

The Talmud has evolved from an oral tradition. To what extent is this reflected in the construction/layout of the written/printed Talmud?

Depending on which of the two Talmuds one looks at, we see that the oral tradition is reflected to varying degrees - possibly more so in the older Jerusalem Talmud. This older Talmud shows signs of insufficient editing, and the text often takes the form of winding discussions, linked by weak transitions, with parallel discussions that sometimes contradict each other. In this case we see that the Jerusalem Talmud is very much like a conversation or a debate, with arguments, counterarguments, digressions and the occasional wanderings of the human mind. The Jerusalem Talmud is frequently said to be more obscure than its counterpart - the Babylonian Talmud. The obscurity arises primarily from the sparsity of any consistent organization within the Jerusalem Talmud, and because of a lack of standard technical terms and rhetorical devices to link the discussions together. In this way the Jerusalem Talmud takes the form of a largely unedited chronicle of Rabbinic oral tradition.

The Babylonian Talmud is altogether a much richer text, but requires more skill to study. Individual pages will present multiple parallel arguments and commentaries on the featured Mishnah (which will be printed at the beginning of the chapter), separated physically on the page into blocks of discussion by individual rabbis. The pages of the Babylonian Talmud are also rich with references and links to other parts of the text and other sources (such as the Bible), not unlike the modern day notion of hypertext. The blocks of discussion on each page have no logical order, and in a sense it is up to the reader to 'listen in' on the conversation and glean from it what they choose. The reader can either choose to focus on the commentary of a particular rabbi, or can hear parallel arguments in rotation from different voices, much as one would sitting around a table during a discussion. In this way, there are multiple narrators each commenting on the same Mishnah, each trying to put their point of view across. The Tosafot of the Babylonian Talmud also acts as the counsel of the individual rabbis, providing links to alternate sources to reinforce their arguments (although usually they just create obscurity).

These factors, when combined, make the Babylonian Talmud a rich hypertext that closely mimics the form of a conversation or debate where multiple experts present a point of view and back up their arguments with alternate sources.

What are the consequences for reading the Talmud?

The consequences of this semi-oral form of the Talmud means that the meaning of the text is different for each reader, depending on the narrators they choose to listen to the most, and the arguments that they believe are most forceful or worthy of merit. The lack of a rigid order in which to read the discussion allows the reader the opportunity to side with a particular school of thought, or focus on a specific point of view, perhaps not listening to others, or perhaps mentally comparing and contrasting them. The hypertext nature of the text with its abundance of links to other discussions also implies that the Talmud should not be simply read from beginning to end, but individual discussions should be constantly cross-referenced and read in combination with other sections of the text that may even be separated by many pages. This requirement for the reader to take an active role in the reading process, makes the Talmud a forum for exploration, and each journey through it can have a different final meaning and significance for individual readers.