



Dr. A. Freimann Collection

DB

Gemara.

By Wilhelm Bacher.

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Wilhelm Bachner

GEMARA.

(Translated by Harry G. Friedman.*)

THE term forming the superscription is one of the best known and most frequently used expressions in Jewish literature. Who does not know that Gemara is the synonym of Talmud and designates the vast spiritual product on the one hand of the Babylonian, and on the other of the Palestinian schools of the third, fourth and fifth Christian centuries, which developed on the basis of the Mishna in the form of a commentary to it, and finally became in literary shape the Jerusalem (Palestinian) and Babylonian Talmud. Everybody knows what "Gemara lernen" signifies, and will, in studying the Talmud, endeavor to discover exactly what "die Gemara sagt." And yet, in spite of this absolute certainty as regards the usage of the word Gemara, the term has not yet been sufficiently investigated and understood in more than one direction. In the special literature on this subject, too, an uncertainty prevails concerning its *etymology*, its *original meaning* and its *history*, indeed, even concerning its *grammatical* form. It is the purpose of the following discussion to remove this uncertainty as far as possible.

1. I begin with the *grammatical* form of the word. It seems to be taken as an unchallenged assumption that "Gemara" is a feminine noun, like "Mishna," as it were. When the word was taken over into Latin it presented a feminine form at once, and was declined in -a, like a feminine; the other languages, in so far

* Thanks are due to Dr. Henry Malter for assistance in the translation and proof-reading of this article.—Tr.

as they distinguish substantives according to their grammatical gender, likewise treated it as a feminine, and in German, e. g., it is of course "die Gemara." This consensus of popular usage has been sanctioned by the dictionaries. Levy (I, 343b.), as well as Jastrow (255b.), add to the word גמרא the specification "f" (= feminine), and obviously consider the ך at the end of the word as the formative suffix of the feminine noun. This is, indeed, a remarkable example of the force of habit, which even the trained scientific observer can not escape. For, in the very article at the head of which גמרא is designated as feminine, examples of the use of the word are cited, from which it follows beyond a doubt, that it is a *masculine* noun, and that the ending ך indicates the emphatic state of the Aramaic noun. It will suffice to quote two of these examples, the first of which is emphasized in both dictionaries,—the form with suffix גמריה, Arachin 29a (Jastrow points גמריה, but it can also be read גמריה, in fact, this is probably the correct reading—cf. חלקה, שלמיה Daniel 4, 12), which points to the absolute state גמר; and משמיה (not מה) (cf. below), Yoma 14b, where the suffix ים clearly shows that in Talmudic usage גמרא was felt to be a masculine noun. That even later the knowledge of this fact did not disappear among those who busied themselves with the language of the Talmud is proved by Tanchum Jerushalmi. In his dictionary, at the conclusion of the article גמר (cf. below), he adds the remark that the Talmud is called also גמר. It is therefore obvious that in Tanchum's sphere it was known that the word was not Gemara but Gemar, and that it was a masculine substantive. I am glad to be able to say that Dalman designated גמרא in his dictionary (p. 78) as "a. m.," i. e., as an Aramaic masculine noun, referring to the form without suffix גמר in the

Targum to Ezekiel 27²⁴. In C. Levias, *Grammar of the Aramaic Idiom* (1900) I have not found the word noted anywhere; it belongs in § 856.

2. As far as the *etymology* of the word Gemara is concerned, the fundamental meaning of the verb גמר "to complete," has been for the most part decisive also for the explanation of the Gemara as a work of literature. In *Buxtorf* (Lexicon Chald., Talmudicum, etc., col. 452) we read: "Gemara. Sic vocatur altera pars Juris Talmudici, quasi dicas supplementum, complementum. Prima Pars dicitur Mishna." This etymology is still adhered to by Schürer (*Gesch. des jüd. Volkes* I. 3, 126 Anm. 28 "von גמר vollenden"). According to *Levy* (l. c.) גמרא denotes: Vollendung, perfectio, Vervollständigung oder Vollkommenheit; insbes. oft: Gemara als Benennung derjenigen Sammelwerke.... wodurch das mündliche (und biblische) Gesetz seine Vollendung erhalten hat." Here the conception of completion has been significantly extended, and laid down somewhat dogmatically. *Mielziner* (Introduction to the Talmud, Cincinnati, 1896, p. 56) is not quite satisfied with this etymology and therefore offers the choice of two derivations. "This term, derived from the verb גמר which in Hebrew means to finish, to complete, and in Aramaic also to learn, to teach, signifies either the completion, the supplement (to the Mishna) or is identical with the word Talmud, which is often used in its place, meaning the teaching, the study." *Strack* (Einleitung in den Talmud, 2d ed. 1894, p. 4) has already freed himself altogether from the idea "Vervollständigung, Vollendung," and states: "גמרא bedeutet da, wo es in den Talmuden ursprünglich ist, überall: Gelerntes, Tradition." In this statement of Strack only the plural, "in den Talmuden," is incorrect, for to my knowledge our term does not occur at all in the *Palestinian Talmud*. And also the Palestinian Midrashic literature does not know it. From Palestinian texts only the expression גמרה של תורה can be quoted from the introduction to Shir rabba and the introduction to Koheleth rabba. The expression

means the "conclusion of the Thora," i. e., the completing of the study of the Thora, which is to be celebrated by a feast, just as King Solomon gave a banquet (I. Kings, 3,¹⁵), when wisdom was bestowed upon him by God.

3. In order to learn precisely the meaning of the word Gemara we must go back to the verb from which it is derived. It is the *Aramaic* (occurring, however, in this sense *only in the Babylonian Talmud*) גמר to learn. The verb is, however, in this sense, a school term, which denotes almost exclusively, and at any rate, primarily, the studying and learning (Lernen und Erlernen) of the traditional lore and of single statements of it. It is synonymous with the verb ילף (אלף) which alone was used in Palestine, whereas, in the Babylonian schools, alongside of ילף (= Heb. למד) the verb גמר came to predominate. How this verb, which also in Aramaic otherwise means "to complete," came to denote "to learn," becomes intelligible in view of the following. The study of the oral traditional material consisted in hearing it recited again and again by the teacher, and then repeating it orally, until it was finally impressed on the memory. When this was accomplished, the acquisition of the subject matter was "completed." A story in Talmud (Erubin 54b) relates that Rabbi Perida repeated the lesson to one of the pupils four hundred times, until he succeeded in learning it מאה וימני וגמר (ליה ר' מאה וימני וגמר). Accordingly גמר denoted the memorizing of the traditional lore.¹ With regard to the Halachic teachings that were forgotten during the time of mourning for Moses (Temura 15b) Samuel the Babylonian Amora says: דאישתכח להו אישתכח ורגמירן להו הוו גמירי כמשה רבינו "what they had forgotten remained forgotten, but

¹ Perhaps the term was originally גמר לימלך or גמר למיתני "to learn thoroughly," which then became גמר in a pregnant sense, to commit to memory.—Tanchum Jerushalmi, too, explains the meaning "to learn" for the verb גמר in a similar way. The part of his article גמר referred to here, I have reproduced in my essay, *Aus dem Wörterbuch T. J. 's* (p. 102).

what they had succeeded in learning, they knew as well as Moses himself."—To learn anything from anyone is expressed by **גמר מן** (Cf. Chagiga 15b), Hebrew, **גמר מפי** (Erubin 54b), or shortened **גמר מן** (Chullin 18b). Raba says in reference to a Halachic teaching heard from Joseph: **האלהים אמר וגמירנא לה מיניה** ("By God, he said it and from him I learnt it"). But I will not follow up here all the manifold uses of the verb **גמר** in the Babylonian Talmud.² One use I will, however, point out, in which **גמר** is contrasted with the verb **סבר** and designates the memorizing of the traditional material as against the intelligent comprehension and examination of it. Thus we have the well-known statement (Shabbath 63a) **ליגמר אינש והדר ליסבר** (One should learn first and comprehend afterwards). This, as it is supposed in Erubin 13a (Sota 20a), was done by the famous Rabbi Meir; under R. Ishmael he acquired the subject-matter, under Rabbi Akiba he entered into the meaning of it **אחא לקמיה דרבי ישמעאל וגמר גמרא**. **י.הדר אחא לקמיה דרבי עקיבא וסבר סברא**.

4. In the statement of the Talmud just quoted, the verb **גמר** is, in the usual way, joined to its own noun. Naturally, as the verb was very frequently employed, this noun (**גְמִירָה**, emphatic state **גְמִירָה**) was likewise often used. We cite a few examples: Sanh. 82b below (Cf. Pesachim 69a) **אדכריה רב לגמריה**; Menachoth 7a: **ואחא קמיה דרב חסדא לאדכורי גמריה**; Chullin 103b: **רבי עקיבא גמריה איסחפק** Rosh Hashana 14b **אסי גמריה איעקר ליה**; Shabbath 130b: **אגב שיטפך רחמי לך גמרך**. In all these instances the substantive denotes that which has been *learnt*, the *subject-matter which has been committed to memory*. Especially frequent is the expression **גמרא גמיר לה** used of anyone who has received a statement as the oral tradition from his teacher; cf. Erubin 38b, Taan. 2b, Shebuoth 12a, Rosh Hashana 4a, Zebachim 13a. In

² More detail will be given in the continuation of my work on the "oldest terminology of Jewish exegesis" which will appear shortly under the title, "The Terminology of the Palestinian Amoraim."

the plural the expression is **גמרא גמירי לה**; cf. Berach. 54b (in connection with a Biblical legend); Pesachim 82b (a Halachic tradition), likewise Shabbath 96b, Nazir 64a. In place of the full expression the abbreviated form **גְמִירָה** (participle plu. mas.) is also used to introduce traditional statements. The biggest part of the traditional statements introduced by this word is non-Halachic in content. Thus with **גמירי** are introduced propositions ethical in content, cf. Berach. 29a, Sota 8a, ib. 11a; Agadic traditions about Biblical history, cf. Erubin 63b, Aboda Zara 9a, ib. 14b.; archeological statements, cf. Sukka 5b, Zebachim 54b, Menachoth 88a, data of the most varied sort belonging to astronomy (Berach. 58b), astrology (ib. 59a), natural science (Shabbath 92a, Chullin 63a), demonology (Sanh. 44a). In cases where historical facts are described as known through tradition, **גמרא** has the same function as **גְמִירָה** which we have just discussed. For example, Taanith 28a **בטל התמיד גמרא** (that on the 17th of Tammuz the daily sacrifice ceased is a tradition). See there also further examples for this use of the word **גמרא**; cf. also Taanith 20a, Baba Kamma 82b, Makkoth 23b. Other instances of the use of the word **גמרא** in the meaning, *traditional knowledge* are: Nazir 39a **גמרא הוא דשלחו ליה**; B. Kamma 61a **גמרא היה בידיו וכוהו גמרא**; Shabbath 55a **גמרא ולא ידענא מאי טעמא**. Sometimes **גמרא** is used in contrast to **קרא**, that which is known by the *tradition* and that which is known from the Bible. See Nazir 25b, **קרא גמרא גמירי לה**, Cf. R. Hashana 31a, Chullin 27a, Krithoth 19a. Strange is the statement occurring a number of times that a teacher of the law taught something "in the name of the tradition" (**משמיה דגמרא**). This expression seems to mean that the one who reported the tradition could not give the name of his authority, but referred to "tradition" in general. It occurs in the instance of the Babylonian Amora Abaji (Yoma 14b) and Acha b. Raba (Yebam. 86a, Kiddushin 53a), but also in a report in regard to Hillel (Pesachim 115a). So, too, the legend of David, B. Kamma 61a.

—Similar is the **משמיה ראוּלפנא** which likewise occurs only in the Babylonian Talmud (Erubin 67a, Arachin 28b).

5. With the meaning of our word shown in the last quoted instances—in which the traditionally transmitted material is, as it were, *personified*, since teachings are reported “in its name,”—we have somewhat approached the special meaning which the word has in the history of literature and which we have been seeking. It denotes the totality of the material, handed down by tradition in the Babylonian schools, in explanation of the Mishna, namely, the Talmud as it received its final redaction at the hands of Ashi and Rabina. It is well possible, that when this material, taken in its totality, was spoken of, it was called Gemara, but in the entire vast extent of the Babylonian Talmud, where, as we have seen, this word occurs so frequently, there does not appear any instance of this one meaning, in which it with certainty denotes the Talmud. In the censored editions of the Talmud the word Talmud is for the first time frequently substituted by the more innocent sounding Gemara; the first editions and the manuscripts always have **תלמוד** in such cases. (Cf. M. Lattes, *Saggio di Giunte e correzioni al Lessico Talmudico*, Torino, 1879, p. 85. See examples in the appendix to the second edition of the first volume of my *Agada der Tanaiten*, p. 479f, also *die Älteste Terminologie*, p. 202.) The characterization of the various periods of life, found at the close of chapter five of Mishna Aboth, contains the statement: **בן חמש עשרה לתלמוד**. Here, too, in the later editions (also in the prayer books) **לגמרא** was put in place of **לתלמוד**. Moreover, the whole passage is not an original part of the Mishna; it is also omitted in Lowe's edition, likewise in Taylor's *Sayings of the Jewish Fathers*, see especially p. 43. Moreover, as it may incidentally be remarked here, even by the word **תלמוד** the “Talmud” in its narrower sense is referred to only in few cases. The only instance where the Babylonian Talmud speaks of the “Babylonian Talmud” (B. Mezia 85a **תלמודא בבלי** and here also the printed editions read **גמרא** instead of Talmud)

¹ Cf. also Sanh. 24a **תלמודא של בבלי**.

means, at any rate, the Babylonian Talmud in that stage of development in which it was impressed on the memory of Zeira, who, as we are told there, desired to forget it again.

6. Although the word Gemara is not used in the Babylonian Talmud itself to designate the Talmud, the examples of its use collected in § 4 suffice to show how the word acquired this special meaning. We cite a few more passages which prove that popular usage did not err when it designated as Gemara that literary work which is officially called Talmud. Nachman b. Izhak, the well-known Babylonian Amora of the fourth century (died 356), who introduced mnemonic sentences, the first external aids for the redaction of the immense material of the Babylonian Talmud (Cf. *Die Agada der babylonischen Amoräer*, p. 134; Jacob Brüll, *Die Mnemotechnik des Talmuds*, Wien, 1864, p. 21), described himself (Pesachim 105b) as **גמרא וסדרנא** “transmitter of the tradition” and “systematizer.” He thereby applies the name “Gemara” to the whole of that material, to which he devotes the activity indicated in the two epithets. Mesharshaya, an Amora of the 5th century, says to his sons (Horajoth 12a) **כי בעיתו מיעל מינמר** “If you want to go to your teacher to study under him, first repeat carefully the text of the Mishna.” Here the Mishna is the substratum of the lecture, while the content of the lecture itself is characterized by the verb **נמר**; it is indeed the Talmud to the Mishna. Especially important is the story in Erubin 32b; here, after the explanation of a Mishna by a number of scholars had obtained the approval of Nachman b. Jacob, they asked him **קבעיתו ליה בגמרא**, i. e. have you (referring to Nachman and his teacher Samuel) incorporated this in the traditional material? They mean to ask whether this explanation is thereafter always to be traditionally transmitted along with its substratum, the Mishnaic statement. This detail coming from the second half of the third century gives us an insight into the formation of the text of the Talmud, for it shows that not all the questions, answers, and explanations, as they emerged in the

school during the discussion of the Mishna, were given a place in the explanation of the Mishna, which was to be transmitted as the tradition. This verb קבע is thus to be accepted as the term for the work of redaction, which produced the Talmud (Cf. also R. Hashana 32a above בשמיהו). As a matter of fact, however, the word גמרא appears in the question asked of R. Nachman as the designation for the *authoritative text of the Talmud*.

7. The importance of such a passage cited from Erubin 32a naturally did not escape the *Gaon Sherira*. He quotes it where he describes, in his famous epistle, the gradual redaction of the Talmud, and uses himself the same expression קבע בגמרא for the redaction of the text of the Talmud (Cf. ed. Neubauer, *Medieval Jewish Chronicles* I, p. 23f). Elsewhere, too, he uses the term גמרא to designate the Talmud. Cf. p. 9. מדרגו בדרגתו... ואמרין עלה בגמרא; likewise, p. 22 above גמרא; אמרין בגמרא; p. 18, line 7 גמרא; p. 26, l. 6 גמרא; p. 4, l. 1 בגמרא; p. 1, l. 7 בגמרא. Also in Seder Tannaim ve-Amoraim (in Neubauer ib. I, 179) we read תיקונו חכמים בגמרא. I can not undertake the further history of the application of the word Gemara to designate the text of the Talmud or the Talmud in its entirety, because the data for it are wanting. Suffice it to affirm here that as the literary name of the work, "Talmud" has always been preferred. The scholars of *Kairuwan*, who occasioned Sherira's Epistle through their questions, already formulated their question thus (ib. p. 26): כיצד נכתבה המשנה ונכתב החלום. Sherira himself speaks of רבנן אימוראי של החלום p. 21, l. 13. Abraham Ibn Daud tells of the redaction and conclusion of the Babylonian Talmud in the following words: והיא (ib. p. 59, l. 5) החל לכתוב את החלום: and רבם סימו את החלום בבלי (ib. l. 6). And he says of R. Jochanan (p. 57): והוא חבר תלמוד ירושלמי. That "Gemara," however, also designated the Talmud as a literary work,—for this we may use the testimony of Menachem Meiri of Perpignan,

who characterizes the period of the Saboraim thus (see the excerpt from *הדיון לומדים החלום* in Neubauer II, 224) על פה כי לא נתפשט מכל וכל היבור הגמרא. Strack (Einleitung in den Talmud, p. 3) quotes from Steinschneider's Catalog der Handschriften der Hamburger Stadtbibliothek no. 165, the note of a manuscript written in 1184 of the treatises Baba Kamma, Baba Mezia, Baba Bathra כתבתי אלו גמרא. In our printed editions of the Talmud גמרא is abbreviated 'גמ' is placed at the head of every section of the text of the Talmud, while the preceding passage of the Mishna is marked by מהניתי. I have not the material for determining whether these external signs in the printed editions are adopted from the manuscripts or are only the innovation of the publishers. In the old manuscript fragment from which Schechter and Singer have published a part of the Talmud treatise Kerithoth (Cambridge, 1896) the text of the Talmud is not separated from the text of the Mishna by any superscription of this sort. Moreover at the head of each Perek all the Mishna to it is given. In the text of the Talmud, sections are in part indicated by the superscription פיסקא (= פיסקא) section, paragraph) and in part by the word מתני' with which the particular Mishna, then in order, is again introduced, abbreviated, however, towards the end.

8. In the Jerusalem Talmud, as has already been pointed out, neither the verb גמר in the sense of learning nor גמרא occur. Naturally both are found in the Babylonian Talmud in the mouth of Palestinian authorities, for the terminology of the Babylonian schools was applied also to traditions that emanated from Palestine. The term "Gemara" was nevertheless applied to the Palestinian Talmud as well as to the Babylonian. For some data pertaining to the subject at issue I am under obligations to my learned friend, Mr. B. Rattner, of Wilna, the author of critical scholia to the *Jeruschalmi* אהבת ציון וירושלים. The Aruch quotes, at the beginning of the section אנטיפהא (ed. Kohut I, 147b), the Jerusalem Talmud to Berach. V, 1, as follows:

חברבר 'בגמ' ראפילו המלך שואר בשלומו בירוש' (III 342a) he quotes both Talmuds to Berach. V, 1, thus בבבלי בברא. In the section סמנר (VI, 74b) the citation reads thus: ירו'ב"ק בברכות בגמרא אמר ר' טרפון: —R. Abraham b. David of Posquieres says in the Hassaga to Hileh. Kerith Shema VI, 7: גם בחכמי הגמרא היו אומרים: and he has in mind a passage in Jerushalmi.—In R. Moses b. Nachman's Milchamoth to Pesachim V, § 20 we read שו' השמועה בגמרא ירושלמית—here j. Terumoth X, 4 is meant.

Concerning the later usage we must state further that copies of the Talmud were designated by the word Gemara, and as the word had long been regarded as a Hebrew feminine, a plural Gemaroth was formed. In the Bull of Pope Julius III, of May 29, 1554 (quoted in Grätz, Gesch. der Juden IX, 358) the copies of the Talmud doomed to the flames are thus spoken of: "certum Hebraicorum librorum volumen Ghemarot Talmud nuncupatum." Asulai presents his remarks on manuscripts of the Talmud under the caption גמרא (Cf. Shem Hagedolim, II, 26f), and speaks in it of גמרא ברכות, גמרא מסכת ברכות, נוסחאות, גמרא כתובות, גמרא ישנור and in plural גמרות רפוס ישן.

In conclusion I wish to state clearly that in determining the grammatical form of the word Gemara it is not at all my intention or wish to bring about a change in the usage that has prevailed since centuries. Gemara has become a feminine noun for all times, just as "Bible" is a feminine substantive in German and French and other languages, although "Biblia" is originally the plural of the neuter (*Bιβλία*, the books) and not a singular of the feminine noun; the recognition of the fact has only a theoretical value. In such cases, too, we may take it as valid principle. מנהג עוקר הלכה.

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Budapest, March, 1904.