

# The Talmud A Biography

*Banned, Censored and Burned.  
The book they couldn't suppress*

Harry Freedman

B L O O M S B U R Y  
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## *About the Author*

Harry Freedman has a doctorate in the ancient Aramaic translation of the Bible. His previous books include *The Gospels' Veiled Agenda: Revolution, Priesthood and the Holy Grail*. He lives in London with his wife Karen.

You can read more about the Talmud, including selected passages, at [www.talmudbiography.com](http://www.talmudbiography.com).

## *Preface*

This is the story of a book. A book which defines the religion of the Jews. A book which, arguably, defines the Jews themselves.

Most books don't have their own story, at best they have a narrative about their publishing history and subsequent reception by the public. But the Talmud has more than just a story, it has a turbulent history. One which, in many ways, parallels the history of the Jewish people.

The Talmud was composed as a record of discussions amongst scholars and sages in the ancient Jewish diaspora, in towns and villages close to Baghdad. As the Jews dispersed across the world, the Talmud went with them, travelling along trade and migratory routes into the Maghreb, Europe, Arabia and the East. It became the foundation of the Jewish legal system, the bedrock of the Jewish faith. It became more important to the Jews than the Bible itself.

The Jews dwelt amongst many cultures. They exchanged perspectives and ideas with their neighbours. Early contacts between Judaism and Islam produced an intense, intellectual cross-fertilization, the effects of which can still be discerned in Talmudic and Islamic law. The medieval encounter between the Jews and Christianity was less benign, the Church regarded the Talmud as the obstacle which prevented them from converting the Jews. Their response was to challenge, burn, ban and censor it.

Later generations, particularly in Protestant Europe, although just as intent on converting the Jews nevertheless explored the Talmud for ideas. We find philosophers and poets, republicans and kings, priests and professors all probing the Talmud, seeking inspiration, support or validation for their particular points of view.

The most intractable of the Talmud's challenges came from the Jews themselves. Rejectionists, messianic pretenders and savants vilified it, seeking to delegitimize or at the very least to minimize its influence. But like the Jews themselves, the Talmud's capacity for survival is boundless. Today it is studied by more people than at any time in its history.

From one perspective the Talmud's story is a history of the Jews. From another, it is a window onto the development of world civilization. The history of the Talmud is a testament to what can happen, for better and for worse, when the literature of one culture comes into contact, or conflict, with the beliefs and values of another. Conversely, it illustrates the consequences for a self-contained, inward-looking society when its defining texts are confronted by new ideas from the outside.

The Talmud is a classic of world literature. It's a massive, ancient and seemingly impenetrable work. People devote their lives to studying it. But you are not reading a book about what is *in* the Talmud. This is the story of what *happened* to the Talmud, and the role it has played in world history, religion and culture. It's not a book for experts, or for specialists. It's a book for anyone who wants to know the story of one of the great classics of ancient literature, albeit one which is far less heavily thumbed, outside of Jewish circles, than Homer, Chaucer or Ovid. The content of the Talmud may be esoteric. But its history belongs to us all. For there is scarcely a square inch of the world's surface upon which its story was not, at some time, acted out.

## *Introduction*

### **What is The Talmud?**

Every nation has its laws. Few nations systematically record the process, the philosophical discussions and legal arguments, which led to those laws. Everybody knows the laws are there for a reason. But the reasons don't make much difference to the everyday life of most people.

The Jews are different. As much value is attached to studying the process by which their laws emerged as to an awareness of the laws themselves. Indeed, studying them is said to be more important than keeping them. Because studying them leads to keeping them.<sup>1</sup>

The Jews are known as the People of the Book.<sup>2</sup> But actually they are the people of the Two Books. The earlier book, the Hebrew Bible is considered the sacred, revealed word of God. But the later book, the man-made Talmud, is the more significant for understanding Judaism.

The Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, is the foundation of the Jewish religion. It is the basis of Jewish belief and the origin of its ethics, rituals and social legislation. But the Bible deals in concepts, principles and generalities; it rarely pronounces upon its injunctions in detail. The Talmud is a record of the discussions that took place over several centuries, which took the principles laid down in the Bible and gave the religion its form and shape.

There is much in the Bible that has been irrelevant to religious practice for at least two thousand years. Including the system of sacrifices, the treatment of an unknown illness incorrectly referred to as leprosy and many of the agricultural

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<sup>1</sup> Sifre Deuteronomy 41, Kiddushin 40b.

<sup>2</sup> People of the Book is a term that was first introduced in the Qu'ran to describe a faith, other than Islam, which has a sacred text.



laws. Conversely, the Talmud contains vast amounts of material that may be based on the Bible but is not immediately evident in it. Including discussions on the governance and regulation of society, the practical performance of religious rituals, family relationships and contract and monetary law. It also contains much that is not in the Bible. Medicine, astronomy, folklore, magic, sex and humour, to mention just a few.

The Talmud (the word means study, or teaching) defines the Jewish religion. Adin Steinsaltz, perhaps the greatest commentator on the Talmud of our age, describes it as 'the central pillar supporting the entire spiritual and intellectual edifice of Jewish life'.<sup>3</sup> It's not an easy book. It is an exquisitely complex, highly logical and frequently impenetrable work. For most of its history studying the Talmud has been regarded by the Jews as an intellectual exercise in its own right. An exercise which, since it leads the student to the essence of human knowledge and experience, confers profound spiritual benefit.

The Talmud is a massive work. It contains one million, eight hundred thousand words spanning thirty seven volumes. Although it is concerned with law, it is not a law code. It is a record of discussions that took place in academies in Babylon between the third and fifth centuries, discussions that were based on a book called the Mishnah, a second to third-century codification of Jewish law.

The Talmud was not written as a book, the people whose discussions it preserves had no idea that someone would come along generations later and edit them into a coherent work. A characteristic Talmudic discussion contains the opinions of people, who may have lived centuries apart, woven together to sound as if they are having an actual conversation.

Modern editions of the Talmud are printed with dozens of commentaries, a typical edition takes up as much space on a bookshelf as a good encyclopedia. It is arcane and obscure, written as free flowing prose, with no punctuation, in two languages with traces of others which it mixes together and switches between unselfconsciously. Its logic is dense yet immaculate, it is more interested in the analysis of a problem than the outcome, it frequently refrains from reaching a conclusion, and even when it does convey a decision it can be hard to understand. The Talmud does have an overall structure, as does each of the topics it discusses. But its structures can be hard to discern and the Talmud is capable

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<sup>3</sup> Steinsaltz, 1989.

of shooting off at tangents for pages on end before returning, sometimes, to the original topic.

A traditional Talmud page doesn't look like the sort of book you are reading now. It's written in three main columns, with additional material in both the left and right margins. The central column which is in a bold typeface contains the Talmud text itself. This column typically includes a few lines from the Mishnah, on which the Talmud is commenting, followed by the Talmud itself.

Of the three main columns, the one on the inside, closest to the binding, contains the commentary of Rashi, the great eleventh-century French commentator. We will meet him in due course. The outside column contains another, slightly later, French commentary, that of the *tosafists*. Both commentaries are written in a cursive script. It's known as Rashi script, not because Rashi wrote in it but because it is the typeface the early Venetian printers used for his commentary and has remained a favourite ever since.

The three columns do not always run in parallel from the top to the bottom of the page. The printers needed to synchronize the main Talmud text with the commentaries, to make it easier for the reader to read the commentary and main text as a single unit. So often one of the columns finishes part way down the page and an adjacent column wraps above and beneath it, the result is that the main text is surrounded by commentary. The margins contain other commentaries or cross references to passages from the Bible and elsewhere in the Talmud that are cited in the text.<sup>4</sup>

The Talmud may be the central pillar of Jewish life, studying it may confer profound spiritual benefit, but most Jews have never picked up a volume, let alone studied it. Serious Talmud study is an esoteric activity, for people with scholarly or religious interest, a certain sort of mind and great powers of concentration. But just because few people have studied it, doesn't mean that if they hear a sentence beginning with the words 'the Talmud says ...', they won't prick up their ears. There may be no desire or opportunity to study it, but people want to know what it says. It's that sort of book.

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<sup>4</sup> There are many examples of a Talmud page on the internet. A good resource is that posted by Eliezer Segal, <http://people.ualgary.ca/~elsegal/TalmudPage.html>

## The Talmud's Story

Nineteen hundred years of history (if we include the period during which the Talmud was being composed) is a lot to put into one book. If all the events and personalities in the Talmud's history were included it would end up as an encyclopedia. My purpose in writing this biography is to provide a sense of the Talmud's vast and extensive history, not to distil everything that happened into a single tome. The result is that some of the key events and locations have been covered in greater detail than others, a few important places and, unfortunately, many important people have not been mentioned at all. My aim was to keep the story interesting and informative, even at the expense of comprehensiveness.

A similar disclaimer applies to the scholars whom I have quoted and their research. There is much about the Talmud's history that scholars dispute: particularly the questions of who edited it and when; whether it was edited in its oral or written form; how it evolved from an oral composition to a written text and just how fluid the content was whilst it was being transmitted. I haven't tried to present the views of every scholar, nor necessarily to follow the opinions of the greatest authorities in the field. I have tended to follow the research that best fits with the story I am telling, provided always that the research is credible and respected in academic circles. The fact that I have cited some scholars and sources and not mentioned others does not reflect any particular preference or approval, it is simply the consequence of trying to distil such a large amount of history into a readable work.

Much of what I have written will not be well received in traditional Talmudic circles. I have approached the Talmud as world literature, not as the exclusive property of the *yeshiva*. This is not a book for the Talmud scholar, unless they are interested in the events surrounding the opus to which they have devoted their life. It is a book for those who want to know what the Talmud is, and why the world would be a greatly impoverished place without it.

I have tried to keep things as simple as possible in order that the story flows. So although this is a biography of the Babylonian Talmud I have, all the way through, referred to it simply as the Talmud. There is of course another Talmud, the *Yerushalmi* or Jerusalem Talmud, and I do touch on it from time to time. But for over a thousand years the Babylonian Talmud has been dominant and conventionally that is the one nearly everyone means when they talk about the Talmud.

I have tried to minimize the use of non-English words. This hasn't always been possible, particularly when referring to technical concepts, or things that would require a full sentence to translate. The glossary at the back will help.

A word on terminology. The main body of the Talmud, that part which comments on the Mishnah is also known as the *gemara*, an Aramaic word meaning 'teaching'. The words Talmud and *gemara* are synonymous and many people prefer the latter term. The designation *gemara* was introduced by medieval printers because the Church censors had banned the use of the word Talmud. For simplicity I have used the word Talmud throughout this book. References to the Babylonian Talmud are tractate and page only, the prefixes M and J before a tractate name refer to the Mishnah and Jerusalem Talmud respectively.

A man asked a rabbi to teach him something of the Talmud. The rabbi refused. 'You haven't got a head for Talmud.' The man persisted. So the rabbi asked him the following question.

'Two men fell down the same chimney. One came out clean the other came out dirty. Which one went to wash?'

'The dirty one of course' replied the man.

'No!' said the rabbi. 'I knew you didn't have a head for Talmud. Now go away and leave me alone.'

'Try me once more' pleaded the man.

'Just once more then. Two men fell down the same chimney. One came out clean the other came out dirty. Which one went to wash?'

The man thought for a moment then grinned. 'The clean one. He looks at the dirty one and thinks he must be dirty too.'

'Idiot. You have no head for Talmud. Leave me alone.'

The man was crestfallen. 'Try me one last time. Please.'

'One last time then. Two men fell down a chimney. One came out clean the other came out dirty. Which one went to wash?'

He pondered hard. 'The clean one looks at the dirty one. He's looking at me, he thinks, and he's not washing, so he must think he's clean. So I must be clean. So, neither of them wash!'

'Moron!' yelled the rabbi. 'How can you imagine that two men can fall down the same chimney, and one come out clean and the other dirty!'