios. It is written in Mishnaic Hebrew and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and contains the teachings and opinions of thousands of rabbis dating from before the 'Common Era' (CE) through to the fifth century CE, on a variety of subjects, including halakha, Jewish ethics, philosophy, customs, history, folklore, etc.

Despite the central place of Talmud in traditional Jewish life, significant Jewish groups and individuals have opposed it vigorously. The Karaite sect in Babylonia, beginning in the 8th century, refuted the oral tradition and denounced the Talmud as a rabbinic fabrication. Medieval Jewish mystics declared the Talmud a mere shell. The messianic sects in the 17th and 18th centuries totally rejected it. The decisive blow to Talmudic authority came in the 18th and 19th centuries when the Jewish Enlightenment movement (Haskala) and its aftermath, Reform Judaism Movement, secularized Jewish life and modern Jews started rejecting Talmud as a medieval holdover.

There is a long-standing anti-Talmudic tradition among Christians. The Talmud was criticized by the church during the Middle Ages and accused of falsifying biblical narrative. The church held that the Talmud contained blasphemous remarks against Jesus and Christianity and that it preached moral and social bias toward non-Jews.

Conclusion

The origins and development of the Talmud are complex and multifaceted, reflecting centuries of intellectual and cultural exchange among Jewish communities across the world. From its beginnings as a collection of oral traditions and commentaries, to its canonisation as a central text of Jewish law and philosophy, the Talmud

has played an important role in shaping Jewish identity and practice.

While the Talmud is traditionally understood to be a humanly authored work, its ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation by generations of scholars and practitioners continues to shape and inspire Jewish thought and practice today. Whether approached as a historical document, a legal text, or a spiritual guide, the Talmud remains a dynamic part of Jewish tradition, reflecting the ongoing conversation and interpretation that lies at the heart of Jewish culture and identity.

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Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of *Tafseer-e-Asedi*, *Irshad Al Asedi*, *Fusus Al-Iman* and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.