Christian knowledge of the Tetragrammaton was—unsurprisingly—mediated through Judaism. By the end of the period covered by this book, Christians had established some significant independence in their treatment of Hebrew material, both biblical and post-biblical, and often they chose to read it in their own way and without reference to the original Jewish context or the guidance of the received Jewish reading. Nonetheless, all such knowledge or competence they eventually acquired came initially from Judaism. The purpose of this chapter is to allow us to review, albeit in a cursory fashion, Jewish material concerning the Tetragrammaton which would in time become available to Christians. This is what they learned, and to make our subsequent account intelligible we shall need to know of the material which progressively became available to them.

**The Tetragrammaton in the Mishnah and Talmud**

The *Mishnah* is a collection of Jewish legal debate and decision-making gathered in the 3rd century A.D. by Rabbi Judah the Prince. It purports to collect the opinions of earlier rabbis. Indeed, the Mishnah’s view of itself, as presented in the tractate *Aboth*, is that it is the culmination of a tradition of oral (rather than written) law which goes back to Moses on Sinai.

This fundamental corpus is supplemented by the later *Gemara*, which in turn is essentially legal debate upon the Mishnah itself and which comprises the *Talmud*. There are two Talmuds, that of Palestine (the Jerusalem Talmud) and that of Babylonia. Alongside this strictly legal material (*Halachah*), we have from the period narrative and exegetical material (*Haggadah*). A large corpus of textual exegesis and exposition is that of the *Midrashim*.

Jewish Talmudic tradition gives an account of the inhibitions upon the use of the Tetragrammaton. Thus Mishnah Sanhedrin (3rd century A.D.) 10.1: “The following have no portion in the world to come: ... Abba Saul says: Also one who pronounces the divine name as it is written.”
Furthermore, the divine name was not to be uttered in court by a witness—that is, it might not be mentioned in the witness’s report (as that apparently was still perceived as using the name). R. Joshua spoke of the use of “Jose smote Jose” in oaths to avoid mentioning the name until the final judgement (Sanh 7.5 and bSanh 91a: compare bSanh 55a). The extension of punishment for blasphemy, even in cases where divine attributes were substituted for the name, suggests that as these still refer to God they therefore qualify as names (bSanh 56a and 60a).

The Babylonian Talmud also offers a report of how it was later considered that the ban had started:

The [Seleucid] Greeks decreed that the name of God may not be spoken aloud; but when he Hasmonaeans grew in strength and defeated them they decreed that the name of God be used even in contracts...when the Rabbis heard about this they said, “Tomorrow this person will pay his debt and the contract will be thrown on a garbage heap [thus defiling the Name of God]” so they forbade its use in contracts.

Beyond what is here (a salutary indication of) a clear difference of opinion and practice, there is also evidence of a less restrictive practice requiring good reason for uttering the name: “What is meant by the verse, “And upon those that fear my name shall (the Sun of Righteousness) shine” (Malachi 3:20)?—This refers to those people who fear to utter the Divine Name without good reason.”

When reading the Scriptures aloud, Rabbinic Judaism used euphemisms or substitutions instead of pronouncing the name. According to the Talmud, after the time of Simon the Just (a contemporary of Alexander the Great) the High Priest stopped using the Name in the blessings. The ban on the name, however, perhaps did not continue in this form, for later in the Second Temple era the name was reputedly used, but only in the Temple as the Mishnah states: “… In the sanctuary one says the Name as it is written but in the provinces, with a euphemism.”

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1 For the suggestion that this word is Zeus: A. Kohut, “Zeus in Misnah, Talmud and Midrash,” Jewish Quarterly Review 3:3 (1891), 552–554.
2 bR. Sh. 18b.
3 bNed. 8b.
4 jMeg. 71d.
5 bYom. 49b. For the priestly blessing in the Hebrew Bible, see: Horst Seebass, “YHWH’s Name in the Aaronic Blessing (Numbers 6.22-27),” in Van Kooten, ed., Revelation of the Name, pp. 37–54.
6 mSot. 7.6; bSot. 38b; mTam. 7.2.