



A Special Unraveller: How the Rabbis won!

Part One

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I assume that some proportion of the people reading this essay have at one time or another studied Talmud but have you ever asked yourself what impact has the studying of Talmud had for the Jewish people? Or have you wondered how the study of Talmud guided the various peoples who lived from early Roman times through at least the Middle Ages?

Obviously, I have.

The truth is that those people who we have come to refer to as “The Sages”, or “The Rabbis”, had very little if any influence on the rulers of the time. We, as a people, lived and functioned as one of many minorities in a majority culture. We were subject to the whims of Kings. Sometimes they were beneficial and other times, well... I don't really have to answer that. You know what I mean.

This essay and the ones that follow, attempt to explain, why the rabbinate succeeded. We know that following the destruction of the Temple that other groups who envisioned the future of the Jewish people existed but how did it happen that the institution that was responsible for the creation of the rabbinate, later called the Patriarchate, succeeded while others failed?

Let's begin with the story of the person who we consider to be the first rabbi, Yohanan ben Zakkai. The story is often told how during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, Yohanan had himself smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin. What the story doesn't tell us is the reason he did it. Yohanan arranged to be smuggled out of Jerusalem because, while the Romans were literally at the gates, two civil wars were taking place inside of Jerusalem as different factions struggled for power. We can assume that his act of fleeing wasn't strongly supported by any of the factions. Yohanan established an academy in the Greco-Roman tradition at Jabneh.

Two additional items need to be explained if we hope to understand how the rabbinate succeeded. The first is the relationship to Davidic lineage. You might recall that legend has it that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David. In the 2nd Book of Kings and the first Book of Chronicles, the Bible lays the groundwork for Davidic continuity in exile.

“In the thirty-seventh year of the exile, King Jehoichin of Judah, King Evil-Merodach of Babylon, took note of Jehoichin and released him from prison. He spoke kindly to him, and gave him a

throne about those of other kings who were with him in Babylon. His prison garments were removed and he received regular rations for the rest of his life." 2 Kings 25:27

"The descendants of Jehoichin, the captive and his son..." Chronicles 3:17

It appears that David's lineage was tracked and many of the rabbis were descended from either the male or female line. The leaders of what emerged as the rabbinate or the patriarchate claimed Davidic descent.

The second item that bolstered the role of the rabbi was the creation of the Mishnah in Palestine. In the beginning of the 3rd Century C.E. (217 C.E), the Mishnah, was edited by Rabbi Judah HaNasi (HaNasi means the prince and was a synonym for Patriarch), thus completing a process which had been ongoing during the preceding centuries in Roman Palestine. This effort paralleled the development of Roman law. The Mishnah was supplemented by a tractate called "Avot", often called the Ethics of the Fathers, where it provides a detailed description of how authority was transmitted, from Moses to Joshua, to the elders, Prophets, to the men of the Great Assembly and into Mishnaic times, thus demonstrating the continuity of David's descendants. With the creation of the Mishnah, the rabbis succeeded in establishing their authority or at least their presence as a major factor in the Jewish world.

The creation of the academies and the Mishnah, both which paralleled Roman culture, coupled with Roman support, is the primary reason that the rabbinic model emerged as the primary group following the destruction of the 2nd Temple. The Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. Sixty five years later, the Bar Kokba rebellion occurred, a rebellion which was supported by Rabbi Akiba and his followers. We read about them in sitting in the roof top in B'nai Berak on Passover. The question is how the emerging institution of the rabbinate survived following the rebellion; and that will be the subject of next week's Unraveller.

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.]