

JEWISH LITERACY

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Mishna and Talmud

I. Overview

- A. If the Bible is the heart of Judaism, the Talmud is its bloodstream.
- B. Talmud = Mishna + Gemara
- C. *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem or Palestinian) Talmud completed in about 400 CE.
- D. *Talmud Bavli* (or Babylonian Talmud) completed in about 500 CE. This is the primary Talmud. The *Bavli* is six times the size of the *Yerushalmi*.
- E. The completed Talmud includes citations from more than a thousand rabbis and teachers.
 1. Rabbis whose views are recorded in the *Mishna* are called *Tanna'im* (Aramaic for “teachers”).
 2. Rabbis quoted in the Gemara are called *Amora'im* (“explainers” or “interpreters”).

II. Mishna

- A. From Hebrew *shonah*, to repeat, therefore to study by repetition
- B. The recorded Oral Law, needed since the Torah didn't answer all legal and religious questions. Example: what work is prohibited on the Sabbath.
- C. An oral law required students to maintain relationships with teachers; this was deemed the best way to pass down Jewish tradition.
- D. Compiled by *Yehuda HaNasi* (Rabbi Judah the Prince or “Rabbi”) in 200 CE (after the failed revolts against Rome). He feared that the law would be lost if not written down.
- E. Statements of Oral Law that Judah did not select are called *Tosefta* or *Baraitah*.
- F. *Mishna* is written in Hebrew, but the Hebrew is different from that of the Bible.
- G. *Mishnayot* are short, elegant and idealistic (compared to the *Gemara*)
 1. In a sense, the *Mishna* corresponds to the US Constitution, elegant, and general
 2. The *Gemara* corresponds to Supreme Court cases which ultimately decide what the Constitution means.
- H. Structure of the *Mishna*
 1. Divided into 6 orders.
 2. Each order is divided into tractates (63 in all)
 3. Each tractate has several chapters
 4. The chapters contain several *mishnayot* (plural for *mishnah*)
- I. Thus a typical reference would read “Sanhedrin 3:4” referring to the 4th *mishnah* of the 3rd chapter of tractate *Sanhedrin* (although *Sanhedrin* is in the 4th order called *Nezikin*, this is not given in the typical citation).
- J. Let's read some Mishna!
 1. *Pirke Avot* – Chap. 1
 2. *Ketubot* 5:6 [A husband's sexual obligations towards his wife]
 3. *Yoma* 8 [rules for Yom Kippur]

III. Talmud

- A. Talmud is difficult because:
 - 1. The rabbis wanted us to study with a teacher and a friend
 - 2. The rabbis wanted to teach us the logic behind Jewish law and tradition so that we could continue the process. They could have written a simple code which would have been quickly out of date.
- B. The *Gemara* is the commentary on the *Mishna*. *Gemara* is the Aramaic word for Talmud. The *Gemara* is written in Hebrew and Aramaic.
 - 1. The *Gemara* does not address each of the 63 tractates of *Mishna*
 - a) the Babylonian Talmud addresses 37 and the Jerusalem, 39 (not the same ones).
 - 2. Some of the talmudic material may have been lost over the years.
- C. The Talmud contains both *halachic* (legal) and *aggadic* (ethical and folkloric) material. The legal material accounts for 80% of the Babylonian Talmud.
- D. The Talmud was first printed in Venice in 1520. Every Talmud printed since this date has the exact same layout. Thus a citation in the Talmud is by page number – for example, *Shabbat* 4a – meaning the “a” side of page four of the (Babylonian) Talmud, tractate *Shabbat*.
- E. Organization of the Talmud Page (see sample)
- F. The Talmud reads like a stream of consciousness discussion of the *Mishna*.
 - 1. The text sometimes seems to stray from the original *Mishna*.
 - 2. Often the most interesting points are made in this “wandering.”
- G. English Translations of the Talmud:
 - 1. There is an excellent English translation of a very small part of the Talmud. This is called *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition*, published by Random House. This has extensive commentary and explanation; it is the only one I recommend for the beginner.
 - 2. The standard translation is called *The Babylonian Talmud*, published by the Soncino Press; it’s literal, without commentary and hard to follow.
 - 3. Artscroll also has recently completed an excellent translation called *The Schottenstein Edition Talmud Bavli*, Mesorah Publications, Ltd.
- H. Books about the Talmud. I strongly recommend a series written by Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, all published by Jason Aronson:
 - 1. *Learn Talmud: How to Use “The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition”*, 1995. This is a must for those who buy the Steinsaltz English Talmud. She provides us background, terminology, etc. as well as leading us to the most interesting stories. She even suggests ways of studying the material to pursue specific interests and themes.
 - 2. *The Talmud for Beginners*. Rabbi Abrams has written three volumes, #1 *Prayer*, #2 *Text and* #3 *Living In a Non-Jewish World*.
 - 3. *The Women of the Talmud*
 - 4. There’s even an *Complete Idiot’s Guide to the Talmud!*
- I. There are many collections of Talmudic sayings:
 - 1. A. Cohen, Everyman’s Talmud, Schocken Books, 1975
 - 2. L. I. Newman, ed., The Talmudic Anthology, Behrman House, 1945
- J. Let’s read some Talmud – the story of the Oven of Akhnai

FOR NEXT CLASS: Read Lotker pp. 25-29; Handbook pp. 149-153