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## THE JEWISH TALMUD AND ITS USE FOR CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

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### SYNOPSIS

The Talmud is a collection of many ancient rabbinic writings extending back even before the time of Jesus. This compilation was completed around AD 550 and includes polemics against Jesus, attempting to present Him in a negative light.

The Talmud is known also as the “Oral Law” among Orthodox Jews. They claim that it was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai along with the written law — the Torah — and that it was passed on orally from Moses to Joshua to the Prophets and finally to the Rabbis who wrote it out.

Although there is absolutely no hard evidence that the Oral Law came from Moses, it nevertheless contains history and represents the primary rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures.

Orthodox Jews regard the Talmud as authoritative and look to it for guidance more than to the Hebrew Bible. In many ways, the Talmud provides fodder for the Christian apologist. For one thing, Talmudic thought is often at odds with the prevailing rabbinic opinions of today. As one example, today’s rabbis dismiss Jesus because He failed to set up an everlasting kingdom, as Scripture had prophesied. However, the Talmud comments that there are two separate descriptions of the Messiah. One describes Him coming humbly and even dying, while the other describes Messiah coming triumphantly.

Numerous Talmudic passages also acknowledge that Jesus had been a worker of miracles. While the Talmud describes these miracles as “magic” or “sorcery,” these admissions still have apologetic value.

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According to Jewish sources, the Babylonian Talmud is at the center of mainstream Judaism. It represents the commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures, a compilation of the writings of many sages and rabbis over a period of hundreds of years, perhaps even predating Jesus. However, it is much more than a commentary. Often, the rabbis inserted their own thoughts where they felt that the Scriptures had left many things unsaid.

It is a massive work. By one count, it contains 6,200 pages, and is comprised of two parts: "The Talmud consists of what are known as the Gemara [compiled around AD 550] and the Mishnah [compiled around AD 200]."<sup>1</sup> However, there are two Talmuds: the Palestinian and the more comprehensive Babylonian Talmud. When people mention "The Talmud," they are referring to the far more popular Babylonian Talmud.

The Babylonian Talmud, also called the "Oral Law," is claimed by many Orthodox Jews to have been given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It has become even more authoritative in practice than the Hebrew Bible, which we know as the "Old Testament": "Judaism has an 'Oral Torah' which is a tradition explaining what these scriptures mean and how to interpret them and apply the laws. Orthodox Jews believe God taught this Oral Torah to Moses, and to others, down to the present day. This tradition was maintained only in oral form until about the 2nd century A.D., when the oral law was compiled and written down in a document called the Mishnah."<sup>2</sup>

The Talmud has even arrogated for itself a position superior to that of Scripture:

- "Those who devote themselves to reading the Bible exercise a certain virtue, but not very much; those who study the Mischnah exercise virtue for which they will receive a reward; those, however, who take upon themselves to study the Gemarah exercise the highest virtue." (Babha Metsia, fol. 33a)
- "The Sacred Scriptures is like water, the Mischnah wine, and the Gemarah aromatic wine." (Sopherim XV, 7, fol. 13b)
- "He who transgresses the words of the scribes sins more gravely than the transgressors of the words of the law." (Sanhedrin X, 3, f.88b)

## JUSTIFYING THE CLAIM

The rabbis cannot appeal to any historical evidence. Instead, they cite the Mishnah tractate, Pirke Avot 1, perhaps written 1500 years after Moses: "Moses passed it [the 'Oral Law'] on to Joshua. Joshua gave it to the Elders. The Elders gave it to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it to the Men of the Great Assembly [including Ezra and Nehemiah]."

Orthodox Jews believe that the Hebrew Scriptures cannot be understood and applied without the commentary from the Talmud. Therefore, they reason, the Talmud itself must also have been given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Why? Since the Torah is incomplete by itself, there must have been other instructions given: "The Oral Torah [Talmud] is needed in order to maintain the context of the Written Torah. It therefore contains much more information than the Written Torah. The Written Torah needs the Oral Torah to make certain that the correct meaning is conveyed and understood."<sup>3</sup>

However, there are many problems connected with this claim:

1. The contents of the Talmud are clearly uninspired. Here's one example: "When a man talks too much to his wife, he causes evil to himself, disregards the words of Torah and in the end will inherit Gehenna." (Pirke Avot)
2. The Talmud often contradicts the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, one Talmudic Rabbi often contradicts another.
3. Rather than declaring, "Thus says the Lord," the Talmud is comprised of rabbinic discussions, one rabbi disagreeing with another.
4. The Hebrew Scriptures give absolutely no support for the simultaneous existence of an Oral Law.

Scripture even contradicts such a claim. For instance: "Moses came and told the people *all* the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.' And *Moses wrote down all the words* of the LORD" (Exod. 24:3–4, emphasis added; all Bible quotations come from the ESV).

All of the words of the Lord had been written down by Moses. These were the very words that Israel had sworn to keep, and no others! This leaves no room for the existence of an authoritative Oral Law.

Furthermore, God had covenanted with Israel to follow a *written* Law, not an Oral Law: "If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions'" (Deut. 28:58–59).

Moreover, we fail to encounter the existence of a second law — an Oral Law — anywhere in Scripture: "And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them" (Josh. 8:34–35). If Moses had passed on the Oral Law to Joshua, as the Talmud claims, then it should have been recited. However, Joshua read *everything* that Moses commanded him. This leaves no room for the existence of any unwritten law.

Later, Joshua charged the Israelites: "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left" (Josh. 23:6). Had Joshua been in possession of an Oral Law, why would he not have commanded Israel to obey it along with the written law? Certainly, the rabbis would not claim that Joshua had failed in his duty.

Throughout the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures, there is not the slightest hint of the presence of an Oral Law. Not once did a Prophet of Israel indict the people for having neglected the Oral Law! This kind of condemnation is nowhere to be found.

Besides this, the Torah was often read at Covenant renewals and revivals (Exod. 24:7; 2 Kings 23:1–3; Neh. 8:1–18). However, there is absolutely *no* indication that the Oral Law was ever recited. It seems to have been entirely absent.

All of this contradicts the claim of the rabbis that the Talmud was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and is therefore authoritative. As a matter of fact, the Jewish exaltation of the Talmud to the level of Scripture represents the serious offense of adding to the Law (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32)!

## THE TALMUD AND CHRISTIANITY

Does this suggest that the Talmud is worthless in terms of supporting Christian truth claims? Not at all! Even though the Talmud is not God-given and is even blasphemous in many regards, it is still a valuable historical document.

Why is this important? For one thing, the Talmud sometimes contradicts present-day rabbinic assertions! For example, the New Testament (John 19:37; Rev. 1:7) regards Zechariah 12:10 as Messianic: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him [Messiah] whom they [Israel] have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.” Against the Christian Messianic interpretation, Rabbi Gerald Sigal has written that the one pierced is actually the nation of Israel: “God cannot literally be pierced. The idea of piercing God expresses the fact that Israel stands in a very special relationship to God among all the nations of the earth. God identifies with His people to the degree that He takes part figuratively in the nation’s destiny. To attack (pierce) Israel is to attack God.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet the context of Zechariah 12:10 argues against Segal. As a result of this “piercing,” Israel mourns for her sin (Zech. 13:1). This would not at all have been likely if Israel had been the victim of the piercing.

Besides, the Talmud doesn’t affirm Segal’s interpretation. Instead, it acknowledges that Zechariah might be prophesying about the death of Messiah:

*And the land shall mourn, every family apart; the family of the house of David apart, and their wives apart [Zech. 12:12]... What is the cause of the mourning mentioned in the last cited verse? — R. Dosa and the Rabbis differ on the point. One explained, The cause is the slaying of Messiah the son of Joseph, and the other explained, The cause is the slaying of the Evil Inclination. It is well according to him who explains that the cause is the slaying of Messiah the son of Joseph, since that well agrees with the Scriptural verse, And they shall look upon me because they have thrust him through, and they shall mourn for him as one mourneth for his only son. (Sukkah 52A5)*

This same Talmudic commentary further contradicts the modern rabbis by acknowledging the possibility of two separate Messiahs — the first would come

humbly and die; the second would set up an everlasting kingdom.<sup>6</sup> This is important because the modern rabbis reject the Christian narrative of two Messianic comings, claiming instead that when the Messiah initially comes, there will be peace and an everlasting kingdom. But when Jesus came, there was neither.

We find that modern rabbis conveniently ignore much Talmudic thought. The late Hebraic scholar turned Christian, Rachmiel Frydland, pointed out that not only do some Talmud rabbis perceive two distinct portraits of the Messiah within Scripture, “a second explanation of the seemingly contradictory portrayals of Messiah as one both humiliated and exalted appears elsewhere in the Talmud”: “[Rabbi] Alexandri said that [Rabbi] Joshua bar Levi combined the two paradoxical passages; the one that says, ‘Behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven’ (Dan. 7:13; showing Messiah’s glory) and the other verse that says, ‘poor and riding upon a donkey’ (Zech. 9:9; showing Messiah’s humility)” (Sanhedrin 98A).<sup>7</sup>

## GOSPEL AGREEMENT

In other places, the Talmud dramatically endorses the gospel narrative, albeit indirectly. In a book devoted to explaining why the Jewish rejection of Jesus was entirely reasonable, Orthodox Jewish scholar David Klinghoffer admitted:

*The Talmud states that from forty years before the Temple’s destruction and onward, there were supernatural omens of the disaster to come — that is, starting from the inception of the Christian religion following the death of Jesus. The eternal fire of the Temple altar would not stay lit. The monumental bronze Temple gates opened by themselves. Josephus confirms the Talmud’s account of the inner Sanctuary’s east gate and its mysterious openings. He adds other portents from these years: a bright light shining around the altar and the Sanctuary at three in the morning, a cow brought for sacrifice giving birth to a lamb, apparitions of chariots and armies flying through the sky above the whole land of Israel.”<sup>8</sup>*

Renowned Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner cites these same omens from the Jerusalem Talmud: “Forty years before the destruction of the Temple, the western light went out, the crimson thread remained crimson, and the lot for the Lord always came up in the left hand. They would close the gates of the Temple by night and get up in the morning and find them wide open.”<sup>9</sup>

Amazingly, after the Crucifixion (ca. AD 30) and for the next forty years until the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, Israel was saturated with a series of miraculous omens pointing ominously to its future destruction.

Why would Jewish sources trying to debunk Christianity make such incredible admissions that support the Christian narrative? Klinghoffer suggests the miraculous events were omens directed against the Jewish believers in Christ: “Was God not warning the people of the disastrous course some [the Jewish Christians] had set out

upon?"<sup>10</sup> However, the Christians had fled to safety across the Jordan to Pella! Therefore, as Klinghoffer apparently sees it, the Christians should have been penalized for their heresy, but instead they left behind the Jews who didn't believe in Christ to pay the price!

What is even more unbelievable about Klinghoffer's explanation is the timing of the omens. They began at approximately the time of the Crucifixion (AD 30) and lasted for forty years until the destruction of the Temple. If Klinghoffer is correct that the omens were intended to demonstrate God's displeasure with *Jesus*, they should have ended at the Crucifixion, at which point God should have been appeased. Instead, since the omens *began* with the Crucifixion, it seems likely that they had served as a warning to repent for rejecting Jesus, not for following Him.

And when did the omens end? After the destruction of the Temple and the death of millions of unrepentant Jews. Why did the omens cease at this time? Presumably because the time for repentance had already passed! Now it was too late to save their nation from destruction.

Israel refused to repent of their rejection of Jesus and seek God's mercy, as Jesus had warned: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:37-38).

## ANOTHER INTERESTING EXAMPLE FROM THE TALMUD

Jewish anti-Christian apologist Rabbi Tovia Singer reluctantly admits:

*In Tractate Yoma 39b, the Talmud...discusses numerous remarkable phenomena that occurred in the Temple during the Yom Kippur service.... There was a strip of scarlet-dyed wool tied to the head of the scapegoat which would turn white in the presence of the large crowd gathered at the Temple on the Day of Atonement. The Jewish people perceived this miraculous transformation as a heavenly sign that their sins were forgiven. The Talmud relates, however, that 40 years before the destruction of the second Temple [approximately AD 30 at the time of the Crucifixion] the scarlet colored strip of wool did not turn white.<sup>11</sup>*

This is a damning admission. It seems that God put Israel on notice that He would no longer accept animal sacrifices now that the ultimate offering of Jesus had been accomplished.

How does Singer explain this cessation at the very time of the Cross? He claims that various miracles were gradually disappearing because Israel's "dedication to the golden rule slacked off." However, the timing of this cessation should make any God-fearing Jew wonder whether Israel's offense was rather that they had rejected their Messianic Hope.

Singer also insists that God had been angry with Jesus for deceiving Israel. If that were true, we would have expected Him to grant signs of His approval of the Crucifixion. Instead, there was this major sign of His disapproval — that He no longer honored the scapegoat to take away Israel’s sins. God’s timing could not have been worse for Singer’s argument!

### ACCORDING TO THE TALMUD, JESUS WAS A WORKER OF MIRACLES

Miracles validated Jesus’ claims, and His detractors would have to offer an alternative explanation or deny the miracles altogether. The safest thing for them to do was simply to deny that He had performed miracles. However, it is likely that Jesus’ miracles were so thoroughly accepted that the Talmud had little alternative but to ascribe them to Satan’s black magic. This is exactly what we find in many of the Talmudic writings:

- Shabbath 104B: “Jesus was a magician and a fool. Mary was an adulteress.”
- Sanhedrin 107B of the Babylonian Talmud: “Jesus [“Yeshu” in the Talmud] stood up a brick to symbolize an idol and bowed down to it. Jesus performed magic and incited the people of Israel and led them astray.”
- Sanhedrin 43A: “On Passover Eve they hanged Jesus [“Yeshu” in the Talmud] of Nazareth. He practiced sorcery, incited and led Israel astray.... Was Jesus of Nazareth deserving of a search for an argument in his favor? He was an enticer and the Torah says, ‘You shall not spare, nor shall you conceal him!’”

However, do the Talmud’s charges of “magic” or “sorcery” mean that it acknowledges that Jesus actually performed miracles, or is the argument merely that He used sleight-of-hand?

It would seem to be the former. In the New Testament, the Jewish leadership customarily accused Jesus of performing *supernatural* works, but by the hand of Satan (Matt. 9:34; 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15). Jesus had, plainly to all, been performing miracles. Therefore, the Pharisees *never* alleged that Jesus’ miracles were merely a matter of illusion. Israelites delivered from their infirmities and from Satanic possession would contradict such a claim. We have no Jewish rebuttals claiming that those seemingly healed really weren’t.

Consistent with these original allegations and the Talmud’s own testimony, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906) acknowledged:

*According to Celsus (in Origen, “Contra Celsum,” i. 28) and to the Talmud (Shab. 104b), Jesus learned magic in Egypt and performed his miracles by means of it; the latter work, in addition, states that he cut the magic formulas into his skin. It does not mention, however, the nature of his magic performances (Tosef.,*

*Shab. xi. 4; Yer. Shab. 18d); but as it states that the disciples of Jesus healed the sick "in the name of Jesus Pandera" (Yer. Shab. 14d; Ab. Zarah 27b; Eccl. R. i. 8) it may be assumed that its author held the miracles of Jesus also to have been miraculous cures. Different in nature is the witchcraft attributed to Jesus in the "Toledot." When Jesus was expelled from the circle of scholars, he is said to have returned secretly from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he inserted a parchment containing the "declared name of God" ("Shem ha-Meforash"), which was guarded in the Temple, into his skin, carried it away, and then, taking it out of his skin, he performed his miracles by its means.*<sup>12</sup>

Based upon their understanding of the Talmud, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* equates miracles with witchcraft (the power of Satan), as the Pharisees had. It therefore makes far more sense to interpret the Talmud's charges of "magic" as referring to miraculous events.

Although the Talmud contains other useful apologetic material that validates New Testament claims, due to its sheer size and various interpretive difficulties, it might be better to leave it to Talmudic Christian apologists to illuminate this material.

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## NOTES

1. <http://www.gotquestions.org/Talmud.html>.
2. Ibid.
3. <http://www.beingjewish.com/mesorah/whynotwritten.html>.
4. Gerald Sigal, *The Jew and the Christian Missionary* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1981), 79–80.
5. <http://halakhah.com/> (Talmud online).
6. Sukkah 52B; <http://halakhah.com/>.
7. Rachmiel Frydland, *What the Rabbis Know about the Messiah* (Cincinnati: Messianic Publishing Company, 1993), 5.
8. David Klinghoffer, *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus* (New York: Three Leaves Press, Doubleday, 2006), 117.
9. Jacob Neusner, *The Yerushalmi* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1994), 156–57.
10. Klinghoffer, 117.
11. <https://outreachjudaism.org/about-us/>.
12. The Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. "Jesus," vol. VII, pp. 171–72. Facsimile pages available as The Jewish Religion: Its Influence Today, Exhibit 277, Exhibit 278, and Exhibit 279, also available at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>.