

# A book in flux

The Talmud is fundamental to Judaism yet hardly anyone has read it all, says **Jonathan Wright**

## The Talmud: a Biography

BY HARRY FREEDMAN  
BLOOMSBURY, £25

**T**he Talmud is "a book which defines the religion of the Jews" and which, Harry Freedman suggests, "became more important to the Jews than the Bible itself". It is also a "massive, ancient and seemingly impenetrable work". Poring over the 1,800,000 words has usually been the preserve of dedicated scholars, but this has never dented the text's crucial role in Judaism: it has always been an object of profound reverence and extraordinary influence.

The Talmud is sometimes thought of as a "code" of Jewish law. This, Freedman explains, is not quite accurate. It resulted from debates held in the Jewish scholarly circles of Babylon between the third and fifth centuries AD.

There was much to discuss when it came to interpreting Jewish legal principles and an attempt had been made in the second and third centuries AD: enter the Mishnah. This was a work upon which the Babylonian debates were based. In what we might call the main Talmud text, we therefore have extracts from the Mishnah, followed by summations of the Babylonian discussions. The utterances of people who lived generations apart are woven together and, rather wonderfully, firm conclusions are not usually the order of the day: it is as much about the intellectual journey as the destination.

To add to the flux, there are two columns at the sides of the main text that relay the commentaries of the 11th-century Frenchman Rashi and the slightly later Tosafists. Purely in terms of how the text was constructed and how it looks on the page, the Talmud must qualify as one of the most intriguing books on the planet.

Freedman next traces how the Talmud



A painting shows Talmudic scholars in deep discussion

pora. Islam was extremely helpful. An "intense intellectual cross-fertilisation" developed between Talmudic and Islamic legal scholars, and cities such as Baghdad and Kairouan in the Maghreb also served as key points of dissemination along trade and postal routes. Cordoba was crucial, too, and this, fittingly, was the birthplace of one of the most significant medieval Jewish scholars, Maimonides.

**T**he Christian encounter with the Talmud was less edifying. There was a concerted attempt within medieval Christendom to understand Jewish thought but the ultimate goals were usually either conversion or polemical assault.

Freedman takes us to the famous 1240 Parisian debate about the Talmud and the subsequent book burnings: the agents of Louis IX were not able to read Hebrew so all manner of Jewish manuscripts were included in the 25 wagon loads of texts that were set alight in 1242. A pattern was set and, in 1553, Talmudic bonfires would arrive in Rome and Venice.

Freedman announces that he does not plan to spend much time exploring "what is in" the Talmud, and that he wants to explain "what happened" to it. In this respect his

of ground: from the presence of that other, earlier Jerusalem Talmud, to the Babylonian text's role in the antics of false messiahs and the squabbles between traditional and Reformed Judaism in 19th-century Europe and North America.

It is a huge pity, however, that Freedman didn't give us just a little more about "what is in" the Talmud. Perhaps he thought this would be off-putting for the general reader or that the task should be left to an accomplished Talmudic scholar. I have a feeling that Freedman could have coped and there was an opportunity to provide a helpful summary of what the Talmud discusses. This would not have been easy and any attempt would doubtless have invited criticism, but any gaffes could easily have been forgiven.

So, if you want to know what the Talmud says you will have to look elsewhere but this should not diminish Freedman's significant achievement. He has written a pithy, well-informed historical study of that most unusual phenomenon: a book that hardly anyone has read in its entirety, that most people haven't even dipped into, but which has managed to transform the world's religious landscape. One can almost forgive yet another author using the word "biography" when defining a study

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Freedman next traces how the Talmud spread around the Jewish dias-



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Freedman announces that he does not plan to spend much time exploring "what is in" the Talmud, and that he wants to explain "what happened" to it. In this respect his book scores very highly. He covers a huge amount

of ground: from the presence of that other, earlier Jerusalem Talmud, to the Babylonian text's role in the antics of false messiahs and the squabbles between traditional and Reformed Judaism in 19th-century Europe and North America.

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