



# Is the Talmud the Word of God? | Aish

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I believe that the Tanakh is the word of God, but I don't know if this is true of the Talmud. Wasn't the Talmud written by scholars much later, who were trying their best to understand God's Torah? And isn't it possible they made some mistakes? The Talmud certainly contains many debates, which seems to say that no one was that sure what God originally meant. If so, wouldn't it be better to simply follow the Torah itself without the commentary and embellishments of rabbis from so many years later?

## The Aish Rabbi Replies

Thank you for your very important question. The first point I would like to make is that it is clear that the Torah was given with *some* sort of explanation. Very many of the Torah's laws are entirely meaningless without further elaboration – such as how to observe Shabbat, make Tefillin, slaughter an animal, do the Temple service, etc. (See [this link](#) for more on that.)

Thus, it is clear that some type of “Talmud” was taught to Moses at Sinai together with the written Torah. This is what we know as the Oral Law.

Originally, God instructed Israel to commit the Oral Law to memory, being transmitted by word of mouth from teacher to student over the generations. This served to preserve it as a living

document, which students would master only through an intense process of discussion and internalization, while closely bonding with their teacher. And this is how the Oral Law was taught and studied for approximately the first 1500 years of its existence.

However, the Sages of later generations realized that over time, especially during periods of exile and persecution, the Oral Law was liable to be forgotten, causing a breakdown of tradition. They thus began a process of recording the Oral Torah – beginning primarily with the Mishna in the early third century and continuing with the more extensive Talmud (containing explanations and elaborations of the Mishna) at around 500 C.E.

See [this link](#) for a more thorough treatment of the content and history of the Oral Law.

Thus, fundamentally, we view the Talmud as part of God's Torah. It was not invented out of thin air but was predicated upon the traditions the Rabbis had been carrying with them orally from Sinai. In fact, a number of the laws recorded in the Talmud are described as "a law of Moses from Sinai" (*"halacha l'Moshe mi'Sinai"*).

Furthermore, Moses did not teach only specific laws to future generations. There was a set of principles God taught Moses for understanding the Torah's text and making further deductions and derivations. (There are a number of lists of such principles recorded in the Oral Torah today.)

In a sense, however, the Talmud is much more than just the collection of laws passed orally from Moses. It discusses many additional decrees the Rabbis instituted to safeguard Torah

observance, new enactments (such as the holidays of Chanukah and Purim), debates about principles, details and sources, ethical stories and teachings, and additional developments in the legal canon, as is natural for any living body of law.

Naturally, unlike the written Torah, the text of the Talmud is not the word for word teachings of Moses. These are teachings in the Rabbis' own words. But they stem from the traditions the Rabbis received from their teachers, going back in a direct transmission from Sinai. Maimonides (intro. to Mishne Torah 21) records the entire line of transmission – the leading rabbi of each generation – from Moses until the recording of the Talmud (totaling 40 generations). Although it's undeniable that many years elapsed and numerous questions and debates crept in, the Sages of the Talmud were hardly guessing or inventing explanations out of thin air.

In addition, the laws discussed in the Talmud were being observed ever since Sinai. How to keep kosher, slaughter an animal, observe Shabbat, make Tefillin etc. were known to every generation. There simply wasn't room for the Rabbis to begin inventing their own laws or explanations.

If so, why does the Talmud contain so many debates? Isn't it clear that much of Moses's original law had been forgotten? Isn't a lot of the Talmud merely guesswork?

First of all, when one studies the Talmud closely, he will see that this is really not the case. Many issues are debated, but by far all of the basics and fundamentals are agreed upon without debate. The vast majority of the Talmud's debates relate to the Rabbinical extensions of the Torah and not the Torah law itself. Sometimes

they do relate to Torah law, but to relatively fine points or specialized applications, bearing little practical relevance. (Keep in mind that the practical laws were being observed by the nation since Sinai and did not leave room for debate.) And much of the time the Sages do not debate if a particular Torah law is true, but exactly how it may be derived from the text of the Torah.

By far more significant, however, is a principle stated several times in the Talmud regarding debates between scholars (e.g. Gittin 6b): “These and these are the words of the living God.” Even when the scholars of the Talmud debated an issue, it was not simply a matter that one scholar had it right and the other wrong. The Torah is enormously broad and multifaceted. There are many valid angles of viewing it, and different people can study its wisdom and see different lessons and insights from the same words. In this vein, the Sages state: “There are 70 ‘faces’ to the Torah” (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15).

Thus, when two Talmudic scholars debate, it is not a matter that one is correctly stating what God said to Moses and the other is not. As great rabbis, versed in the methods used for making inferences from the Torah, both are in a sense correct. They are both expressing valid Torah truths (although of course in practical law, we can only follow one of their opinions). The Torah given to Moses has many aspects to it and can be accurately viewed from many perspectives. (God may have taught all the many potential meanings to Moses explicitly or He may have provided him with the basic framework, opening up each topic so that later scholars could make further derivations.)

Thus, the wisdom and debates of the Talmud, in all their diverseness and variety, may be accurately seen as correct and eternal Torah truths, as “the words of the living God.”

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