

THE TALMUD AND ITS AUTHORS

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Description: What is the Jewish Talmud? How many versions of Talmud are there? Who wrote the Talmud? The article answers these questions in light of Jewish and secular scholarship.

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What Is The Talmud?

The Talmud is the basic book of Judaism. Encyclopedia Britannica states that the Hebrew term “Talmud” refers to a compilation of ancient teachings regarded as sacred by Jews from the time it was compiled until modern times and still regarded so by religious Jews.^[1] In the words of Rabbi Dr. Jacob Neusner, it is “the foundation-document of Judaism”^[2]

Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds

There are two versions of the Talmud. The Anti-Defamation League states,

“There are two editions of the Talmud; one was composed by Babylonian Jews and one by Jews who lived in ancient Jerusalem. Generally a citation from the Talmud refers to the Babylonian version, which is considered authoritative. The Jerusalem Talmud is not generally taught in even the most Orthodox Jewish schools today, though advanced Talmud scholars sometimes study it.”^[3]

Professor Shanak explains it further:

“Basically, the Talmud consists of two parts. First, the Mishnah - a terse legal code consisting of six volumes, each subdivided into several tractates, written in Hebrew, redacted in Palestine around AD 200 out of the much more extensive (and largely oral) legal material composed during the preceding two centuries. The second and by far predominant part is the Gemarah - a voluminous record of discussions on and around the Mishnah. There are two, roughly parallel, sets of Gemarah, one composed in Mesopotamia (‘Babylon’) between about AD 200 and 500, the other in Palestine between about AD 200 and some unknown date long before 500. The Babylonian Talmud (that is, the Mishnah plus the Mesopotamian Gemarah) is much more extensive and better arranged than the Palestinian, and it alone is regarded as definitive and authoritative. The Jerusalem (Palestinian) Talmud is accorded a decidedly lower status as a legal authority, along with a number of compilations, known collectively as the

‘talmudic literature’, containing material which the editors of the two Talmuds had left out.”^[4]

Another author confirms that the Babylonian Talmud is regarded as the authoritative version as well,

“The authority of the Babylonian Talmud is also greater than that of the Jerusalem Talmud. In cases of doubt the former is decisive.”^[5]

Authors of Talmud

According to Talmud scholars, the Talmud is the written form of the teachings of the Pharisees. So who were the “Pharisees”? The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia states under the subject of “Pharisees,”

“The Jewish religion as it is today traces its descent, without a break, through all the centuries, from the Pharisees. Their leading ideas and methods found expression in a literature of enormous extent, of which a very great deal is still in existence. The Talmud is the largest and most important single piece of that literature ... and the study of it is essential for any real understanding of Pharisaism.”

Concerning the Pharisees, the 1905 edition of the Jewish Encyclopedia says under the subject of “Pharisees”:

“With the destruction of the Temple (70 A.D.) the Sadducees disappeared altogether, leaving the regulation of all Jewish affairs in the hands of the Pharisees. Henceforth, Jewish life was regulated by the Pharisees; the whole history of Judaism was reconstructed from the Pharisaic point of view, and a new aspect was given to the Sanhedrin of the past. A new chain of tradition supplanted the older priestly tradition (Abot 1:1). Pharisaism shaped the character of Judaism and the life and thought of the Jew for all the future.”

Rabbi Michael Rodkinson states,

“Is the literature that Jesus was familiar with in his early years yet in existence in the world? Is it possible for us to get at it? Can we ourselves review the ideas, the statements, the modes of reasoning and thinking, on moral and religious subjects, which were current in his time, and must have been [resolved] by him during those silent thirty years when he was pondering his future mission? To such inquiries, the learned class of Jewish rabbis answers - by holding up the Talmud. Here, say they, is the source from whence Jesus of Nazareth drew the teaching which enabled him to revolutionize the world; and the question becomes, therefore, an interesting one to every Christian, What is the Talmud? ... The Talmud, then, is the written form of that which, in the time of Jesus, was called the Traditions of the Elders, and to which he makes frequent allusions.”^[6]

Rabbi Dr. Louis Finkelstein, Instructor of Talmud, and later president of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, writes:

“Pharisaism became Talmudism, Talmudism became Medieval Rabbinism, and Medieval Rabbinism became Modern Rabbinism. But throughout these changes of name, inevitable adaptation of custom, and adjustment of Law, the spirit of the ancient Pharisee survives unaltered. When the Jew reads his prayers, he is reciting formulae prepared by pre-Maccabean scholars; when he dons the cloak prescribed for the Day of Atonement and Passover Eve, he is wearing the festival garment of ancient Jerusalem; when he studies the Talmud, he is actually repeating the arguments used in the Palestinian academies.”^[1]

Jesus is reported to have strongly denounced this very sect of Jewish priests known as the Pharisees:

John 8:44 “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it.”

In addition, Jesus is reported to have said that they nullified all the Commandments of God by their Tradition, “teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:13; Matt. 15:6-9, etc.). His invective, in truth, cannot be equaled. All of Matthew 23 is like a whiplash. He likened Pharisaism to a white sepulcher, indeed beautiful outwardly, but “inside full of dead men’s bones and of all uncleanness.” Christ climaxed one condemnation after another with the expletive, “Hypocrites!” He called the Pharisees children of them that killed the Prophets. He foretold they would go on killing, crucifying and persecuting until the guilt for all the righteous blood shed from Abel on down would be upon them. “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” Christ asked.

Footnotes:

^[1] “Talmud and Midrash.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2006.

^[2] Jacob Neusner, *How the Talmud Works* (Boston: Brill, 2002) ix

^[3] Anti-Defamation League, *The Talmud in Anti-Semitic Polemics*, February 2003, (http://www.adl.org/presrele/asus%5F12/the_talmud.pdf)

^[4] Professor Israel Shahak, *Jewish History, Jewish Religion: The Weight of Three Thousand Years* (Boulder: Pluto Press, 1994) ch. 3.

[5] R.C. Musaph-Andriesse, From Torah to Kabbalah: A Basic Introduction to the Writings of Judaism, p. 40).

[6] Rabbi Michael Rodkinson, The History of the Talmud, Vol. II, page 70.

[7] Rabbi Dr. Louis Finkelstein, The Pharisees: The Sociological Background of Their Faith, page xxi,

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