

MISHNAH (ORAL TORAH)

The following is a very brief explanation about oral Torah. When I use the term "Torah" I am usually referring to those teachings contained in the first five books of the Bible. Or I can refer to any Biblical instruction, including New Testament texts, as "Torah." The Torah has a broad range of meanings as well as a narrow definition. If you were to ask an orthodox Jew what is the Torah, he may give you a different answer. He would first talk about the written Torah, but then he would include in his definition the oral Torah.



History of the Oral Torah

The oral Torah was compiled and written down in a document called the Mishnah. Over the next few centuries, additional commentaries elaborating on the Mishnah were written down in Jerusalem and Babylon. These additional commentaries are known as the Gemara. The Gemara and the Mishnah together are known as the Talmud. This was completed in the 5th century C.E.

Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donim in his book "To Be a Jew" has this to say about the oral Torah: "By Torah is also meant the Oral Torah 'which Moses received at Sinai, and transmitted to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly...' The Oral Torah included the finer points of the commandments, the details of the general principles contained in the Scriptures and the ways by which the commandments were to be applied."

Yah gave Moses the written Torah, and to accompany the written Torah it is believed that Yah also gave Moses an oral Torah. This oral Torah was verbally passed down to Joshua, and Joshua verbally passed it down to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. By the year 200 CE this oral Torah which had been transmitted through memory was now put in writing. The first piece of writing is called the Mishnah.

Definition and Explanation of Mishnah

The name "Mishnah" comes from a Hebrew root meaning to teach by repetition. The Hebrew root "ShNH" means "to repeat," and refers to memorization by repetition. "Mishnah" therefore has the sense of "that which is memorized". It was the first of several Rabbinic documents written between the 2nd-7th centuries CE that contained the oral Torah.

The Mishnah has six sedarim (divisions) each containing subdivisions known as tractates. Each tractate is divided into chapters. These are the different sedarim (divisions) with their tractates (subdivisions):

- Zera'im "Seeds": 11 tractates...deals mostly with portions of crops and foodstuffs that must be set aside for the Priests and poor, etc.,
- Mo'ed "Festivals": 12 tractates...the weekly Sabbath and the cycle of annual festivals.

- Nashim "Women": 7 tractates...concerning marriage, divorce, etc., including laws of oaths.
- Neziqin "Torts": 10 tractates...this section covers the full range of civil and criminal laws
- Qodashim "Sacred Things": 11 tractates...about the Temple and sacrificial worship
- Tohorot "Purity": 12 tractates

Some pro-Mishnah people will argue that the Torah doesn't define some commands. The Torah will sometimes introduce a command, but the Mishnah will define that command. For example, the Torah says we are not to work on the Sabbath, but it does not define "work." The oral Torah defines work. Here is what is prohibited on the Sabbath according to the oral Torah: 1) Sowing 2) Plowing 3) Reaping 4) Binding sheaves 5) Threshing 6) Winnowing 7) Selecting 8) Grinding 9) Sifting 10) Kneading 11) Baking 12) Shearing wool 13) Washing wool 14) Beating wool 15) Dyeing wool 16) Spinning 17) Weaving 18) Making two loops 19) Weaving two threads 20) Separating two threads 21) Tying 22) Untying 23) Sewing two stitches 24) Tearing 25) Trapping 26) Slaughtering 27) Flaying 28) Salting meat 29) Curing hide 30) Scraping hide 31) Cutting hide up 32) Writing two letters 33) Erasing two letters 34) Building 35) Tearing a building down 36) Extinguishing a fire 37) Kindling a fire 38) Hitting with a hammer 39) Taking an object from the private domain to the public, or transporting an object in the public domain. (Mishnah Shabbat, 7:2)

Here is another example. Exodus 12 Yah commands the eating of roasted lamb at Passover, but it doesn't explain how one is to roast the lamb. The oral Torah explains how one is to roast the lamb. The Mishnah says that one pomegranate stick is to be inserted length wise into the cavity and another pomegranate stick is to run across the chest. According to Exodus 12:9 the lamb was not to be boiled. A pomegranate stick was used because it was a drier wood. Other types of wood contained more moisture and when the lamb was being roasted, the moisture from these woods could cause the lamb to be boiled thus breaking the commandment. There are other examples of the oral Torah clarifying the written Torah.

Problems with the Mishnah

How was the Mishnah passed down? What is the problem with oral transmission? Remember the game "operator?" The oral Torah was written down hundreds of years after the original event. When something is orally passed down from one generation to another, it has the chance of becoming distorted and corrupted.

QUESTION: When is the greatest level of accuracy with oral transmission? The greatest level of accuracy occurs when something is orally transmitted then immediately written down (like oral dictation). Before the New Testament was written, it was passed along orally. The teachings of Yeshua were orally taught from one believer to another. Then about 20-40 years later, Messiah's teachings were written down. Unlike the Mishnah the New Testament was written by those individuals who were first hand witnesses. **1John 1:1** *"What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what **we have seen with our eyes**, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life"* John saw, heard, touched, and experienced Messiah. John, and the Renewed Testament writers, took it upon themselves to write the account of the life and teachings of Messiah. **Luke 1:1-2** says, *"Dear Theophilos: Concerning the matters that have taken place among us, many people have undertaken to draw up accounts based on what was handed down to us by those who from the start were eyewitnesses and proclaimers of the message."*

QUESTION: What if the gospel accounts were orally transmitted from one believe to another over a period of 500 years, and then were written down? How accurate would these accounts be? How many "extras" could have been included? This is the problem with the Mishnah. Too many years transpired from the original event (that can't be Biblically proven or verified) at Mt. Sinai till it was written down by the "Men of the Great Assembly."

Responding to the Mishnah

How did the religious groups of the first century (Messiah's time) respond to the oral Torah? The leading religious group, the Pharisees, considered the oral Torah authoritative and inspired. The Sadducees, however, rejected the oral Torah and said it was not authoritative or binding.

QUESTION: How should believers respond to the Mishnah? I do not consider the Mishnah authoritative or inspired by Yah. There are some things we can learn from the Mishnah, but the Bible is my final authority for faith and practice. There is also strong Biblical evidence that Yah did not give an oral Torah: **Deut. 31:9** says, *"So Moses wrote down this Torah."* Deut. 31:24 says, *"After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this Torah from beginning to end."* (also Exod. 20:1, 21:1 & 24:3-4)

Looking for spiritually inspired writings in the Talmud, Mishnah, Zohar, or Cabala is like looking for a needle in a hay stack. There may be some nugget there somewhere, but the effort involved to find it is not worth the trouble. Possibly, for those who know everything there is to know about the Torah, those books could be researched, but what person exists that knows everything about the Torah? I strongly believe that the time and effort spent reading those Talmudic type writings could benefit much greater if it was spent learning the Biblical scriptures. Of this I have no doubt.

Moses wrote everything down, and nothing was left out. Scripture tells us not to add to what has been written (Deut. 4:2 & Rev. 22:18). Nowhere in the written Torah is there any mention or allusion to an oral Torah. God is always giving us instruction to be careful to observe the things written in the book of the Torah (Joshua

1:7,8 & 23:6).

If there was an oral Torah then why don't any of the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel) or even King David or Solomon make reference to it? I believe the oral Torah is a Rabbinic fence placed around the written Torah.

I would like to give our Savior's thoughts on the matter. I believe this is what Messiah was referring to when He said in **Matt. 23:4** ***"They tie heavy loads onto people's shoulders but won't lift a finger to help them carry them."*** The Mishnah is an exhausting work. I believe those who wrote the Mishnah already had a legalistic approach to the written Torah.

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