

**The *Talmud*
and
The *Masoretic Text* of the Old Testament**

Dr. Ian A. Fair

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The *Talmud* and Masoretic Text

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Two Talmuds!

Introduction

***Talmud*, a Hebrew Term**

“The Hebrew word *Talmud*, 'Limud', means “teaching” or “learning,” This word carries the weight of 'learning' or 'study', much like a well-worn book carries *the promise of knowledge*. Think of the Talmud as a *huge library of Jewish wisdom*. It's more than just a collection—it's a Jewish tribute to the *pursuit of understanding*.

The *Talmud*, is a vast and deep reservoir of Jewish legal and ethical teachings. *Talmud* has been the bedrock of Jewish life and learning for millennia.

Before we can understand the *Talmud*, we must understand the difference between the *written* and *oral law* in Judaism. The written and oral law are like having two halves of a book, each complementing and illuminating the other.

The **Written Law**, the *haggadah*, also known as the *Torah*, is essentially *the Jewish constitution*. It's contained in *the first five books of the Torah, given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai*. It's the cornerstone, the bedrock of Jewish life and belief.

The **Oral Law**, the *halakha*, also given at Mount Sinai, is like a *commentary of the Written Torah*. *It helps us understand the Torah better*.

The **Written Law** can be pretty concise and sometimes leaves us with questions.

The **Oral Law**, passed down from generation to generation and *eventually written down in the form of the Talmud*, steps in to fill in the gaps. It gives us context, explains how the laws should be applied in daily life, and offers interpretations and rulings on ambiguous points in the Written Law.

*The Written and Oral Laws go hand in hand. One cannot function without the other. Together, they form the comprehensive framework of Jewish law and practice.”*¹

The *Talmud*, either the Palestinian or *Jerusalem Talmud*, or the *Babylonian Talmud*, combine the Jewish application of the *Oral halakha* and *Written haggadah* laws of Israel.

The Talmud was compiled in two forms, an *earlier* Palestinian “Jerusalem” Talmud, and a *later* Babylonian Talmud

The two Talmuds were written between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE. Both Talmuds was carefully assembled and written by well-trained Rabbinic scholars.

There are two versions - *The Babylonian, later 5th century*, and the earlier 3rd century “Jerusalem” Talmud are like two siblings, each with its own personality. The Babylonian Talmud, born in the ancient lands of Babylonia—what we now call Iraq—is the more well-known of the two. It has become the go-to reference for most scholars. On the other hand, the Jerusalem Talmud took shape in the Land of Israel, it is viewed as a companion volume with its own unique insights. Though perhaps less well-known, the Palestinian “Jerusalem” Talmud is still an integral part of the *Talmudic* tradition.

¹ <https://aish.com/what-is-the-talmud>

The History and Reason for Two Talmuds

“The origins of the two *Talmuds* lay in the *destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple*, ca CE 70, when the heart of the Jewish faith; the cultic Temple center and the destruction of the Jewish Scrolls in the Temple, left a serious vacuum in Jewish life and faith,

In antiquity, the two major centres of Jewish scholarship were the *Talmudic academies* in *Syrian Palestine, Tiberias, and Babylon*. A *Talmud* was compiled in each of these Jewish Rabbinic regional centres.

The earlier of the two compilations took place in Galilee, either in the late fourth or early fifth century, CE, and it came to be known as the *Jerusalem Talmud* (Jewish Palestinian Aramaic: תַּלְמוּד יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, *romanized: Talmud Yerushalmi*).

Later, and likely sometime in the sixth century, CE, the *Babylonian Talmud* was compiled (in Babylonian Jewish Aramaic: תַּלְמוּד בְּבֵלִי, *romanized: Talmud Bavli*). The latter Talmud is usually what is meant when the word "*Talmud*" is used without qualification. The traditions of the Jerusalem Talmud and its sages had a significant influence on the milieu out of which the Babylonian Talmud arose.”²

² Various comments from the Jewish Encyclopedia, Wikipedia, and other sources. The library if valuable Talmudic information is extensive, Cf. also Dr. Ian A. Fair’s research and teaching notes.

The “Components” of the Babylonian *Talmud*

Since the Babylonian *Talmud* is most often referred to when “defining” Judaism after the Second Temple era, 70 CE, the historical process adopted of the Rabbinic Scholars in Babylon is most helpful.

The *Talmud* was developed in three Rabbinic stages, each merging eventually into the *Babylonian Talmud*.

The three stages were the early *Torah*, *Mishna*, and *Gemarah*.

The *Torah* was the five books of “Moses” which had been translated into Greek, the Septuagint, in Egypt, ca, 230 BCE. Several partial manuscripts of the Hebrew *Torah* were available outside the repository of the Jerusalem Temple, such as in the Qumran Dead Sea Scrolls.

The *Mishna* was developed by *Tannaim*, *Rabbinic scholars and teachers*. *The Mishna was aided by the Tosefta supplemental teachings on the Mishna.*

The *Gemarah* was produced by another group of Rabbinic scholars, the *Amoriam*.

The *Talmud*, the final efforts of over 200 years of “remembrance, oral traditions, and research,” by Rabbinic scholars produced the **Babylonian Talmud**.

The Talmud thus became the established authority of Rabbinic tradition derived from the *Torah*, *Mishna* oral traditions, and the *Gemarah* Rabbinic commentaries on *Mishna*.

The *Babylonian Talmud* is “presented” in six “orders” and sixty-three “tractates.”

The Written Form of the Old Testament Scriptures, the *Tanakh*

The study of the *history* of the *Tanakh*, the Old Testament scrolls and manuscripts, is for serious scholars an interesting and informative experience! Working from traditionally conservative estimates of dates, the “writing” of the Old Testament resources reflected in the *Tanakh* spread over 1000 years, from the early recording of Moses’ Pentateuchal traditions, to the writing of Malachai, Ezra, and Nehemiah!

Traditionally, it has been believed that our Old Testament books were written in Hebrew, possibly influenced by Egyptian, Canaanite, Aramaic and Greek language and cultural influences. Any reasonable student would recognize a significant “morphing of the “Hebrew” language over a period as long as 1000 years!

A side caveat was the experience of Jewish Scribes in Egypt, Alexandria, approximately 230 years BCE, possibly 700 years after Moses’ time who translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. Tradition has it that the Egyptian Jews in Alexandria could not read their “Hebrew” texts and requested that the Jerusalem Great Synagogue send some Greek speaking Jewish scholars to Egypt to translate the Hebrew *Torah* into Greek, hence, we have the Septuagint, a Greek version of the *Torah*!

The “original” written Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts or scrolls of the text of the *Tanakh*, the Old Testament Scriptures, were destroyed by the Roman sacrilege of Jerusalem and the Temple, CE 70. After this the complete destruction of what remained of the *Tanakh* posed a problem for the Jewish Rabbis. They might have had the Septuagint in Greek but this was not a sacred language to the Jews. The Rabbis in both Tiberias and Babylon were anxious to restore the *Tanakh* to its “original Hebrew” text.

However, this was difficult, for by the end of the Second Temple era, CE 70, Hebrew was no longer the common religious language of Israel which through the years had incorporated much of the Aramaic dialectal style into the “Aramaic-Hebrew” dialect spoken by the Jews during Jesus’ ministry, and during the Rabbinic control of the Temple cult.

Languages never stay static. They are often shaped or influenced by geo-political changes experienced in regions as when Alexander III of Macedon conquered Greece, Persian, Egypt, and Hellenized the middle-east world. The “Hellenistic” Greek used by Paul and John is sometimes called *Koine*, *common* Greek which was significantly different from the Classical Attic Greek of Ancient Greece.

The morphology of proto-Palestinian “Hebrew” most likely spoken by Moses, ca 1400 BCE was influenced by Canaanite, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian cultures through which Israel “moved” and eventually became an Aramaic form of Hebrew, Galilean Aramaic. Moses’ Hebrew would not have been the Hebrew that most Jews spoke after the time of Saul, David, and Solomon.

Unfortunately, today it is commonly believed, inaccurately, that the Hebrew of our Old Testament is the same Hebrew which Moses “wrote” 1400 BCE. What Moses “wrote” or “said,” the terms *wrote* and *said* implied by Jesus and Paul, had been *carefully memorized* into *oral traditions* which were considered by the Jews or Hebrew to be more than mere stories. They carried within them the *authority of Moses* and *the will and power of God*. These *oral and written traditions* were gathered by *faithful scribes*, like Jeremiah’s Baruch, and Peter’s Mark, and *passed down*, or *on* through both *oral* and *written* traditions.

The study of the *history* and *power* of *oral traditions* informs us that the earliest tridents of “*authoritarian*” *tradition* were passed down initially orally in ancient tribes or cultures like Virgil’s Roman *Aeneid*, and Homer’s ancient Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Israel, the *Prophets* and *Judges*.³

Thus, gradually over the centuries of Israel’s political and religious history, namely, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Egyptian and Greek conflicts the *early proto-Phoenician text and language of Moses* and ancient Israel had “evolved” into the *Hebrew* language and text found in the varied manuscripts evidenced in the Second Temple era.

The development of the Hebrew language and text from the time of Moses and the Egyptian bondage, Egyptian proto-Phoenician learning of 400 years, the Exodus experience, on into the Aramaic form of Hebrew of the Second Temple era is a fascinating study which impacts what Moses is *said* to have *written* or *said* “1400 years” before the Second Temple era!

It was a rude and rough experience for me years ago to learn that Moses did not communicate with the Egyptian Pharaoh *in Hebrew*, for the Hebrew language had not formed by that time. Linguistic scholars have suggested that the language of Egypt, and of Canaan, the home of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, was in the form of either a Proto-Sinaitic or a proto-Phoenician dialect of the Ancient Near East.

³ I recommend some time/research in the authority of oral tradition in ancient cultures, including Israel. Cf. John H Walton and Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority*, InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition, 2013. There are several other works by Walton and others under this category.

The Masoretic Text of the *Tanakh*, Old Testament

The Rabbinic Scribes of the post Babylonian and Palestinian *Talmud* era worked assiduously for several centuries following their 1st century CE settlement in Tiberias and Babylon. Their task was producing an “Old Testament” Hebrew text which was referred to as the *Tanakh*! For reasons described below these Scriptures become known as the *Masoretic Text*.

The work of early Rabbinic scholars called the *Tannaim* had produced the *Mishna*, commentaries on the Jewish religious traditions. The scholars, the *Tannaim* and *Amoriam* who final produced the *Talmud* was not over! The task of compiling a Hebrew textual base for the *Tanakh*, Old Testament, continued for centuries from the *sixth* to the *tenth* century. Meticulously they pieced together the numerous *manuscript* texts available producing a patchwork text that needed years of textual and linguistic criticism to produce a Hebrew text of the *Tanakh*.

The critical work on the manuscripts and sources available was done by a group of Rabbinic scholars called the *Masorettes* working in Palestine/Tiberias and Babylon. The completed text was named after the *Masorettes*, hence, the *Masoretic text* of the Old Testament.

The following citation from Wikipedia gives a brief idea of the history of the Masoretic Text:

“The Masoretic Text, MT or **מ**, Hebrew: **גִּזְתָּהּ הַמְסוּרָה**, carries the sense of *Text of the Tradition*. It is the authoritative Hebrew and Aramaic text of the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) in Rabbinic Judaism. The Masoretic Text defines the Jewish canon and its precise letter-text, with its vocalization and accentuation known as the *masora*. Referring to the Masoretic Text, *masora* specifically means the diacritic markings of the text of the Jewish scriptures and the concise marginal notes in manuscripts (and later printings) of the *Tanakh* which note textual details, usually about the precise spelling of words. It was primarily copied, edited, and distributed by a group of Jews known as the *Masorettes* between the 7th and 10th centuries of the Common Era (CE). The oldest known complete copy, the *Leningrad Codex*, dates to 1009 CE and is recognized as the most complete source of biblical books in the *Ben Asher* tradition. It has served as the base text for critical editions such as *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, a definitive resource of current Hebrew Bibles”⁴

The work of the *Masorettes* included adding vowel -sound points, accent marks, and marginal notes called the *masora*! The Hebrew alphabet does not include vowels, so *circa* the tenth century CE the *Masorettes* introduced *vowel sounds/letters* into the consonant based Hebrew text for pronouncement.

A remarkable feature of this Masoretic text is its closeness to the large Isaiah text of the Dead Sea covenanters, which dated ca CE 66-70.

The Hebrew text of our Catholic and Protestant Bibles today is based on the Masoretic tradition of the 11th century CE, and not on any ancient Mosaic Hebrew Bible. Research on the Masoretic text in comparison with the Greek 230 BCE Septuagint texts, and the vast number of Dead Sea fragments supports the careful work of the *Masorettes* and the accuracy and reliability of the *Masoretic text*.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/masoretic_text