

The Babylonian Talmud

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Introduction: The History and Architecture of the Talmud

The Six Orders, the Oral Transmission and the Formation of a Millennial Work

§1. Introduction: What is the Talmud?

Attempting to answer the question of *what the Talmud* is means approaching a cultural object that, by its very nature, eludes unambiguous definition. The Talmud is not a book in the ordinary sense of the term: it has no single author, it follows no plot, it does not offer a philosophical system organized according to the canons of the Greco-Roman West, it does not present itself as a theological treatise or a legal code in the modern sense. Yet it is, simultaneously, each of these things and something more. It is a vast anthology of rabbinic discussions, a collection of laws, narratives, parables, logical disputes, mystical speculations, historical recollections, ritual prescriptions, ethical reflections, biblical exegesis, biographical anecdotes, dream descriptions, medical formulas, astronomical calculations, botanical considerations, disputes over field boundaries, rules for food preparation, and meditations on the existence of God. It is, above all, the written record of a dialogue that has continued for centuries and that, in a certain real sense, has never ended.

The Hebrew term *Talmud* (תַּלְמוּד) derives from the roots *lmd*, "to learn" and "to teach," and literally means "study" or "learning." The choice of its name reveals a fundamental concept: the work does not aim to convey crystallized conclusions, but rather to teach a method, to train the mind in a certain way of thinking, to initiate the reader into an ongoing

conversation. Those who open the Talmud do not receive definitive answers: instead, they are ushered into a study hall filled with voices, some in harmony, others in conflict, all engaged in the tireless investigation of the divine will expressed in the Torah. This dialogical aspect constitutes the very heart of the work, and it is essential to understand it even before addressing its content: the Talmud is not what it affirms, it is what makes one think.

Composed over a vast historical period, from the earliest presumed oral formulations dating back to the Second Temple period (c. 516 BCE–70 CE) to the final draft conventionally placed around the 6th–7th century CE, the Talmud represents the cumulative product of over a thousand years of Jewish thought. In its development, it has endured the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the Babylonian exile and the diaspora, Roman persecutions and the Parthian and Sassanid dominations, the rise of Christianity and then Islam, and the birth and demise of entire generations of scholars. Every page bears the traces of these events, even when it discusses seemingly trivial matters such as the proper way to light a lamp on Shabbat or the compensation due for an ox goring a donkey.

Studying the Talmud, therefore, means entering a universe. It means accepting that truth comes through discussion, that doubt is a form of piety, that lost arguments are preserved alongside victorious ones, and that the meaning of a text unfolds only in the uninterrupted commentary that generations address to it. For traditional Jewish thought, the Talmud is the place where the written Torah, received by Moses on Sinai, joins the oral Torah, also revealed at that same moment, but passed down from master to disciple before history dictated its transcription. For the secular scholar, the Talmud is one of the most extraordinary monuments of world literature, comparable in ambition and depth to the great wisdom texts of humanity, yet incomparable in its form.

In this work, we intend to accompany the reader on a journey through some of the pinnacles of the Babylonian Talmud. We obviously cannot hope to exhaust a corpus that in its standard edition reaches 2,711 folio pages, and which, according to scholars' estimates, contains approximately two and a half million words. What we can offer is a thoughtful selection of passages—some famous, others lesser-known—from seven treatises of particular ethical, juridical, liturgical, and spiritual significance, accompanied by commentaries and explanations that should allow the non-specialist reader to grasp something of the depth, beauty, and relevance of this extraordinary text. Before delving into the individual treatises, however, it is necessary to provide a sufficiently comprehensive introduction to the history of the Talmud's formation, its internal structure, the principles governing its reading, and the interpretive traditions that have accumulated around it. Without these basic coordinates, even the simplest passage would risk appearing incomprehensible, or—perhaps worse—misinterpretable.

§2. Biblical Roots: The Written Torah and the Idea of a Complementary Tradition

To understand how, centuries after the closure of the biblical canon, such an immense corpus as the Talmudic one was born, we must go back to the very foundations of ancient Jewish thought, namely, the revelation at Sinai and the idea of a Torah that manifests itself in two ways: written and oral.

According to the classical tradition, summarized in the opening lines of Tractate Pirkei Avot—to which we will dedicate the entire second chapter of this work—the transmission of the Torah unfolds in an unbroken chain that begins with Moses and reaches the Men of the Great Assembly, through Joshua, the

Elders, and the Prophets. The initial formula of the tractate, *Mosheh kibbel Torah mi-Sinai* , "Moses received the Torah from Sinai," does not refer exclusively to the text of the Pentateuch. For the rabbis, what Moses received included both the written text, fixed in the consonantal words of the five books, and an oral interpretative heritage—the *Torah she-be-al peh* , literally "the Torah that is in the mouth"—which allowed for its understanding, practical application, and doctrinal expansion.

This dual conception of revelation is essential because it explains why rabbinic scholars, speaking of laws apparently not found in the biblical text, could nevertheless attribute their Sinaitic origin. Within rabbinic literature, there is a specific category of norms referred to by the expression *halakhah le-Moshe mi-Sinai* , "norm revealed to Moses from Sinai," which applies to those prescriptions considered to be of divine origin but lacking an explicit anchor in the written text. According to this view, these are laws that were part of the oral heritage from the beginning, and which were only later—when historical circumstances made the survival of pure mnemonic transmission impossible—entrusted to writing.

The biblical text itself already contains numerous indications that the written law was not self-sufficient. Many prescriptions in the Pentateuch are stated in an extremely concise, sometimes enigmatic, form, and necessarily require an interpretative tradition to be applied. Consider the commandment to rest on the seventh day, repeated several times with great solemnity, but never accompanied by a working definition of what constitutes prohibited "work." Consider the requirement to bind certain words to the hand and forehead as a "sign," without any concrete indication of how, physically, this should be done: without oral tradition, the custom of *tefillin* would be unthinkable. Consider the prohibition against "cooking a kid in its mother's milk," repeated three times in the Torah, which alone would not be sufficient to establish the complex Jewish

dietary legislation on the separation of dairy products from meat. Consider the laws of ritual slaughter, courts, monogamy and polygamy, contracts, the restitution of lost property: in any case, the written statement raises more questions than it answers, and presupposes an applied knowledge that the text itself does not provide.

Rabbinic tradition has grasped this characteristic of the Written Torah with great clarity. In numerous Talmudic passages, examples of which we will encounter in the following chapters, the scholars explicitly state that without the Oral Torah, the Written Torah would be devoid of operational meaning, sometimes comparing it to a lamp lacking oil, or to a body without a soul. Revelation, therefore, would not have been a one-off act concluded at the foot of Sinai, but rather the inauguration of a process of continuous unveiling, in which each generation contributes its own *chiddushim*—literally "novelties" or "intuitions"—to bring to light meanings that were potentially present in the original text.

It is within this theological and cultural framework that the slow gestation of the Talmud must be placed. It does not appear, in the eyes of tradition, as a work added to the Bible, but as the recording of what was already implicitly contained in the Sinaitic revelation and which, for historical reasons of survival, had to be committed to writing. The distinction between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, although attenuated by the inevitable writing of the latter, remains a distinction of principle: the Written Torah possesses a fixed text, immutable in its consonantal form; the Oral Torah, on the other hand, is living, plural, dialogical, and manifests itself precisely in the perennial discussion of the scholars.

§3. From the Second Temple to the destruction of Jerusalem: the historical context

To understand how the Mishnah and, subsequently, the Talmud were compiled, it is essential to briefly review the history of the Jewish people in the centuries preceding and immediately following the Christian era. Without this historical framework, the editors' editorial choices—their silence on certain topics, their insistence on others, their very concern to preserve memory—would be incomprehensible.

In 586 BC, the conquest of Jerusalem by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II led to the destruction of the First Temple, built by Solomon, and the exile of much of the Jewish elite to Mesopotamia. This catastrophe marked a turning point in the history of the Jewish people: deprived of its cult center, its political autonomy, and its land, Israel found itself having to redefine its identity in the diaspora. It was during this period, according to many scholars, that the centrality of Scripture as a source of collective identity was consolidated and that the first forms of communal study of the sacred text developed. The synagogue—an institution of which there is no trace in the Pentateuch and which probably emerged during the Babylonian exile—became the place where the community gathered not to offer sacrifices, impossible in the absence of the Temple, but to read, listen to, and comment on the word of God. Thus, in essence, the cultural and institutional foundation for the entire subsequent development of rabbinic Judaism was laid.

With the edict of Cyrus the Great in 538 BC, a significant portion of the exiles returned to Judea and, under the leadership of figures such as Zerubbabel, the high priest Joshua, and later Ezra and Nehemiah, rebuilt the Temple (completed in 516 BC) and restored worship. This Second Temple remained the center

of Jewish religious life for nearly six centuries, until 70 AD. It was during the Second Temple period, and particularly from the 4th to 3rd centuries BC, that the major religious currents of ancient Judaism took shape: the Sadducees, linked to the aristocratic priesthood and faithful to a strictly literal reading of the written Torah; the Pharisees, close to the lower classes, advocates of the oral Torah and a Judaism that could be practiced even outside the precincts of the Temple; the Essenes, ascetic groups about whom the discovery of the Qumran manuscripts has shed further light; the Zealots, of a political-revolutionary orientation, hostile to Roman rule. On the fringes of these currents, and in constant interaction with them, the movement of followers of Jesus of Nazareth also developed, which in the decades following his death would give rise to Christianity as a phenomenon distinct from Judaism.

Of all these currents, only the Pharisaic current survived the catastrophe of 70 AD and constituted the nucleus from which Rabbinic Judaism emerged. This is a crucially important fact, because it means that the Talmud—although formally the work of the rabbinic masters of the following centuries—stands in direct continuity with the Pharisaic tradition and inherits its fundamental theological approaches: the centrality of the Oral Torah, the idea of the resurrection of the dead, faith in a world to come, the conviction that the study and observance of the Law are the privileged path to a relationship with God. Everything the Gospels polemically attribute to the Pharisees—their halakhic rigor, their meticulous attention to precepts, their propensity to surround the Law with protective "hedges"—constitutes precisely the doctrinal heritage that the Talmud would inherit and develop.

The watershed event, as mentioned, was the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, at the height of the first Jewish war against Rome. Titus's legions conquered Jerusalem, burned the Sanctuary, desecrated the holy sites, and deported thousands of

prisoners. A few decades later, in 132-135 AD, the Bar Kokhba revolt—the last great attempt at political and religious restoration in the land of Israel—was crushed by the arms of Emperor Hadrian, who reduced Judea to a province renamed *Syria Palaestina* as a deliberate erasure of Jewish identity, barred Jews from entering Jerusalem, which was rebuilt as a pagan colony under the name of *Aelia Capitolina*, and prohibited the practice of numerous fundamental mitzvot, from circumcision to Torah study.

Faced with this dual catastrophe—religious, because sacrificial worship was impossible without the Temple; political, because state autonomy was definitively lost; demographic, because the human losses were enormous—Judaism faced an existential choice. A choice that, according to the famous Talmudic narrative reported in the tractate Gittin (56a-b), was made by the sage Yochanan ben Zakkai. Having himself carried out of besieged Jerusalem hidden in a coffin, ben Zakkai presented himself at the Roman camp and obtained permission from Emperor Vespasian to establish a rabbinical academy in the coastal city of Yavneh. The symbolic meaning of this request is extraordinary: faced with the ruin of the Temple, ben Zakkai asked neither for the city's salvation nor the restoration of worship, but for permission to continue studying. Thus, a conscious choice was made to reestablish Jewish identity on new foundations: no longer sacrifice in the Sanctuary, but the study of the Torah; no longer the priest, but the teacher; no longer the place, but the text. Yavneh, and then the other academies that would soon arise in Lod, Tiberias, Tzippori, and Babylon, would become the laboratories in which Rabbinic Judaism would be forged, the only form of Judaism destined to survive and, through the Talmud, to be perpetuated to this day.

§4. The Tannaim and the Birth of the Mishnah

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is called the era of the *Tannaim* —from the Aramaic *tana* , "to repeat," "to teach orally." The Tannaim are the rabbinic scholars of this phase: masters such as Hillel and Shammai (who actually lived shortly before 70, but are considered to be among the founders of the tannaitic tradition), Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Hananiah, Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef, Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, Rabbi Yossi, and finally Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, the "Prince," the editor of the Mishnah. It is to these masters and their disciples that we owe the systematic formulation of the Oral Torah and its transposition into concise mnemonic units, called *mishnayot* (singular: *mishnah*).

The term *mishnah* derives from the root *shanah* , "to repeat," and originally referred to both the act of orally repeating a teaching and the content of that teaching. For generations, rabbinic knowledge was transmitted orally, according to a pedagogical method that relied on memorization, rhythmic repetition, and thematic organization. This was a highly refined transmission technique, requiring the presence of specialists—the *tannaim* , strictly speaking, professional "repeaters"—whose task was precisely to preserve the doctrinal heritage in their memory and make it available for scholarly discussion. It was a fragile system, exposed to the vicissitudes of history, and it was precisely this fragility that would eventually push the scholars to break the taboo of writing it down.

The first major arrangement of the tannaitic material is traditionally attributed to Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef (c. 50-135 CE), a figure of legendary proportions whose biography spans both the pinnacle of rabbinic exegesis and the tragedy of Hadrianic repression. Akiva organized the material by topic, laying the foundations for the structure that would later be adopted by the definitive Mishnah. His work was continued and refined by his disciple Rabbi Meir, and finally completed

by Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, simply called *Rabbi* par excellence, around 200 CE.

Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi lived in Galilee. He was *a nasi* — patriarch, the political and religious leader recognized by the Roman authorities of the Jewish community of Palestine—and enjoyed immense personal prestige. Tradition describes him as a man of vast culture, great piety, and rare diplomatic skill, capable of maintaining cordial relations even with the emperor (perhaps Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius, although the identifications are uncertain and partly legendary). He is credited with the decision, of enormous historical importance, to collect, sift, organize, and record in a single work all the tannaitic material considered authoritative. This was not yet, strictly speaking, a fully written work: Rabbi's Mishnah continued to be transmitted orally for some time, and was probably committed to writing only at a later stage. However, its compilation nevertheless marked an irreversible turning point, as it gave the oral heritage a defined, ordered, hierarchical form, destined to form the basis of all subsequent discussion.

The Mishnah thus composed consists of six *sedarim* , "orders," which are further divided into *massekhtot* , "tractates," for a total of sixty-three (or sixty-one, according to certain computations that unite several closely related tractates). Each tractate is further subdivided into *peraqim* , "chapters," and each chapter into individual *mishnayot* . The language of the Mishnah is a late Hebrew, of a technical-legal register, rich in Aramaic and Greek loanwords, significantly different from both biblical Hebrew and classical liturgical Hebrew: it is the so-called *Mishnic Hebrew* , a linguistic variety that reflects the language actually spoken by the scholars of 2nd-century Palestine.

The Mishnah's style is dry, lapidary, and sometimes enigmatic. The sentences are short, free of rhetorical flourishes, and

constructed with maximum economy. They often take the form of a dispute between two or more scholars, whose opinions are stated without the writer explicitly taking a stance. The opinions of the majority are recorded alongside those of the minority, even when the latter are not normative: a significant choice, as it preserves the plurality of halakhic thought and leaves open the possibility that, in future circumstances, even a currently minority opinion may be rehabilitated. The structure of a typical mishnah might be: a statement of a case, an exposition of the opinion of the scholar So-and-so, an exposition of the opinion of the scholar So-and-so, and, if necessary, a concluding opinion of the *Chakhamim*, "the Scholars" (i.e., the majority). The dryness of the style is no accident: the Mishnah is meant to be memorized, and any superfluous word would have been an unnecessary burden on the students' memories.

Alongside Rabbi's Mishnah, other tannaitic collections also survive, the most important of which are the *Tosefta* (literally "addition"), a parallel and complementary collection of tannaitic traditions not included in the Mishnah, and the *midrashei halakhah*, works of juridical exegesis of the written Torah attributed to the schools of Akiva and Yishmael (the *Mekhilta* on Exodus, the *Sifra* on Leviticus, the *Sifrei* on Numbers and Deuteronomy). These are texts of great importance that are often cited in the Talmud under the generic name of *baraitot*—literally "external," that is, tannaitic traditions that remained external to the canonical Mishnah—and which contribute to outlining the complete panorama of rabbinic thought of the period.

§5. The Amoraim and the Formation of the Gemara

Amoraim (singular: *amora* , from the Aramaic *amar* , "to say," "to explain") began , which lasted approximately from 200 to 500 CE, divided into six or seven generations. The Amoraim are the scholars who, taking the Mishnah as their basic text, discussed each paragraph, clarified its ambiguities, compared its different formulations, deduced practical implications, filled in gaps with baraitot and alternative traditions, and contextualized its decisions with new cases posed by the realities of their time. It is the result of this immense intellectual activity that bears the name of *Gemara* , from the Aramaic *gemar* , "to complete," "to perfect," "to conclude the study."

The activity of the Amoraim took place in two large geographical centers, giving rise to two distinct Talmuds.

The first center was the Land of Israel, where the main academies arose in Tiberias, Zippori (Sepphoris), and Caesarea. Here, during the third and fourth centuries, the Palestinian Amoraim produced what we know as *the Talmud Yerushalmi*— "Talmud of Jerusalem," although it was not actually produced in Jerusalem, the city having been forbidden to Jews since the time of Hadrian—or, more correctly, *the Talmud of the Land of Israel* . The conditions in which this Talmud was compiled were extremely difficult: Roman-Byzantine Palestine in those centuries experienced persecution, anti-Jewish decrees, economic crises, and demographic decline. The *Yerushalmi* reflects these circumstances: it is a smaller, less refined, and sometimes incomplete work, interrupted abruptly at many points without ever reaching a definitive version. It covered only four of the six orders of the Mishnah and was compiled in quasi-final form, according to the prevailing opinion, around the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 5th century.

The second center was Babylon, a region politically under Parthian and then Sassanid rule, where the Jews enjoyed

relatively broad autonomy and generally better economic conditions than in Palestine. The great Babylonian academies arose at Sura – founded, according to tradition, by Abba Arikha, called *Rav* , at the beginning of the third century – at Nehardea, and then at Pumbedita, which succeeded Nehardea after the latter's destruction in 259 AD. For over three centuries, these academies were the beating heart of world Jewish thought: in them were trained the great Amoraic masters – Rav and Shmuel of the first generation, then Rav Huna, Rav Yehudah, Rabbah bar Nachmani, Rav Yosef, Abbaye, Rava, Rav Pappa, Rav Ashi, Ravina – whose disputes, opinions and narratives would form the fabric of what is universally known as *Talmud Bavli* , the Babylonian Talmud, the subject of our work.

The *Bavli* was traditionally edited primarily by Rav Ashi (d. 427) and his successor Ravina (d. 499), who oversaw the collection and organization of Amoraic material in the academies of Sura. Their work was probably completed by the *Savoraim* , a generation of scholars intermediate between the Amoraim and the Geonim, active between the 6th and 7th centuries, who are credited with the final editorial additions, the arrangement of some sections, and the fixing of the text in the form in which it has come down to us.

The Babylonian Talmud is a work of enormous proportions, far superior to that of the *Yerushalmi* . It covers thirty-seven of the sixty-three tractates of the Mishnah, partially leaving out—for reasons we will see—the orders most closely related to the land of Israel (*Zera'im* , agriculture) and the prescriptions of ritual purity of the Temple (*Tohorot*). In its standard printing, the one curiously "canonized" by Daniel Bomberg's Venetian edition of 1520-1523 and which has become the universal reference, it contains 2,711 pages in folio format (called *daf* , "leaves," numbered from 2 a, b onwards: the first cover page is conventionally considered page 1, and the numbering therefore begins with *daf* 2). Each *daf* contains two pages, *amud aleph*

(page a) and *amud bet* (page b). When quoting a Talmudic passage, it is done in the form: name of the tractate, number of the *daf*, letter of the face. For example, *Berakhot 17a* indicates the first face of *daf* 17 of tractate Berakhot.

The internal structure of the *Bavli* is highly dialogical. Each mishnah is reproduced in its entirety, and it is followed by an Amoraic discussion—the *gemara* proper—which can last for many pages. The discussion typically proceeds as follows: a *mishnah* is read; one of the Amoraim raises a question (*kushya*) about the meaning or coherence of the statement; another proposes an answer (*teyruts*); a third objects; a fourth proposes a distinction (*chilluk*); baraitot are introduced in support of one position or another; the case is analyzed from a new angle; the opinions of Amoraim from different generations are compared; the question is raised whether the decision of one scholar contradicts that of another; the cases are distinguished; new hypotheses (*hava amina*) are proposed and immediately rejected (*dechiyot*); sometimes a conclusion is reached (*maskanah*), sometimes the problem is left unsolved with the technical formula *teyku* , an abbreviation, according to a traditional interpretation, of *Tishbi yetaretz qushyot u-be'ayot* , "the Tishbite [i.e., the prophet Elijah, who according to tradition will return in messianic times] will resolve questions and problems."

The *Bavli* 's *dialectical method* is extraordinarily refined. The scholar who dedicates himself to it consistently acquires, almost without realizing it, an extremely rigorous way of thinking, attentive to distinctions, suspicious of hasty generalizations, capable of sustaining the tension of complex argumentation over long periods without seeking shortcuts. It is this mental training ground that, in subsequent centuries, would shape generations of rabbis, jurists, and philosophers, and which many scholars have pointed to as one of the remote roots of that particular attachment to discussion, analysis, and

reasoning that characterizes so much of modern and contemporary Jewish culture.

§6. Talmud Bavli and Talmud Yerushalmi: two works compared

Before continuing, it is useful to briefly dwell on the differences between the Babylonian Talmud and the Talmud of the Land of Israel, because the choice to focus on the former—as the present work does, for reasons we will see—is not arbitrary, but reflects the very history of Jewish reception.

Formally, the *Bavli* is broader, more elaborate, and more dialectical than the *Yerushalmi*. The latter presents a more concise, sometimes sketchy text, in which discussions are often interrupted and many of the argumentative passages that the *Bavli* makes explicit are missing. The *Yerushalmi* was probably drafted hastily, under the pressure of a turbulent historical situation: the authority of the patriarchate in Palestine was waning, the academies were closing, and emigration to Babylonia was emptying the centers of learning. Its final draft, around 400-425 CE, must have been almost an act of rescue. The *Bavli*, by contrast, was produced under far more favorable conditions, in the thriving Babylonian academies that would continue to flourish for centuries to come. Its composition dragged on for over three hundred years and was subjected to successive editorial revisions that ensured its internal coherence and stylistic refinement.

Linguistically, both Talmuds share a bilingual structure: the *Mishnah* is in Mishnaic Hebrew, while the *Gemara* is predominantly in Aramaic. However, these are two distinct varieties of Aramaic: the *Yerushalmi* uses Western Palestinian Aramaic, a language spoken in rural and urban areas of Galilee; the *Bavli* uses Eastern Babylonian Aramaic, the

language of the scholars of Mesopotamia, a dialect closely related to that of *Mandaeism* and various forms of Syriac. The grammatical and lexical differences between the two varieties are significant, and expert readers can immediately recognize the geographical origin of a text by analyzing its language.

In terms of content, each of the two Talmuds presents unique qualities. The *Yerushalmi* preserves an irreplaceable heritage of Palestinian traditions, of prescriptions related to the land of Israel (tithes, the Sabbatical year, first fruits), and of ethnographic and geographical observations on that region found nowhere else. The *Bavli*, for its part, presents a richer picture of *aggadic narratives*, philosophical and mystical speculations, and highly subtle logical disputes, as well as a systematic treatment of laws that apply universally, regardless of geography.

In subsequent Jewish reception, the *Bavli* ended up clearly prevailing over the *Yerushalmi*, for various reasons: its superior editorial polish, its greater breadth and completeness, the authority of the Babylonian academies and the Geonim who assumed its custody, the politico-religious prestige of the *Resh Galuta* (the Exilarch, head of the Babylonian Jewish community), and finally the fact that the medieval Jewish diaspora took shape precisely from Babylon, exporting its textual tradition wherever it went. When, in the Middle Ages, one speaks of the "Talmud" without further specification, one always means the *Bavli*. The *Yerushalmi* continued to be studied, but remained in a subordinate position for centuries, and only in modern times has it experienced a true rediscovery by scholars and academies. This does not mean, of course, that the *Yerushalmi* is inferior: on many issues its opinions are considered authoritative and sometimes preferable, and the great codifiers of the Middle Ages systematically consulted it. But the *Bavli* has constituted, since the 9th-10th centuries, the central reference for rabbinic law, theology, and spirituality.

It is to this work that our anthology is dedicated.

§7. The Six Orders (Shisha Sedarim): The Architecture of the Mishnah and the Talmud

To orient oneself in the Talmud, it is essential to understand its structure. The Talmud—both the Bavli and the Yerushalmi—follows the thematic organization established by Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi in the Mishnah. This organization is divided into six great orders (*sedarim*), which are mnemonically designated by the acronym *ZeMaN NaKaT*, formed from the initials of their Hebrew names: *Zera'im*, *Mo'ed*, *Nashim*, *Nezikin*, *Kodashim*, *Toharot*. Each order groups together tractates that deal with a general thematic domain, although, as we will see, the adherence of the topics to the nominal categories is not always perfect, and within each tractate one often finds digressions that range in all directions.

7.1. Zera'im — "Seeds"

The first order, *Zera'im* (זְרָעִים), deals with agricultural laws, that is, all those Torah prescriptions regarding the cultivation of the land of Israel and vegetable offerings. It comprises eleven tractates: *Berakhot* (the blessings, placed here for associative reasons because it also deals with blessings on food), *Pe'ah* (the corner of the field to be left to the poor), *Demai* (products of dubious decimal ownership), *Kil'ayim* (prohibitions on mixing crops), *Shevi'it* (the Sabbatical year), *Terumot* (offerings to the priests), *Ma'aserot* (tithes), *Ma'aser Sheni* (the second tithe), *Challah* (the dough offering), *Orlah* (the fruit of the tree's first three years), and *Bikkurim* (the first fruits).

An important peculiarity: in the Babylonian Talmud, only the tractate *Berakhot* has a *gemara*, while all the other ten tractates

of this order are present only as Mishnah. The reason is clearly historical-geographical: the agricultural laws specific to the land of Israel did not apply in Babylonia, and therefore the Babylonian Amoraim did not devote a systematic study to them. For Amoraic discussions on these topics, one must turn to the *Yerushalmi*, which instead covers the entire order of *Zera'im*. This gap in the *Babylonian Talmud* is one of the main reasons why, even today, the study of Israel's agricultural laws remains largely indebted to the Palestinian tradition.

7.2. Mo'ed — "Appointed Time" / "Festivities"

The second order, *Mo'ed* (מוֹעֵד), deals with the laws of the sacred calendar: the Shabbat and the holidays. It includes twelve tractates: *Shabbat* (the very long and detailed weekly rest), *Eruvin* (the symbolic enclosures that allow certain movements on Shabbat), *Pesachim* (Passover), *Sheqalim* (the annual Temple tax), *Yoma* (the "Day" par excellence, i.e., Yom Kippur), *Sukkah* (the Feast of Tabernacles), *Beitzah* (the laws of the holidays in general), *Rosh Hashanah* (the New Year and its rituals), *Ta'anit* (public fasts), *Megillah* (the holiday of Purim and the reading of the Scroll of Esther), *Mo'ed Katan* (the semi-holidays between Pesach and Sukkot), *Chagigah* (pilgrimage offerings and, in its final pages, esotericism). Of this order, four treatises — *Rosh Hashanah*, *Ta'anit*, *Megillah*, *Chagigah* — are the subject of specific chapters in our work, testifying to their centrality for anyone wishing to approach the liturgical-spiritual rhythm of Judaism.

7.3. Nashim — "Women"

The third order, *Nashim* (נָשִׁים), regulates relations between the sexes in family life: marriage, divorce, vows, and the status of women in Jewish society. It comprises seven tractates: *Yevamot* (levirate marriage and impediments to marriage), *Ketubot* (the marriage contract), *Nedarim* (vows and their dissolution), *Nazir* (Naziriteship), *Sotah* (women suspected of

adultery), *Gittin* (divorce documents), and *Kiddushin* (betrothals and the acquisition of marital status). Despite its title, the *Nashim* order contains much material that does not specifically concern women as such, but more generally family law and related legal institutions.

7.4. *Nezikin* — "Damage"

The fourth order, *Nezikin* (נִזְקִין), is devoted to civil and criminal law, conflict resolution, and the administration of justice. It comprises ten treatises, including—of particular relevance to our work—*Sanhedrin* (courts, capital punishment, eschatology), *Makkot* (corporal punishment, particularly flagellation), and—an interesting aside—*Avot* (the "Fathers," i.e., *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers), which deals not with law at all but with ethical wisdom, and which was placed in this order for historical and thematic reasons that are not immediately obvious. The other treatises are *Bava Kamma*, *Bava Metzia* and *Bava Batra* (the three "Gates", which originally constituted a single treatise later divided into three parts for reasons of extension, and which deal respectively with damages, discoveries and loans, sales and inheritances), *Shevu'ot* (the oaths), *Eduyot* (the testimonies, a collection of traditions of various masters), *Avodah Zarah* (idolatry and relations with pagans), *Horayot* (doctrinal errors committed by the courts and the high priests).

Three of the central tractates of our work — *Avot*, *Sanhedrin*, and *Makkot* — belong to this order, which reflects the fact that it is precisely in *Nezikin* that the Talmud develops most fully ethical, juridical, and theological themes of general scope.

7.5. *Kodashim* — "Sacred Things"

The fifth order, *Kodashim* (קֹדָשִׁים), deals with the laws of sacrificial worship, offerings, the Temple, and the priesthood. It comprises eleven tractates: *Zevachim* (sacrifices), *Menachot*

(vegetable offerings), *Chullin* (the ritual slaughter of animals for profane use), *Bekhorot* (the firstborn consecrated animals), *Arakhin* (the economic valuations of vows), *Temurah* (the substitutions of sacrificial animals), *Keritot* (sins punishable by "cutting" the soul), *Me'ilah* (the misappropriation of sacred goods), *Tamid* (the daily offering), *Middot* (the architectural measurements of the Temple), and *Kinnim* (bird offerings). Of these, only a few are of practical interest in the era following the destruction of the Temple; Nonetheless, their study is considered highly meritorious, because tradition sees in the study of sacrifices a substitute form of the sacrificial cult itself, awaiting the messianic restoration.

7.6. Tohorot — "Purity"

The sixth and final order, *Tohorot* (טְהוֹרוֹת), deals with the laws of ritual purity and impurity. It comprises twelve tractates: *Kelim* (utensils and their susceptibility to impurity), *Ohalot* (impurity transmitted by the corpse), *Negaim* (sores on the skin and in the home, improperly called "leprosy"), *Parah* (the red heifer whose ashes purify), *Tohorot* (minor impurities), *Mikvaot* (ritual baths), *Niddah* (menstrual impurity and the laws governing marital relations), *Makhshirin* (substances that predispose a food to impurity), *Zavim* (abnormal bodily discharges), *Tevul Yom* (one who has immersed in the mikveh but must still wait for sunset), *Yadayim* (the hands and their purity), and *Uktzin* (plant parts and their impurity).

Even in this order, as in *Zera'im*, the Bavli developed the *gemara* for only one tractate — *Niddah* — because the other purity laws applied very largely to the Temple and the priests, and lost much of their practical significance after 70 CE.

7.7. A structural observation

Note how the architecture of the Mishnah follows a movement from the general to the particular, simultaneously reflecting a

certain logical-theological order. It begins with the earth (Zera'im), which is the basic material condition; it continues with time (Mo'ed), which organizes ritual life; it moves on to family relationships (Nashim) and then to civil ones (Nezikin), which structure human coexistence; it arrives at the highest cultic questions (Kodashim) and finally to the purity of body and soul (Tohorot), which is the condition for access to God. It is, ultimately, a true map of the totality of human life, according to the religious perspective of classical Judaism.

§8. Tzurat ha-Daf: The Architecture of a Page

Anyone who opens a volume of the Talmud for the first time in the standard Vilna edition—the *Romm edition* of 1880–1886, which has become the universal reference and is still used in all publications today—is surprised by a completely unique typographical layout, itself a masterpiece of visual engineering and a metaphor for how the Talmud should be read. This layout, established as early as the Venetian Bomberg edition of 1520–1523 and respected by all subsequent editions, is called *tzurat ha-daf*, "the form of the page."

At the center of each page is...

END PREVIEW