

Origins of the Talmud

The name “Talmud” means “teaching” or “study” and refers to the oral law which has been taught to the children of Israel since the time of Moses.

The name “written law” was given to the Old Testament, and “oral law” refers to all the teachings of the “sages” consisting of comments on the text of the Bible. It has always been the teacher’s duty to explain and comment on the laws and ordinances until the people understood them thoroughly and knew them by heart. The descendants of Aaron, the priesthood, was commissioned to teach the Bible to the people. Although there are very few historical records to show us how this was accomplished from the days of Moses until the time of the Kingdom, it is apparent that the teaching ministry was unbroken during all those centuries.

Figurative interpretation of the Bible began in the days when the Great Assembly resolved to keep themselves distinct from the Samaritans, who adhered to the literal interpretation of the text. This study began to make progress from approximately the time of the Greek conquest of Judea, when the term “Great Assembly” was changed to the Greek “Sanhedrin.” It spread into every college where prominent teachers were charged with leading congregations in instruction of the Law, of ordinances relating to things clean and unclean, to rights of property, and to crime.

All of the scholars who interpreted the Bible passages figuratively were called “Pharisees.” The Pharisees interpretations began to be codified and collected in the work that eventually became the Talmud.

At the time of Antiochus Epiphanes the high priesthood passed from the descendants of Zadok (David’s high priest) to other families, and finally came into the possession of the Maccabees, who also were not descendants of the house of Zadok. These leaders began to differ from the Pharisees in the interpretation of the Torah (the Bible); and they began to explain the texts on the basis of oral tradition. They founded a distinct sect, called “Sadducees” (after Zadok). They disputed with the

Pharisees and with their Talmud; and they persecuted the Pharisees to the utmost. Since the Maccabees were the nation’s leaders and were men of power and wealth and held sway in Palestine, they joined with the Samaritans in an attempt to eradicate the trend toward figurative interpretation of the Bible.

Antiochus Epiphanes decreed that Pharisees who did not discontinue their studies would be executed; that circumcision was to be performed in a manner other than that prescribed by the Pharisees; that the Sabbath should not be observed according to the Pharisees’ interpretations, etc. The obvious intention was to destroy the Talmud and anyone who adhered to it.

These persecutions against the Talmud usually ended in favor of the Sadducees until the time of Johanan the High Priest. Then, the Pharisees triumphed over their enemies and the oral law became the absorbing subject of the Sanhedrin. The Talmud began to be studied in all the colleges of Palestine, Egypt, and wherever Jews lived.

The Talmud of the Time of Christ

After the triumph of the Pharisees over the Sadducees, the Talmud developed rapidly. The numbers of scholars and followers of the Talmud increased quickly, and the colleges of Talmudic study developed steadily, until at the beginning of the Christian Era the schools of Hillel and Schammai had become important. Although there were still plenty of enemies arising, such as the Essenes and other sects who were opposed to particular doctrines, they did not have the power to hinder the progress of the Talmud or weaken its influence.

People from all over the world, including many in high places, came to learn the doctrines and morality of the Talmud, which was already recognized as having a great moral contrast to the teachings of the priests of the heathen religions. Hillel the Elder received many of these people with enthusiasm. His grandson, Rabban Gamaliel the Elder, the teacher of Saul of Tarsus, continued the teaching of Hillel

in the Talmudic school in Jerusalem.

The period of good fortune was only of short duration, however, as the time of the destruction of the Temple (70 AD) was near, and the victims of the sword (and of hunger) were many. Gamaliel the Elder was persecuted, and his son Simeon ben Gamaliel, was slain. In fact, if Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai had not risked his life to petition Vespasian to spare the Sanhedrin, who had been compelled during the Roman conquest of Jerusalem to move their college to Jamnia, there would have remained no vestige of the Talmud, since most of those who cherished it had passed away by the sword, by hunger, or by plague..

The study of the Talmud increased after the destruction of the Temple, but with great difficulty. There were continuous disputes with Sadducees and other sects, and undoubtedly with Christians.

Principal resources for this study are:

Rodkinson, Michael L, "The History of the Talmud", The Talmud Society, Boston, 1918.

Steinsaltz, Rabbi Adin, "The Essential Talmud", Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, NJ, 1992

Edersheim, Alfred, "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah"