

that evolved after centuries of scholarly effort by sages who lived in Palestine and Babylonia until the beginning of the Middle Ages. It has two main components: the Mishnah, a book of halakhah (law) written in Hebrew; and the commentary on the Mishnah, known as the Talmud (or Gemarah), in the limited sense of the word, a summary of discussion and elucidations of the Mishnah written in Aramaic-Hebrew jargon. . . .

The Talmud is ostensibly constructed along the lines of a legal tract, and many people commit the error of thinking that it is legal in essence. It treats the subjects with which it deals--basic halakhah, biblical verses, or traditions handed down by sages--as natural phenomena, components of objective reality. . . .

The Talmud reflects so wide a range of interests because it is not a homogeneous work composed by a single author. . . . the Talmud is the end result of the editing of the thoughts and sayings of many scholars over a long period . . . we cannot discern a clear trend or a specific objective in the Talmud. . . . At the same time, the Talmud has an unmistakable and striking character of its own, which . . . is collective, reflecting the quality of the Jewish people over a given period. . . .

. . . To a certain extent, the entire Talmud is framed by questions and answers, and even when not explicitly formulated, questions constitute the background to every statement and interpretation. (pp. 3-8)

The historical development of the oral law may be divided into three ages: (1) the age of the written law; its exegesis, exposition, and application to the life of Israel; (2) the Talmudic age; (3) the rabbinic age. These three ages are briefly sketched in the following pages.