

## A HISTORY OF THE TALMUD

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the Talmud in Judaism and beyond. Yet its difficult language and its assumptions, so distant from modern sensibilities, render it inaccessible to most readers. In this volume, David Kraemer offers students of Judaism a sophisticated and accessible introduction to one of the religion's most important texts. Here, he brings together his expertise as a scholar of the Talmud and rabbinic Judaism with the lessons of his experience as director of one of the largest collections of rare Judaica in the world. Tracing the Talmud's origins and its often controversial status through history, he bases his work on the most recent historical and literary scholarship while making no assumptions concerning the reader's prior knowledge. Kraemer also examines the continuities and shifts of the Talmud over time and space. His work will provide scholars and students with an unprecedented understanding of one of the world's great classics and the spirit that animates it.

DAVID C. KRAEMER is Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He is the author of *Mind of the Talmud* and *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages*.

# A HISTORY OF THE TALMUD

DAVID C. KRAEMER

*Jewish Theological Seminary*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-108-48136-6 — A History of the Talmud  
 David C. Kraemer  
 Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom  
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
 79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108481366](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108481366)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108611411

© Cambridge University Press 2019

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd., Padstow, Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Kraemer, David Charles, author.

TITLE: A History of the Talmud / David C. Kraemer.

DESCRIPTION: New York : Cambridge University Press, [2019] |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2019009278 | ISBN 9781108481366 (hardback : alk. paper)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Talmud—History.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BM501 .K715 2020 | DDC 296.1/2009—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019009278>

ISBN 978-1-108-48136-6 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

## *Contents*

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Glossary</i>	x
<i>Timeline</i>	xii
1 Introduction: Why a History of the Talmud?	1
2 Before the Rabbis	15
3 The Emergence of the Mishnah	36
4 What Is the Mishnah?	58
5 The Reception of the Mishnah	82
6 The First Talmud: The Yerushalmi	100
7 Jews in Babylonia and the Emergence of the Babylonian Talmud (the Bavli)	126
8 What Is the Bavli?	144
9 The Reception of the Bavli	179
10 The Talmud in Early Modernity	209
11 The Talmud in Modernity and Beyond	237
<i>References</i>	273
<i>Index</i>	284

## *Preface*

This book began with a phone call several years ago, when an editor for Cambridge University Press contacted me and asked if I would be interested in writing a “biography” (a conceit that has been used at least twice now) of the Talmud, as part of a larger series on world religious classics. After a brief round of conversations, I told her that my interest had been piqued, but that, as I was then working to finish my prior book (*Rabbinic Judaism: Space and Place*), I would not have the time to write a proposal until perhaps nine months later. When I completed that earlier project, I sought to get back in touch with the same editor to inquire about the nature of the proposal she would require, only to find that she had since left the Press and that the larger series had never been realized. Nevertheless, the new editor with whom I spoke expressed an interest in such a book on the Talmud, which I described to her as a kind of “grand history” of the work, from its origins to the present day, and despite the “hiccup” in the process, proposal led to contract, and the seed planted years ago now comes to fruition in the volume you are now reading.

What is it that interested me in this project? To begin with, my first field of study, and the focus of my first several books, was the Talmud and its related literatures and culture. But I had, after my earlier career, turned to broader horizons, engaging other topics (particularly my work on the history of Jewish eating practices). After years of “wandering,” this seemed to me a good time to return to the Talmud and its related literature as a primary focus and account for developments in the field since my earlier studies and contributions. Secondly, more than a dozen years ago (fewer when I first considered undertaking this project) I assumed the position of director of the Library of The Jewish Theological Seminary, one of the greatest repositories in the world of Hebrew manuscripts and early printed books. To do my new job responsibly (and to be able to present and explain parts of our rare collections to the many lay visitors who come to the Library for tours), I devoted myself to the study of medieval

manuscripts and early print. Both my study of the scholarly literature and my increasing familiarity with these media of literary preservation and dissemination put me in a position to understand the factors that affected the reception, study, and impact of the Talmud from the Middle Ages to Early Modernity and beyond. Given these two areas of expertise – rabbinic literature and the history of the Jewish book – I felt that I was well positioned to tell the story of the Talmud through the many ages of its formation, canonization, and influence.

But no scholar ever acquires such complete expertise that they can afford not to rely on the knowledge and insights of others. This is especially true for me with respect to questions of the political and cultural history of Jews in the many settings in which the Talmud was so key a part of their lives. The degree of my dependence on the work of others will be immediately clear in the chapters of this book in which many dozens of footnotes document my sources and judgments. As importantly, the story I tell in this book has been corrected and improved by colleagues and friends who have been extremely generous with their time and expertise, individuals who have read earlier drafts of chapters of this book and suggested abundant corrections and improvements. The scholars who shared their wisdom with me in this way include Seth Schwartz, Shaye Gafni, Gail Labovitz, Talya Fishman, Adam Shear, Elisheva Carlebach, and David Fishman. Without their insights and cautions, this book would have been a far more flawed work than it is, and I am grateful to them for what they have contributed to my project. Whatever flaws remain in this volume are, of course, my own responsibility. This book has also been shaped by an anonymous reader for the Press, whose recommendations concerning matters of organization and style have been extremely helpful. I am grateful to that reader as well.

As I was undertaking revisions of my first draft of this book, I became aware of the impending publication of a new work by a colleague – *The Talmud: A Biography*<sup>1</sup> (!), by Barry Scott Wimpfheimer – and I received my copy of the book upon its publication in April 2018. Wimpfheimer's is a very different book from this one, evidently for a different audience (though their audiences will undoubtedly overlap). I have not spoken with Professor Wimpfheimer about his work, but I nevertheless thank him for what he has done. Reading his book – if only at the last stages of my

<sup>1</sup> Which should not be confused with the book of the same name by Harry Freedman (Bloomsbury, 2014). Though there is much to learn from Freedman's book, it is too often marred by representations that scholars would today reject.

*Preface*

ix

revision of my own – has allowed me to learn from his judgments of balance and emphasis and to evaluate my own. The comparison allowed me to fill out certain matters to which I had given short shrift. What I learned from his judgments also helped make this a better book.

The final year of my work on this book has been a year of both sorrow and joy. The sorrow comes from the deaths of three of my four parents – my biological mother, Phyllis Ferster Kraemer, and my long-term second parents, Eleanor and Albert Boxerman. I am saddened by the awareness that they will never have a chance to read this book, the first of my works that they might have read without difficulty. The joy is a product of my daughter Talia's marriage to Yoni Cohen. I wish them joy in their journey together.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents – Paul and Phyllis Kraemer, and Albert and Eleanor Boxerman.

## *Glossary*

- Aggadah** – Rabbinic stories or narratives, preserved in various midrashim as well as in the Talmuds.
- Amora (pl. amoraim)** – a rabbinic sage of the period of the Gemara, commencing in the early third century and continuing until the fifth century in Palestine and the sixth century in Babylonia.
- B.** – Abbreviation for Bavli
- Baraita (pl. beraitot)** – A Tannaitic teaching that was not included in the Mishnah. Beraitot might be quoted in a Talmud or preserved in a collection such as the Tosefta or halakhic midrashim.
- Bavli** – The Talmud of Babylonia, completed sometime in the sixth century.
- Gaon (pl. geonim)** – Sages of the “Babylonian” (= Iraqi) and North African yeshivot in the centuries following the completion of the Talmud Bavli.
- Gemara** – The Talmud’s “commentary” on the Mishnah and related texts, comprised of quoted Tannaitic teachings, the teachings of Amoraim, and an unattributed voice that frames and directs the deliberation.
- Genizah** – Normally a temporary storage place for sacred Jewish writings that are no longer fit for use and must therefore be buried. In the case of the Cairo Genizah: a synagogue storage chamber that collected Hebrew and other writing, both sacred and mundane, for centuries. Discovered by Solomon Schechter and others in the late nineteenth century.
- Halakhah** – Decided Jewish Law and Practice.
- Karaite** – Jews who, from the eighth century and onward, refused to accept rabbinic authority and texts. Also an adjective describing that which pertains to the Karaites.
- M.** – Abbreviation for Mishnah

- Midrash (pl. midrashim)** – A rabbinic elaboration of or “commentary” upon scripture. The term particularly refers to various collections of such comments, from the Talmudic period or later.
- Mishnah** – The first compilation of rabbinic laws and teachings, formulated by R. Judah the Patriarch in Palestine in ca. 200 CE.
- Mitzvah** – An obligation upon Jews
- Rosh Yeshivah** – The head of a rabbinic academy
- Seder (pl. sedarim)** – An “order” = large topical category of the Mishnah, replicated in the Talmudim
- Talmud (pl. Talmudim)** – One of two documents (either the Bavli or Yerushalmi) comprised of the Mishnah and the Amoraic deliberation upon it. Also, the topic of this book.
- Tanna (pl. Tannaim)** – 1. A rabbinic authority of the period of the Mishnah, from the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE until ca. 200 CE. 2. A “repeater” = reciter of memorized teachings in rabbinic circles of the Talmudic age.
- Tosefta** – A particular collection of beraitot (see above), ordinarily understood to supplement the Mishnah (the name means “addition” or “supplement”) but recently understood by some also to preserve earlier versions of Mishnaic teachings.
- Y.** – Abbreviation for Yerushalmi
- Yerushalmi** – The Talmud of Palestine/The Land of Israel, named after the city for which Jews through the generations have longed, “*yerushalayim*” = Jerusalem.
- Yeshivah (pl. yeshivot)** – Rabbinic academies. The term is used for very different kinds of institution (and what might be called “pre-institutions”) from late Antiquity to the present day.

## *Timeline*

Second–first century BCE 166–160	Composition of major Apocryphal works Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid kingdom of Syria
152	Jonathan, brother of Judah Maccabee (d. 160), becomes High Priest
142–163	Jewish independence under the Hasmonean rulers
63	Pompey intervenes in Judea, asserting Roman control
37–34 BCE	Herod “the Great” is Roman client king in Palestine
6–41 CE Ca. 30 CE 66–73	Judea under more direct Roman rule Crucifixion of Jesus Jewish revolt against Roman domination, ongoing war
70 132–135	Destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem Bar Kokhba revolt, followed by severe Roman suppression
Ca. 200 70–ca. 200 226	Composition of the Mishnah The Tannaitic period Beginning of Sassanid dynasty in Persia (Babylonia)
312	Conversion of emperor Constantine to Christianity
313	Edict of Milan, legalizing Christianity in the Roman realm
360–363	Emperor Julian “the Apostate” seeks to reverse Christianization of the empire, expresses will to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple

*Timeline*

xiii

Early fifth century Before 429	Completion of the Yerushalmi Abolition of the Jewish Patriarchate in Palestine
200–500	The Amoraic period
Mid-sixth century 622	Completion of the Bavli The Hijra of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina
638 762	Muslim conquest of Jerusalem Founding of Baghdad, the new capital of the Islamic empire
Mid-eighth century	Formation of what would come to be known as the Karaite movement
Mid-eighth–eleventh century 1040–1105	The Geonic period Rashi
1095–1099	First Crusade
Twelfth century 1204	Period of the Tosafot Death of Maimonides
1242	Talmud burned in Paris
1263	Nachmanides and the Barcelona disputation
1305	Death of Moses de Leon, first “author” of the Zohar, and the beginning of the development of Zoharic tradition
1415	First papal censorship of Talmud
1450s	Invention of the movable type printing press by Gutenberg
1475	First printed Hebrew book with a date
1483	Publication of first Talmudic tractate
1492	Expulsion of Jews (and Muslims) from Spain; the beginning of the Sephardic diaspora
1517	Martin Luther and the beginning of the Protestant Reformation
1520–1523	First complete printing of the Talmud by press of Daniel Bomberg in Venice
1553	Burning of Talmud in Rome
1554	Beginning of censorship of Talmud and other Hebrew books
1565	Publication of Shulchan Arukh

Second half of sixteenth– mid-eighteenth century	Council of the Four Lands and nominal Jewish autonomy in Polish territories
1626–1676	Shabbatai Zevi, false messiah
1720–1797	Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, the Vilna Gaon
1760	Death of Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and the beginning of the growth of the Hasidic movement
1786	Death of Moses Mendelssohn
1789	Beginning of French Revolution
Nineteenth century	Spread of Jewish enlightenment (Haskalah)
1802	Founding of first modern yeshivah in Volozhin
1806	Offer of citizenship to Jews in France
1818	Beginning of Jewish Reform in Germany
1880	First Hasidic yeshivah
1881	Beginning of mass migration of Jews from eastern Europe to the United States
1886	Completing of printing of Vilna Shas
1923	Birth of Daf Yomi program
1933–1945	Nazi regime in Germany
1941–1945	The Holocaust
1948	Establishment of the State of Israel
1965	Beginning of publication of Steinsaltz Talmud
1990–2005	Publication of Artscroll Talmud