

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Harry Freedman, *The Talmud: a biography* (Bloomsbury, 2014)

By an odd coincidence, I started writing this review during Banned Books Week.¹ The subtitle of Freedman's biography of the Talmud is 'banned, censored and burned – the book they couldn't suppress'. It's not often that timing in life and literature coincide so neatly.

This is the story of a book' (ix), but it is not one for scholars or readers interested in delving into the text of the Talmud and its teachings in the Jewish faith. In his introduction, Freedman makes it clear that,

You are not reading a book about what is *in* the Talmud. This is the story of what *happened* to the Talmud, and the role it has played in world history, religion and culture. It's not a book for experts, or for specialists. It's a book for anyone who wants to know the story of one of the great classics of ancient literature. (x)

Freedman is successful in this aim: his book is well-researched, thoughtfully written and engaging. It will appeal to the general, educated reader. Anyone who is intrigued by aspects of the Jewish faith, the place of religion in world history, the development of ancient literature or the cultural impact of written texts will enjoy its range and depth.

Harry Freedman, a Jewish scholar, is a writer and academic with post-doctoral qualifications in Aramaic. He has divided his book into two parts: 'The Talmud in *its* world' and 'The Talmud in *the* world.' The first section, from 'In the beginning' to 'The age of the giants', covers the origin and the compilation of the many parts of the Talmud, its flourishing in ancient Babylon and its impact in the Middle Ages. Part II, 'The Talmud in the world', begins with the censoring, banning and burning of the book in thirteenth-century Europe and continues through events of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Holocaust of the twentieth century. The accumulated blend of facts and stories in this chronological approach is easy to follow, illuminating the cultural and historical impact of the text. The reader is left in the age of the internet where 'the Talmud is a multi-dimensional, non-linear text in a web of connections with multiple paths ... to explore' (212).

My own path through this biography of the Talmud led me along the winding route of the history of its censorship, from medieval Paris to Nazi Germany. The ethics of my profession, librarianship, are grounded in the freedom to read; I was fascinated by the accounts of the thousands of manuscript copies destroyed in twelfth-century France or suppressed through the Index Librorum Prohibitorum. From a literary perspective, I enjoyed reading about Eastern legends and European folklore, Abelard and Heloise and the Old Testament. From a historical perspective, there was also much to intrigue. For instance, I learnt that Henry VIII demanded that his officials study the Talmud in the hope that they would discover religious or legal grounds for his longed-for divorce from Catherine of Aragon. Freedman's book is enlivened by his wide scholarly range and lively selection of anecdotes and facts.

But this book will not please everyone. Some scholarly reviewers have criticised Freedman for the lack of comprehensiveness in his study of the Talmud, and for the vagaries and tangents that he follows.² His target audience of general readers, though, is likely to appreciate the diversity and the

¹ See the Banned Books Week website (27 September – 3 October): <http://www.bannedbooksweek.org/>.

² Jeremy Dauber 'Edging out the Bible,' *Wall Street Journal* 2 November 2014 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-the-talmud-a-biography-by-harry-freedman-1414972212>

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richness of the composite picture that he presents. The index is an interesting guide to the range of material, including entries for Babylon, dictionaries, quantum theory, fleas (killing of) and lice (reproduction of). There is a helpful glossary and the generous bibliography includes many scholarly titles.

Recently I've seen the word 'bibliobiography' used for 'books about books' and read that Freedman's *The Talmud: a biography* fits into this category³. Its companions could include Simon Winchester's *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* (the *Oxford English Dictionary*), Melvyn Bragg's *The Book of Books* (the *King James Bible*) and Anthony West's *The Shakespeare First Folio*. Another well-received, recent example is classicist Christopher Krebs's *A Most Dangerous Book: Tacitus' Germania from the Roman Empire to the Third Reich* (2011). If 'bibliobiography' appeals to you, this intelligent and accessible biography of the Talmud is one to add to your list.

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³ Dauber.