

40. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai

Mishnah: Rosh Hasshanah 4

Judaism had always been a religion of sacrifice. After Solomon built the first Temple and centralized the sacrifices in his capital Jerusalem, it had been a religion of sacrifice at the Jerusalem Temple. When the Romans put down the Jewish Revolt of 68-72, they destroyed the Temple. Learned rabbis, some of the Sadducee and some of the Pharisee party, gathered at Yabneh, west of Jerusalem, and considered what to do. This was Judaism's moment of decision: what kind of religion would it now be? The answer was to keep the sacrificial observances in place, but to diffuse them: to the towns with a Rabbinic court, and to the local synagogues.

The great figure in this transition was Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, whose rulings on how the old observances shall be continued (or in some cases abandoned) are preserved in the Mishnah, the earliest compilation of Rabbinic traditions. Here are four of Yoḥanan's decisions about ritual continuation.

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. (4:1)

[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]. (4:3)

At first they would receive testimony about the new moon¹ 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. (4:4)

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]. (4:4)

¹The date of the festival was fixed by direct observation of the new moon.

Reflections

Yoḥanan was first known as a judge at the local court in the Galilee town of Gabara.² Two of his Sabbath rulings from that early period are preserved:

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

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

His origins were modest, and his early rulings were notably strict. His teacher was probably his father, Zakkai or Zacchaeus. What happened at Yabneh under his leadership was the establishment of a control center to replace Jerusalem, a center from which rulings could be passed down to the court towns and the local synagogues.

Thus, at the moment of their decision, did the rabbis abandon the Prophets, the ethical tendency which Jesus and his later movement had been developing, and choose instead the Law. The basis for the final separation had been laid.

The new network of local courts and still more local synagogues which the rabbis defined was not unlike the old Christian system of Apostolic control, exerted from centers in Capernaum and Jerusalem, by personal visits and by circular letters, which had come to an end with the deaths of the chief Apostles only a few years earlier. The Christian response to the loss of *their* centralized system was to strengthen local churches and to provide new text authorities. There was no one figure comparable to Yoḥanan. That role was taken by three: Luke, who updated the old Gospel of Mark to give guidance for new questions; Matthew, who produced a quite different replacement for Mark, in which he challenged the rabbis on their central ground of the Law; and on the Paul side, a committee under Onesimus, which edited Paul's letters for wider circulation, and went on to issue new letters under Paul's name, stating the qualifications for the new church leaders. Paul's followers took such positions themselves: the former slave Onesimus went on to become the Bishop of Ephesus.

And as one aspect of getting their act own together again, the Jesus people sought to patch up the quarrel between their Alpha and Beta factions.

²Gabara (Hebrew "Arab"), in central Galilee, was one of the towns which supplied priests for the Temple. It was destroyed by Vespasian in 66, during the Jewish War.