

The president of the rabbinical academy in second-century Judaea, Gamaliel, was challenged by a non-Jewish intellectual to justify his presence in a bathhouse of Aphrodite in Acre. Wasn't it forbidden in the Pentateuch to associate with idolatrous gods? Gamaliel replied that Aphrodite had invaded his territory, not he hers. He argued that the bathhouse was not an adornment to Aphrodite, but that a statue of Aphrodite had been used to adorn the bathhouse. In the case of hand, Gamaliel reasoned, the statue stood by a sewer and everyone urinated there. Alternative gods were indeed forbidden, but statues that were not treated with the reverence due to a deity did not count as gods.

When Huna, a leading Babylonian rabbi of the third century, died, his remains were brought to the land of Israel for burial. Some mourners wanted to show special respect to him by placing a Torah scroll on his bier, but others pointed out that he would have disapproved. The initiative was duly quashed. Because they could not manoeuvre the bier through the door, his followers suggested lowering it through the window or finding another bier. Various views about this were again cited and discussed. Both projects were eventually abandoned and the door was broken through. In the course of his funeral oration, the speaker, named Abba, made a bald and controversial statement: "Rabbi Huna's piety and learning were of such a high standard that one might have said that the divine presence could

be detected in him. Alas, this was not possible, given that he lived in the exile of Babylonia and not in the homeland of Israel". One of the rabbis took exception to this and cited Ezekiel 1, in which it is stated that God's holy word was received by the prophet in spite of his residence in the diaspora. At this point the objector's father kicked him under the table and said, "Have I not told you before to avoid troubling people with politics? Perhaps Ezekiel first received the divine inspiration when he was still in the land of Israel".

All this is reported (somewhat more elliptically than in my paraphrased narrative) in texts found in the Babylonian Talmud (the so-called Bavli). Does that vast literary corpus of more than 6,000 pages constitute religious law, theology and biblical exegesis? Or might one better regard it as a potpourri of Jewish history, politics and folklore? Who compiled it and why? Was there a guiding editorial hand? How did later generations regard, respect and record what they had received? Does the earlier Talmud (the so-called Yerushalmi) edited by the rabbis of northern Roman Palestine in the fourth century help us to analyse the compilation made by their counterparts some 500 miles to the east at least two centuries later? In what way does each Talmud make use of the rabbinic teachings of the first two centuries which were compiled in Judaea and on which each is based? What made the Babylonian Talmud so central to Rabbinic Judaism and its system of education, and why was it on many occasions the subject of abuse at the hands of the Christians and sometimes even consigned to public bonfires in leading European capitals? In what way has it been studied over the centuries, and how is it viewed in the modern world? Rabbinic luminaries have addressed a number of these questions for more than a millennium, and modern scholars have attempted to find scientific explanations for an intriguing literary

## Two texts

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Harry Freedman

THE TALMUD  
A biography  
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Moulie Vidas

TRADITION AND THE FORMATION  
OF THE TALMUD  
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history. The two books under review add to our understanding.

Harry Freedman combines a professional life in the world of business and management in London with a passionate, personal interest in Jewish history and literature. In this his third book, he has set himself the task of introducing the Talmud to contemporary readers whose encounter with talmudic matters may be exclusively limited to using the adjective, rather unfairly, to describe hair-splitting dialectic. Freedman studied with the late Louis

stant need to take a breather. He sets out the reasons why the Rabbinic Judaism of the first few Christian centuries recalled, studied and transmitted a vast and varied chrestomathy of Jewish traditions and teachings, and traces the manner in which this helped the Jews to survive the loss of their independence, homeland, capital city and religious shrine.

As the centre of talmudic study moved more unequivocally to Babylonia from the fourth century onwards, so it became possible to evolve a religious culture that combined a yearning for the glories of the past with a determination to reinterpret these in the context of the present. While the earlier generations of talmudic scholars were satisfied to preserve and evolve their religious heritage in all its complexity and with many internal contradictions, those who championed the cause in the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods opted to provide clear guidance and systematic codification. In this they often clashed with their co-religionists who were having a less comfortable life in Jewish Palestine but were somehow determined to maintain theological diversity. Owing to the supremacy of the Babylonian Talmud, the religious ideas and practices of Mesopotamia came to dominate the

does not, however, forget to mention that there were others who set about understanding it and translating parts into Latin, and later into other European languages. There were Catholic humanists, such as Johannes Reuchlin early in the sixteenth century, who risked their status in the Church, and even their lives, to offer a defence of the Talmud against attempts to ban and burn it. When Jews could leave their ghettos and settle in emancipated and enlightened circles, they had to wrestle with new understandings of their ancient sources. Remarkably, many thousands of Jews still study the Talmud today, regularly and often intensively. Most of them are religiously observant, but there are also growing numbers of more secular students taking up the challenge to understand this massive and intriguing work. They can now do so under their own steam, thanks to the publication of so many translations and guidebooks in recent years.

Moulie Vidas is a secular Israeli who studied the Talmud at Tel Aviv University as an intellectual exercise and not out of religious commitment. He became fascinated by its unique literary form and went on to complete a doctorate at Princeton. He has based *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* on his dissertation. It still reads as a technical piece of academic research. He has no truck with the casual reader, instead targeting those with an existing knowledge of the literary history of the Talmud and challenging them to think anew about certain problems. Many scientific



The rehearsal for an ordination in the New Synagogue, Dresden, 2006

Jacobs, a man of great rabbinic learning and a superb teacher; he matches the stimulating and entertaining style of his precursor. While never failing to note traditional Jewish views on the origin, value and purpose of the Talmud, Freedman also provides more scientific and historical explanations. He is familiar with much current scholarship, but his style of presentation is never tedious, so that readers will be able to cover extensive ground in what is a remarkable odyssey without feeling the con-

Jewish world, even when its centres of Jewish population and study disintegrated and were replaced from the eleventh century onwards by the new and growing communities of Europe and North Africa which, in their turn, produced their own *yeshivot* and talmudic sages.

Freedman relates how many Christian churchmen (sometimes converted Jews), who saw the Talmud as the enemy of their faith, polemicized against its contents, censored its text, and promoted its physical destruction. He

studies are cited and closely analysed, and some passages from the Babylonian Talmud are closely examined in a literary-critical fashion. Since the Palestinian version of the text was created in a more harassed environment and edited more quickly, there appears to have been no opportunity to expand it discursively, as was later done in Babylonia. A comparison of the treatment of similar topics in the two Talmuds therefore helps Vidas to formulate his views on how the Babylonian teachers edited earlier traditions. For those with the interest and energy to stay the course, there are stimulating ideas and challenging suggestions.

Vidas explains current scholarly thinking on how the Talmud is structured. The layers begin with statements of traditional teaching, attributed to certain scholars, and then move on to more discursive and anonymous material. The usual conclusion is that these later editors were "creative transmitters" who saw the need for development in exegesis and in elements of religious practice, but attempted to justify such development by presenting it as a truer development of the original traditions, not a radical departure from them.

By contrast, Vidas argues that these later editors were actually more iconoclastic than has hitherto been recognized. They were not hiding behind the tradition but promoting their own agenda. In addition to contributing to the literary debate, Vidas also offers interesting perspectives on the connection between the reciters of talmudic traditions and the Zoroastrian magi, on the relationship between such reciters and Jewish mystical texts (*hekhalot*) of the period, and on the ideological motivations of the later rabbis.

In conclusion, Harry Freedman can look forward to being nodded through with a smile and a pat on the back. Moulie Vidas may expect to be stopped in his tracks and subjected to scrutiny and argument.