

Mishna + Gemara = Talmud?

The Talmud as a Facebook wall

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ABSTRACT: *The following squib is aimed at novices at rabbinical literature and those teaching such novices. It recommends comparing the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmud to a Facebook wall, with a mishna being a post, and the gemara being the comments underneath. You are welcome to re-use this analogy.*

It is notoriously difficult to explain to a newcomer what the Talmud is. I frequently encounter students who have come across the cryptic equation *Mishna + Gemara = Talmud*. Although this equation certainly holds, it hardly helps anyone understand what the Talmud is. Those students also often add that the Talmud is a piece of rabbinical exegesis to the Hebrew Bible – yet another statement that is both true and false. Then, I offer them the following explanation.

The *Mishna* is the earliest (known) legal code in rabbinical Judaism. Compiled around 200-220 CE by rabbi Judah Hanasi ('the prince'), it covers most of the fields in *halacha*, the Jewish religious legal system. Its 63 tractates (*masechet*, plural: *masechtot*) are thematically organized in 6 orders (*sefer*, plural *sedarim*). Each tractate is composed of chapters, and chapters contain paragraph-long units that are called a *mishna* (plural: *mishnayot*). English orthography can easily distinguish between the Mishna (the entire code), and a mishna (its smallest units). The rabbis whose opinions appear in the Mishna are called *tanaim* (singular: *tana*).

In order to imagine the *Talmud* – or, rather, a *talmud* – imagine a Facebook wall with the *mishnayot* as posts. Not all tractates are included, and the order of the *masechtot* in a *sefer*, or the order of the chapters in a *masechet* might be slightly altered. But basically, you have the *mishnayot* posted on the Facebook wall, one by one, with a break between the chapters, and a new volume starting for each tractate.

Then, the rabbinic scholars of the subsequent centuries (*amora*, plural: *amoraim*) were invited to comment under the posts, and they were certainly not shy about doing so. As this was a multigenerational enterprise, the author of the original post could obviously not respond to the questions, issues and criticisms raised by later generations.

The comments sometimes concern the meaning of the mishna, seeking clarification of some terms, or circumscribing the applicability of the rules. Underlying general principles are sought, which are applied to new situations. Other comments discuss the biblical roots of the legislation, searching for the verse or verses in the *Tora* (Pentateuch) that can be (creatively) interpreted as a support for the statement in the mishna under discussion. Divergent opinions often clash, as various scholars favored different exegetical techniques. Contradicting biblical precepts are also explained away, and a new (Roman law-like) abstract system emerges from the (Near Eastern-like) Pentateuchal law codes. It is in this sense that the Talmud can be seen as a form of Bible exegesis.

Yet another type of comments is text-critical in nature, asking the opinion of which rabbi (*tana*) is best reflected in the wording of the mishna. Consequently, *our mishna*, the one under discussion, is often compared to other mishnayot, or to similar paragraphs external to the Mishna (so-called *beraytot*). Thus is identified the tannaitic (early rabbinic) authority represented in our mishna. In the same way, amoraim find and solve (apparent) contradictions between various tannaitic sources.

Like on Facebook, these chains of comments can often digress to other topics. For instance, when a general principle or an analogous case is brought in, the discussion can easily move to a different field of rabbinic law. When compiling new codices of Jewish law, the medieval authors had to collect, for each topic, relevant information from all parts of the Talmud, as they could not simply rely on a single relevant tractate in the Mishna. Digressions sometimes also include lengthy non-legal materials (*agada*, plural: *agadot*): elaborations on biblical stories, anecdotes from the lives of famous rabbis, historiography, folklore, science, and so on. Here again we find discussions that count as biblical exegesis. While agadic materials also appear in the Mishna, they are more prominent in the Babylonian Talmud.

These “comments” on the mishnayot were subsequently edited by the late anonymous editors of the Talmud, who also added connecting remarks to the text and much more. The result is called *gemara*. Hence, the *gemara* is the set of “comments sections” under the mishnayot, the “Facebook posts”. The equation $Mishna + Gemara = Talmud$ holds in a way analogous to the equation $Facebook\ posts + Facebook\ comments = Facebook\ wall$.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the amoraim in the Land of Israel, and the amoraim in Babylon worked on two separate walls, each containing (basically) the same posts. Thus arose the two oeuvres of the *talmud* genre: the *Palestinian Talmud* (or *Jerusalem Talmud*), and the *Babylonian Talmud*, respectively. The latter is frequently referred to simply as the *Talmud*, or as the *Gemara*.

I hope this squib has helped you better understand what the Talmud is, if you are a novice at rabbinic literature; or better explain what the Talmud is, if you teach novices. As you might have guessed, much more remains to be said about this topic.