

Layered Structure of the Babylonian Talmud

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The Babylonian Talmud, often called the Bavli, is a repository of rules of Jewish practice. Written in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, its spokesmen span at least five centuries, from 1-550 CE. No one knows with certainty how the Bavli came into being. Opinions differ as to how the teachings of many rabbis, living in different locations and time periods, coalesced into one text.

The overall structure of the Bavli is easy to grasp: the Mishnah, published about 200 CE, lies at its base. Each individual piece of Mishnah, also called a mishnah, is followed by gemara, i.e., discussion and analysis by later rabbis. The Mishnah's spokesmen are called tannaim, and their dicta "tannaitic." The gemara's spokesmen are called amoraim, and their dicta "amoraic."

A unit of discourse in the gemara, a sugya, consists of comments on a single statement in the Mishnah. A typical sugya is composed of several layers. The oldest type of sugya is a collection of tannaitic texts called baraitot. The term signifies that they are "outside" the Mishnah. The baraitot address the same issues as the mishnah under discussion and are articulated by mostly the same spokesmen in roughly the same time period. These passages formed the earliest commentary on the Mishnah.

As time passed, a second layer took shape. Amoraim explained difficult statements in the Mishnah and its associated baraitot, introduced new rules, pointed out contradictions between one text and another and resolved them, provided biblical prooftexts, and so on.

At the end of the amoraic period, around 550 C.E, a typical sugya was composed of a series of tannaitic and amoraic passages. The relationship of these passages to each other was often not evident, however. Many sugyot were hard to understand. To solve this problem, a number of individuals in the post-amoraic period interpolated additional comments into the sugya. This third layer is called *stama d'gemara*, or stam for short. Stam, in this context, means "anonymous," because these later contributors did not disclose their names. Nor did they issue halakhic statements of their own. The stam commentators wove the earlier materials together into a unified whole, provided transitions from one tannaitic or amoraic text to the next, and drew the implications of the various texts. The stam layer accounts for over 50% of all Talmudic material.