



## The Talmud: A Biography

*Harry Freedman*

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Containing nearly two million words in 37 volumes, the Talmud covers topics as diverse as law, faith, medicine, magic, ethics, sex, humour and prayer. It is a highly complex, profoundly logical and frequently impenetrable work with a history like no other. In its 1500 year history the Talmud has been banned, censored and burned, dissected by scholars and rabbis, probed by philosophers, poets, republicans and kings.

In *The Talmud – A Biography*, Jewish scholar Harry Freedman recounts the engrossing story of an ancient classic, the legal and mystical pillar of Judaism and recounts the story of a book which, in many ways, parallels the history of the Jewish people. From its origins as a record of discussions amongst scholars in towns and villages close to modern-day Baghdad, Freedman traces the spiralling paths of the Jewish diaspora and explores the story of the Talmud's early origins in Babylon, its role during the Enlightenment and its influence over traditional Judaism. A compelling fusion of law, storytelling and spirituality, the Talmud's story is a fascinating insight into the history of Judaism and Harry Freedman's *The Talmud – A Biography* is a remarkable account of one of the most important cultural, historical and religious works of our time.

## **The Talmud: A Biography Details**

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Author : Harry Freedman

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## From Reader Review The Talmud: A Biography for online ebook

### Caleb Robinson says

Compulsively readable and a great overview.

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### William Crosby says

This book explained to me the Talmud (more specifically the Babylonian Talmud) and its importance and relationship to other works such as the Torah and Mishnah.

Presents the Talmud as having a turbulent history parallel to that of the Jewish people, being more important than the Bible as the foundation of the Jewish legal system and the reason for the development of the Jews as a distinctive group of people who might have otherwise been dispersed and forgotten (like the lost 10 tribes). Discusses its role in world history and culture and how a variety of tragedies have often led to the further development of the Talmud and its influence. Primarily focuses on individuals and what they did with respect to the Talmud.

Mostly interesting account. Extensive bibliography for further reading.

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### Reading Reader says

I know a few bits and pieces about the Talmud, but not much. I was looking forward to learning about its formation and history, sure, but I assumed that its *content* would also be on display here, at least a little bit.

It was the subtitle that drew me in. A book about the Talmud, written as a biography -- that sounds great. Unfortunately, this is instead written as *The Talmud: A History*. It's like a biography that tells you all about what happened to the person over the course of his/her life, but never tells you even a little bit of what the person was like.

A final thought (and the reason for two stars instead of three): Was Bloomsbury's editorial staff on vacation when this got published? Large chunks of the book are filled with sentence fragments and the kind of mistakes that a spell-checker doesn't notice but an editor should. Other sections of the book are more or less free of these errors, so there was clearly some editing done -- just not nearly enough.

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### Paul says

I received a free copy of this book from Goodreads.

This isn't a book with mass market appeal and it's not for the faint hearted. Turgid, indigestible, impenetrable – all words that came to mind when reviewing this book. However, just because a book is 'difficult going' doesn't in itself detract from the quality of the work. In this case, it doesn't, as the author

has clearly made a spirited attempt to contribute to a better understanding and appreciation of the subject matter.

With only a layman's prior knowledge, I felt that this book was always going to be difficult and so it proved to be. When the going got tough, I didn't really get going. However, it did shine a light for me into some dark corners, even if it was only akin to that from an energy saving bulb!

I thought it was well-written and the author shouldn't be judged on the failings of his readers. I would say that if you have a genuine interest and a desire for greater understanding, then jump in as you will derive some benefit– but if you're not one of life's strong swimmers, then you will struggle and end up climbing out, if you haven't already drowned in treacle.

In reading this book, I have certainly learnt a few things but in all honestly, I was pleased to get to the end and move onto something rather lighter.

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### **Joe Q. says**

This book is a survey of Jewish history from the perspective of the Talmud, illustrating its rise to prominence and both the devotion and scorn it has received.

As someone who regularly learns Talmud, I appreciated learning more of the back-story of its dissemination and adoption into the Jewish world. At the same time, I wonder how much someone who has never opened a volume of Talmud could actually appreciate a book like this -- while describing the Talmud's history very well, it doesn't actually provide much in the way of a sample text (its quotes consist only of sentences and sentence fragments) that would give the neophyte reader any perspective on the Talmud's language and methods.

Freedman's writing is clear but somewhat choppy. The book also has an unfortunate number of spelling mistakes and typos. It's a quick read, though, and worth a look for anyone interested in Jewish history who already has some familiarity with the Talmud.

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### **C. Varn says**

Freedman's history is a history of the development and traditions around the Talmud--moving from post-Second Temple Pharisaic Judaism through the diaspora in Zoroastrian and Islamic lands and its reception in Europe. Freedman's introduction is readable, journalistic, but its scope is somewhat beyond the couple of hundred pages of a popular introduction. For those with little understanding of the structure of the Talmud--the Mishnah, Midrash, and legalistic discussion or the various schools of Rabbis that led it, I suspect many will be fascinated. The more modern discussion, including Christian Hebraists, attempts to translate it, Henry VIII's attempt to use the text against the Pope, the various pro- and anti-Judaist polemics abounding about the Talmud is also fascinating and even less known. The discussions of the complicated relationship of the between the Jewish Enlightenment and classical Reform movement and the Talmud are fascinating and Reform's love/hate relationship to the Talmud is quite interesting. The primary frustration I have with the text is that each topic could be more fully discussed, but not in a book for a popular readership and at an

approachable page count. My secondary frustration is that the content of the Talmud is not discussed that much at all, but again, that is not what the book attests it will do. Freedman's text does exactly what it says it will, so holding those two traits against it seems hardly fair. Highly recommended as an introduction to the history around the Talmud.

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### **The Jewish Book Council says**

Review by Wallace Green for the Jewish Book Council.

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### **Harry Freedman says**

I wrote **The Talmud: A Biography** because I have had so many conversations over the years with people who had heard of the Talmud but didn't really know what it was.

Traditionally, writers have tried to bring the Talmud to a wider audience by compiling anthologies or publishing extracts. Some of these are excellent, I've mentioned a few on this website.

But extracts and anthologies do not fully explain why the Talmud is such an important, and yet in many ways neglected, part of world culture. It is as ancient as many of the world's classics, lengthier than possibly any other, complex in its composition, frequently profound in its content and it has had a far more tumultuous story than most. A story which is not contained in the words on its pages. It was this story, or at least a good part of it, which I have tried to tell.

Most people who have had a good Jewish education have studied, or at least dipped into the Talmud. We value it because it is, as I have tried to explain in the book, the foundation of Judaism. We rarely stop to acknowledge it as part of our cultural heritage. Yet, in a world which is far more culturally interconnected than ever before, the Talmud is not just the heritage of the Jews. It is a classic of world literature. And its story deserves to be told.

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### **Tracy Riva says**

*The Talmud: A Biography* is a book of magnificent scope covering the history of the Talmud – one of Judaism's most important texts – from its beginnings in the schools of Jerusalem and Babylon through the modern era. It details the first known burning of the Talmud as Crusaders set forth to battle Muslims in Jerusalem, but stopped first to kill Jews along the way and burn their ancient scrolls, through the many burnings that have taken place since. It also details how Talmud study has become an end in itself. For many the study of the Talmud becomes a life long pursuit. The belief being that Talmud study is even more important than good deeds for its study is believed to lead to good deeds.

The history of the Talmud, and its endurance through multiple persecutions is fascinating. Its history and that of the Jewish nation, are so intricately intertwined that they mirror one another.

I highly recommend this book. It is well presented, interesting and presented in a manner anyone can understand. A solid, stimulating read.

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### **Abbey says**

I'm pretty certain that I'm not the target audience for this work, despite Freedman writing in the Introduction that a knowledge of the Talmud isn't necessary, I think it would be of more interest to people with a prior knowledge. That being said, I really enjoyed reading this. I'm not going to lie and say that it wasn't hard going; it took so much of my concentration to make sure that I was actually taking the information in - I felt like I was doing my dissertation all over again. I really feel that it was worth it though. I read around a chapter a day, sometimes I gave it a miss for a few days, but it was something that seemed to stick with me. The way that Freedman writes is almost conversational, so although the information you're getting is heavy the way in which it reaches you is quite relaxed. This really awoke the history student inside me, and I will definitely be looking into reading more about early Europe and on Moses Mandelsohn and Shabbetai Tzvi.

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### **T Fool says**

To consider Talmud biographically does imply it to be a living being. The devout may regard it so. But its vitality really isn't explored here.

We're given chronology, geography. We get mention of key figures surrounding it. As an item sacred to a culture, one that helped further develop that culture, we watch it survive and continue to regenerate.

But page after page, we as readers live on its surface. Talmud is 'handled', but looking at its interior is disclaimed from the start.

This book is informative, but . . . superficial.

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### **John Carter says**

I received this book from Goodreads after entering a giveaway.

I went into the reading of this book with minimal knowledge of the Jewish faith. And with zero knowledge of the Talmud. Even though at the start of the book it says you don't require knowledge of the Talmud to be able to read this book. I do think that previous knowledge of the Talmud and what it has been through would make the read more interesting, as you can better know what the book contains rather than being told.

But nonetheless, I still enjoyed reading and found the content of the book fascinating. My previous (and basic knowledge of the Jewish faith, and the Talmud) has been vastly expanded. The book gives an in-depth look at the content and appearance of the Talmudic pages, with a detailed history about the book itself.

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### **Binia Koatz says**

GREAT

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### **Nic says**

An approachable introduction to the Talmud - repeats many of the things you might know about the Talmud and some you might not. Gives a broad overview of the history of study and composition in an approachable non-academic writing style.

Worth a read.

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### **Maurizio Codogno says**

Il Talmud non è un semplice libro. È parte integrante della tradizione ebraica. Ma non è sempre stato così, e la sua storia è davvero incredibile, anche se il sottotitolo di questo libro è un po' esagerato. Freedman ci racconta di come il corpus iniziale delle discussioni tra rabbi e rav si sia man mano coagulato in due versioni diverse (il Talmud di Gerusalemme e quello di Babilonia) che poi si sono più o meno mischiate e sono passate al testo scritto. Ma c'è anche dell'altro: nel libro leggiamo infatti la storia di due millenni dal punto di vista ebraico - e qui si comprende anche la scelta come traduttore di Gadi Luzzatto Voghera che ha ben presente quello di cui si parla. Le persecuzioni contro gli ebrei, e quindi contro il Talmud, magari erano già note: ma molto più interessante è vedere che in alcuni casi il mondo cattolico e luterano si sono avvicinati alla lettura del Talmud per capire meglio il significato della Torah. Anche le pagine su Spinoza hanno un tono diverso da quello che almeno io ho studiato a filosofia, e finalmente ho compreso la differenza tra le tre correnti moderne nel mondo americano. Un solo appunto: ogni tanto l'editing si è perso, con nomi che a distanza di poche righe sono scritti in maniera diversa.

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