

Yohanan ben Zakkai

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The usual view is that Yohanan ben Zakkai was the key figure in the transition from the Temple, after its destruction in 70, to a reinvented Rabbinic Judaism with its center at Yabneh (Jamnia) near the sea in Judaea. The earliest evidence is the mentions of Yohanan in the Mishnah, which according to Neusner¹ was closed in c200. These roughly confirm the usual view, along with some adulatory and hostile passages, and some which implausibly make Yohanan a teacher of Torah with five disciples. I here give the 30 Yohanan passages by group, numbered consecutively for later reference.

Seemingly Reportive (16)

2/1. Shabbat

[01] 16:7. [On the Sabbath] they cover a lamp with a dish, so that it will not scorch a rafter, and the excrement of a child,² and a scorpion, so that it will not bite. Said R Judah, A case came before Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai in Arab,³ and he said, I suspect [he is liable] for a sin offering.

[02] 22:3. [On the Sabbath] someone breaks a jar to eat dried figs from it . . . Said R Judah, A case came before Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai in Arab, and he said, I fear on his account that he should bring a sin offering [for violating the Sabbath].⁴

2/4. Sheqalim

[03] 1:4. Said R Judah, Testified Ben Bukhri in Yabneh, Any priest who pays the sheqel does not sin. Said to him Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, Not so.⁵ But any priest who does not pay the sheqel sins.

2/6. Sukkah

[04] 2:5. They brought Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai some cooked food to taste, and to Rabban Gamaliel two dates and a dipper of water. And they said, Bring them up to the sukkah. And when they gave to R Zadoq food less than an egg's bulk, he took it in a cloth and ate it outside of the sukkah and said no blessing after it.⁶

¹Neusner **Mishnah** xvi. For his comments on the Yohanan passages see **Legend** 41-64.

²So the text. For another interpretation, interpreting all three actions as undertaken to prevent future injury, see Danby 114 n12.

³A Galilean town (Gk Garaba; Gabara); it supplied priests for the Temple rotation. Yohanan's cases concern Sabbath observance. Later tradition invents a curse on Galilee by Yohanan (y.Shabbat 16:8, **Legend** 133).

⁴Here and above, Yohanan takes a strict view of what can be done on the Sabbath.

⁵Evidently there were several opinions, and Yohanan's word was not law in Yabneh.

⁶No blessing was said since the portion was too small to constitute a meal.

2/6. Sukkah

[05] 3:12. [Formerly], the lulab [bundle of palm, willow, or myrtle branches] was carried in the Temple for seven days, and in the provinces, for one day. When the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai ordained that the lulab should be carried in the provinces seven days, as a memorial to the Temple; and that the whole of the day on which the omer is waved [16th Nisan] should be forbidden [for the use of new produce, which may be used only from the waving of the omer and thereafter; this had formerly been at noon].

2/8. Rosh Hasshanah

[06] 4:1. The festival day of the New Year which coincided with the Sabbath: in the Temple they would sound the shofar, but not in the provinces. When the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai made the rule that they should sound the shofar in every locale in which there was a court.⁷ Said R Eleazar, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai made that rule only in the case of Yabneh alone. They said to him, All the same are Yabneh and every locale in which there is a court.

[07] 4:3. [Formerly], the lulab was taken up in the Temple for seven days, and in the provinces, for one day. When the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai made the rule that in the provinces the lulab should be taken up for seven days, as a memorial to the Temple; and that the day on which the omer is waved [16th Nisan] should be wholly prohibited [in regard to the eating of new produce].⁸

[08] 4:4. At first they would receive testimony about the new moon all day long. One time witnesses came late, and the Levites . . . made the rule that they should receive testimony only up to the afternoon offering . . . When the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai made the rule that they should [once more] receive testimony about the new moon all day long.⁹

[09] Said R Joshua ben Qorha, This rule too did Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai make: Even if the head of the court is located somewhere else, the witnesses should come only to the location of the council [to give testimony, and not to the location of the head of the court].

3/2. Ketubot

[10] 13:1. He who went overseas, and his wife [left at home] claims maintenance: Hanan says, Let her take an oath at the end, but let her not take an oath at the outset [that is, she takes an oath when she claims her marriage contract after her husband's death, or after he returns, that she has not held back any property of her husband]. Sons of high priests disputed with him,¹⁰ and ruled, Let her take an oath at the outset and at the end. Ruled R Dosa ben Harkinas in accord with their opinion. Said R Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, Well did Hanan rule. She should take an oath only at the end.

[11] 13:2. He who went overseas, and someone went and supported his wife: Hanan says, He [who did so] has lost his money. Said R Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, Well did Hanan rule. He has put his money on the horn of a gazelle.¹¹

⁷The court here functions as a ritual successor to the Temple.

⁸This same ruling appears at Sukkah 3:12 and again at Menahot 10:5; see below.

⁹The absence of the Temple makes the provision unnecessary.

¹⁰“Sons of the priests” implies a post-Temple priestly party. Yoḥanan here opposes them, and supports the view of Hanan ben Abishalom (who appears nowhere else in the Mishnah).

¹¹His action is speculative, and not a contract on which to base a claim for reimbursement.

3/5. Sotah

[For Sotah 5:2 and 5:5, see under Hostile, below]

[12] 9:9. When adulterers became many, the ordeal of the bitter water¹² was canceled. And Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai canceled it, since it is said, I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, for they themselves go apart with whores [Hosea 4:14].¹³

[For Sotah 9:15, see under Adulatory, below]

[4/4. Sanhedrin: For Sanhedrin 5:2, see under Adulatory, below]

[4/7. Eduyyot. For Eduyyot 8:3 and 8:7, see under Hostile and Adulatory, below]

[4/9. Abot. For Abot 2:8-12, see under Yoḥanan's Five Disciples, below]

5/2. Menahot

[13] 10:5. After the Temple was destroyed, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai ordained that the day of waving [of the omer, the second day of Passover] should be wholly prohibited [in respect to new produce].

6/1. Kelim

[14] 2:2. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai says, [As to] large store jars, the measure is two logs.¹⁴ [As to] Galilean cruses and little jars, the measure [of liquid to be held for uncleanness to persist is], for their bottoms, any quantity whatsoever. And they do not have sides [to be susceptible to uncleanness when broken].¹⁵

[15] 17:16. [Anything, including a beggar's staff, which has a receptacle is susceptible to uncleanness]. And concerning them all did Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai say, Woe is me if I speak; woe is me if I do not speak.¹⁶

6/11. Yadayim

[16] 4:6. Say Sadducees, We complain against you, Pharisees, for you say, Holy Scriptures impart uncleanness to hands, but the books of Homer do not impart uncleanness to hands.¹⁷ Said Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, And do we have against the Pharisees only this matter alone? Lo, they say, The bones of an ass are clean, but the bones of Yoḥanan the high priest are unclean.¹⁸ They said to him, According to their preciousness is their uncleanness, so that a man should not make the bones of his father and mother into spoons. He said to them, So too Holy Scriptures. According to their preciousness is their uncleanness. But the books of Homer, which are not precious, do not impart uncleanness.

¹²Undergone by women accused of uncleanness.

¹³Here, Yoḥanan appears to advantage as having Scriptural sanction for his ruling.

¹⁴This follows a series of rulings by the later R Aqiba on the uncleanness of vessels. Presumably, of the earlier rulings by Yoḥanan, only these were thought to retain their validity.

¹⁵A surface has no inside. Only things that can hold liquid are vessels, and come under the usual rule as to what is susceptible to uncleanness.

¹⁶The extension of rules for vessels to other items with cavities is intrinsically uncertain. The dilemma may be clarified in the revised remark by Yoḥanan in t.Kelim Baba Mesia 7:9.

¹⁷Sacred texts impart uncleanness; secular texts do not. For Christian texts kept in synagogues, see t.Yadayim 2:13 (no counterpart passage in m.Yadayim).

¹⁸There may be confusion in this passage with Yoḥanan the High Priest (John Hyrcanus); see Neusner **Pharisees** 1/160-176 for the later association of this figure with the Sadducees. Given this doubt, I do not conclude that Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was, or became, a Sadducee.

Adulatory (2) and Apologetic (2)

3/5. Sotah

[17] 9:15. When Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai died, the splendor of wisdom came to an end.¹⁹

4/4. Sanhedrin

[18] 5:2. The more a judge tests the evidence, the more is he deserving of praise. Ben Zakkai²⁰ once tested the evidence even to the inquiring about the stalks of figs [under which the incident took place].²¹

4/7. Eduyyot

[19] 8:7. Said R Joshua, I have a tradition from Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his master, and his master from his master, as a law revealed to Moses at Sinai, that Elijah is not going to come to declare clean or unclean, to put out or draw near.²²

6/11. Yadayim

[20] 4:3 . . . They voted and decided: Ammon and Moab give a poor man's tithe in the Sabbatical year. And when R Yose the son of the Damascene came to R Eliezer at Lydda, he said to him, What new things have you in the bet hammidrash today? He said to him, they voted and decided, Ammon and Moab give poor man's tithe in the Sabbatical year. R Eliezer wept, saying, [q of Ps 25:14]. Go and tell them, Do not be anxious about your vote. I have received a tradition from Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, who heard it from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, a law given to Moses at Sinai, that Ammon and Moab give poor man's tithe in the Sabbatical year.²³

Hostile (3)

3/5. Sotah

[21] 5:2. Said R Joshua [ben Hurqanos], Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai? For you used to say, Another generation is going to come to declare clean a loaf of bread in the third remove [from the original source of uncleanness], for there is no Scripture in the Torah which indicates that it is unclean. But now has not Aqiba, your disciple, brought Scriptural proof from the Torah that it is indeed unclean? [quote from Lev 11:33].²⁴

[22] 5:5. Said R Joshua, Who will remove the [dust] from your eyes, Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai? For you used to expound for your entire life that Job served the Omnipresent only out of awe [quote from Job 1:8] . . . And now has not Joshua, the disciple of your disciple, taught that he did what he did out of love?²⁵

¹⁹From a list of rabbis noted for some particular quality; that list concludes the Sotah.

²⁰This, the sole reference to Yoḥanan by his patronymic, has been thought to be hostile, but the passage as a whole is positive. It shows Yoḥanan in his role as a sitting judge.

²¹Presumably to see if the witness is correct about the season of the year.

²²No teacher is named, but Yoḥanan's rulings are vaguely claimed to go back to Moses.

²³This too is apologetic rather than adulatory. A Yoḥanan follower notes that Yoḥanan's rulings are forgotten *as his*, but are still affirmed by the sense of the current ruling majority.

²⁴Yoḥanan's prediction of future laxity is ridiculed as having been proved false.

²⁵Another criticism of Yoḥanan as lacking in Scriptural learning.

4/7. Eduyyot

[23] 8:3. Testified R Joshua and R Judah ben Beterah concerning a widow of an Israelite family suspected of contamination with unfit genealogical stock, that she is valid for marriage into the priesthood. For a woman deriving from an Israelite family suspect of contamination with unfit genealogical stock is herself valid for being declared unclean or clean, being put out and being brought near. Said Rabban [Simeon ben] Gamaliel, We should accept your testimony. But what shall we do? For Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai decreed against calling courts into session for such a matter.

Yoḥanan's Five Disciples (7)²⁶

4/9 Abot

[24] 2:8. Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai received [teaching] from Hillel and Shammai.²⁷ He would say, If you have learned much Torah, do not puff yourself up on that account, for it was for that purpose that you were created.

He had five disciples, and these are they: R Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, R Joshua ben Hananiah, R Yose the priest, R Simeon ben Netanel, and R Eleazar ben Arakh.

He would list their good qualities: R Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: A plastered [cistern], which does not lose a drop of water. R Joshua: Happy is the one who gave birth to him. R Yose: A pious man. R Simeon ben Netanel: A man who fears sin. And R Eleazar ben Arakh: A surging spring

He would say, If all the sages of Israel were on one side of the scale, and R Eliezer b Hyrcanus were on the other, he would outweigh all of them.

Abba Saul says in his name, If all the sages of Israel were on one side of the scale, and R Eleazar [b Arakh] were on the other side, he would outweigh all of them.²⁸

[25] 2:9. He said to them, Go and see what is the straight path to which someone should stick.

R Eliezer says, A generous spirit. R Joshua says, A good friend. R Yose says, A good neighbor.²⁹ R Simeon says, Foresight. R Eleazar says, Good will.

He said to them, I prefer the opinion of R Eleazar ben Arakh, because in what he says is included everything you say.

He said to them, Go out and see what is the bad road, which someone should avoid. R Eliezer says, Envy. R Joshua says, A bad friend. R Yose says, A bad neighbor. R Simeon says, Defaulting on a loan. All the same is a loan owed to a human being and a loan owed to the Omnipresent, blessed be he, as it is said, The wicked borrows and does not pay back, the righteous person deals graciously and hands over [what he owes; Ps 37:21].³⁰ R Eleazar says, Bad will.

He says to them, I prefer the opinion of Eleazar ben Arakh, because in what he says is included everything you say.

²⁶Perhaps modeled on Jesus with his five disciples, a grouping of which the Rabbis were aware; see b.Sanhedrin 43a.

²⁷Vague and implausible; "Hillel" and Shammai are emblematic opposites in the Mishnah.

²⁸For the meaning of this reversal of Yoḥanan's estimate of Eliezer, see below.

²⁹Compare Lk 19:29-37 (the Good Samaritan), used to redefine the concept "neighbor."

³⁰An echo of the distinctive Alpha Christian commandment against fraud (Mk 10:19).

[4/9 Abot]

[26] 2:10. They said three things. R Eliezer says, (1) Let the respect owing to your fellow be as precious to you as the respect owing to you yourself.³¹ (2) And don't be easy to anger, (3) And repent one day before you die. And (1) Warm yourself by the fire of the sages, but be careful of their coals, so you don't get burned. (2) For their bite is the bite of a fox, and their sting is the sting of a scorpion, and their hiss is like the hiss of a snake. (3) And everything they say is like fiery coals.³²

[27] 2:11. R Joshua says, (1) Envy, (2) desire of bad things, and (3) hatred for people push a person out of the world.³³

[28] 2:12. R Yose says, (1) Let your fellow's money be as precious to you as your own.³⁴ And (2) get yourself ready to learn Torah, for it does not come as an inheritance to you. And (3) may everything you do be for the sake of Heaven.³⁵

[29] 2:13. R Simeon says, (1) Be meticulous in the recitation of the Shema and the Prayer. And (2) when you pray, don't treat your praying as a matter of routine. But let it be [a plea for] mercy and supplication before the Omnipresent, blessed be he, as it is said, For he is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and full of mercy, and repents of the evil (Joel 2:13). (3) And never be evil in your own eyes.³⁶

[30] 2:14. R Eleazar says, (1) Be constant in learning of Torah. (2) And know what to reply to an Epicurean.³⁷ (3) And know before whom you work, for your employer can be depended upon to pay your wages for what you can do.³⁸

³¹An echo of what is easily the most popular of all Christian precepts, the Golden Rule, first articulated at Lk 6:31 as part of his Sermon on the Plain. In its Matthean form (Mt 7:12) it was later attributed to Hillel, but of that development there seems to be no trace in the Mishnah.

³²This astonishing critique of the sages (the learned tradition of the Torah) has no parallel in the Mishnah. It finds a more extreme form in the Christianity of Saul of Tarsus. For the general situation, see the summary appreciation at the end of this essay.

³³"Pushing someone out of the world" may imply interest in the next world, which is absent in other Yohanan passages but held by the Pharisees, to whom Yohanan is here assimilated. Yohanan was a sufficiently prominent figure to be annexed by various persuasions within Rabbinic tradition: the Christianizers as well as their opponents, the Pharisees.

³⁴As in n33 above, again Yose and a concern for other people's money, perhaps held on deposit for another and requiring to be paid back scrupulously. A promise of future payment, whether to laborer or friend, is sacred. This is the only economic aspect of Jesus' teachings; it is embodied in Jesus' new (non-Mosaic) commandment against fraud (Mk 10:19)..

³⁵As in n36 above, again a possible interest in the world to come.

³⁶Note the seeming appearance of the factor of conscience, not simply lawfulness.

³⁷Or "unbeliever;" see Danby p397 n4 (ap m.Sanhedrin 10:1, the only other Mishnah mention of Epicureans, in a long list of those who "have no share in the world to come").

³⁸If this is another instance of seeming Christianization, the employer may be God, and paying wages may imply the two options for the afterlife. That wages are to be paid, one way or the other, in the afterlife is the point of Luke's Parable of Lazarus (Lk 16:19-26), illustrating a point made more theoretically in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20-49).

Summary: The Mishnah Evidence for Yoḥanan

Reasonable inferences are the following. (1) **Teacher**. He had no famous teacher [19-20], and was probably taught by his father Zacchaeus. (2) **Galilee**. In his early years, he ruled on Sabbath and domestic propriety in Gabara [01- 02, cf 14-15], a town which provided priests for the Temple. His rulings were strict, compatible with reports of the Galilean Shammai. (3) **Temple**. There is no direct evidence for a Jerusalem phase: his approval of Hanan [in 10-11] is ambiguous, and his one ruling about priests [10] was given in Yabneh. He is not a “son of the high priests” [10]. Implication that he was of the priestly Sadducee party [16] is insecure, though he never mentions the afterlife, agreeing with Sadducees. (4) **Transition**. His judiciousness [17] would make him valuable in the transition from the Temple to the courts. He makes rulings for that period. [05-08, 13, cf 12], but was not unopposed at Yabneh [10]. (5) **Courts**. His rulings often concern courts and evidence [06, 09, cf 17-18]. His rule on what may be heard in courts, though disliked by some, held firm [23]. (6) **Succession**. One passage [04] implies that Gamaliel II was his junior; this is plausible if, as is widely thought, Gamaliel later succeeded him at Yabneh.

Inconsistent and implausible: (7) **Students**. Aqiba (died c135) and Joshua, who ridicule Yoḥanan’s Scripture interpretations [21-22], are not a plausible lineage; still less the Abot portrait of Yoḥanan [24-30]. The slightly Christianized sayings of the five disciples [25-30] probably reflect a special, and temporary, development.

It is a something of a relief to report that of the story of Yoḥanan being smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin, and being granted Yabneh by the Roman general in charge of the siege, a doublet of a story told by Josephus about himself, does not appear in this investigation. The legendary side of Yoḥanan thus continued to grow after the period or periods to which the Mishnah is our primary witness.

Judaism at this time faced the challenge of the loss of the Temple in 70. With the Temple went (1) the sacrifices, and (2) the judicial function of the Sanhedrin. For the solution of these problems, Yoḥanan seems to have been, as traditions says, the central figure. He continued some observances connected with the sacrifices, but now diffused to the local synagogues; and at Yabneh, he founded a new judicial center.

Why the traces of Christianization? The end of the Temple in 70 threatened the survival of Judaism, while the Jesus sect was winning converts among the Gentiles, whom Scripture saw as coming eventually into the fold. The appeal was ethical. It derived from those Prophets (Isaiah 1:10-17, Amos 5:21-24, Micah 6:6-8) who had rejected the Temple cult in favor of an ethical definition of the duty of man. Mainline Judaism in the end remained with ritual, but some may have favored the other option, and tried to adjust the image of Yoḥanan in order to countenance it.

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