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*Reading the Classic Jewish Texts, Barry Holtz*

It strikes me that the Talmud, in both its structure and its content, is a web of intertwined and sometimes contradictory opinions all tied together. This may be a result of the seemingly pressing need to include every opinion of well-known Rabbis of the past and to capture the traditions of Jewish ancestors.

Because the Talmud is a collection of commentaries about previous commentaries about previous commentaries etc., it clearly is a result of a very strong oral tradition. I ask myself what the original scripture was that set this chain of commentaries going. Was it the Holy Bible? Looking at the sample page of the Talmud, given in the reading, I realize that the Bible takes up the least amount of space on the page.

Yet there is much to learn about the values and traditions of the Jewish religion by the structure of the Talmud. The *mishnah* and *gemara* lie on the center of the page with a series of commentaries such as *Tosafot* and *Rashi* framing the central text. This framing, or nesting, of ideas seems to clutter the page, suggesting that in the oral tradition of the religion, there have been many different figures who have interpreted the scriptures in differing, maybe even opposing, ways. It is interesting that all of these figures in history have been given a place in the Talmud, even if their opinions may have contradicted other leaders' opinions. This brings up the question of hierarchy. I admit that as I read the glossary, which is usually a good tool for clarifying different ideas, I was finding it difficult to differentiate different texts. Many of the texts were defined as very important or widely respected and it was difficult to follow which ones are more important to whom and why. For example, the *Rashi* is described as the "heart" of the study of the Talmud (139). However, on the page, it is not the central text and is only one of the framing commentaries. In reality, there is probably no definite hierarchy among the texts because, as in many religions, there are different branches within the Jewish tradition that believe slightly different things. Therefore, because of the oral tradition and the mix of several ideas, the Talmud may be the only uniting piece among sects in the Jewish religion.

In addition to the structure of the Talmud, its content also is evidence of its strong oral tradition. Certain texts not only contradict each other but go off on tangents. The *Tosefta* is described as commentaries that are "unpredictable in sequence" (137). Because several of these texts were not recorded through writing, it is probably true that they were modified, expanded and branched off from the original works through the oral tradition. Consequently, the many texts in the Talmud sometimes contradict each other and there may be many versions of similar core ideas. Ultimately, the Talmud is structured for deep study and provides a way for the user to read several interpretations at once of similar topics. However, I worry that the user may depend so much on the material and be intimidated by the amount and content of the text, that s/he may be dissuaded to pursue study of the Talmud. In fact, I fear that s/he may depend so much on other interpretations of the scriptures that s/he may not have the capacity to interpret them him/herself.