

# Jewish Rabbinic Literature of the formative period (1st – 7th c. CE)



# Jewish Rabbinic Literature

## What preceded?

- **Great Jewish revolt against Rome** broke out in Judea and in Galilee in **66-70 CE**, led by Zealots, some radical Pharisees and Sadducees.
- Having crushed down the revolt, the future Roman emperor Titus **plundered Jerusalem and burnt down its Temple** (see the detail of the arc of Titus in Rome, depicting the seized equipment of the Temple).



# Jewish Rabbinic Literature

A Pharisee whose name was **Johanan ben Zakkay** deserted in 70 CE from besieged Jerusalem. **Interned in Yavneh** (Yamnia) he concentrated on studying Torah, becoming the **founder of Rabbinic Judaism**. His followers stressed **profound study and obedience of the Torah**. Later, they became the decisive group within Judaism.



# Rabbinic Literature: a particular Jewish way of reading Bible



- Jewish historian **Josephus Flavius** in his *Jewish War II*, 119 lists following streams within Judaism
- **Pharisees**: to keep the Torah in all details of life
- **Sadducees**: everything stands and falls with the Temple. To be on good terms with Roman authorities
- **Essenes**: to separate themselves from the sinners, imminent expectation of the end of the world, hard core in Qumran and many sympathizers among normal Jews.
- **radicals**: to implement God's kingdom by violence

# Rabbinic Literature

## Two ways of thinking

### Halakha („walking“)

- How to live Jewish?
- Attention to a detail
- The Law is no burden, but a gift of a meaningful way

### Aggadah („narrating“)

- Why to live Jewish?
- Attention to tradition
- All those who have been with us: motivation, examples and warnings

# Rabbinic Literature

## starting point: the Torah is dual

The Torah existing in two forms, i.e. as

- **Written Torah**, or Bible
- **Oral Torah**, or tradition

“Moshe received the Torah from Sinai, and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.”

“They said three things: Deliberate before delivering a verdict, and establish many students, and make a fence for the Torah.”

Mishna, tractate Avot I,1 (translation from The Open Mishna Project)

# Rabbinic Literature – Dual Torah (examples from the Babylonian Talmud)

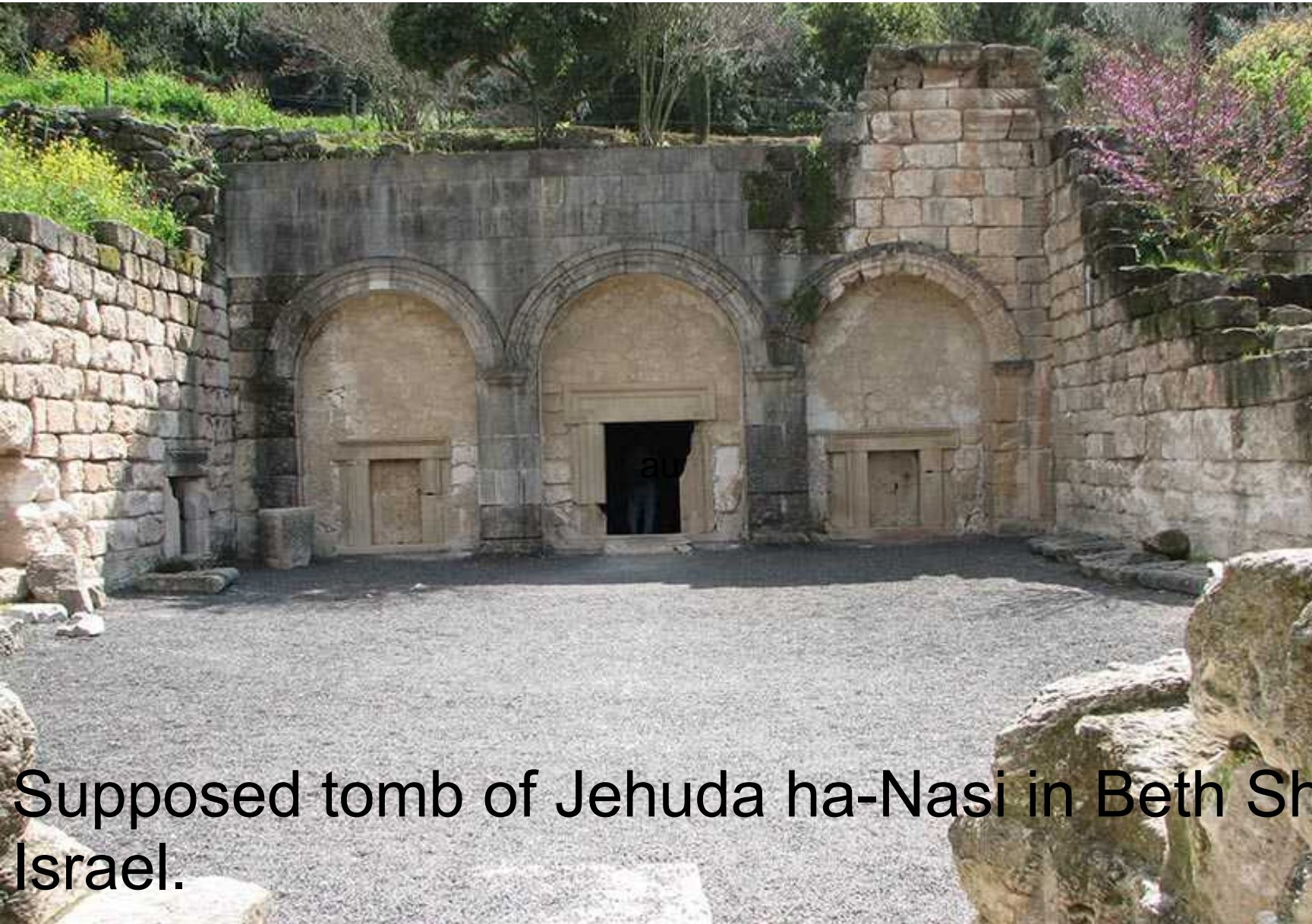
Our Rabbis taught: A certain heathen once came before Shammai and asked him, 'How many Torahs have you?' 'Two,' he replied: 'the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.' 'I believe you with respect to the Written, but not with respect to the Oral Torah; make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the Written Torah [only]. [But] he scolded and repulsed him in anger. When he went before Hillel, he accepted him as a proselyte. On the first day, he taught him, Alef, beth, gimmel, dalet; the following day he reversed [them] to him. 'But yesterday you did not teach them to me thus,' he protested. 'Must you then not rely upon me? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah] too.'



On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.'

Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat  
31a

**Mishna** is the first collection of the oral Torah. Its editor was in about 200 CE **Jehuda ha-Nasi** (J. The Patriarch), a rich planter from Galilee.

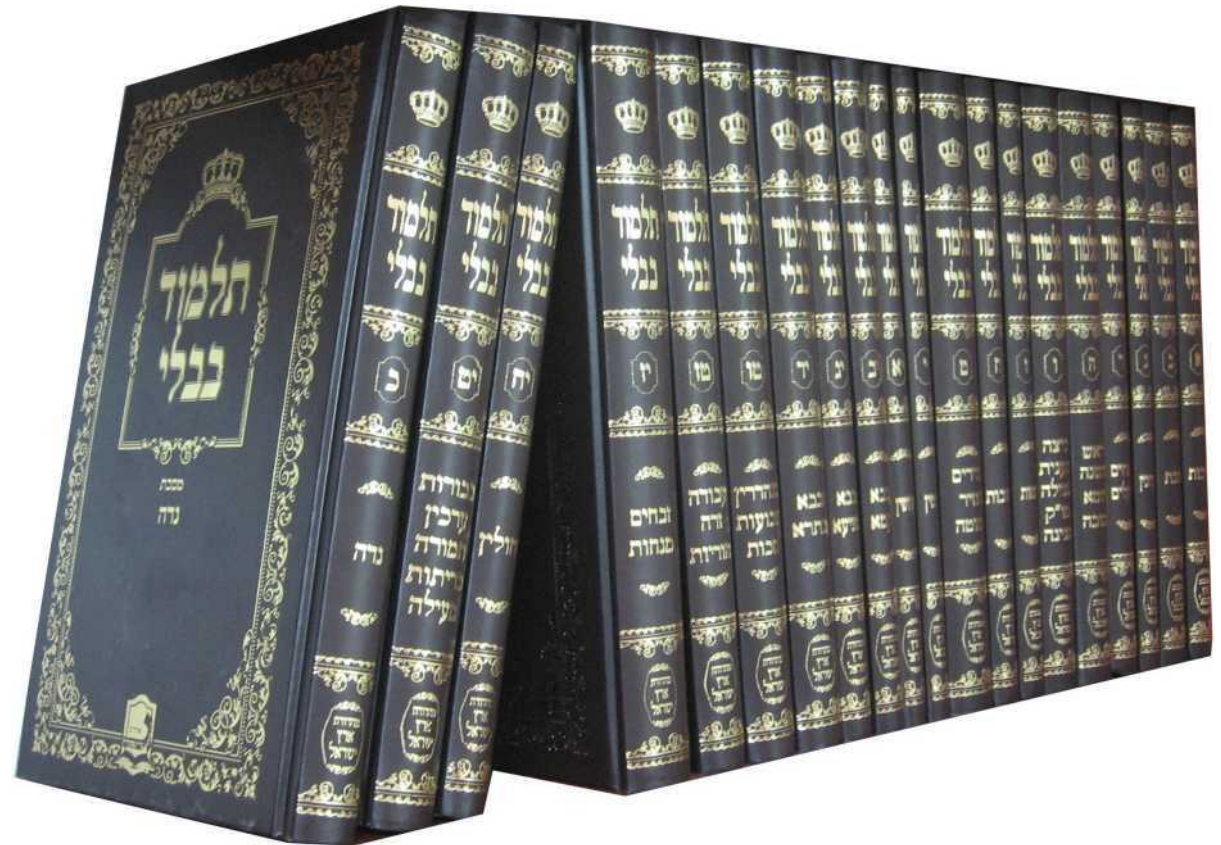


Supposed tomb of Jehuda ha-Nasi in Beth Shean in Israel.



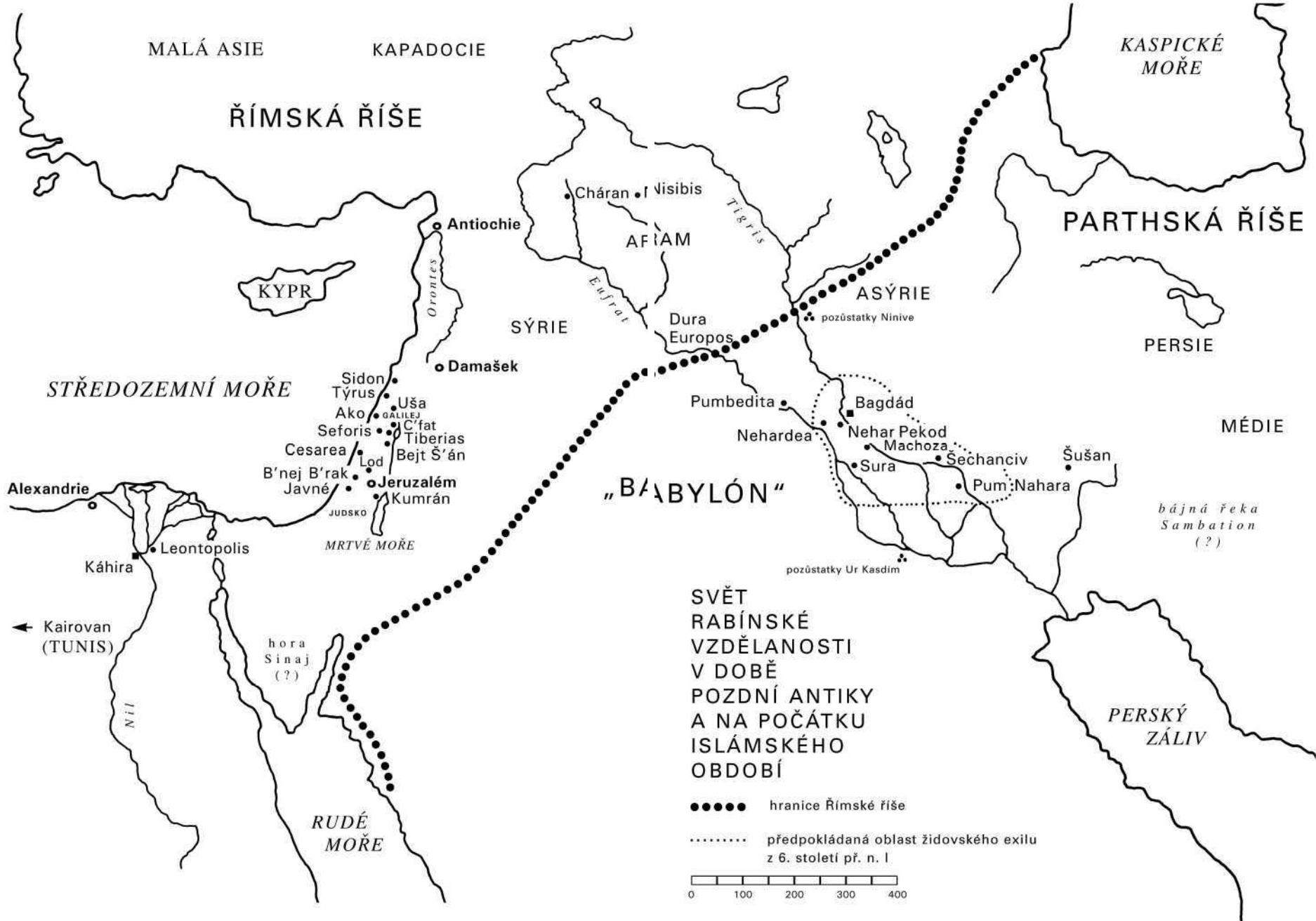
# The centres of the Rabbinic movement

- **The Land of Israel** (esp. Galilee in the north, cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias, Jerusalem devastated and abandoned).
- Headed by **patrirchs**, Jewish aristocrats appointed by Romans from the circles of moderate Pharisees, called **tannaim** („memorizers“).
- From 3rd c. onwards the rabbinic teachers indulge in rafined argumentation, they are called **amoraim** („debaters“).
- The product of *tannaim* is **Mishna** and Tosephta.
- The product of *amoraim* are **midrashim** (sg. *midrash*, Biblical sermons) and the **Talmud of Israel**, a collection of Rabbinic knowledge from 5th c. CE.
- **Babylonia** (academies or yeshivas in Sasanide Persia, esp. in Sura, Nehardea and Pumpedita).
- Headed by exilrachs, representatives of the exilled Jews.
- It was in these academies that the **Babylonian Talmud**, a collection of more than 5.000 pages of aggadic ( 2/3) and of halakhic (1/3) texts was edited and promulgated in the 7th c. CE as the autoritative document of Judaism.



# Living in the Roman and in Babylonian (Persian) world

## >> Ashkenaz and Senhadid Jews



# Rabbinic Literature

**Mishna** („teching to be learned by) repeating consists of six „orders“, each one of them consisting of 10 – 15 tractates.

- Sroupec 1
- Sroupec 2
- Sroupec 3

- *Zeraim* (Seeds): agriculture
- *Moed* (Terms): feasts
- *Našim* (Women): family, sex
- *Nezikin* (Damages): penal code
- *Kodašim* (Holy things): the Temple
- *Toharot* (Purities): how to purify



# Rabbinic Literature

proceeds in two directions. It fosters

- a) the discourse of Mishna and
- b) the discourse of the Bible

## MISHNA (about 200 CE)

- Halakhic discussions and decisions on *tanaim*.
- **GEMARA** = traditions of various kinds ordered as discussions to the sentences of Mishna.
- By far more extensive than Mishna.
- The discussing authorities are called *amoraim*, „debaters“.
- **Mishna + Gemara = TALMUD**
- Talmud of Jerusalem – 5th c. CE
- Babylonian Talmud (7th c. CE).

## BIBLE

- is – according to Rabbis – the **written Torah** which is in a need of explanation, **in a need of oral Torah**.
- Engaged interpretation of the Bible = midrash.
- **Halakhic midrash**: how Bible supports current halakha.
- **Aggadic midrash**: creative embellishment of the Bible.

## Avot 1,14

אם אין אני לי מי לי

וכשאני לעצמי מה אני

- ואם לא עכשיו אימתי

If I am not for myself,  
who is for me?

And when I am for  
myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Hillel the Elder (1st C.BCE)