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978-0-521-60508-3 - The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature

Edited by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
THE TALMUD AND RABBINIC LITERATURE

This volume guides beginning students of rabbinic literature through the range of historical-interpretive and culture-critical issues that contemporary scholars use when studying the rabbinic texts of Late Antiquity. The editors, themselves well-known interpreters of rabbinic literature, have gathered an international collection of scholars to support students' initial steps in confronting the enormous and complex rabbinic corpus. Unlike other introductions to rabbinic writings, the present volume includes approaches shaped by anthropology, gender studies, oral-traditional studies, classics, and folklore studies.

Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert is the author of *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (2000), which won the Salo Baron Prize for a best first book in Jewish Studies of that year and was one of three finalists for the National Jewish Book Award.

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a revelation to witness the breadth of textual knowledge, acuteness of literary analysis, and encyclopedic mastery of the entire tradition of medieval and modern Talmudic exegesis commanded by an exemplary contemporary *talmid ḥakham*, as embodied in the person of Rabbi Kletenik.

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## Brief Time Line of Rabbinic Literature

Late Second Temple Period (ca. 200 B.C.E.–70 C.E.)

200: Temple-state of Judaea passes from Egyptian Ptolemaic to Syrian Seleucid control.

ca. 180: The scribe Yeshua b. Sira describes the Temple cult administered by the High Priest, Simon (Wisdom of ben Sira 50: 1ff.). This Simon is probably the figure recalled in Mishnah Avot 1:2 as Shimon the Righteous, “a remnant of the Great Assembly,” the first named figure in the post-biblical period identified as a tradent of Torah received from Moses at Sinai.

167–152: The Maccabean uprising against the Seleucids and consolidation of Hasmonean rule

152–63: Hasmonean Dynasty

ca. 152–140: The anonymous author of the “Halakhic Letter” (found among the Dead Sea Scrolls: 4QMMT) refers to disputes regarding cultic purity ascribed in the Mishnah (Yadayim 4:6–7) to the Sadducees and Pharisees.

134–104: Reign of John Hyrcanus

Emergence of Pharisees as proponents of “traditions (*paradoseis*) not written in the Torah of Moses” (Josephus, *Antiquities* 13)

103–67: Reigns of Alexander Jannaeus and Alexandra Salome

Composer of the Qumran Peshar Nahum refers to Pharisaic opponents as *dorshei ḥalakot* (“seekers of smooth things”), a possible punning reference to *halakhot* derived from proto-rabbinic midrashic hermeneutics.

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*xiv Brief Timeline of Rabbinic Literature*

63 B.C.E.–70 C.E.: Herodian Period

63: Pompey intervenes in a Hasmonean dynastic controversy and Rome incorporates Palestine as a province.

37–34: Herod rules Palestine as Jewish king and begins massive renovation of the Jerusalem Temple.

32 C.E.: Roman procuratorial administration sentences Jesus of Nazareth to execution by crucifixion for political crimes.

ca. 50–70 C.E.: Earliest Gospel traditions refer to Pharisees as guardians of “traditions” (*paradoseis*).

66–73: Palestinian Jews wage war against Rome.

Early Rabbinic (“Tannaitic”) Period (ca. 70–220)

70–90: Depopulation of Judaea and shift of Jewish settlement to Galilee

ca. 80–130: Postwar Jewish leadership, centered in Yavneh, formulates and gathers traditional teachings ascribed to pre-70 sages “beginning with Hillel and Shammai” (T. Eduyot 1:1).

115–117: Suppression of Diaspora Jews’ uprising against Rome and obliteration of Alexandrian Jewry

132–135: Bar Kokhba rebellion and Hadrianic repression of Galilean Jewry encourages migrations of early rabbinic sages to Parthian Empire.

ca. 140–200: Consolidation of Patriarchate under the Gamalian dynasty

ca. 180–220: Rabbinic traditions trace the origins of the Patriarchate back to the first-century B.C.E. Pharisee Hillel the Elder (e.g., M. Hagigah 2:2, T. Pesahim 4:1–2).

ca. 200–220: Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, administering Jewish affairs from his patriarchal seat in Sepphoris, sponsors the promulgation of the Mishnah, a curriculum of memorized literary traditions designed for the training of rabbinic disciples.

Middle Rabbinic (“Amoraic”) Period (ca. 220–500)

ca. 200–220: Patriarchate of Rabban Shimon b. Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi

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ca. 220–250: The anonymous introduction to Mishnah Avot (1:1–2:8) provides a transmissional chain linking Torah received at Sinai to the patriarchal line, which now includes Hillel and Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai and culminates in the traditions of Rabban Shimon b. Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, the patriarchal scion of Sepphoris.

ca. 220: Rav (Abba Arikha) and Mar Shmuel establish rabbinic presence in Parthian Empire.

226: Shapur I becomes first king of Sasanian Empire in Babylonia.

ca. 220–350: Compilation by anonymous Galilean editors of extra-mishnaic “tannaitic” traditions into mnemonically structured compositions. The Tosefta (“Supplement”) is organized in terms of the structure of the Mishnah, while works of scriptural exegesis (*midrash*) are organized in tandem with scriptural verses.

ca. 250: Galilean sages in the circle of Rabbi Yohanan b. Nappaha circulate earliest traditions that the Oral Torah received at Sinai is “embedded in the Mishnah” (e.g., Y. Peah 2:6).

313: Roman Emperor Constantine issues Edict of Milan, establishing Christianity as a tolerated religious sect in Roman Empire.

ca. 220–425: Galilean amoraic traditions and tannaitic antecedents are gathered for circulation with the Mishnah as a focused curriculum. The Talmud Yerushalmi represents a version of this curriculum as transmitted primarily in Tiberias.

ca. 320–425: Byzantine Palestine becomes a center of Christian pilgrimage as the “Holy Land.”

360–363: Emperor Julian sponsors efforts to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple, but his death interrupts the project.

ca. 300–500: Galilean amoraic traditions are compiled into a series of accompaniments to the books of the Torah (e.g., Genesis Rabbah) and key liturgical scrolls, such as Lamentations (Lamentations Rabbah) and Koheleth (Koheleth Rabbah).

425: Palestinian Patriarch Gamaliel VI dies and no successor is appointed.

ca. 220–500: Babylonian sages, centered in such towns as Sura, Pumbeditha, Nehardea, Huzal, and Mehoza, develop, formulate,

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and amplify traditions of learning (*gemara*) to accompany memorization and analysis of the Mishnah and other tannaitic materials.

Late Rabbinic ("Savoraic"- "Stammaitic") Period (ca. 550–620)

553: Emperor Justinian attacks the rabbinic *deuterosis* ("oral tradition").

500–600: Compilation of Palestinian midrashic anthologies, such as *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*, *Pesikta Rabbati*, *Midrash Tanhuma*

ca. 600: Savoraic tradents have organized amoraic traditions from Babylonia and Palestine into coherently plotted critical discourses (*sugyot*) to accompany mishnaic tractates.

620: Completion of the Babylonian Talmud: A final redactional voice (the "Stam") enhances the Savoraic *gemara* with hermeneutical cues and synthesizing discussion that serve as interpretive supplements. The earliest manuscript fragments of the ninth century correspond to extant medieval manuscripts of the Babylonian Talmud.

Early Geonic Period (ca. 620–800)

620: Beginning of Islamic conquests in Mesopotamia and North Africa.

661: Umayyad Dynasty established, with capital in Damascus

750: Abbasid Dynasty establishes Baghdad as its capital

750–800: Geonic heads of Suran and Pumbedithan rabbinical academies relocate to Baghdad. The Babylonian Talmud is the chief curriculum and the source of legal tradition for administering the Jewish *ahl al-dhimma* on behalf of the Caliph.

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## Glossary

**'aggadah:** nonlegal rabbinic teachings, often appearing in the form of commentary on the narrative portion of biblical text (*midrash 'aggadah*).

**'Amora'im:** literally, "expounders." These are rabbinic sages, living from the middle of the third to the early sixth centuries in both Palestine and Babylonia, who appear throughout the Talmud, commenting on the discussions of the Tanna'im found in the Mishnah and the Tosefta.

**'am ha'arez:** literally, "people of the land." In rabbinic usage it tends to convey a perjorative evaluation of the majority of Jews who are uneducated in or resistant to rabbinic customs.

**baraita'/baraitot:** literally, "external." A baraita' is a tannaitic legal ruling, regarded as part of the Oral Torah that was not included in the Mishnah. Baraitot are often cited in the Talmud as evidence for or against amoraic interpretations of the Mishnah.

**bet midrash:** rabbinic study group or disciple circle, later institutionalized as study house.

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** a collection of more than 800 fragmentary documents of the Late Second Temple period discovered in several caves near Qumran on the shore of the Dead Sea. The scrolls include biblical texts, commentaries known as *pesharim*, previously unknown works such as the Temple Scroll and Genesis Apocryphon, and other documents. The first Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947.

**Diaspora:** settlements of Jews outside the Land of Israel.

**Essenes:** a Second Temple pietist and sectarian group, known for being particularly strict in the observance of the commandments. Many scholars believe that the Essenes bore some connection to the Dead Sea sect at Qumran.

**Great Assembly:** a legendary body of sages listed in the opening paragraph of Mishnah Avot as one link in a chain transmitting the teachings of Torah from the rabbis to Moses.

**Hakham/Hakhamim:** rabbinic term for a sage, cognate to the Greek *philosophos* or *didaskalos*.

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**halakhah/halakhoh:** literally, “the procedure (for fulfilling a biblical commandment).” This is the general term for rabbinic law. Halakhah addresses religious and ritual matters as well as civil and criminal law. The seeds of halakhah are found in the Hebrew Bible and developed by the rabbis in the Talmud and other documents. Legal commentary on the Bible is known as *midrash halakhah*.

**Ḥaver/Ḥaverim:** rabbinic term for an associate or colleague in the circle of masters and disciples (*bet midrash*),

**masekhet/masekhtot:** a tractate or subtopic within one of the orders (*sedarim*) of the Mishnah or Talmud.

**Masoretic Text:** the “official” version of the Hebrew Bible. Between the seventh and tenth centuries C.E., a group of scholars known as the Masoretes standardized the text’s spelling, cantillation, vowels, and accents. Direct ancestors of the Masoretic Texts are attested in many biblical manuscripts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**midrash/midrashim:** the rabbinic mode of biblical commentary, composed in both Palestine and Babylonia by both Tanna’im and ‘Amora’im. Rabbinic midrash comments on either legal or narrative portions of the biblical text (*midrash halakhah* and *midrash aggadah*, respectively). Palestinian *midrash* can be found in various collections (e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* or *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*). Both Palestinian and Babylonian midrash appear in the Talmud.

**mikveh:** a ritual bath, used for rites of purification from various sorts of uncleanness that would limit a person’s access to the Temple and its sacrificial forms of cleansing. In post-Temple rabbinic Judaism, it is used most commonly at set times during a woman’s menstrual cycle.

**min/minim:** within the Talmud, the term referring to Jews who hold legal or theological views that place them beyond the rabbinic pale. In any given context, references to *minim* might include believers in the messiahship of Jesus, Sadducees, Boethusians, Zealots, and Samaritans. As depicted in the Talmud, *minim* are often quite familiar with the scriptural text but dispute rabbinic interpretations.

**Mishnah:** the earliest collection of tannaitic traditions, organized into six orders and sixty-three tractates. The contents are mostly legal in nature. According to rabbinic tradition, Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi (early third century C.E.) is responsible for the compilation of the Mishnah.

**mitzvah/mitzvot:** literally, “commandment.” The term describes a scriptural law or, in some cases, rituals prescribed by sages (e.g., the lighting of lights on Hanukkah). The rabbis believed the mitzvot were commanded by God to the Jewish people (and, in the case of the seven Noahide commandments, to all humankind).

**peshar/pesharim:** running commentaries to the books of the Prophets and Psalms, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls and characterized by a distinct eschatological bent. Peshar is a direct antecedent of rabbinic *midrash*.



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*Glossary* xix

**Pharisees:** a dominant group of Second Temple Jews, from which some early rabbinic sages likely descended.

**Sadducees:** a group of Second Temple priestly families who appear in rabbinic literature as opponents of halakhic rulings of early sages.

**Samaritans:** natives of Samaria traditionally opposed to the Judean Jewish community of the Late Second Temple and early rabbinic periods. Their customs are often disparaged in rabbinic texts as examples of religious error or intentional deviation from rabbinic halakhic norms. Accordingly, rabbinic halakhah defines Samaritans as Jews in some contexts and as non-Jews in others.

**Savora'im:** a hypothetical group of rabbinic scholars falling chronologically between the 'Amora'im and the Stamma'im, often believed to have a crucial role in the editing of talmudic *sugyot* in the century or so prior to 620 C.E.

**seder/sedarim:** literally, "order." The six major legal divisions of the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Talmudim.

**Shekhinah:** a name for God's presence, usually associated with God's feminine characteristics.

**Shema:** Deuteronomy 6:4–9, when recited as part of the liturgy.

**Stamma'im:** the anonymous sages who, perhaps around 600 C.E., edited the Babylonian Talmud by collecting and reworking earlier traditions. The *Stam* is the interpretive voice of these anonymous editors.

**sugya':** the characteristic literary unit of the Talmud exploring some legal or homiletic issue through the voices of disputing or interacting parties. A *sugya'* can be as brief as a few lines of discourse or, in contrast, extend over a folio page or more of the printed Talmud.

**talmid ḥakham/talmidei ḥakhamim:** rabbinic term for a disciple(s).

**Talmud:** literally meaning "study." The Talmud is a lengthy commentary on the Mishnah composed in Hebrew and Aramaic. The earlier edition, most likely redacted in Tiberias in the late fourth and/or early fifth centuries C.E., is known as the Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud (*Talmud Yerushalmi*). The later and larger edition, redacted in Persia in as-yet poorly understood stages between the late fifth and late eighth centuries C.E., is known as the Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*). Like the Mishnah, the Talmud is organized into orders (*sedarim*) and within the orders into tractates (*masekhot*).

**Tanna'im:** literally, "repeaters" (i.e., of orally transmitted teachings). According to Talmudic chronology, the period of the Tanna'im begins with the remnants of the Men of the Great Assembly, presumably around the time of Ezra, and continues through the generation of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi. They are responsible for the traditions included in the Mishnah, Tosefta, and other early rabbinic literature.

**Torah:** the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Pentateuch). It is also a generic term for all authoritative religious teaching, for example, "Moses received Torah from Sinai" (M. Avot 1:1).

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xx *Glossary*

**Torah she-be'al peh:** literally, “the oral Torah.” This is the all-inclusive term for traditional rabbinic teaching as it is found in the Mishnah and Talmuds. According to rabbinic tradition, it was taught orally by God to Moses on Sinai and transmitted in an unbroken link of masters and disciples to the talmudic masters.

**Torah she-bikhtav:** literally “the written Torah.” Broadly, this refers to the canonical Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, although the paradigmatic work of “Written Torah” is the scroll of the Five Books of Moses.

**Tosefta:** one of the early tannaitic compilations of rabbinic literature (dating to the third century). Understood by most scholars to be a supplementary commentary on the Mishnah, it is also largely legal. The circumstances and purpose of its compilation are unknown, although it is traditionally ascribed to Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba.

# Abbreviations

BAR:	<i>Biblical Archeology Review</i>
DSD:	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
FJB:	<i>Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge</i>
HTR:	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA:	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
IEJ:	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
JAOS:	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL:	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JHS:	<i>Journal of the History of Sexuality</i>
JJS:	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JQR:	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JSHL:	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature</i>
JSJ:	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
NJPS:	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
PAAJR:	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
PWCJS:	<i>Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies</i>
SZ:	<i>Sifre Zuta</i>
ZSS:	<i>Zeitschrift der Savigny Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte</i>

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