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# Jewish Bible Commentary:

## A Brief Introduction to Talmud and Midrash

**Dieter Mitternacht\***

*"And Moses received Torah at Sinai and handed it to Joshua,  
Joshua to elders and elders to prophets.  
And prophets handed it on to the men of the great assembly.  
They said three things: Be prudent in judgment.  
Raise up many disciples. Make a fence for the Torah."  
(mAbot 1:1)<sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

The book of Deuteronomy makes it very clear: the people of Israel were to keep the statutes and ordinances of the Lord God. They were to learn and observe and recite them to their children. They were to talk about them at home and away from home, in the evening and in the morning. They were to bind them as a sign on their hand, fix them as an emblem on their forehead, and write them on the doorposts of their houses and on the gates of their cities (Deut 5:1; 6:7-9). In fact, their diligent observance was to be the gauge of their wholehearted love for the Lord their God (Deut 6:5, 25).

The text is also quite explicit about the consequences, stating that if the Israelites obey God they will receive benefits, whereas if they disobey or ignore the requirements of God's instruction they will be punished.<sup>2</sup> As the people looked back at the catastrophic events of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile, they accredited the events to their infidelity towards the Torah. However, from now on, they would remember their calling and respond to God's instruction with great fervor. They would examine the commandments for their precise meaning. They would even go a step further and build a fence (*geder*) around the biblical precepts in order to prevent accidental violations of the Lord's will.

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<sup>1</sup> All Mishnah references are taken from Neusner, *Mishnah*. For clarity, all references to the Mishnah begin with a lowercase "m". Quotations of biblical passages are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated. I thank my friends and colleagues Birger Olsson, Lund University, Mark Nanos, Rockhurst University, and Håkan Bengtsson, Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem, for a critical reading of a draft of this paper, and for valuable comments and suggestions. I also thank Rebecca Lee, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong, for proofreading the article.

<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the strong emphasis on requirement and obedience, the book of Deuteronomy makes it equally clear that the premise for Israel's calling was God's grace. Thus, obedience to the commandments was not a condition of election, but rather clarified how to live properly within God's family (covenantal nomism).

Leaders arose from among the people who studied the scriptures thoroughly and taught their wisdom to the nation. Houses of learning were founded where children were taught to read and write, but most of all, to understand and live according to the Torah. For each new generation and time they would do their utmost to determine the most adequate application of every commandment (*mitzvah*) in the book of the LORD.

## The Formation of Rabbinic Schools

During the reign of King Herod (37 to 4 BCE) and up to the beginning of the first century CE, two Rabbis, Hillel the elder (ca.110 BCE to 10 CE), a migrant from Babylonia, and Shammai (ca. 50 BCE to 30 CE), a native of the Land of Israel, became very influential interpreters of the Torah. Both founded rabbinic schools known as the House of Hillel (*Beit Hillel*) and the House of Shammai (*Beit Shammai*). In about 20 BCE, Hillel became the 'nasi' (president) of The Great Sanhedrin (the supreme court of ancient Israel).

According to the Talmud, the two Rabbis were quite different in character and outlook on life. At one place it is stated that, "A man should always be gentle like Hillel, and not impatient like Shammai." (BTShabbath 30b).<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the Talmud favors Hillel and tends to emphasize the difference of opinions between the two Houses, recording 316 cases of disagreements. Among the areas of discussion we find: Who should be allowed to study the Torah? What is the proper cause for divorce? How should we celebrate Hanukkah?<sup>4</sup> Is there such a thing as white lies?<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to determine which of the differing opinions actually go back to the Rabbis themselves and which have been attributed to them by their schools or adversaries. In actual fact, in terms of tangible rulings, the difference between Hillel and Shammai themselves may have been quite limited.<sup>6</sup> However, their general outlook on life and the world, plus the fact that Hillel became the leading figure of the two, seems to have contributed to the development of two diverging schools with a great number of disputes.

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<sup>3</sup> References to the Babylonian Talmud start with "BT", whereas references to the Jerusalem Talmud start with "JT". For details of the referencing system see the chapter "A page of the Talmud". The latest editions of the Talmudim are those by Neusner (see literature references).

<sup>4</sup> Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, marks the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by the forces of the King of Syria Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 165 BCE.

<sup>5</sup> On the issue of "White lies" the Rabbis dispute the rather amusing case of whether one should tell an ugly bride that she is beautiful. Shammai is said to have claimed that it was wrong to lie no matter what the circumstances are. Hillel on the other hand is said to have argued that all brides are beautiful on their wedding day (BTKetubot 16b-17a).

<sup>6</sup> The kabbalist mystic Rabbi Isaac Luria (the "Ari") is said to have argued that contrary to their face value the words of the House of Shammai and of the House of Hillel are not mutually exclusive but instead should each be understood in regard to their own time and place. Whereas the House of Hillel addresses the limited applicability in present imperfect world, the House of Shammai prepares for the era of Messiah, a perfected world that will embrace the more exacting application of Torah (cf. *Jewish Virtual Library*).

Kabbalah (Hebr. קבלה, receiving) is the name of a set of Jewish esoteric teachings. The Kabbalah is not primarily interested in what God wants from man, but seeks to discern, on a deeper, mystical level, the nature and purpose of the universe, human being, and ultimately God's essence. In this presentation, the literature of the Kabbalah will not be treated.

## The Core of the Torah

In one of the stories about Hillel and Shammai it is said that, “a gentile came to Shammai and said to him: ‘Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Shammai pushed him aside with the measuring stick he was holding.” The gentile then went to Hillel with the same request and Hillel said to him, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor, this is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary, go and learn it.” (BTShabbat 31a).

According to the classic Talmud commentator Rashi (see below), Rabbi Akiba (ca. 50 to 135 CE) corroborated the position of Hillel. Rashi takes recourse to an early Midrash (see below) where Akiba states, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Lev 19:18) This is a great principle of the Torah.” (JTNedarim 9:4).

In another passage we read that the school of Shammai challenged the traditional interpretation of Deut 24:1 (“Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him ... so he writes her a certificate of divorce ...”) and argued that a husband could not divorce his wife except for sexual immorality. The school of Hillel opposed this strict ruling and held instead that the husband need not assign any reason whatever. Any act on the woman’s part that displeased him (“Even if she soiled his dish”) entitled him to give her a bill of divorce (mGittin 9:10).

These passages illustrate two major concerns of Rabbinic Judaism. The first is a concern with the core of the Torah, or the question as to what is the greatest of the commandments. The second concern is with the fence (*geder*) around the law, i.e. how to prevent accidental or unintentional violation.<sup>7</sup> As is clear from the above case, lenience is not necessarily the same as kindness, especially if one considers the issue from the perspective of the woman.

For comparison we may recall Jesus’ assertion of the so-called Golden Rule (Matt 7:12 “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”) and the incident when he was asked about which is the greatest commandment. Jesus responded by quoting Deut 6:4-5 and then added, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt 22: 37-39; par.). In these two cases Jesus seems to comply with the Hillel school. In the case of reasons for divorce, on the other hand, Jesus seems to apply a ruling that is compatible with the House of Shammai (Matt 19:3-9).

## The Oral Torah

### The Use of the Word “Torah”

As we turn to the thinking in Rabbinic Judaism about Torah (Hebr. תורה), we shall first look at the general usage of the word. In terms of purpose and function, Torah denotes the mean-

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<sup>7</sup> The move towards fence building was prepared by the pharisaic tradition, commonly considered to be the main antecedent of Rabbinic Judaism. Interpreting Ex 19:6 (“You shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy people”) and 2 Maccabees 2:17 (“God gave all the people the heritage, the kingdom, the priesthood, and the holiness”) literally, the Pharisees argued that the people should act as if they were priests in the temple (Neusner, *Invitation*, 40). By applying the strict priestly form of purity regulations even outside the temple they would then ensure not to trespass the less strict requirements for life outside the temple.

ings “teaching”, “instruction”, and to some degree “law”. As a label, the word denotes a part of the Jewish corpus of writings that alternates between:

- a collective title for all revelation given to Israel, written and oral,
- the five books of Moses,
- the commandments God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai,
- individual commandments (Hebr. מצוה , *mitzvah*, -ot).

According to tradition, the Torah contains (apart from many stories and historical records, see below), 613 commandments that guide the people of Israel through all situations of life. The number 613 consists of a combination of 365 negative commandments (one for each day of the year) and 248 positive commandments (one for each bone in the human body).

While there is an emphasis on commandments that regulate what is right and what is wrong to do, translating “Torah” with “law” is partly misleading, as the Torah contains, in most of the above definitions, not just prescriptions for judicial procedures. Instead, for the religious Jew the Torah encompasses God’s gift and guidance for all aspects of life.

## The Two Parts of the Torah

Rabbinic Judaism upholds the notion that God purposely gave the Torah in two different modes and parts. One part was given in writing, also called the written Torah, the second part was given by word of mouth, also called the oral Torah. The written Torah was then preserved in the five books of Moses, also known as the Pentateuch (Greek: *pente*, “five” and *teuchos*, “tool, vessel, book”).

According to the Rabbis, the double mode of revelation, oral and written, reveals God’s intention concerning how the Torah should be taught and transmitted, how its meaning should be interpreted and commented upon.<sup>8</sup> The oral Torah was to be kept in living memory and passed on from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation, from teacher to pupil (mAbot 1:1ff). Just as Moses followed God’s example, so also the Rabbis follow the example of Moses. Revelation is therefore only complete as both written and oral Torah are taught.<sup>9</sup> For the Rabbis, “orality” was not a matter of coincidence, nor was the oral inferior to the written. Instead, the combination of the two was considered a vital principle of transmission, intended by God himself.

Nevertheless, after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and the time of desolation and uncertainty that fell upon the land and its people, the need to safeguard the oral tradition against extinction became urgent. Thus, up and to around 200 CE, many oral traditions were brought together and put in writing in the collection called the Mishnah.

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<sup>8</sup> The conventional scientific way of explaining the phenomenon of the oral Torah, is, of course, that it emerged gradually as the commandments were interpreted and applied to new situations and contexts. Even the Rabbis themselves sometimes conceived of the Oral Torah as an interpretive tradition, and not merely as memorized traditions. The Talmud even states that Moses himself would not understand these interpretations, even though they were called Mosaic traditions. BTMenahot 29b (see Shanks Alexander, *Orality*, 39).

<sup>9</sup> For the manner of teaching and memorization, cf. BTERubin 54b.

## The Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha

Before we take a closer look at Talmud and Midrash, a few remarks need to be made concerning the Hebrew Bible and the so-called Old Testament Apocrypha. The Hebrew Bible contains 24 writings, the content of which basically coincides with the 39 writings in the Protestant Old Testament (see table 1).

All movements of Judaism agree that the Hebrew Bible (especially the Pentateuch) takes prime position among its many traditions. Next to that, Judaism attributes the greatest importance to the Rabbinic or Talmudic literature. Compared to those texts, the great amount of apocrypha and pseudepigrapha has never played any significant role in the formation of Judaism.

Although put into writing much later, some of the traditions preserved in the Rabbinic literature go back to Rabbis contemporary with Jesus and Paul. The writers of the texts that were later to become the New Testament used the Septuagint (see below) as “their Bible”, and thus we find in the New Testament references and allusions to texts that only later were divided into canonical, apocryphal and pseudepigraphal texts. When it is sometimes stated that the Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus, it has to be remembered that there was no canonized collection of biblical texts in the times of Jesus and that the label Old Testament emerged only as Christians in the middle of the second century began to speak about the New Testament as the second part of writings included in the Christian Bible. Terms such as canonical, apocryphal or deuterocanonical had not been invented yet.

Even to this day, the major strands of Christianity differ on how to define the terms. In the protestant tradition the following texts are labeled apocrypha: Tobit, Judith, Esther (Greek text) 1 + 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Jesus Sirach, Baruch, Jeremiah’s Letter, Additions to Daniel, Susannah, Asarja’s prayer, Song of the Three Men, Bel and the Dragon, Manasseh’s Prayer. Martin Luther included these writings in his edition of the Bible as a separate section between the testaments.

In the catholic and orthodox traditions the apocrypha have a higher status. They are added according to genre to the appropriate sections in the Old Testament and are named “deuterocanonical” writings. The orthodox tradition has the “largest” Bible as it also includes 1 Esdras, 3 and 4 Maccabees and Psalm 151. It may be noted that the term “apocrypha” is also used for a large number of writings that were not included in the New Testament.

In modern Judaism, the idea of a canon is not very prominent. Instead, the Pentateuch together with the oral Torah is taken as the main point of departure for all discussions, debates, and authoritative rulings among the Rabbis.

## The Septuagint (LXX)

Long before the exact content of the Hebrew Bible was determined, highly regarded Hebrew texts were translated into Greek, the *lingua franca* of the time. At first the scribes translated the alleged Five books of Moses. This was completed around 200 BCE. Then, up to the middle of the first century BCE, the other writings were translated in Egypt and included in the collection known as the Septuagint (LXX).

Despite the legendary account concerning its perfection as a translation,<sup>10</sup> the LXX, as any translation, is an interpretation. When translators thought that a Hebrew idiom was incredible, they chose to interpret its meaning, at times rather freely. One example of this is God’s self-presentation to Moses in the burning bush (Exod. 3:14) where the Hebrew states: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה literally: “I shall be who I shall be”). The translators wrote in Greek: Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (approx. “I am the one who is”). Thus a phrase that made sense to the Hebrew mind was made accessible to Hellenistic images of God. But something concerning God’s association with and involvement in time and history was lost in the process of translation.

The core of Israel’s holy writ consisted of the Torah and the Prophets. In the middle of the second century BCE, people began to also speak of a third part, calling it “the other writings,” foremost among them what they called “the Psalms of David.” Thus, as we read in the gospels about Jesus and others referring to the holy writ of Israel, we encounter the term “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (cf. Matt 22:40; Luke 24:27, 44).

## Tanak and Old Testament

Around the year 200, the Christian Bible began to take shape as the Early Church began to put the LXX and texts that would later form the New Testament into a collection of writings. The LXX included texts that would, also later, be labeled “Apocrypha”. It was divided into four parts, and concluded with the book of Daniel as the last writing. This “prophetic conclusion” was kept in the Christian Old Testament; maybe because the prophetic outlook of Daniel was considered an appropriate transition to the New Testament, as the New Testament begins with stories about the fulfillment of messianic prophecies.

Table 1: Tanak and Old Testament

Tanak	Protestant Old Testament
<p><b>Torah</b> 5 books of Moses (Bereshít, Shemót, Waj-jiqrá, Bemidbár, Devarím)</p> <p><b>Prophets (Nevi'im)</b> <i>The early</i> Joshua, Judges, Samuel (one book), Kings (one book)</p> <p><i>The latter</i> Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve (one book): Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk,</p>	<p><b>Pentateuch</b> 5 books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri, Deuteronomy)</p> <p><b>Historical books</b> Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 + 2 Samuel 1+ 2 Kings 1 + 2 Chronicles Ezra, Nehemiah Esther</p> <p><b>Poetic books</b> Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of</p>

<sup>10</sup> In *The Letter of Aristeas*, a Hellenistic work of the second century BCE, we can read about the Greek translation of the Torah by seventy-two interpreters who were sent from Jerusalem to Egypt at the request of the librarian of Alexandria. Within seventy-two days the seventy-two scholars completed the Septuagint translation.

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Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi

**Writings (Ketuvim)**

Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (one book), Chronicles (one book)

Solomon,

**Prophets**

*Major*

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel

*Minor*

Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zachariah, Malachi

The formation of the Hebrew Bible took a different direction. The Rabbis applied a three-fold division and concluded their collection with the book of Chronicles. Some of the writings in the LXX were excluded and put among the supposed “Apocrypha”. With time, the acronym *Tanakh* was introduced to signify the three parts, *Torah* (instruction), *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (writings).

## Types of Interpretation

Approaching the topic of rabbinic interpretation and commentary from the angle of types of interpretation, we can distinguish three types of interpretation: *midrash*, *halakhah* and *haggadah*.<sup>11</sup>

### Midrash

The term *midrash* (Hebr. מדרש, pl. *midrashim*, “investigation”, “study”) is used to denote a method of either halakhic (legal) or haggadic (non-legal and chiefly homiletical) biblical exegesis. Halakhic midrashim are usually called “middot,” as opposed to the “halakhot,” or formulated laws. The term is found in 2 Chron 13:22 and 24:27 with the meaning “to record,” “to describe.”

As a method of interpretation, the original characteristics of a midrash are to identify on philological grounds the literal meaning (*peshat*) of the written Torah. Over time the method developed a focus on the deeper, spiritual, meaning of scripture.<sup>12</sup> In the Talmud this kind of interpretation is compared to a hammer who awakens sparks that sleep in a rock (BTSanhedrin 34a). Another characterization of midrashic exposition is to perceive the text as being an interlocutor in an ever-ongoing conversation.

A famous midrash on the first verse of the Bible (“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth”) goes like this:

*In the way of the world, when a king of flesh and blood builds a palace, he builds it not according to his own whim, but according to the idea of an architect. Moreover,*

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<sup>11</sup> The term *midrash* is also used as a label for texts that contain interpretations of scripture (see below).

<sup>12</sup> In comparison, the kabbalistic tradition distinguishes four levels of interpretation called *Pardes*, an acronym for *Peshat* (literal meaning), *Remez* (allegoric meaning, allusion), *Derash* (midrashic meaning), and *Sod* (“secret”, deeper, esoteric, metaphysical, meaning).



*the architect does not build it out of his own head; he has [a design]--plans and diagrams to know how to lay out the chambers and where to put in wicket doors. Even so the Holy One looked into the Torah as He created the world. (Midrash Genesis Rabba, 1:1)*

For the Rabbis, the Torah was the blue print for all of creation. To them, the actual letters and words that appear before our eyes could be compared to a garment under which the eternal design is hidden. The meaning of the sacred words, therefore, has a depth that can never be fathomed completely by the mind. Maybe this kind of thinking is also in Jesus' mind when he says, "not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt 5:18).

Midrash interpretations culminated in the works of the schools of Rabbi Ishmael (90-135 CE) and Rabbi Akiba. The hermeneutics of the school of Ishmael focused on logic and looked for similarities and analogies, whereas the hermeneutics of the school of Akiba focused on the subtle, the hidden, words and phrases that seemed redundant and on that which could be read between the lines. Many Gemara (see below) passages in the Talmud quote midrashic passages and it has been said that the Gemara is to the Mishnah what midrashim are to the written Torah.

## Halakhah

The term *halakhah* (Hebr. הלכה, pl. *halakhot*, "praxis") is derived from the verb *halakh*, ("to walk"). It denotes the interpretive tradition that focuses on practical advice, how a rule should be applied in daily life, in worship or in relation to tradition and custom. Halakhot are usually divided into those belonging to earlier (before Mishnah) and later traditions. With some simplification it can be said that halakhah starts with a midrash (a Torah interpretation) and applies its meaning to a specific context or situation. Earlier halakhot are then used to contextualize a rule in a new situation.

Three sources of halakhah are accepted: the Torah, laws instituted by the rabbis and long-standing customs. A halakhah from any of these sources, can be referred to as a mitzvah. In addition, there is no "official" halakhic interpretation. Instead, different individuals and communities give different answers to halakhic questions. In cases of controversy, there is no single judicial appellate, but Jews typically choose to follow specific rabbis and reinforce their particular interpretation by adhering to a particular community.

For many religious Jews the mitzvot that are directly derived from the written Torah are the most important. An illustration of how this may affect a daily religious routine is provided by the website [www.jewfaq.org/halakhah.htm](http://www.jewfaq.org/halakhah.htm):

Suppose you are reading the morning prayers and you can't remember whether you read *Bar'khu* and *Shema* (two important prayers). You are in doubt, *safek*. The recitation of Shema in the morning is a *mitzvah d'oraita*, a biblical commandment (Deut. 6:7), so you must be strict, you must go back and recite Shema, if you are not sure whether you did. The recitation of Bar'khu, on the other hand, is a *mitzvah d'rabbanan*, a rabbinic law, so you can be lenient, you don't have to go back and recite it if you are not sure.

## Haggadah

The Hebrew noun *haggadah* (Hebr. הגדה, pl. *haggadot*) is derived from the verb meaning “to report”, “to explain”, “to tell”. While the verb is sometimes used to introduce a halakic interpretation, the noun most often refers to “non-legal” passages in the rabbinic literature such as narrative, philosophical, mystical texts, sometimes aphorisms. In other words, *haggadot* do not explicitly focus on laws, but rather on the interpretation and elaboration of stories, themes and ideas.

The *haggadah par excellence* is the so-called *Haggadah of Pesach* (Passover). It is an elaboration of the story of the Exodus from Egypt with a focus on ritual use. This *haggadah* is recited by the father of the house at the *pesach* meal as a fulfillment of the scriptural commandment, “And you shall tell your son in that day, saying: It is because of that which the LORD did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.” The *Haggadah of Pesach* includes the famous question: Why is this night different from all other nights? Haggadic interpretations can be found in the New Testament, e.g. in 1 Cor 10:1-13.

## The Formation of Mishnah and Talmud

### Periods

The rabbis divide the centuries according to how they perceive the relationship between tradition and teaching. The period up to the year 200 is the era of the *Tannaim* (Aram. תנאים, sg. תנא, *tanna*, from Hebr. השנ, *shanna*, “repeat,” “teach,” “learn”, also the root-word of *Mishnah*). Because of their immense knowledge of scripture and legendary ability to recite the oral tradition by heart, the *tannaim* have sometimes been labeled “living scrolls”. Their life commitment was to teach students the traditions by means of continuous repetitions. The students were also the Rabbi’s disciples, and the aim of education was learning in life and thought in order to be equipped to make independent decisions in religious and legal matters.

After the *Tannaim*, the period of the alleged *Amoraim* (Aram. אמוראים, from *aram*, “say”, “comment”) covers the period up to 500 CE. The *Amoraim* specialized in commenting and interpreting the teaching of the *Tannaim*. The 6<sup>th</sup> century belongs to the *Saboraim* (Aram. סבוראים, from *sabar*, “think”), the editors of the Talmud, followed by the *Geonim* (Hebr. גאונים, *geonim*, sg. גאון, *gaon*, “the eminent one”), the leaders of the academies during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### The Formation of the Mishnah

After a period of oral transmission that stretches over hundreds of years, the Jewish sages decided to put the oral instruction in writing and preserve it in a collection of texts that came to be known as the *Mishnah*. At the time many Jews lived in Babylon, while others, after decades of war and destruction, had again settled in the land of Israel and established a Jewish centre of learning in Yavneh, Judea under the leadership of the aforementioned Rabbi Akiba. Akiba, who is referred to in the Talmud as *Rosh la-Chachomim* (Head of all the Sages), organized the oral tradition in three collections: *Midrash*, *Mishnah* and *Haggadah*. After the Bar

Kokhba revolt (132-36)<sup>13</sup>, Rabbi Yehuda haNasi (“Judah the Prince”) the son of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamaliel II became the leader of the school of Yavneh. He was also the president (*nasi*) of the re-established Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, thus invested with the authority of the Jewish Supreme Court. Under Yehuda haNasi, the Mishnah was formally legalized. The process met with much opposition (“the letter kills”), but was completed around 200 CE.

There are two different accounts concerning the formation process during this period. According to one, Yehuda’s ambition was to collect the entire oral tradition, but the sheer amount of material forced him to exclude almost all midrashic and haggadic material. The excluded material, the so-called *baraitot* (sg. *baraita*, Aram. ברייתא, “external”, “outside”), were therefore later on put together by others into separate collections, of which one was called *Tosefta* (see below).

According to the other account, the Mishnah represents the authoritative collection of that which was accepted and taught in the Jerusalem and Babylonian academies, whereas Rabbis Chiya and Oshaiah edited the Tosefta on their own (Rashi, commentary in BT Sanhedrin 33a). The Tosefta baraitot were thus purposely “excluded” and relate to the Mishnah in terms of authority, roughly like the Apocrypha relate to the Hebrew Bible.

## The Formation of the Talmudim

After the Bar Kokhba revolt, many rabbis moved to Baghdad in Babylon and founded Jewish academies, first those who adhered to the House of Hillel and then also those who adhered to the House of Shammai. At the same time new schools were started in the land of Israel, most important among them the schools in Sepphoris, Tiberias and Lydda. These interpreters of the Mishnah were called the Amoraim. They continued to discuss and debate the proper interpretation and application of the commandments and wanted to thoroughly explain the Mishnah and the Baraitot. Exchange between the schools was frequent and in both places collections of interpretations were assembled.

The Rabbis and their students gathered in their Houses of Learning and decided on correct and incorrect interpretations on democratic grounds: by majority decisions. Interpretations became common opinions that were collected and preserved. However, they also retained differences of interpretation and allowed conflicting interpretations to be included next to each other by ascribing divergences to different contexts, situations and persons.

The Mishnah was supplemented with new interpretations and commentaries. These latter commentaries are called Gemara (*Gemara* means “completion,” from the Hebr. רמג, *gamar*, “to complete”). Mishnah, Gemara and some baraitot were then edited together in a new edition of texts called the Talmudim.<sup>14</sup> The collection in Babylon was completed towards the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup> and is called the Babylonian Talmud, or *Talmud bavli*. The collection in Je-

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<sup>13</sup> Akiba thought it possible that Simon Bar Kokhba was the Messiah. He combined the meaning of his name (“Bar Kokhba” = “son of a star”) with the “Star Prophecy” in Numbers 24:17: “There shall come a star out of Jacob.”

<sup>14</sup> Sometimes the terms Gemara and Talmud are used interchangeably.

<sup>15</sup> According to tradition the compilation of the Babylonian Talmud is associated with two major Babylonian sages, Rav Ashi (375 to 427 CE) and Rav Ravina (died in 499 CE), the final expounder of the Amoraic period. With Ravina’s death, the compilation of the BT is closed. Some have argued, however, that a number of additions to the Gemara stem from the Saboraim, and suggest that the “closing” of the BT occurred around 700 CE instead (Jacobs, *Jewish Religion*).

Jerusalem was completed already towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century and is called the Jerusalem Talmud, or *Talmud Yerushalmi*. The Jerusalem Talmud was never formally legalized, wherefore the Babylonian Talmud became the normative collection.

In the centuries following the completion of the *Talmudim* the process of interpretation continued. Some of these latter interpretations were subsequently included in the Talmud as commentaries; others were put into separate text collections. These processes of interpretation and collection have continued and are going on to this very day. In fact, the sheer number makes it virtually impossible for any one person to know, let alone fathom, all that is included in the vast corpus of Jewish commentaries and interpretations.

## Talmudic and Midrashic Literature

### The Mishnah

The name Mishnah (Hebr. משנה, “repetition”, “recitation”) is a derivative from the verb *shannah* (Hebr. שנה, “repeat” or “study and review”). From this a double usage of Mishnah has developed: 1) “instruction,” i.e. the teaching and learning of the tradition (cf. mAbot. 3.7, 8); 2) the content of that instruction, i.e. the law which was transmitted orally, in contrast to “Mikra,” the law which is written and read (BTMegillah 33a; BTBerakhot 5a; BTHagigah 14a; JTPesachim 4:130d, et. al.).<sup>16</sup>

The genre of the Mishnah impresses on the reader from the very beginning that this is a record of “oral instruction.” Immediately upon reading the first lines of the first chapter (Berakhot), the atmosphere of conversation and of orality dominates.<sup>17</sup> The record of diverging opinions also points to the openness of the discussion. Each student of the Talmud is asked to make up his mind as to which are the best arguments. We may also note that the Mishnah arises primarily from an agrarian society, as many of the issues debated relate to fields, seeds and property. In addition, the perspective is patriarchal, all of the agents of the text are men and the discussions of issues involving women presuppose the interests of men. This is how the Mishnah begins:

#### *Example: mBerakhot 1:1*<sup>18</sup>

- 1:1 A. From what time may we recite the *Shema* in the evening?  
B. From the hour that the priests enter [their homes] to eat the heave offering.  
C. “until the end of the first watch” –  
D. The words of R. Eliezer.  
E. But sages say, “Until midnight.”  
F. Rabban Gamaliel says, “Until the rise of dawn.”  
G. *M’ SH S*<sup>19</sup>: His [Gamaliel’s] sons returned from a banquet hall [after midnight].

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<sup>16</sup> For the referencing system cf. notes 4 and 5.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Neusner, *Mishnah*, xi: “... a move from a realm of visual silence to world of song on paper.”

<sup>18</sup> This and the next example are taken from a translation by Tzvee Zaharvy and Alan J. Avery-Peck, in Neusner, *Mishnah*, 3. The subdivisions into small units, marked by letters, divides the text into “the smallest complete thought-constituents of a unit.” (Neusner, *Mishnah*, xi).

- H. They said to him, “We did not [yet] recite *Shema*.”
- I. He said to them, “If the dawn has not yet risen, you are obligated to recite [the *Shema*]
- J. And [this applies] not only [in] this [case]. Rather, [as regards] all commandments which sages said [may be performed] ‘Until midnight,’ the obligation to perform [them persists] until the rise of dawn.”
- K. [For example,] the offering of the fats and entrails—their obligation [persists] until the rise of dawn [see Lev. 1:9, 3:3-9].
- L. And all [sacrifices] which must be eaten within one day, the obligation [to eat them persists] until the rise of dawn.
- M. If so why did the sages say [that these actions may be performed only] until midnight?
- N. In order to protect man from sin.

### *Example: mAbot 3:1*

- 3.1 A. Aqabiah b. Mehallalel says, “Reflect upon three things and you will not fall into the clutches of transgression:
  - B Know (1) from whence you come, (2) whither you are going, and (3) before whom you are going to have to give a full account [of yourself].
  - C. “*From whence do you come?*” From a putrid drop.
  - D. “*Whither are you going?*” To a place of dust, worms and maggots.
  - E. “*And before whom are you going to give a full account of yourself?*” Before the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he.”

### *Orders and Tractates*

The Mishnah consists of six orders (Hebr. סדר, *sefer*, also called “division”). Within the orders the text is divided into tractates (sometimes called treatises) and within the tractates into chapters and verses. In the Neusner edition, the verses are then divided by capital letters into thought-units. References specify tractates, chapters and verses. Thus, “mBerakhot 1:1” refers to the Mishnah tractate Berakhot, chapter 1, verse 1 (the section cited above).

These are the 6 orders and 63 tractates of the Mishnah:

<i>Zera'im</i> (seeds) –	The first order consists of 11 tractates that deal with agricultural laws such as food production and harvesting fees (tithes, etc.). The first tractate (Berakhot= “Benedictions”) deals with blessings and prayers, such as the <i>Shema</i> .
<i>Mo'ed</i> (seasons) –	The second order consists of 12 tractates that deal with the Sabbath and festivals.
<i>Nashim</i> (women) –	The third order consists of 7 tractates that focus on issues related to women, such as marriage, divorce, and family.

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<sup>19</sup> M' SH S points to a previous case or an illustration.

<i>Neziqin</i> (damages) –	The fourth order consists of 10 tractates that deal with civil and criminal jurisprudence, idolatry, as well as the proper handling of right and wrong.
<i>Qodashim</i> (holy things) –	The fifth order consists of 11 tractates that discuss the sacrificial cult and dietary laws.
<i>Tohorot</i> (purifications) –	The sixth order consists of 12 tractates dealing with ritual defilement and purification ( <i>kashrut</i> ).

Already this overview shows that the Mishnah does not distinguish the religious from the secular sphere. Civil law and prayer custom stand side by side. The whole life is one identity that should be sanctified to God.

## The Tosefta

The *Tosefta* (Aram. תוספתא, “supplement”) is a compilation of *baraitot* from the period of the Mishnah, four times larger than the Mishnah and probably compiled and edited between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. The *Tosefta* is organized along similar lines as the Mishnah, and addresses similar problems and issues. However, it’s haggadic and midrashic material sometimes contradicts the halakhah rulings of the Mishnah.

The *Tosefta* used to be considered a commentary on, or a supplement to, the Mishnah, but several observations speak for an independent collection: 1) the *Tosefta* contains discussions that are absent in the Mishnah; 2) parallel concerns are treated similarly yet without reference to the Mishnah; 3) several talmudic *baraitot* are exact quotations from the *Tosefta*; 4) the *Tosefta* draws on source material that predates the Mishnah. It has also been argued that the *baraitot* of the *Tosefta* were compiled in order to avoid the impression that the Mishnah was equivalent with the entire oral Torah.<sup>20</sup>

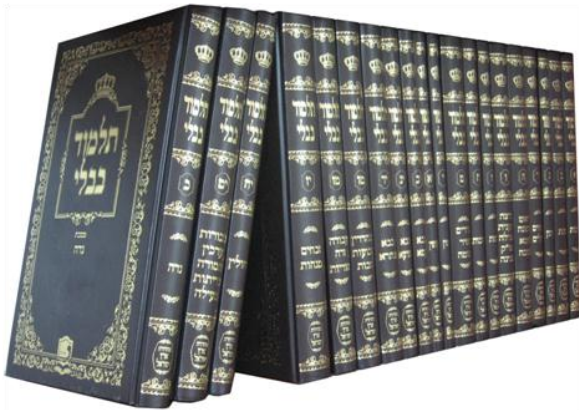
## The Talmud

The *Talmud* (Hebr. תלמוד, “instruction, learning”) follows the Mishnah in terms of its basic structure. It divides its content into orders, tractates and chapters. Instead of the 63 tractates of the Mishnah, the Talmud has 517 tractates and its size is many times that of the Mishnah. The English edition of the Babylonian Talmud by Neusner consists of 39 volumes and around 20,000 pages.

Strictly speaking the Talmud consists of the Mishnah and the Gemara (and some early *baraitot*). However, interpretation and commentaries did not stop with the completion of the Babylonian Talmud around the year 500 CE. Commentary writing continued, now commentary on the Talmud, that is. The earliest Talmud commentaries were written by the Geonim in Babylonia, and from around 900 CE onwards new academies of Jewish learning were established in Europe and North Africa that claimed the right of commenting authoritatively on the Talmud. The one commentator who has contributed more than any other is Rashi (1040-1105 CE) from Troyes, France. The name Rashi is an acronym for *Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi*.

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<sup>20</sup> Houtman, *Mishnah and Tosefta*.



A full set of the Babylonian Talmud

Medieval commentators on the Talmud from Ashkenazic Jewry (see below) produced a major commentary known as *Tosafot* (Hebr. תוספות, “additions” or “supplements”). The authors of the *Tosafot* (around 50 Rabbis) are known as *Tosafists*. One of the main goals of the *Tosafot* was to explain and interpret contradictory statements in the Talmud. Unlike *Rashi*, the *Tosafot* is not a running commentary, but rather comments on selected matters. Beginning with the

fifteenth century, Sephardic Jewry (see below) sought to apply Aristotelian logic to the study of the Talmud, adopting a study on three levels: textual or literary (just the text), intertextual (including commentaries), and forensic (relating Talmud opinions to halakhic codes).

The first complete edition of the Babylonian Talmud was printed in Venice by Daniel Bomberg during the 16th century. The Bomberg edition put the Mishnah and Gemara in the centre of the page and included the commentaries of Rashi and the *Tosafot* around this middle section. Rashi’s commentary, which includes text-critical remarks, was soon recognized and respected for its masterly clarity. In fact, it is said that the thoroughness of his comments left the attempts by other schools to make additions to the Talmud redundant. With time, minor additions were added in the outer margins, but Bomberg’s edition set a standard that has been adapted ever since in almost all printed Hebrew language Talmud editions. A book project called *Halacha Brura* from the Halacha Brura Institute in Jerusalem, presents the Talmud and the halachic codes in the Sephardic tradition, side by side.

## A Page of the Talmud<sup>21</sup>

Illustration 1 shows a standard printed page of the Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 24a. References in the Talmud are by tractate and page sheet. A page sheet is divided into obverse page (a) and reverse page (b). Thus, the reference BTMegillah 24a points to the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megillah, page sheet 24, obverse page a. As Hebrew is read from right to left the obverse page (a) is on the right and the reverse page (b) on the left.

The page is divided into a central or middle section that contains the Mishnah and Gemara text [A]. To the right of the middle there is the commentary of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaqi (Rashi) [B], to the left and across the bottom of the middle, we find the *Tosafot* [C].

The lower right margin contains short comments (glosses) by Rabbis from recent centuries, mostly emendations to the text or cross-references [G]. On this page the glosses are by *Ga'on* of Vilna, *Hagahot Ha-Ba"H*, Rabbi Isaiah Berlin, and *Gilyon Ha-Sha"Sh* by Rabbi Akiva Eger. The lower left margin contains several additional commentaries [H], on this page by Rabbenu Hananel, *Sefer Ha-Mafteah*, *Tosafot Yeshanim*, Rabbenu Gershom (Mainz Commentary), *Tosefot RI"D* and *Shittah Mequbbetzet*.

<sup>21</sup> For this section and the sample page I am indebted to <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/TalmudMap/Samples.html>.

The upper right margin contains cross-references to other passages in the Talmud where the same quote appears [D]. The upper left margin combines two indices (*Ein Mishpat* and *Ner Mitzvah*) with references to the main codes of Jewish law [E]. In recent printings of the Talmud we can find additional glosses by various Rabbis from recent centuries [F].

Here follows an extract from the page in translation, with a selection of comments:

- [A] *Mishnah 4:5-6*: The one who concludes with the reading from the Prophets may also lead the responsive reading of the *Shema*. He also passes before the ark [to lead the congregational prayers], and he lifts his hands [to recite the Priestly Benediction]. And if he was a minor, then his father or his teacher passes in his stead. A minor may read from the Torah and recite the Aramaic translation. However, he may not lead the responsive reading of the *Shema*, and he may not pass before the ark, and he may not lift his hands.

*Gemara*: “And if he was a minor, then his father or his teacher passes in his stead.”

What is the reason? Rav Pappa says: On account of the honour. Rabbah ben Shimi says: Because it might lead to a quarrel. What is the practical difference? The practical difference would be in a case where he did it gratis.

- [B] *Rashi on Mishnah passage*: “The one who concludes with the reading from the Prophets.” The Sages have enacted that one who is accustomed to read the concluding reading from the Prophets should lead the responsive reading of the *Shema*.

“He also passes before the ark.” In order to fulfill the obligation on behalf of the congregation with regards to the Kedushah (“sanctification”) section of the prayer.

“in his stead.” for his sake.

“A minor... may not lead the responsive reading of the *Shema*.” Because he is supposed to fulfill the obligation on behalf of the community, and since he himself is not obliged to do it, he may not release others from their obligation.

“And he may not lift his hands.” If he is a Priest, since it dishonors the congregation to be subject to his blessing.

*Rashi on Gemara passage*: “On account of the honor.” Of being allowed to pass before the ark. As a reward for volunteering himself for a task that carries no honor, they ruled that he should be given this honor.

“Because it might lead to a quarrel.” The matter gives provokes disagreements: ‘I am concluding with the reading from the Prophets, while you get to pass before the ark!’

“Where he did it gratis.” The one who passes before the ark does not receive any payment. In such an instance, the fear of a quarrel would apply, but not the issue of honor.

- [C] *Tosafot (selection)*: “However he may not lead the responsive reading of the *Shema*.” And even according to Rabbi Judah who permits this with respect to the Scroll of Esther above (19b), in the present case he would nonetheless concede that he may not perform the obligation on behalf of others in a matter related to sanctity, since a minor is subject to two rabbinic obligations, as I explained above with respect to the opinion of the Rabbis who disagree there with Rabbi Judah. However, with regards to the Scroll of Esther there is reason to rule more leniently because little children and women were



also under the threat “to destroy, to slay, etc.” (Esther 3:13). For this reason Rabbi Judah treated him like an adult.

# הקורא עומד פרק שלישי מגילה

ב

עין סומט  
ר ספוד

ובנביא עשה. וטעמו אף על פי שפרקנו למחצית אפי' נבואת  
אלה פסוק אחד אלא שאלו נבואות רחוקות הן מהנביא  
ואם היו פסוקים על שם פסוקים פתוחים פתוחים  
מלאו ענין המאמר ומלאו ענין המאמר. ומה שאמר  
מלאו ענין המאמר ומלאו ענין המאמר.

D

**ב** ובנביא עשה. וטעמו אף על פי שפרקנו למחצית אפי' נבואת  
אלה פסוק אחד אלא שאלו נבואות רחוקות הן מהנביא  
ואם היו פסוקים על שם פסוקים פתוחים פתוחים  
מלאו ענין המאמר ומלאו ענין המאמר. ומה שאמר  
מלאו ענין המאמר ומלאו ענין המאמר.

**ב** ובנביא עשה. וטעמו אף על פי שפרקנו למחצית אפי' נבואת  
אלה פסוק אחד אלא שאלו נבואות רחוקות הן מהנביא  
ואם היו פסוקים על שם פסוקים פתוחים פתוחים  
מלאו ענין המאמר ומלאו ענין המאמר. ומה שאמר  
מלאו ענין המאמר ומלאו ענין המאמר.

(לפי הל' א)

(לפי הל' ב)

(לפי הל' ג)

(לפי הל' ד)

(לפי הל' ה)

(לפי הל' ו)

(לפי הל' ז)

(לפי הל' ח)

(לפי הל' ט)

עין סומט  
ר ספוד

**E**

**C**

**F**

**H**

**A**

**B**

לפי הל' י  
לפי הל' יא

## Midrashim<sup>22</sup>

The most important source of midrashic material is the compilation called *Midrash ha-Gadol* (Hebr. מדרש הגדול, “the Great Midrash”). It was put together in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, forgotten and rediscovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It contains midrashim from the two Talmudim and other sources, such as the Mekhiltas and the Sifra (see below). The sources are creatively combined to a new literary composition.

### *Halakhic Midrashim*

Halakhic midrashim are exegetical commentaries on legal sections in the Pentateuch by the ancient Rabbis. The main focus is on identifying the biblical sources or the traditionally received 613 mitzvot (see above) and on interpreting these passages. In the Talmud quotations of halakhic midrashim are often introduced with phrases like: “Tana debe R. Yishmael” (‘It was taught in the school of R. Ishmael’).

The five most prominent collections are: *Mekhilta* on Exodus (from the school of Rabbi Ishmael), *Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* on Exodus (from the school of Rabbi Akiba), *Sifra* on Leviticus, *Sifre* on Numbers and Deuteronomy. *Mekhilta* means “measure”, “rule”, *Sifre* (pl. *sifra*) means “writing.” The above quotes from mBerakhot 1:1 and BTMegillah 24a serve as examples of halakhic midrashim.

### *Haggadic Midrashim*

The origin of haggadic midrashim is related to reading and exposition in the Synagogue worship service. These midrashim consist of interpretations of the Bible, often taken from synagogue preaching, moralistic teachings and maxims, anecdotes about the Rabbis, folklore, especially magical and medical recipes, and records of legal rulings by the Rabbis.

Preserved collections stem from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Most well known is *Midrash Rabba*, a collection of commentaries on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, Esther and Lamentations. The oldest haggadic midrash is *Genesis Rabba*, a verse by verse commentary. Here follows an excerpt from that text:

On Genesis 1: There is a difference of opinion as to the day on which angels were created; one authority decides for the second day, on the ground that they are mentioned in connection with water (Ps. 104:3, 4), which was created on that day; while another, arguing from the fact that they are said to fly (Isa. 6), assigns their creation to the fifth day, on which all other flying things were created. But all authorities are agreed that they did not exist on the first day of creation, so that skeptics cannot say that they were helpers in the work of creation....

“How is it,” asked an inquisitive matron of Rabbi José, “that your Scriptures crown every day of creation with the words: ‘And God saw that it was good,’ but the second day is deprived of this phrase?” The Rabbi sought to satisfy her by pointing out that at the end of the creation it is said: “And God saw all that he had made, and it was exceedingly good,” so that the second day shares in this commendation. “But,” insisted the matron, “there is still an unequal division, since every day has an additional sixth part of

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<sup>22</sup> Note that this section focuses is on literary evidence. As interpretive genres the terms midrash, halakhah and haggadah have been dealt with above.

the praise, whilst the second day has only the sixth part without the whole one, which the others have for themselves.” The sage then mentioned the opinion of Rabbi Samuel, that the reason for the omission is to be found in the fact that the work begun on the second day was not finished before the following (the third) day; hence we find the expression “it was good” twice on that day.

In sum, Mishnah and Talmud are names of collections of texts; midrash, halakhah and haggadah denote types of interpretation, among which midrash is the basic type that is also used as an overarching designation for “Bible interpretation”. Midrash then is a variable term, denoting: 1) a type of interpretation, 2) the basic form of Bible interpretation, 3) a type of texts of which some are compiled in separate text corpuses.

## Targumim

Finally, a few words need to be said about the Targumim (sg. Hebr. תרגום, *targum*, “translation, interpretation”). These are Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible (some of them more like paraphrases) for liturgical purposes, from the Second Temple period and until the late first millennium. Like the LXX, the Targumim translations purport traditions of interpretation that reflect the geographical and cultural milieus of Jewish life, especially in Israel and Babylonia. The two most important *targumim* for liturgical purposes are the *Targum Onkelos* on the Torah and the *Targum Jonathan ben Uzziel* on the Prophets. They are referred to in the Babylonian Talmud as *targum didan* (“our Targum”). In Talmudic times the Targumim were read in the synagogues together with the corresponding Hebrew texts. Except for the country of Yemen, the public reading of Targum along with the Torah and *Haftarah* (a selection of synagogue readings from the Prophets) was abandoned in most communities in post-Talmudic times.

Many scholars believe that the *Peshitta*, an aramaic bible translation from ca. 100 BCE to 100 CE, is based on targumim. The Peshitta is the traditional Bible of Syriac-speaking Christians.

## The Talmud and Judaism

As we have seen, the Talmud, although primarily a product of the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, has been a thriving and expanding tradition throughout the centuries. It may, therefore, be useful to conclude this presentation with a short sketch of the main movements and some historical developments of Judaism.

### Rooted in Diversity

Like other peoples and religions, Judaism consisted and consists of many groups, each with specific interests and priorities on faith confessions, faith actions, traditions and revered texts. In addition, as Jews have been dispersed to the four corners of the earth for thousands of years, some of these developments occurred rather independently.

Today, there are approximately 15 million Jews living in the world, about a third of them in Israel, about half in North and South America and about 15% in Europe. Similarly to the Jews of antiquity who were dispersed throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond, Jews

today conduct their lives in a variety of ways. Jews in Russia follow other traditions than Jews in Ethiopia or Australia. Jews who live in France correlate to another culture than Jews who live in Argentina. Again, there is a growing population of Jews in Germany that affiliates with the humanistic and cultural heritage of their ancestors from before the Second World War and the *Shoah*.<sup>23</sup> Even within a city, we find great variation. Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn, New York, differ considerably from other Jews in the same city. In Hong Kong we find both orthodox and reformed Jews, depending on the migration of Jews with the diverse traditions from the United States, Israel, Britain, Australia, Canada and other countries.

Looking back we can identify the emergence of two main Jewish movements with diverging cultural developments. First, there are *the Sephardic Jews* who lived for many centuries in Spain and Portugal. They were expelled from these countries in 1492 and most of them migrated to the main cities of the Ottoman Empire, such as Cairo, Thessaloniki, Istanbul and Damascus. The Sephardic Jews were then also called the oriental Jews. They tend to trace the origin of their communities back to the time of the first temple (10<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Some communities of oriental Jews, with quite independent traditions, can be found in India and China.

The other main movement is *the Ashkenazi Jews* who are first found in Central Europe and later in Eastern Europe. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century *the Ashkenazi Jews* constituted the majority of Jews throughout the world. For the most part, Ashkenazi Judaism sought to adapt to European culture and to cooperate with Christianity. Many of its members internalized the ideals of the Enlightenment and embraced the educational system and the languages of Europe. But there were always those who warned against too much integration and the loss of identity. Conspicuously, from within this division of Judaism evolved the so-called *Chasidic Judaism*, which is a “pietistic” Jewish movement that did not embrace the ideals of the Enlightenment. *Chasidic Judaism* emphasizes sincerity and the hidden holiness of the common people, and favors a popularized form of Jewish mysticism.

As the Shoah brought all integration efforts to a sudden and horrendous halt, migration wave after migration wave of Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe arrived at the shores of Palestine so that when the state of Israel was founded 80% of the population was Ashkenazi.

Today Judaism throughout the world is primarily divided according to religious-philosophical criteria into Liberal, also called Reform Judaism, Orthodox and Ultra-orthodox Judaism and Conservative Judaism. The movements diverge from each other in terms of forms of worship, ritual issues, the role of women, and the importance of the rabbinic tradition. In addition there is Falasha (black) Judaism from Ethiopia and Karaite Judaism (which sometimes traces its origin back to the first century Sadducees). These do not submit to rabbinic halakhah. Also, the mystical and Chasidic movements focus, more than others, on exploring the mysterious meanings of the Torah.

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<sup>23</sup> The *Shoah* (Hebr. שואה, “calamity”) is a term used to describe the genocide of approximately six million European Jews during World War II. Also known as the *Holocaust* (Greek *λόκαυστος*, *holos*, “whole” and *kaustos*, “burnt”). The Latin form *holocaustum* was first used with reference to a massacre of Jews in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

## A Common Identity

Besides diversity, there has always also been a basic commonality between different Jewish movements, concerns and convictions that bind Jews and Judaism together and guarantee a common identity throughout the world. The most basic commonality (although modern Reform Judaism diverges here partly) is found in the answer to the question: Who is a Jew? Answer: A person who is born by a Jewish mother, or who has converted to Judaism. This idea of commonality highlights the difference between the designation “Jew” and other religious designations such as “Christian” or “Muslim”. Calling oneself “Jewish” implies asserting that one belongs not only to a religion but also to a people. Some would add that belonging to the land of Israel is a third component that is (should be) common to all Jews.

A second matter of commonality is that Jews who practice their religion agree basically that the Torah, as represented by the Talmud, is God’s complete instruction and His binding word to His people both in the past, the present and the future. Unlike Christianity, where the confession of faith is central, for Judaism it is the faithfulness towards God’s instruction that is essential. If Christians can quarrel about true faith, i.e. orthodoxy, Jews would rather quarrel about true action and behavior, i.e. orthopraxy.

## Modern Israel and the Talmud

As the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 brought a new cultural upswing, the Talmud has again found proponents that want to organize, not just the life of the family, but also the life of society according to the Talmud.

Orthodox Judaism has always held the Talmud in high regard and seen it as the ultimate halakhic authority. Conservative Judaism respects the rabbinic tradition, but views it as part of historical and cultural contexts and developments. The approach allows for greater practical flexibility than that of the orthodox tradition. Classical Reform Judaism has in general kept the Talmud at arm’s length and considered it a product of late antiquity, having relevance merely as a historical document, but even in reform circles it has been noticeable lately that greater attention is paid to ritual customs and traditions. Even the rabbinic style of argumentation, including the Talmudic casuistic, seems to gain new interest.

In modern Israel the major dividing line between different forms of Judaism has shifted in part towards a distinction between secular and traditional. The traditional community wants to establish the Talmud as the law of the land. It stresses the importance of Talmud study and has made it a central component of the Yeshiva (orthodox school) curriculum. Secular Jewry aims at a democratic and religiously pluralistic society.

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#### Useful Internet Resources

- The Jewish Virtual Library: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org>.
- The Jewish Encyclopedia: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>.
- Internet Sacred Texts Archive: <http://www.sacred-texts.com>.
- Early Christian Writings: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com>.
- Page from the Talmud: <http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/TalmudPage.html>.

Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/Talmud>.