



Jewish Writings

By Steve Cohen

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Important Writings for Religious Jewish People

Torah

For Orthodox and Conservative Jews today the centerpiece of Judaism is of course the Torah. The word Torah actually combines three different concepts or meanings. One understanding of the Torah is “the Jewish way of life.” All that we do and all that encompasses our life is found in what we call a “Torah way of life.”

Another understanding of Torah is that it encompasses the first five books of the Bible, or the Pentateuch.

A third understanding of Torah is that it refers to the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Sometimes, however, you may hear Jewish people refer to the Old Testament as Tanakh an acronym, made up from the initials of the three sets of writings found in the Old Testament. One, the Torah, is the first five books, second, Naviim, the prophets, and the third, Katuvim, the writings such as Psalms, Proverbs and Lamentations.

Talmud

Next in order of importance to religious Jewish people comes the writings compiled in the Talmud. The Talmud is a series of rabbinic commentaries upon the first five books of the Bible, the Torah. Frequently, I hear stories of a minister who has gone to visit a Jewish man, and has said, “I will read your Talmud if you will agree to read my Christian New Testament.” The minister did not get the good end of the bargain, because the Talmud in English contains nearly 18 volumes with an average of 500 pages per volume!

The Talmud is broken down into two major groupings. The first is the Mishnah, which means a repetition, or a statement, of the law. The compilation of the Mishnah is the work of Rabbi Judah Ha Nassi. The form in which it has come down to us contains many additions and modifications recorded by other scholars, and was completed by the end of the second century CE. It contains many rabbinic interpretations and understandings of what the Scriptures seek to tell us.

The second portion of the Talmud is known as Gemorrah, meaning the completion or conclusion. The Gemorrah was completed by the end of the fifth century CE. The Mishnah and the Gemorrah together form the Talmud. Religious Jewish people today study not only Torah, but also Talmud.

In effect, the Mishnah is rabbinic commentary on the Scriptures, and Gemorrah is rabbinic commentary upon the Mishnah. So many Jewish people who study today are not studying the Word of God directly, but rabbinic opinion and rabbinic opinion upon rabbinic opinion.

Pirke Avot

One tractate of the Talmud is known as Pirke Avot. Literally, it means the ethics (sayings) of the fathers. Within Pirke Avot, as maintained by Orthodox Jewish leaders, the oral law, or the Talmud, was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, at the same time as the written law, that is, the Torah.



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“From the humblest of mountains, Mount Sinai, Hashem chose to give us His Torah. He chose Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses our teacher) who was the most humble man who ever lived. Only through such a man, could the chain of Torah be passed down to the Jewish people. The Ten Commandments are the beginning of the chain, followed by The Five Books of the Torah. Each word of the Torah was received by Moshe Rabbeinu and in exactly the same way was given over to Yehoshua (Joshua), the next leader and prophet of Israel. Yehoshua faithfully gave it over word for word to the Elders and the Elders to the Prophets, until it reached the Men of the Great Assembly. Not only were the laws of the Torah handed down so carefully, but even Pirkei Avos - The Lessons of Good Behavior - were given over through this chain.” (Taken from Pirkei Avos translated by Pirchei Shoshanim located at web site: <http://www.pirchei.com/pictoral/avos/perek1/m01x.htm>)

By tracing (in its first two chapters) the uninterrupted transmission of tradition from the Sinaitic revelation through the leading tannaim of the generation after the destruction of the Second Temple, the treatise provides the credentials, so to speak, of these teachers and their subsequent students. In effect, it declares that in these teachers and their loyal disciples is found the unbroken, authoritative instruction that began at Sinai. Thus Avot serves as the underpinning of the authority of the Mishnah as a whole.

Today they claim the same level of authority and inspiration for the Talmud as is given to the Torah, even though the Talmud was not actually written down until many hundreds of years later.

It is customary for religious Jewish people to study one of the six chapters of Pirke Avot during the afternoons of the Sabbath, beginning with the Sabbath after Passover and concluding with the Sabbath before Rosh Hashannah (Jewish New Year).

One famous commentator upon the Bible and the Talmud was Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, who lived in the eleventh century CE. He is commonly referred to as “Rashi.” His name and works became synonymous with Jewish learning. In fact, tradition holds that Rashi’s contributions to Jewish scholarship was considered so significant that when the printing press was invented, his commentary was printed even before the Bible!

Shulhan Arukh

Another important collection, known as the Shulhan Arukh, is the code, or table, of Jewish laws, organized and presented in a simple form so that common man could understand and use them. The Shulhan Arukh, compiled by Joseph Caro in the early 16th century, deals with the rituals and legal questions helping Jewish people to understand their duties and responsibilities in daily life.

Within the Lutheran church, the hymnal gives us our liturgical order for worship. It contains our hymns and the order of the service. Within the synagogue, the Siddur, or prayer book, is the centerpiece for Jewish worship life. Here lies the order for morning prayers, afternoon and evening services, and prayers for the Sabbath and special holidays and festivals. Some of the more modern Siddurim contain the Pirke Avot. Many today are printed in both Hebrew and English on opposite pages.



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During certain special holidays, other books are used. For example, during Passover, the book called the Haggadah, which literally means “the telling,” is used to help recount the Exodus event. The Haggadah contains a collection of folklore and stories, songs and prayers, gathered over the centuries and compiled within one festival book. Jewish people are frequently known as a People of the Book – not only of the Scriptures, but of many other writings.

Books, learning and knowledge are an important part of Jewish life. Many of your Jewish friends would be happy to acquaint you with some of these works. A good source of information for Jewish life is found in a set of books known as *The Encyclopedia Judaica*, an 18-volume set available in most public libraries and synagogues.



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For More Information

For more information about this resource, please feel free to contact us at:

The Apple of His Eye Mission Society
PO Box 1649
Brentwood, TN 37024-1649
(888) 512-7753
info@appleofhiseye.org

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