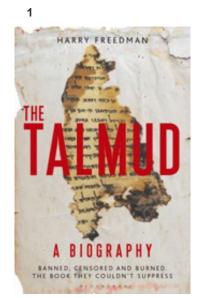
## he Talmud: A Biography Harry Freedman

## Review by Wallace Greene

The Talmud is the primary Jewish text after the Bible itself, and its devoted study has been the linchpin of Jewish survival. Dilettantes may dabble in it and cite a few passages here and there. Mature scholars devote their lives to understanding the underpinnings of Jewish legal theory and its application to current life. Historians must first master the complex text and then analyze it from various inter-disciplinary perspectives.

Its importance is axiomatic. Attempting to describe the Talmud in the abstract is quite a challenge. However, Freedman is on the right track. It is precisely because of its importance in Judaism that the Talmud has been banned, censored, and burned. Those who pioneered in this field were great scholars. A few of the classics are cited, however, a work which purports to show not only the world's treatment of the Talmud but why Judaism and Jews view it with such reverence cannot omit the conclusions of Agus, Albeck, Chajes, Lieberman, Twersky, Weiss, and others of similar rank. Not citing Grayzel's work on papal edicts nor Finkelstein's book on Jewish communal ordinances is an equally egregious omission.



Bloomsbury 2014 243 Pages \$26.99 ISBN: 9781472905949



Extracts and anthologies do not fully explain why the Talmud is so important. 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.

The book does, however, reflect turbulent events in Jewish history, and present pieces of Jewish history and the history of anti-semitism as reflected in controversies over its central text.

In discussing the development and impact of the Talmud, Freedman first considers the Talmud as a developing text, exploring its origins in the Roman Empire after the destruction of the Second Temple. He also provides a fascinating investigation into cross-fertilization between Jewish and early Islamic scholars and its impact on the ideas and development of the Talmud. Some of his conclusions are questionable and others are simply inaccurate. His claims that before the Temple was destroyed, the lulav was only used there, his dating of the

first Jewish printing presses, and claiming that the rabbis of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees are erroneous. Equally imprecise is his claim that there were 19,000 documents in the Geniza, when in fact there are hundreds of thousands. When discussing Jewish flight from the Holocaust, the community of Shanghai is mentioned, but omitted is any discussion of the transplanted Yeshiva of Mir and the famous "Shanghai Talmud."

Mastery of the Talmudic text requires years of concentrated study. Historical analysis of it requires a knowledge of many languages, different legal systems, literary styles, and the breadth of Jewish history. Freedman has read widely and relies heavily on secondary sources, many of which are not listed in the Bibliography, yet are cited in the notes. The field of Talmudic historiography is not for the faint of heart nor for those lacking a rigorous grounding in Talmud. Haym Soloveitchik's withering critique of Talya Fishman is totally omitted as is his new theory about a third center of Talmud study which influenced the scholars of early medieval Ashkenaz.

Freedman comprehensively covers the uglier burnings and bans, why and how the Talmud survived, how it became a central study text, the influence of printing on its dissemination, its encounters with Christian scholarship, science and enlightenment thought, and its role today. It's a broad, ambitious work, which succeeds as an outline for further study.

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