

# THE LITERATURE OF THE RABBIS



The 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in Israel was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and this threw *Judaism* into chaos.

Out of this chaos, though, the rabbinic era emerged, and around 200 CE, *Rabbi Judah* put into writing the oral traditions surrounding Jewish law. This document is known as the *Mishnah*.

Over the next three to five hundred years, the rabbis debated and commented on the *Mishna*, and the *Mishna* along with this commentary (known as the *Gemara*) comprises what today we call the *Talmud*. It is the most important document we have on Jewish law and the rabbinic thought behind it. Also, there are actually two versions of the *Talmud* – the *Babylonian Talmud* and the *Jerusalem Talmud*. The one, however, that most people are referring to when they simply say “*Talmud*” is the *Babylonian Talmud* which was compiled by Jewish communities in ancient Babylonia and is more complete. Also, references to tractates from the *Babylonian Talmud* are often prefaced with the letter “*B*” such as in “*B. Chagigah 14b.*”

Another important work that contains many of same rabbinical voices found in the *Talmud* is the *Midrash Rabbah* collection. This work is primarily a line-by-line rabbinic commentary on the *Torah* and some of the other books in the *Bible*.

In both of these works, though, we also find a little bit of Jewish mysticism.

In particular, one of the most important mystical references in the *Talmud* is the very brief story on the next slide of four colleagues who enter the “*Garden*.” One goes mad, one becomes a heretic, and one dies. Only the fourth returns safely, and this cryptic passage has always been interpreted as a warning of the dangers that lie ahead on the mystical path.

*“Our Rabbis taught: Four men entered the ‘Garden’, namely, Ben ‘Azzai and Ben Zoma, Aher, and R. Akiba. R. Akiba said to them: When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not, water, water! For it is said: He that speaks falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes. Ben ‘Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says: Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. Ben Zoma looked and became demented. Of him Scripture says: Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it. Aher mutilated the shoots (a euphemism for heresy). R. Akiba departed unhurt.”*  
*(B. Chagigah 14b)*



This same account appears in *Song of Songs Rabbah* with a couple of important differences. First, in the *Midrash Rabbah* version it is *Ben Azzai* who goes insane and *Ben Zoma* who dies, and second, it importantly says that *Rabbi Akiba* both entered in peace and left in peace. In Hebrew, the word for *peace* also implies *wholeness*, and, thus, this suggests that in order to survive the potential pitfalls of the mystical path, you first need to be someone who is already very balanced.

*“Four entered the Garden, Ben ‘Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha b. Abuya, and R. Akiba. Ben ‘Azzai peered [into the mysteries] and became demented; and of him it is said, Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee (Proverbs 25:16). Ben Zoma peered and died; and of him it says, Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints (Psalm 126:15). Elisha b. Abuya began to ‘lop the branches’. How did he ‘lop the branches’? When he entered a synagogue or house of study and saw children making progress in the Torah, he uttered incantations over them which brought them to a stop; and of him it is said, Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt (Ecclesiastes 5:5). R Akiba entered in peace and came out in peace.” (Song of Songs Rabbah 1:27)*

On the next slide is an excerpt from *Genesis Rabbah* that highlights even further *Ben Zoma's* mental problems.

*“It once happened that Simeon b. Zoma was standing wrapped in speculation, when R. Joshua passed and greeted him once and a second time, without his answering him. At the third time he answered him in confusion. ‘What means this, Ben Zomai!’ exclaimed he: ‘whence are the feet?’ ‘From nowhere, Rabbi,’ replied he. ‘I call heaven and earth to witness that I will not stir hence until you inform me whence are the feet,’ he urged. ‘I was contemplating the Creation [and have come to the conclusion] that between the upper and the nether waters there is but two or three fingerbreadths,’ he answered. ‘For it is not written here, AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD blew, but HOVERED, like a bird flying and flapping with its wings, its wings barely touching [the nest over which it hovers].’ Thereupon R. Joshua turned to his disciples and remarked to them, ‘The son of Zoma has gone.’ But a few days elapsed and the son of Zoma was in his [eternal] home.”*

*(Genesis Rabbah II:4)*

Approximately two thousand years ago, there were two main forms of Jewish mysticism known as the *Work of Creation* and the *Work of the Chariot*, and both of these are referenced in the *Talmud*.

*“MISHNAH THE [SUBJECT OF] FORBIDDEN RELATIONS MAY NOT BE EXPOUNDED IN THE PRESENCE OF THREE, NOR THE WORK OF CREATION IN THE PRESENCE OF TWO, NOR [THE WORK OF] THE CHARIOT IN THE PRESENCE OF ONE, UNLESS HE IS A SAGE AND UNDERSTANDS OF HIS OWN KNOWLEDGE.”*

*(B. Chagigah 11b)*

The *Work of Creation* is discussed extensively in the *Sefer Yetzirah (Book of Creation)*, and we will discuss it later in great detail.

The *Work of the Chariot*, on the other hand, is a reference to the visions of *Ezekiel*, and many today believe that this was a teaching on meditative methods. This, too, receives some mention in the *Sefer Yetzirah*.



Related to the *Work of the Chariot* is the *Hekhalot* (Palaces) literature which describes these mystical journeys and the dangers faced along the way as one ascends from one mystical palace to another. However, we won't have much to say about the *Hekhalot* literature because (1) very little of it has survived intact, (2) it is post-rabbinic, and (3) there is no guarantee that what is said in the *Hekhalot* literature corresponds to how the rabbis experienced the *Work of the Chariot* two thousand years ago.