



Special Unraveller: How the Rabbis won! Part Three: The Rabbinate and the Exilarchate June 27, 2015 / 10 Tammuz 5775

[Note: This is the 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.]

Last week we explained that Babylonian Jewry grew in the aftermath of the Bar Kokba rebellion and that the two communities (Palestine and Babylon) had ongoing contact with one another; but what happened when their cultural institutions interacted? The Parthians and the Sassanid dynasty that followed, structured the Exilarchate in a way that reflected their societies. The Exilarch had executive powers without any real authority. He was subject to the whims of the ruling powers even though he served as the voice of the Jewish people. He was empowered to enforce decisions of rabbinical courts, appoint judges and at times authorize corporal punishment. At times he was assisted by a retinue of Goths, allocated specifically to help him maintain his authority. He regulated economic life, appointed overseers in the market place and was able to provide privileged places in the market place to the rabbis thus indebting them to him. This position was not dissimilar to the powers of the Patriarch in Palestine, who often had the use of Roman soldiers.

Babylonian/ Parthian/Sassanid society was structured, hereditary and consisted of a number of bureaucracies. Initially the Exilarch partnered with the emerging creative charismatic rabbinate in order to overcome the resistance of powerful Jewish merchants who operated independently. Their combined influence cemented the Exilarch's ability to provide the needed tax base to satisfy Persian authorities. In return for rabbinic support, the Exilarch provided funding for the rabbinic academies and utilized their emerging legal expertise by appointing them as judges. We have one example of the rabbinate attempting to expand its influence beyond the Exilarch. Apparently, they attempted to exempt themselves as priests from taxation. The Exilarch held firm, the existing establishment backed them and the rabbis acquiesced.

The theology of Babylonian Exilarchate Jewry which developed paralleled Parthian/Sassanid culture. The Exilarch, a Davidic descendent and the political leader of the Jewish people, presented himself as the representative of the ancient tradition of Moses. When people heard their words, they assumed they were obeying the Torah of Moses. The Exilarchate believed that the exilarchate would be the instrument through which the restoration of the Jewish people, the Messiah, would occur. They reasoned that at some point in time when God decided, restoration

should occur; it would occur and the Exilarch would be the one to whom it would be revealed or would be the instrument of change.

The Rabbis, many of whom also claimed Davidic descent, believed that along with the written Torah revealed to Moses that an Oral Torah had been preserved and transmitted from the Prophets to the sages and finally to them. They believed they were the only ones who could understand God's will. One could say that the rabbis sought to reform the life of Israel so it would conform to the Torah as they taught it and that if Israel lived according to the will of God, which only they knew, then History would come to an end and peace and prosperity (Messianic times) would result.

In the early 6th Century the Sassanids were replaced by an evolving Muslim culture and travel between Babylon and Palestine became more limited and eventually ceased. But Roman culture, and with it the rabbinic model, continued to expand into Europe, academies became Yeshivot and Jewish life continued to evolve country by country and what we have called the rabbinate continued.

If there are lessons to be learned; perhaps one of them could be that the different world views of the rabbis and the Exilarchs reflected two different cultures and that one always needs to consider the impact of culture when determining a course of action. A corollary to this view might suggest that multiple views and innovative visions are necessary to attract, integrate and acculturate the many forms and identities of being Jewish that have existed and are coming into existence.

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.]