

WIT AND WISDOM OF THE TALMUD

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Wit and wisdom of the Talmud by Madison C. Peters

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MADISON C. PETERS

**WIT AND WISDOM
OF THE TALMUD**

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OF
THE TALMUD

EDITED BY
MADISON C. PETERS

Author of "Justice to the Jew," etc.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
by
RABBI H. PEREIRA MENDES



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PREFACE

WHILE gathering the facts for "Justice to the Jew," I chanced upon so many wise proverbs, witty sayings, beautiful parables, and quaint legends of the Talmud, that I became intensely interested in this remarkable literary production of antiquity. In its twelve folio volumes it embodies the mental labors of the ancient Jewish teachers during the period of about eight hundred years.

After a lecture at a Western university, by a well-known Rabbi, one of his hearers went to him and said: "I came to hear 'The Talmud,' in order to know what kind of mud it is," confessing his utter ignorance as to the very name (Talmud, Study, from *lamad*, to learn).

I once asked one of the most brilliantly gifted preachers in New York, if he had ever read anything from 'the Talmud.' "No," he answered, "only a few sentences which

now and then I have met by chance." Then I determined I would add to my Talmudic collection, which I had made for personal use, and give the Christian public some idea of the book which has been so remarkably powerful in the influence it exercised upon the thought and life of the Jews during the middle ages, and even down to the present time. I believe that readers will find this volume of incalculable value in the pursuit of wisdom, helpful in gaining a knowledge of the Jewish religion, and, I hope, that it will lead Christian scholars to study the subject further.

Among scores of other periodicals and books consulted, I beg to acknowledge my indebtedness to the following works:

"Parabeln, Legenden und Gedanken, aus dem Talmud," by Ludwig Seligman.

"The Poetry of the Talmud," by S. Sekles.

"Rabbinische Blumenlese," by Leopold Dukes.

"The Talmud," by Emanuel Deutsch.

"Talmudic Sayings," by Rabbi Henry Cohen.

"Talmudic Legends," by L. Weiss.

"Translations of the Talmud," by Polano.

Rodkinson's "Talmud."

"Introduction to the Talmud," by Mielziner.

Hershon's "Genesis," and the Prayer-book.

MADISON C. PETERS.

INTRODUCTION

THE Torah (or law) was given A.M. 2448. From the following forty years of the desert-life down to the present day, countless rulings, precedents, etc., have accumulated. Some are indicated in various passages in the Bible, e.g., ceremonies or rules observed in mourning, or have come to us by tradition.

Rabbi Judah Hanassi, surnamed the Holy, collected all attainable and published them in what we call the Mishna, A.M. 3980.

The Mishna contains six sections or Sedarim. Each section or Seder contains Mas-sechtoth or treatises, as follows:

Section I: Seeds.—After a chapter devoted to the benedictions, it treats of tithes, first fruits, sacrifices, and gifts due from the produce of the land to the priests, the Levites, and the poor; of the cessation of agricultural labor during the Sabbatic year; and of the prohib-

ited mixtures in seeds and in grafting.—In all eleven treatises.

Section II: Feasts.—Of the Sabbath and Sabbath rest, of feasts and fasts: Passover, Tabernacles, New Year, the Day of Atonement, and the Fasts; of work forbidden, ceremonies to be observed, and sacrifices to be brought on those days.—Twelve treatises.

Section III: Women.—The legislation concerning marriage, divorce, the levirate marriage, and adultery; vows and the regulations for the Nazirite.—Seven treatises.

Section IV: Fines.—Civil legislation, besides a tractate on idolatry, and one called *Aboth*, consisting of a collection of the ethical sentences of the Rabbis. This section treats of commercial transactions, purchases, sales, mortgages, prescriptions, etc.; of legal procedure, of the organization of tribunals, of witnesses, oaths, etc.—Ten treatises.

Section V: Sacred Things.—The legislation concerning sacrifices, the first-born, clean and unclean animals; the description of Herod's Temple.—Eleven treatises.

Section VI: Purifications.—Laws concerning Levitical cleanness and uncleanness; clean

and unclean persons and things, objects capable of becoming unclean by contact. Purifications.—Twelve treatises.

Many decisions not included by Rabbi Jehudah, because not considered by him sufficiently authoritative, or because they were merely repetitions, were collected later under the name of Boraithoth in a work called the Tosiphtha, or Addition (Supplement), by Rabbis Hiya and Oshaya of Babylon. Yet other Boraithoth are to be found in the Gemara.

The Gemara is a comment on the Mishna, just as the Mishna is a comment on the Torah or Law. One Gemara, the work of the Palestine schools, inaccurately but generally called the Jerusalem Talmud, was edited in Tiberias about 380 c.e. The other, much larger, better known and constituting what is meant when the word "Talmud" is used, is the work of the Babylonian schools, and was edited by Rabbi Ashi and his disciple, Rabbi José, about 500 c.e. This is usually published with the commentary of the celebrated Rashi, and with comments called Tosephoth.

The Rabbis identified with the Mishna are called Tanaim, or teachers; those of the Ge-