



A Special Unraveller: How the Rabbis won! Part Two: Babylon and Jerusalem June 20, 2015 / 3 Tammuz 5775

[Note: This is the next to last issue of the Unraveller for the summer. We'll be back after Labor Day. We thank you for your readership, and would hope you'll share this publication with your friends and other congregants, and suggest that they sign up to have it delivered to their email boxes on a weekly basis. Thanks for your support. The Editor.]

How did the rabbinate survive in the aftermath of the Bar Kokba rebellion? In order to understand this question it is important to have a general understanding of the world politics of the time. Prior to Rome's ascendancy the ancient world was ruled by Greece. When Alexander the Great died without an heir his four major generals divided his empire into separate kingdoms. One of his generals was named Ptolemy. He established the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt. Another was named Seleucis who inherited or claimed Persia. Incidentally one of his descendants, Antiochus the fourth was the central figure in the Hanukkah story. The language of both empires was Greek.

The Seleucids were succeeded by the Parthians. Rome established a center in Constantinople which bordered on the Parthian empire. The Parthians inherited Babylon. They could have been better neighbors.

If you recall, the Jewish community grew exponentially prior to and after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Jewish life thrived in Babylon, the Torah was created and our people were permitted to return to Palestine and to rebuild the Temple because the Babylonian rulers desired it. It was logical for the Jewish population to return to Babylon in light of the Roman occupation, destruction of the Temple and in the aftermath of the rebellion. The population swelled but the source of Jewish vitality, the Mishnah remained in the academies in Roman Palestine.

The Parthians encouraged travel to Palestine ostensibly to provide the leadership of the Jewish community with the opportunity to receive instruction in the Mishnah, but practically it served a variety of political purposes since the Jewish population in Palestine was not overly supportive of Roman policies. Babylon and Jerusalem, Palestine and Babylonia, two different cultures, two different centers, two different versions of the Talmud, each guided by different theologies and different political establishments.

The Babylonian Talmud developed between the third-seventh centuries and reflected the Parthian, Sassanid and eventually Arab cultures that ruled Mesopotamia; while the Jerusalem Talmud more reflected Roman culture. It stands to reason that the Romans nurtured and supported rabbinic culture which was led by a patriarch, while the Parthians followed a Babylonian model and created an institution called the "Exilarch." The Exilarchate in Parthian Babylon, like the Patriarchate in Roman Palestine, was the most convenient means for both Rome and Babylon to manage a potentially useful ethnic group's affairs at home and abroad.

We don't really know exactly when the institution of the Exilarch of Resh Galuta was created. Jacob Neusner suggests around 79 C.E. This could be the case since large numbers of people fled Judah and migrated to Babylon prior to and after the Temple's destruction. We know that less than one hundred years after the rebellion a Babylonian born scholar called "Rav" returned from studying Mishnah in Palestine and established an academy in Sura. His younger counterpart, "Samuel" is responsible for the famous phrase, "The Law of the Land is the Law". This statement formalized the relationship between the Jewish community and the ruling government. Samuel could have been acting on behalf of the Exilarch. It was during this period that the calendar was intercalated (145 C.E.) this could have been authorized by a leader of the community, possibly the Exilarch.

The first actual reference in the Talmud to the Resh Galuta refers to Rav Huna as the Exilarch. This was in the 3rd century corresponding to the time of Judah HaNasi. Judah who lived in Palestine claimed Davidic descent through the female line. While Huna claimed descent from the male line.

It is recorded that Judah HaNasi stated, "That if Huna came to Palestine he would give him precedence for Huna was descended from the male line of David. Frankly I find this statement extremely revealing because it hints of possible friction between Babylonian and Palestinian authorities and for those of us who are interested in Jewish personal status, it sheds credibility on patrilineal descent.

The Exilarchate existed until 1258 when Baghdad was sacked by the Mongols.

How these two diverse communities interacted with one another will be the subject of the third and final Unraveller installment.

This week's Unraveller commentary was written by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of numerous books, including "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership." [Both of these books are available in the FJMC on-line store.]