

Tenakh and Talmud

When God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the basis of Jewish law - the Ten Commandments - it was all fairly easy to remember. The fact that they were written on stone meant they were a bit awkward to carry around, but at least there wasn't too much writing on them.

Things have a tendency to get more complicated over time though, and after a millennium or so, Jewish history and law ended up being tackled in two rather huge texts, the Tenakh and the Talmud.

The Tenakh is made up of three sections.

The Torah is the foundation of all Jewish teaching, and is believed by many Jews to be the revealed word of God. It recounts the creation of the universe, through to the time of Moses.

Nevi'im, sometimes known as the books of prophets and kings, as they're the people through whom many Jews believe God spoke to his chosen people.

And Ketuvim, which are the books of poetry, philosophy and history, a bit like a comments section for ancient rabbis.

All these books together are often referred to as the Hebrew Bible. They'll be familiar to many Christians, as they're the same books that make up the Old Testament, although presented in a different order.

The Talmud is different. It's sometimes known as the Oral Torah, because it started out as knowledge that was spoken, and passed from rabbi to rabbi in a tradition that some believe goes all the way back to Moses' talk with God. It was very important as a way of understanding in more detail how God's laws should be applied in daily life.

Eventually, it was decided that this precious knowledge really should be written down, and so the first part of the Talmud, called the Mishnah, was created. It's like a sort of in-depth rulebook.

There was still a huge amount of discussion amongst rabbis as to how each law should be applied in different situations, and these explanations and clarifications all got written down too, although it took a thousand years.

This part is called the Gemara. It covers so much ground that the whole Talmud is 50 times longer than the Torah, and today it helps rabbis and Jews to apply the teachings of the Torah to some very modern-day issues.

For example, one of the instructions the Torah gives is, "do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk". Which is nice and straightforward. Or is it?

Bitesize

Rabbis have debated this command in the Mishnah and Gemara for generations. Is the commandment from the original version of the Torah, or was it added at some later point?

Is it specific to goat meat, or does it mean all mammals? Is it actually a way of saying that meat products and dairy products should never be cooked together, as many Jews believe today?

And like most interpretations of the Torah, the debate carries on today.

What exactly is defined as milk? Does using a microwave still count as 'cooking'?

So, the Tenakh and Talmud are long and complex texts, and many people spend a lifetime, literally, reading and re-reading and debating what they mean.

One thing everyone agrees on though, is it's great that it's no longer carved in stone.