

UNIT 3: THE RABBINIC PERIOD

RABBI GAIL LABOVITZ, PH.D.

INTRODUCTION

The identification of a “period” in history – when it starts and ends, what its representative events and institutions are, what gives it its identity– is a fraught and subjective process. Before speaking to the history of the “Rabbinic Period”, therefore, I note that to designate this period as “rabbinic” is to suggest that its most salient feature is the rabbinic movement, known to us primarily through the rabbis’ literary production. This raises the question of whether the boundaries of the period are (or should be) set based on the first stirrings and final redaction of the materials contained in rabbinic texts – from the time of the earliest sages cited in the Mishnah to the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud – or perhaps the boundaries should be based on significant events and/or political moments that affected the majority of the Jewish population, such as from the Destruction of the Second Temple to the Muslim conquest. In addition, it suggests that the rabbinic movement provided the dominant social, cultural, and/or political leadership of the time, an image that the rabbis themselves may have wished to promote, but one that is not necessarily borne out by a careful reading of the evidence. Privileging the rabbis and their Judaism limits our vision of what else might have constituted being Jewish or practicing Judaism at the time. Along the same lines, rabbinic literature was primarily produced in two locations, the Land of Israel under the Roman Empire, and Babylonia under the Sassanian Empire. To speak of the history of the “rabbinic period” is to place those two communities at the center of our investigation. But while they may have been the largest and most enduring Jewish communities of late antiquity, a variety of other Jewish communities within the Roman Empire and elsewhere waxed and waned and participated in significant events, and should not be overlooked. I proceed with these concerns in mind.

AFTER THE DESTRUCTION

The destruction of their central shrine and a Jewish life bereft of sacrificial rites were not entirely new to the Jews of 70 CE; they knew that the Temple had been destroyed once before (586 BCE), and had been rebuilt 70 years later. Jews of the 1st century could understand events of their time through the biblical-prophetic model of sin and punishment, and say that just as the First Temple was destroyed because of the people’s faithlessness, but God did not abandon his people, so too this second destruction should lead to atonement for the sin(s) that had brought about the catastrophe. The prior restoration may have given Jews a source of hope that the Temple might be rebuilt and the sacrificial cult restored. Violent Jewish resistance to Roman hegemony flared up at least twice after the Destruction, suggesting that the defeat of 70 was not accepted as conclusive, at least by some significant portion of Jews.

The political state of the land changed dramatically immediately after the Roman defeat of the uprising. Renamed Provincia Judea, the land of Israel became an imperial province administered by a governor appointed by Rome. The Roman army was a fixed presence.

An important consequence of the Destruction appears to be that the sectarianism of the late Second Temple period largely disappears from the available historical sources. Since the Temple was a focal point of sectarian differences, its absence removed a major source of disputation among Jews. According to rabbinic accounts, this is also the moment at which the rabbinic movement coalesced as a political and religious force and moved into a position of communal leadership. In a story told in several documents (all redacted well after the Destruction), Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai escaped Jerusalem during the rebellion and Roman siege, secured an audience with the Roman general Vespasian, and requested the right to establish a rabbinic center in Yavneh and/or to rescue rabbis from Jerusalem. Although the early rabbinic movement may have had ideological and historical connections to the Pharisees, the early rabbis themselves do not claim direct identity with this group. If the rabbis were not the dominant group that they portray themselves to be, neither does there appear to have been another Jewish faction competing for the role.



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The notable exception is the adherents of Christianity. The Destruction strengthened their increasingly distinct identity and beliefs. The Gospels, composed after the Destruction, record an ambivalent attitude to the Temple, and its Destruction was interpreted as punishment of the Jews for rejecting Jesus as messiah. The events of 70 constitute an important stage in the process of separation between the nascent Church and the community that continued to identify as Jewish.

Intriguingly, early rabbinic texts are reticent in their expressions of mourning and despair. Rather, the rabbis strive to depict a utopian, timeless vision in which legal directives for the Temple are presented as if it were still standing and its rites still being observed. Yet they also constructed a system of rites, regulations and observances that could be practiced without a central shrine, in any location, thus laying the foundation for the growth and eventual dominance of rabbinic Judaism.

THE TRAJANIC REVOLT, 116-117

Jewish uprisings broke out in Egypt, Libya and Cyprus during Trajan's reign. The instigating reasons are obscure, though the Destruction of 70 and its after-effects likely fed lingering resentment against Rome.¹ There were also long-attested tensions between Jews and Greeks in Egypt. Roman forces were occupied with the Parthians in Mesopotamia, and that may have influenced the timing of the uprising.

Jews attacked pagan temples and destroyed statues of gods, as well as civic institutions, roads, and waterways. Christian and pagan writers report considerable destruction and loss of life in Cyprus. After Trajan suppressed the uprisings in 117, the Jewish communities of Egypt and Libya fall out of the historical record for some time, and there is no record of Jews in Cyprus again until the 4th century.

Jews may have participated in resistance against the Romans in Mesopotamia, where Lucius Quietus led the Roman response. Sources also hint at an uprising in Judea which involved Quietus. At least two parallel rabbinic sources refer to a "war of Kitos".² It is possible that Jews fleeing from North Africa met their final defeat at the hands of the Romans in Judea.

THE BAR-KOKHBA REBELLION, 132-135

Little evidence remains of the causes or details of events during this uprising. Motivating factors may include popular discontent with the Roman military presence in Judea, lingering rebellious sentiment after the Trajanic Revolt, possible rulings of the emperor Hadrian to ban circumcision and to rebuild Jerusalem as the Roman city Aelia Capitolina, and/or the building of a temple to Jupiter on the site of the destroyed Temple.

The revolt appears to have occurred mainly in Judea, and historians are divided as to whether rebels took Jerusalem at any point. Literary and archeological evidence points to a guerilla war in which Jewish fighters used caves and underground tunnels to take cover and launch attacks. Both rabbinic and Christian sources broadly agree that Roman governor Quintus Tineius Rufus played a significant role on the Roman side, and that Shimon bar Kokhba (or Kosiba) led the Jews. One rabbinic source suggests that Rabbi Akiva supported Bar Kosiba and saw him as a messianic figure,³ but it is not known whether anyone else affiliated with the rabbinic movement was involved in the rebellion in any way.

¹ Moreover, these communities were host to refugees who fled the war in Judea.

² See Mishnah Sotah 9:14 and Tosefta Sotah 15:8. Although a number of manuscripts of both the Mishnah and Tosefta have the name "Titus" here, the likely reference and correct reading should be "Kitos".

³ Palestinian Talmud, Ta'anit 4:5, 68d.



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The war concluded with the siege and defeat of the rebels at Beitar. The destruction in Judea was extensive, the center of Jewish life in the Land of Israel moved to the Galilee, and the Romans renamed the province “Syria Palestina.”

THE PATRIARCHATE

Rabbinic sources depict the Patriarchate as an institution with well-established roots, extending back even before the Destruction. Modern scholars, however, divide over whether it first appeared shortly after the Destruction or is a later development. Some question whether the Romans would have allowed (or [re]established) this form of client ruler in the immediate aftermath of the Bar Kokhba rebellion or in light of Judea becoming an imperial province. They note that the title of *Nasi*/Patriarch is first used for Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi in the late 2nd century, and that he does not seem to have served in an official role vis-à-vis the Roman government. Earlier figures may have had leadership roles within the rabbinic movement or the broader Jewish community, and may have assumed judicial functions without formal authority. In rabbinic texts, the *Nasi*'s functions are mostly religious: he set the calendar, declared fasts, and issued decrees on observance. The *Nasi* as an institutionalized position with governmental recognition cannot be confirmed from Roman legal documents prior to the 4th century.

END OF THE SEVERAN DYNASTY

The early 3rd century saw transitions in the Roman Empire and in Mesopotamia that had significant repercussions for Jewish history. In both Rome and Persia, royal dynasties fell and were replaced by new political leaders. Extended military confrontations between the two empires affected areas with significant Jewish populations.

The redaction of the first discrete rabbinic work, the Mishnah, which many later sources attribute to the editorship of Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, is ascribed to this period. The text remained open to additions for a brief period after the Patriarch's death in 225. Thus, it is at about this time that rabbinic culture marks the transition from authorities called Tannaim, whose views are recorded in the Mishnah and contemporary sources (such as the Tosefta and several midrashic works), to those who appear in Talmudic discourse, known as Amoraim. On the Roman side, Alexander Severus's death in 235 led to years of instability that saw invasions and war, economic decline, internal strife, and a series of claimants to rule who rose and fell in quick succession until Diocletian's ascension in 284. At the death of Constantius (Diocletian's successor in the west) his son Constantine vied for control and achieved it in 312. Constantine attributed his victory to “the God of Christians”, and declared Christianity a licit religion in 325.

Constantine and his son Constantius II instituted new laws that affected Jews' status and rights within the Empire, while Jewish converts to Christianity received legal protection from harassment. The Jews' long-standing exemption from service in municipal government was revoked. Constantine and his mother Helena undertook a campaign to identify Christian holy sites and build churches in Palestine, especially in Jerusalem, thereby putting an enhanced Christian stamp on the land.

When Julian became Emperor in 361 he disavowed Christianity and endorsed the restoration of pagan worship and rites. Julian announced plans for the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple, thus challenging Christian arguments that its destruction was proof of God's rejection of the Jews. But Julian's reign was short; he died in 363, and was succeeded by Jovian and Valentinian, under whom Christianity regained its prominence. At first,



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rights granted to the Jews under pagan rulers continued to be officially recognized, even if enforcement was often absent or ineffective. Indeed, it is during the 4th century that the Patriarchs and other Jewish religious authorities are most consistently mentioned in non-Jewish sources, which recognized them as leaders of the Jews of Palestine and beyond.

Nonetheless, legislative attempts to restrict the privileges of Jews and limit their legal rights resumed. In 388, Theodosius I prohibited intermarriage between Christians and Jews and under his successor, positions in the military and imperial administration were closed to Jews. Protections were extended to converts to Christianity, while converts to Judaism suffered confiscation of property, exile, and even capital punishment. Jewish ownership of Christian (or other non-Jewish) slaves was prohibited. In 415, Theodosius II prohibited the Patriarch from hearing cases that involved a Christian; the Patriarchate itself came to an end before 429. A century later, Justinian forbade any non-Christian (Jew or pagan) to testify against an Orthodox Christian.

Palestinian rabbinic culture is noted for several key literary productions. The date and circumstances of the redaction of the Palestinian (or Jerusalem) Talmud are much debated. Some suggest the redaction corresponds to the end of the Patriarchate in the early 5th century. Others argue for a slightly earlier date, noting, for example, that its latest possible historical reference is to Julian's campaign against Persia (363). Fragmentary evidence from Roman, Christian and Jewish sources suggests that an uprising occurred in the Galilee in 351; if so, this too may have impacted the end of the Palestinian Amoraic period. Palestinian Amoraim of up to the 4th century feature in Midrash collections such as *Genesis Rabbah* and *Leviticus Rabbah*, and several more such works may be dated to the 6th and 7th centuries. The making of midrashic collections was one form of rabbinic writing that continued beyond the Muslim conquest. At the end of this period, paytanim or liturgical poets, flourished, including Yanai (5th century) and Eleazar ha-Kallir (6th-7th centuries).

BABYLONIA: FALL OF THE PARTHIAN MONARCHY AND SUCCESSION OF THE SASSANIAN DYNASTY (224-651)

Meanwhile, in Babylon, we know almost nothing about the Jewish community prior to the succession of the Sassanian Dynasty in 224. Around this time, Jews began the literary and scholarly project that would culminate in the Babylonian Talmud. Remains of the Dura Europa synagogue, built in 245, attest to the presence of a Babylonian Jewish community, but tell us little about its composition. Even after the Sassanian ascension, our information comes almost exclusively from rabbinic texts, texts which are not meant to be historical accounts and which reflect the interests of one group of Jews.

Although the Sassanians established Zoroastrianism as the state religion, rabbinic sources display mostly positive or at least accommodationist attitudes to the rulers. There is no clear contemporaneous evidence of overt religious persecution or attempts to proselytize (let alone forcibly convert) Jews through at least the mid-5th century CE. Two post-rabbinic Jewish sources and one Islamic source describe anti-Jewish persecution under Yazdgird II (438-457), but this is not reflected in the Babylonian Talmud. Nevertheless, at around this time, the recorded work of named Babylonian Amoraim ceased, and the work of the Talmud's anonymous redactor began.

THE EXILARCH AND THE RABBINIC MOVEMENT

It is not clear when the office of the Babylonian Exilarch, parallel to the Palestinian Patriarch, was established, but it is not documented until the 3rd century CE. Our portrait of the Exilarchate emerges mostly from rabbinic



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literature. It resembles the Patriarchate in its profession of Davidic lineage, its wealth, its interactions with and support from governmental authorities, and its administration of an independent Jewish court system. The Babylonian Exilarch, however, does not seem to have had the same authority and power within the rabbinic movement itself as did his Palestinian counterpart.

The Babylonian Talmud is the major literary work of the Babylonian rabbinic movement. Opinions vary as to the time of its final redaction, with some dating it to the mid-6th century, and others to the Muslim conquest in the early 7th century. Historians also debate the structure of the rabbinic movement itself, notably whether the formal rabbinic academies of the Geonic/Islamic period have their origins in this earlier time. In the Babylonian Talmud, students are frequently found “at the house” or “at the study hall” of a particular master, rather than at the institution of a particular place; references to the term *yeshivah* (*metivta* in Aramaic) are usually attributable to the late, editorial layer of the Talmud, suggesting that it may be towards the end of the rabbinic period that these institutions began to coalesce.

It is worth noting that the scant archeological remains from this period attest to a lively interest among Jews (along with their neighbors) in magical incantations, found inscribed on amulets and bowls buried under houses. Texts seek protection for the residents from demons and disease; several contain curses or love charms. While incantations, divination and demonology are hardly absent from rabbinic sources, it is difficult to determine the relationship between these folk practices and the Judaism advocated by the rabbis.

Perhaps exhausted by years of fighting each other, neither the Sassanian nor the Eastern Roman Byzantine Empire was able to withstand the Arab conquest, carried out under the banner of the new religion of Islam. The rabbinic period which began with the Destruction of the Second Temple, ended with the advent of the Muslim conquest. The rabbinic period ended, but Rabbinic Judaism was not defeated. The rabbis, with their amazing literary production of the Mishnah, Tosefta, two Talmuds and collections of midrashim, left behind texts which would continue to shape and eventually come to dominate the practice of Judaism. Today’s Judaism, the Judaism of the 21st century, remains Rabbinic Judaism, and it is a testament to rabbinic greatness.

