

Messianics and the Talmud

BLOGCAST

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What is your position concerning the Talmud? Should Messianic people consider the Talmud as containing important information for their study of the Scriptures?

It is fair to say that not enough of today's Messianic people are familiar with the role of extra-Biblical literature in their understanding of the Bible itself. While those from Orthodox Jewish backgrounds who have come to Messiah faith might have the most experience in dealing with literature like the Talmud, your average Messianic person has little to no knowledge about the Talmud or associated resources. When you find someone communicating that Yeshua of Nazareth opposed the traditions of the Rabbis, and opposed the Talmud, then it is obvious that the person making such remarks does not know what he or she is talking about. While there were certainly various oral traditions and customs circulating in the Judaism of Yeshua's day, in the First Century C.E., most especially those followed by the Pharisees—the Talmud as a formal body of work would not arrive onto the scene until the Second Century at the very earliest, but most probably much later.

What are some of the things that led to the production of the Talmud?

The Mishnah is the transcribed or written down form of what was considered to comprise the Oral Torah by the First-Second Centuries C.E. Following the destruction of Jerusalem, the surviving Jewish Rabbis wrote down the Pharisaic oral traditions that guided their Torah observance. The Mishnah was composed by around 200 C.E. in a unique form of Hebrew. The Mishnah forms the basis of Jewish law, being divided into six distinct segments: agriculture, the appointed times, women, damages, holy things, and purities. The Mishnah certainly records the history and procedure of how things were done in the Temple and much of the *halachah* or Torah application that Yeshua and the Apostles would have been exposed to in Judea. The Mishnah is an invaluable historical resource that gives us much insight into how the Torah was followed in the First Century, and there are many good wisdom sayings in it.

The Talmud is actually a broad term describing two principal bodies of literature: the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud. Both of these works are composed in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, and span across two centuries from the Second to Fourth Centuries C.E. The Babylonian Talmud largely represents the interpretation and traditions of Eastern Judaism from Babylon building upon the Mishnah, and the Jerusalem Talmud represents the views and traditions of Judaism from Judea, although there are many, many areas of overlap. Reading through the Talmud can often be a very daunting task to the interpreter who is unfamiliar with reading legal briefs. Much of the Talmud is compiled in the form of "Rabbi X said in the name of Rabbi Y that Rabbi Z said..." Most who examine the Talmud in any detail are religious scholars and teachers, whereas your average interpreter will have to have a tractate pointed out in a commentary or reference book so as not to get lost.

According to Jewish tradition, two Torahs were given to Moses on Mount Sinai: the Written Torah (the Pentateuch or Chumash), as well as the Oral Torah or explanations on how to perform the Written Torah's commandments. Such an Oral Torah is now written down in the Mishnah, with the Talmud offering commentary. In Orthodox Judaism today, both the Written Torah and Oral Torah hold equal status. In Conservative and Reform Judaism, they comprise the basis of Jewish custom and tradition, but are treated more as commentary and are flexible in terms of modern-day application.

For the Biblical scholar, Jewish literature such as the Mishnah and Talmud, contain valuable sources of commentary, historical data, philosophy, and even some spiritually edifying concepts. Because of their close proximity in time to the Second Temple era, they are considered valid to use as secondary and tertiary resources to aid in one's reasoning through various issues seen in the Bible (among other bodies of ancient literature). At the same time, the Mishnah and Talmud are also broad-sweeping collections, so one should expect (particularly with the Talmud) there to be some internal inconsistencies and differences of opinion among Rabbis. When the Talmud, in particular, is treated as a wide body of commentary with many different perspectives, then the interpreter should be able to employ it in a responsible manner. When the Mishnah and Talmud are treated as being Divinely inspired and authoritative the same as Holy Scripture, then we have problems.

For the Messianic layperson, one can encounter those who are greatly enamored with literature like the Mishnah and Talmud, and who then make the effort to synthesize much of what is seen in the Apostolic Writings with this material. While there are definitely overlaps of content and agreement of perspective on various issues, this is not a good way of employing the Mishnah and Talmud. More concerning, however, are those who completely dismiss literature like the Mishnah and

Talmud, specifically because it is believed that these bodies, and others, of ancient Jewish literature were composed by those who consciously rejected Yeshua of Nazareth, and hence have nothing edifying or positive to communicate *at all, on any subject* to the Messiah's followers. The bigger and more complicated question, for certain, that today's Messianic movement must answer, is **Do Jewish non-Believers have anything useful to communicate to Messiah followers?** It is probably best that such a question be considered on an issue-by-issue basis. But those who are fair do recognize that the Rabbis have many useful things to say.