

# THE TALMUD—A BIOGRAPHY

Banned, Censored and Burned. The Book They Couldn't Suppress

by [Harry Freedman](#)

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## KIRKUS REVIEW

A history of the Jewish people as reflected in its central text.

The Talmud, Freedman (*The Gospels' Veiled Agenda: Revolution, Priesthood and the Holy Grail*, 2009, etc.) explains in this capacious history, is an “arcane and obscure” compendium of interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. Containing nearly 2 million words, the original Talmud recorded discussions that took place among scholars in Babylon between the third and fifth centuries. Although the Talmud is now considered “the final authority on Jewish religious law and practice,” it began as an academic exercise of biblical exegesis, with analyses transmitted orally. “Talmudic scholars would happily base their rulings on it when responding to inquiries,” the author writes, “but they weren’t particularly bothered about laying it out in front of the masses as an object of study.” Once the Talmud became fixed in writing, it took on the function of law, and it became the focus of waves of anti-Semitism. Copies in France were destroyed in 1242, when Pope Gregory IX, in a sweeping condemnation of Jews, ordered the text to be burned. From 1553 to 1559, all copies found in Rome went up in flames. In creating the biography of a book, Freedman offers biographical sketches of major figures involved in its story, including the 11th-century rabbi known as Rashi, whose commentary forms part of the modern Talmud; Maimonides, “a giant on the Talmudic stage”; and Baruch Spinoza, a philosopher whose ideas challenged the teachings of the Talmud. The modern Talmud is a layered work, comprising quotations from the Mishnah, a codification of Jewish law written in the second to third centuries; Babylonian commentaries; additions by the original editors of the Talmud; and later material intended to provide introductions and conclusions to various topics.

Freedman brings impressive research to the biography of a 2,000-year-old text that still excites scholars, inspires controversy and reflects turbulent events in Jewish history.

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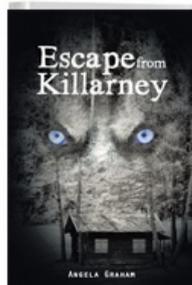
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