A Guide to the Layout of a Talmud Page

There are several primary and secondary sources of comments on the Talmud. The majority of them are medieval. This is true even though the Talmud was composed about a hundred years before the birth of Christ. The Talmud was redacted during the period of diaspora when Jewish communities were dispersed across the Mediterranean basin, and the central question of Jewish life was the creation of unified law and tradition. The Talmud records the oral teachings of the sages of the earlier centuries, and the extensive commentaries on the text of the Talmud were the means by which these teachings were preserved.

The Talmud is composed of two parts: the Mishnah and the Gemara. The Mishnah records the teachings of the rabbis, and the Gemara is an analysis of and expansion on the Mishnah. The Gemara is divided into six ‘orders’ according to their subject matter: Avot (Heb., ‘generations’), Nezikin (Heb., ‘legal decisions’), Soferim (Heb., ‘scribes’), Ketuvim (Heb., ‘books of the Bible’), Eruvin (Heb., ‘route’), and Kelim (Heb., ‘vessels’). Each order is divided into ‘tractates,’ which are organized into ‘chapters.’ The Talmud is composed of sixty-three ‘orders’ and 600 ‘tractates,’ which are organized into six ‘orders’ according to their subject matter.

Mishnah: The Mishnah (Heb., ‘repetition’) is the primary record of the teaching, decisions, and disputes of a group of Jewish religious and judicial scholars, known as Tannaim, who were active from about 30 BCE to 200 CE, mostly in the areas now known as Israel and Palestine. Originally transmitted orally, the Mishnah was redacted into its current form and committed to writing around the year 200 CE by R’ Yehudah haNasi. The language of the Mishnah is Hebrew. The Mishnah is divided into sixty-three ‘tractates,’ which are organized into six ‘orders’ according to their subject matter.

Gemara: The Gemara (Aramaic, ‘study,’) is an analysis of and expansion upon the material presented in the Mishnah. Taken together, the Mishnah and Gemara make up the Talmud. The Gemara records the oral discussions of a group of scholars, known as Amoraim, who were active from about 200 to 500 CE, in the areas of present-day Iraq, Israel, and Palestine. These discussions often center around statements of the Tannaim and are structured by the anonymous voice of a redactor (or group of redactors) known as the stam (Heb., ‘plain’ or ‘attributed’). There are two versions of the Gemara. The Yerushalmi (also known as the ‘Jerusalem’ or ‘Palestinian’ Talmud) was compiled in what is now northern Israel around 400 CE. The Bavli or Babylonian Talmud was redacted about a hundred years later in the Jewish communities of Mesopotamia. Traditionally the redaction of the Bavli is attributed to R’ Ashi and his student Ravina. The Talmud Bavli is the more commonly studied of the two and is considered to be more authoritative when the two offer different legal rulings. The primary language of the Gemara in both versions is Aramaic, although quoted material in Hebrew is common (mostly from biblical texts or earlier tannaitic material), and words in Greek, Latin, or other languages occasionally occur. In literary form, the Gemara is a complex combination of legal debate, case law, legend, textual analysis, and philosophical inquiry. Its subject matter covers nearly every imaginable facet of ancient Jewish life, ranging from religious, civil, and criminal law to biblical interpretation to speculation about and investigation of the natural world.

Rashi: Rashi (an acronym for R’ Shlomo Yitzchaki) was an eleventh-century scholar active in France. Rashi compiled the first complete commentary on the Talmud. His commentary focuses on helping students understand the plain meaning of the text. Both the Mishnah and Gemara are written in a brief, terse style, without the use of punctuation or vowel markings. Rashi’s comments are therefore directed toward helping readers work their way through the text and understand its basic form and content. Rashi also offers explanations of unusual or rare vocabulary and concepts and occasionally indicates preferred readings in cases where manuscripts differ. Rashi’s commentary is always set forth in a semi-cursive typeface called ‘Rashi script,’ is positioned on the gutter side of a printed page of Talmud.

Other Commentaries: Various other commentaries appear in the margins of a printed page of Talmud. None of these minor works cover the entirety of the Talmud, so different tractates include different commentaries in this area. Among these are the comments of Rabbenu Chananel (11th c., Tunisia), the Sefer haMafteach (Heb., ‘Book of the Key’) of R’ Nissim (11th c., Tunisia), Tosofet Yeshanim (Heb.: ‘Additions of the Ancients’) 13th c. France and Germany, the Mainz Commentary compiled by the students of Rabbenu Gershon b. Yehudah (11th c., Germany), the Tosofet Midrash (Heb.: ‘Additions of the Midrash’) of R’ Yeshayahu diTrani (13th c., Italy), and the Shittah Mequbetzet (Heb.: ‘Gathered Interpretation’) of R’ Beniziel Ashkenazi (16th c., Egypt and Jerusalem).

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