

Hum 110/Leibman
Reed College
The Tractate Avot (Ethics of the Fathers)
Study Questions

Read the article "The Emergence of Rabbinic Judaism" before you read the *Tractate Avot*. Write an abstract of the article. Based on Cohen's description, how does the Mishnah differ from the writings of Torah and New Testament in purpose, theology, and social function? What do the differences in style reveal about the authors' subcultures? i.e. How can you make sense of the style of the *Tractate Avot*. in light of our discussions of the Torah and Judaism?

Compare the dialogical style of the *Tractate Avot* to the Platonic dialogues we read last semester. What do the authors seem to think we as readers will gain from their styles? Do their desires and modes differ? Pretend you are either Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Moses, John, Paul, or Matthew. What would your response be to the *Tractate Avot* both on the level of content and style?

Pick one set of juxtapositions (i.e. two sayings that seem to oppose or work off of each other) that intrigues you from the *Tractate Avot*. What ethical dilemma this opposition trying to get you, the reader, to ponder?

Terms Related to Judaism (<http://philo.ucdavis.edu/~bruce/RST23/gloss.html>)

(h)aggada(h): "telling, narration." Jewish term for non-*halakhic* (nonlegal) matter, especially in Talmud and Midrash; includes folklore, legend, theology/theosophy, scriptural interpretations, etc. Not to be confused with the Passover Manual called "the Haggadah."

halaka(h)/halakha: Any normative Jewish law, custom, practice, or rite--or the entire complex of such. *Halaka* is law established or custom ratified by authoritative rabbinic jurists and teachers. Colloquially, if something is deemed *halakic*, it is considered proper and normative behavior.

midrash: "exposition" (of scripture). Refers to the commentary literature developed in classical Judaism that attempts to interpret Jewish scriptures in a thorough manner. Literary *midrash* may focus on *halaka*, directing the Jew to specific patterns of religious practice, or on *haggada*, dealing with theological ideas, ethical teachings, legend, allegory, fable, etc.

rabbi: "my master." An authorized teacher of the classical Jewish tradition after the fall of the second Temple in 70 CE. Traditionally, rabbis serve as the legal and spiritual guides of their congregations and communities. The title is conferred after considerable study of traditional Jewish sources.

Sanhedrin: Greek for "assembly." A legislative and judicial body from the period of early Judaism into rabbinic times. Traditionally composed of 71 members

TaNakh: Relatively modern acronym for the Jewish Bible: Torah (Law), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (writings).

Torah: "teaching, instruction." In general, "torah" refers to the study of the whole gamut of Jewish tradition or some aspect thereof. In its special sense, "the Torah" refers to the five books of Moses in the Hebrew scriptures.

Mishnah: "teaching." The digest of the recommended Jewish oral halaka as it existed at the end of the 2nd century and was collated, edited, and revised by Rabbi Judan the Prince. The code is divided into six major units and sixty-three minor ones. The work is the authoritative legal traditions of the early sages and is the basis of the legal discussions of the Talmud.

Talmud: "Study" or "learning." Rabbinic Judaism produced two Talmuds: the one known as the "Babylonian" is the most famous, and was completed in the fifth century CE; the other, known as the "Palestinian" or "Jerusalem" Talmud, was edited perhaps in the early fourth century CE.