

Rabbinic literature

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Rabbinic literature includes texts that comprise the collected teachings and traditions of the rabbinic sages of Palestine (Land of Israel) and Babylonia from the first century CE through the fifth century CE. Its language is mainly Hebrew, but with some texts incorporating significant amounts of Aramaic, as well as Greek and Latin loan-words. Although they are preserved in writing, these collections are thought to have circulated in antiquity mainly in oral form, perhaps together with written aids. Rabbinic literature itself refers to its teachings as “oral Torah” (literally, “Torah of the mouth”), Torah here being intended in the broad sense of teaching or instruction, as distinct from “written Torah” of canonical scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, or TaNaKh, as an acronym for *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings), known to Christians as the “Old Testament,” but with some differences of content and arrangement.

All such collections as wholes are of anonymous “authorship” (or redaction), although some have been associated with named rabbinic sages by tradition. Their incorporated traditions, however, are often attributed to named sages (or “schools”), sometimes with variant attributions across the collections.

Rabbinic literature is divided along lines of chronology and genre. Since the rabbinic sages of the first two centuries CE, all in Palestine, are known as *tanna'im* (oral teachers), the collections of their teachings are referred to as *tannaitic*. Since the rabbinic sages of the third through fourth (in Palestine) or fifth (in Babylonia) centuries CE are called *amora'im* (expositors), the collections of their teachings are referred to as *amoraic*.

The tannaitic corpora divide into two structural types: *midrash* (explication) and *mishnah* (oral teaching). The former refers to teachings and collections of teachings that are focused on

the exegetical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, usually structured as comments to successive verses of biblical books or sections thereof. There are extant tannaitic midrashic collections (in some cases more than one to a biblical book, in some cases not covering all chapters of a biblical book) for the biblical books of Exodus (*Mekhilta*), Leviticus (*Sifra*), Numbers (*Sifre*), and Deuteronomy (*Sifre*). Although these collections cover legal as well as narrative biblical passages, the fact that they cover the legal passages more thoroughly has led to their being designated as *midreshei halakhah* (legal *midrashim*, plural of *midrash*). Nevertheless, their narrative interpretive sections are substantial and important. Scholars have discerned that these collections, particularly in their legal sections, derive from two tannaitic rabbinic “schools,” one having as its progenitor Rabbi Akiva (see AKIBA, RABBI), the other, Rabbi Ishmael, both of whom flourished in the first half of the second century CE. According to this theory, the legal sections of these midrashic collections can be assigned to either “school” based on exegetical terminology, the named sages to whom interpretations are attributed, and, less consistently, to their specific hermeneutical methods and more general hermeneutical approaches to scripture.

The second type of tannaitic literature is best represented by the Mishnah of Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (flourished around 200 CE in the Galilee; see JUDAH HA-NASI/THE PRINCE, RABBI). The Mishnah comprises mainly legal rules (*halakhot*, plural of *halakhah*) organized topically into six orders, which are subdivided into sixty-three tractates. The six orders are: “Seeds” (rules relating to agriculture); “Seasons” (rules relating to Sabbath, festivals, and fasts); “Women” (rules relating to marriage, divorce, vows); “Damages” (rules relating to courts, civil and criminal law); “Holy things” (rules relating to sacrifices); and “Purities” (rules relating to ritual contagion and purification). Tractates included in each order relate to its overall theme, although some are included by looser associative

principles. Scholars have long debated how to characterize the Mishnah as a collection of rules, that is, whether it initially bore the status of an authoritative statutory “code,” an idealized blueprint for Jewish society, or a pedagogic component of the training of rabbinic disciples. The Mishnah is different from proximate codes or digests of law in that many, if not most, of its rules were no longer applicable at the time of its redaction (ca. 200 CE, long after the destruction of the Second Temple and the cessation of sacrificial worship in 70 CE). The Mishnah is also different from proximate legal codes in that it often includes a variety of legal opinions (sometimes in explicit dispute with one another), often without expressing a definitive preference between them. While the Mishnah sometimes cites scriptural proof-texts for its rules, most of its rules are stated without any explicit basis in scripture. Unlike *midrash*, the Mishnah is structured principally not as scriptural commentary but as topically associated rules. While there are many legal narratives within the Mishnah, and while its rules are often presented in narrative form, its subject matter is almost entirely “law” (*halakhah*) rather than “narrative” (*aggadah*), unlike *midrash*, which attends to both. In part because of these differences of structure and content, it is not clear which came first (and was generative of the other): *midrash* or *mishnah*.

Closely associated with the Mishnah in structure and contents is the Tosefta (addition), which contains variants to mishnaic rules, additional opinions, explanations, and scriptural warrants for some mishnaic rules, generally in a less tightly edited form. Scholars have debated the historical and editorial relation of the two collections to one another, especially whether the Tosefta presumes the Mishnah (or a proto-Mishnah), whether the Tosefta contains the raw materials from which the Mishnah was more heavily edited, or some combination of these interrelations. Its name would suggest that in its present form it is later than the Mishnah, but the relation of its constitutive traditions to those of the Mishnah is

less clear and most likely in need of determination on a case-by-case basis.

Two texts that have been rabbinically transmitted and may come from the earliest stages of rabbinic literature are more historiographic (or chronographic) in structure and nature. One is *Megillat Ta’anit* (the Fasting Scroll), which lists in calendrical sequence dates on which it is forbidden to fast (or mourn, or eulogize), those dates marking minor joyous days, mainly associated with the Maccabean Revolt of 168–165 BCE. The other is *Seder Olam (Rabbah)* (the Order of the World (Major)), which is a chronographic midrashic history of the world from Creation to 135 CE.

Collections of *midrash* that incorporate the interpretations of the *amoraim* are almost entirely Palestinian, and unlike their tannaitic antecedents are almost entirely narrative (aggadic) or homiletical in subject and tone. Whereas some comment on a biblical book verse by verse (e.g., *Genesis Rabbah*, redacted in the early fifth century CE), others comment more thematically and homiletically on the opening verses of each synagogue lection (e.g., *Leviticus Rabbah*, redacted in the late fifth century CE). Still others comment thematically and homiletically on scriptural lections for particular festivals or special Sabbaths (e.g., *Pesiqta deRav Kahana*, redacted in the late fifth century CE). The homiletical *midrashim* of the Amoraic period may have been geared, whether directly or indirectly, to a more “popular” audience of synagogue attendees than were the more expository *midrashim* of the Tannaitic period.

Shortly after the compilation of the Mishnah in the early third century CE, it became the focus of study and interpretation (along with its accompanying paramishnaic traditions) in amoraic rabbinic study circles in both Palestine and Babylonia, resulting ultimately in two Talmuds (*talmud* denoting dialectical study), Palestinian (traditionally referred as *Yerushalmi*, Jerusalemite) and Babylonian (*Bavli*) (see TALMUD, PALESTINIAN AND BABYLONIAN). Neither covers every tractate of the Mishnah (the Palestinian covers

thirty-nine of sixty-three, whereas the Babylonian covers thirty-six and a half). Nevertheless, the Babylonian Talmud is about three times as long as the Palestinian because its discussions are more dialectically complex and diverse, preserving more of the “give and take” of the legal argumentation, often without a clear-cut resolution, and with seemingly extraneous traditions added by association. The texts of the Talmuds are in a mixture of rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic, with the anonymous redactional layers mainly in Aramaic. The Palestinian Talmud is of great importance for understanding the development of Judaism in the Greco-Roman environment of third-fourth centuries CE Palestine, having been redacted some time after 400 CE. The Babylonian Talmud is of great importance for understanding the development of Judaism in the Persian environment of the third to fifth centuries CE, having undergone a longer period and more intensive process of redaction until about 700 CE. The Babylonian Talmud, with time, became the central text of traditional Jewish study and the basis of later legal codes and commentaries, down to the present.

Other types of rabbinic literature that are more difficult to date and to assign a place

within the above schematization are *targum* (Aramaic scriptural translations), *piyyut* (liturgical poetry), and *heikhalot* (early mystical ascent literature).

SEE ALSO: Bible, Hebrew; Mishnah and Tosefta; Piyyut (Jewish liturgical and secular poetry); Rabbis; Synagogues, Jewish; Targum (Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible).

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