

Louis Ginzberg Biography

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Biography

The Lithuanian-born Jewish scholar Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953) was a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America for over 50 years and was among the foremost Talmudic and rabbinic students of his time.

Louis Ginzberg was born in Kovno on Nov. 28, 1873, into a family with a tradition of distinguished scholarship. After studying at various rabbinic academies in Lithuania, Ginzberg pursued his studies at German universities, receiving a doctorate in Semitic languages from the University of Heidelberg in 1897. Emigrating to America in 1899, he served as editor of rabbinic literature for the Jewish Encyclopedia. In 1902 he became professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where he remained until his death. He was a founder and the first president of the American Academy for Jewish Research and was among those awarded honorary degrees at Harvard University's Tercentenary Celebration in 1936. He married Adele Katzenstein in 1909.

Ginzberg authored over 500 books and articles on Talmudic and rabbinic literature; the earliest work was a study of Talmudic folklore (1899) in the writings of the Church Fathers. His *Legends of the Jews* (7 vols., 1909-1938) is an encyclopedic compilation of almost all the folkloric material in the Talmud and Midrash dealing with biblical episodes and personalities. (In 1956 a one-volume edition was published posthumously under the title *Legends of the Bible*.) This material was again the subject of the first volume of the series *Genizah Studies in Memory of Dr. Solomon Schechter* (1928).

Ginzberg's chief area of interest, however, was the Halakah (Jewish religious law). His earliest book on this subject, *Geonica* (1909), dealt with the Halakah in the period of the Geonim (heads of Talmudic academies in Babylonia in the 6th to 11th century). He dealt with this period again in volume 2 of the *Genizah Studies*. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Jerusalem or Palestinian Talmud) was his specialty within Halakic research. His earliest work in this area is a collection of texts, *Yerushalmi Fragments from the Genizah* (1909); his major work is a commentary on the Palestinian Talmud (1941 and 1961).

Research emphasizing Halakic literature was a reflection of Ginzberg's belief that only in the Halakah could one find "the mind and the character of the Jewish people exactly and adequately expressed." As the teacher of generations of Conservative rabbis, Ginzberg was mentor to Conservative Judaism in America for half a century. He died on Nov. 11, 1953.