

The Talmud: A Biography

Harry Freedman

Review by [Wallace Greene](#)

The Talmud is the primary Jewish text after the Bible itself, and its devoted study has been the linchpin of Jewish survival. Dilettantes may dabble in it and cite a few passages here and there. Mature scholars devote their lives to understanding the underpinnings of Jewish legal theory and its application to current life. Historians must first master the complex text and then analyze it from various inter-disciplinary perspectives.

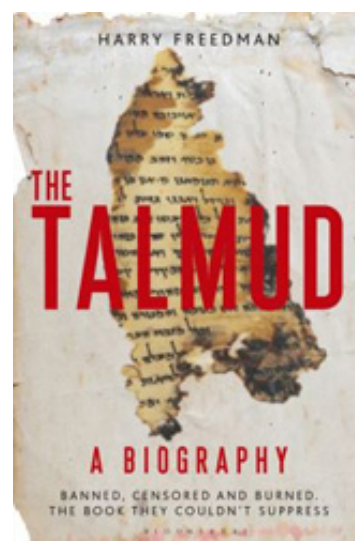
Its importance is axiomatic. Attempting to describe the Talmud in the abstract is quite a challenge. However, Freedman is on the right track. It is precisely because of its importance in Judaism that the Talmud has been banned, censored, and burned. Those who pioneered in this field were great scholars. A few of the classics are cited, however, a work which purports to show not only the world's treatment of the Talmud but why Judaism and Jews view it with such reverence cannot omit the conclusions of Agus, Albeck, Chajes, Lieberman, Twersky, Weiss, and others of similar rank. Not citing Grayzel's work on papal edicts nor Finkelstein's book on Jewish communal ordinances is an equally egregious omission.

Extracts and anthologies do not fully explain why the Talmud is so important. It is as ancient as many of the world's classics, lengthier than possibly any other, complex in its composition, frequently profound in its content and it has had a far more tumultuous story than most.

The book does, however, reflect turbulent events in Jewish history, and present pieces of Jewish history and the history of anti-semitism as reflected in controversies over its central text.

In discussing the development and impact of the Talmud, Freedman first considers the Talmud as a developing text, exploring its origins in the Roman Empire after the destruction of the Second Temple. He also provides a fascinating investigation into cross-fertilization between Jewish and early Islamic scholars and its impact on the ideas and development of the Talmud. Some of his conclusions are questionable and others are simply inaccurate. His claims that before the Temple was destroyed, the lulav was only used there, his dating of the

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