Gophna to Galilee: The Bridge between Christian Beginnings and Jewish Rebirth

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Cliff Carrington (Australia) explores the significance of the Academy at Jamnia for the formation of rabbinic Judaism and some possible connections to early Christianity.

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By Cliff Carrington

Gophna and Josephus

Josephus[1] tells a story involving a group of priests who defect to Titus and are given Roman protection and temporarily housed in the small town of Gophna. Titus promised the priests to respect their religion and that when the war was over he would settle them permanently with their property. This was most likely the group of priests, possibly including Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples, who were finally settled at Jamnia by the Flavians.

Some also there were who, watching a proper opportunity when they might quietly get away, fled to the Romans, of whom were the high priests Joseph and Jesus, and of the sons of high priests three, whose father was Ishmael, who was beheaded in Cyrene, and four sons of Matthias, as also one son of the other Matthias, who ran away after his father's death, and whose father was slain by Simon the son of Gioras, with three of his sons, as I have already related; many also of the other nobility went over to the Romans, together with the high priests.

Now Caesar [Titus] not only received these men very kindly in other respects, but, knowing they would not willingly live after the customs of other nations, he sent them to Gophna, and desired them to remain there for the present, and told them, that when he was gotten clear of this war, he would restore each of them to their possessions again; so they cheerfully retired to that small city which was allotted them, without fear of any danger." [*Jewish War*, 6 2 2]

The Flavians did not give away their favours cheaply. What they needed was a non-nationalistic, peaceful and controllable Judaism. These rabbis were the men to do this for the Flavians, in exchange for their lives. The academy went through the Scriptures and edited them to suit their masters. Excepting the modern Zionist movement, this is the Judaism of today,

Jamnia and Beyond

Here are many Jewish legends about the evolution of their post-temple religion. These are found in

the Talmud and Haggadah. With minor variations the story goes like this:

During the siege of Jerusalem in the summer of 70 CE a Jewish priest, the deputy head of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Johanan (Jochanan) ben Zakkai defected to the Romans. It is written that he communicated to the Roman camp, via arrowmail, that he was a "Friend of Vespasian" and wished to come over. The Romans gave him a promise of safe conduct, if he could get out of the strife-torn city.

Rabbi Johanan devised a scheme, with the assistance of a relative who was in charge of a gate, to be carried out of Jerusalem in a coffin. This deception was needed because none but the dead were allowed out of the city. His disciples, with permission, carried their master out to the cemetery and placed the coffin in a burial cave. Later, at night, Rabbi ben Zakkai got out of the coffin and made his way to the Roman camp, where he was welcomed.

The Rabbi then has an interview with Vespasian (sic), the commander of the siege. During the interview Rabbi ben Zakkai gives Vespasian a prophecy, very similar to the story told by Josephus, that he would soon become emperor (sic). He was taken into the camp to await the outcome of the war. Then Vespasian becomes emperor, fulfilling ben Zakkai's prophecy. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple the Rabbi was rewarded.

Vespasian allotted Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai and his disciples, who had also defected or somehow survived the destruction, a place of refuge in the coastal town of Jamnia. This little town was on the main road along the Mediterranean sea, the Via Maris. There, under Roman protection and, perhaps guidance, the rabbis founded an academy for the study of the Jewish Scriptures, which gained the nomenclature The Vineyard. This name either came from the fact that the academy was actually set up in an old vineyard, or because the students sat in rows like planted grape-vines. Either way, the members of this academy were the roots of modern Judaism.

Rabbi ben Zakkai had some able followers to assist in the teaching. Legend has it that amongst others, they included Akiba ben Joseph (50-135), Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, Ishmael the 'Priest' (60-140), Rabbi Jose and Rabbi Meir (110-175). There were also learned women like Bruria, Rabbi Meir's wife, who was the foremost authority on *Halakhah* or the explanation of the Laws. Even the servant-girl of Judah Ha-Nasi could explain the meaning of obscure Hebrew words. They were later joined by Gamaliel II (Nasi) of the House of David, who took over from Rabbi ben Zakkai as head of the academy. He was recognised as Patriarch by the emperor.

Thus the 'House of David – Branch of Jesse' 'ruled' the Jews through to the third century from Galilee. This was supported by the authorities with grants of Imperial land. It was this group of scholars who founded modern Judaism and settled the canon of what became the Hebrew 'Old Testament'.

The Talmud purports to record some of the debate which went on as they decided which books to include and exclude from the canon. Much of the discussion is profound, some trivial. For instance there was much opposition to including the three books, Ecclesiastes, Esther and Song of Songs. The one which caused the most discussion was Song of Songs. Many wanted to exclude it because of its obvious erotic nature, but the allegorists won the day and it made it into the canon by a spiritual reading. However, with typical Jewish compromise they had arrived at a decision after a few years and the Hebrew Bible - minus the revolutionary Maccabees - was set in Flavian concrete, as it were.

The Jewish canon, with this one exception, was set between 70 and 100 CE; which is also when the Christian Gospels were written. The canons of both religions were completed at the same time and remain basically the same to this day. The Hebrew canon is our prime example of how this came about. Its canon was set by the academy of tame Jewish scholars at Jamnia - under the

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Flavian favour, protection and guidance. This is the official canon which could not be altered without official approval. It was Authorised.

The Flavian academy at Jamnia continued for sixty years to be the centre of Jewish learning. They set all the important calendar dates for the lunar feasts which varied from solar year to solar year. They also responded to questions about Jewish Law sent to them from communities around the world. Their authority was respected not only throughout the Roman world but also as far away as Babylon.

When the second Jewish war broke out, the rabbis first went underground and later were relocated to a small town in western Galilee near Mt. Carmel, opposite Nazareth, which was named Usha. One rabbi, Akiba, had joined the Bar Kochba revolt and was tortured before execution for his breach of faith. The others remained faithful to the Romans and lived under Roman protection and guidance. The academy remained in Galilee until the end of the fourth century, though its location was moved over the years to Bet Shearim, Tiberius, Caesarea and Lydda. The academy was given Imperial land grants by the Flavians. This was probably granted from the deceased Herod Agrippa II's Galilean estates.

One of the first things the Flavians did upon gaining power was to regulate or found academies of learning. In other words – by the appointments to the chairs and payments of the salaries to the professors in Rome, Athens, Alexandria and other centres of learning, the Flavians controlled education and, to a large extent, people's minds.

That they also founded and endowed the definitive Jewish academy is not unexpected. The scholars of the Jamnian academy were in constant contact with the Romans, who undoubtedly advised them how far they could go in their teaching – as the Flavians did with all other academies.

The most important head of the academy in its Galilee period was a friend of the ruling Emperors, Judah Ha-Nasi, or Judah the Prince ('ruled' 135-217). He was also called 'Rabbi' or 'Teacher', because of his great learning. The son of Gamaliel II, he was of the Royal house of David, through his great-grandfather Hillel the Babylonian (60 BCE-10 CE).

He ruled like a real prince of David, with bodyguards and sumptuous court, which only admitted learned men and women. Judah HaNasi used to say that: "it is the unlearned who bring trouble into the world". He was reputed to have been close friends with the Antonine Emperors, as was his father. He ruled from the end of the second to the beginning of the third centuries and figures in many Jewish legends.

As Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai and Gamaliel II presided over the setting of the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures, so Rabbi Meir organised the *Mishna* and Judah Ha-Nasi completed the basis of the *Talmud*. Thus by the end of the second century modern Judaism was formulated under the friendly Roman rule and influence (excepting part of Hadrian's reign).

Aqulia, a Greek scholar from Sinope in the Pontus, was commissioned to translate, with exact literalness, the Hebrew canon into Greek. Alas, this 'Quila' Greek version of the early Hebrew canon has completely disappeared, except for some fragments embedded in the later Fathers.

After the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the Jamnian rabbis had to reconstitute not only the Jewish Scriptures but also its worship. They had to abandon the Temple, Sanhedrin, State, Warfare and History. To replace the Temple they had *Torah*, for the Sanhedrin the Academy, for the State the Commonwealth of Jews, in place of warfare they now had 'internal spiritual struggle' and instead of History they turned to interpretation or exegesis.

The rabbis retained many of the important Passover became a celebration of survivors.

Tabernacles was of necessity without the Temple (as it had been all along). *Chanukkah* was a problem: celebrated the cleansing of the Temple after the victorious Jewish revolt against the Greeks and it became a 'festival of lights'. There was much confusion in later Judaism about exactly what they were celebrating. Anyhow, the Christians soon took over the 'festival of lights' concept for Christmas and its original significance was by and large forgotten.

This was all accomplished under the guidance of the Flavians and their immediate successors between 70 and 132 CE. One result of this Flavian censorship was that the book recording the successful Maccabean revolt against the Selecuid Greeks, was excluded from the Hebrew canon as being possibly inflammatory as it might encourage further sedition.

This is also shown in the English translations of the Bible where the Books of the Maccabees are relegated to the Apocrypha. The Flavians had tight control over all literature as a matter of policy and they certainly would have been very careful with this religious canon. They virtually remade Judaism in their own image. The rabbinic Judaism we have today was created at Jamnia by the Flavians.

There are many problems with the Johanan ben Zakkai story, not the least being that Vespasian was not actually present at the siege of Jerusalem,. His son Titus (of the same name) was the commander. Secondly, when Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai escaped from the siege, in the summer of 70 CE, to promise the Emperorship to Vespasian, Vespasian was already Emperor! These and other inconsistencies can never be sorted out because of lack of reliable evidence.

Jamnian Jews and Kabbala

Not only Orthodox Judaism claims Jamnian/Flavian beginnings. Even the mystics amongst the Jews trace their tradition back to these very same Flavian rabbis. Gershom Scholem, the late Jewish historian of the Kabbala, traces its foundation to the academy at Jamnia:

Palestine was the cradle of the movement, that much is certain. We also know the name of the most important representatives of mystical and theosophical thought among the teachers of the Mishnah. They belonged to a group of the pupils of Johanan ben Zakkai, around the turn of the first century A.D. There is good reason to believe that important elements of this spiritual tradition were kept alive in small esoteric circles; the writers at the end of the Talmudic epoch, attempted a synthesis of their new religious faith and thereby laid the foundations of an entirely new literature.

As we have seen, these writers no longer appear under their own names, but under those of Johanan ben Zakkai, Eliezer ben Hyrakanus, Akiba ben Joseph [Jose], and Ishamel the ‘High Priest.’ These authentic personages are at the same time introduced as the chief characters of their writings, the 'heroes' of mystical action, the keepers and trustees of secret wisdom..." [Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p.41]

The seminal book for modern Kabbalists is the Medieval work known as the *Sepher ha Zohar*, which first surfaces in the Twelfth Century but purports to come from the First Century. In this work the principal rabbis, who propound the secrets of the *Kabbala*, are those from the First Century academy. Perhaps this is wishful thinking on their part but, interestingly, it is again a Flavian beginning to a Jewish sectarian movement.

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The Bridge

The Desposyni Eusebius, in his *History*, wrote of two descendants of the House of David, (through Jude, Jesus's brother), in Galilee. These men are called the 'Desposyni'. They were summoned before Flavius Domitian and examined as to their political correctness. They were found harmless, released and sent back to Galilee to become "leaders of the Churches everywhere". Christians claim these two men as their own. But, they were also claimed by the Jews as well. 'Desposyni' is only defined in the Lexicons as "Emperor's Men", or "members of the Imperial Household"! Paul gives away the plot: "All the Saints send their greetings, especially those of the Imperial household." (*Philippians*. 4:22)

The whole Domitian story is suspect but may have a grain of tradition embedded in it. Perhaps this is the bridge between the Flavian Jewish academy in Galilee and these two men claimed to be Christians. That Domitian would act in the manner Eusebius presents him as doing is very unlikely, unless there is something else going on. It was precisely this period of transition for the Jews, after the turn of the Century, that the first identifiable Christians come to our attention. Lucian, our first truly independent pagan witness, in his *Death of Peregrinus*, mentions a group of early Christians in this area at about the same time.

Galilean Christians

The Carmelites of the Twelfth Century claimed that they were the earliest Christian hermits and traced their beginnings to this period in Galilee under Titus and Vespasian. Their early Latin documents claim their descent from Elijah, through John the Baptist, to Jesus, after whose ascension they build a chapel to Mary on Mount Carmel, opposite Nazareth, under Flavian protection.

Five of these early Latin documents specifically name Titus and Vespasian, in that order. There is also something about a "seventh year" of the Flavians after the destruction of the Temple. Some of the documents claim that the Carmelites had a foundation near the Golden Gate, which faces East from the Temple towards the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane, which was the position of the Flavian commander's camp during the siege. As that may be, they all claim their foundation in conjunction with "Titi et Vespasiani".

Avenging of the Saviour

Another early apocryphal work, *The Avenging of the Saviour*, written in bad Seventh Century Latin, claims the Flavians destroyed Jerusalem to avenge their new Lord. The story is interesting in that Titus is anachronistically claimed to be a prince under Tiberius, when he summons Vespasian and five thousand men, to go to Judea for vengeance.

Both Titus and Vespasian are converted to Christianity by a character named Nathan. When they surround Jerusalem, the Jewish armies commit suicide rather than be killed by the Romans. This is reminiscent of the Masada story in Josephus. Anyhow, the Flavians destroy the city, locate the Veil of Veronica and send it to Tiberius who is cured of "nine kinds of leprosy" and also converts to Christianity!

This is pure romance of course. However, the connection with the early Carmelite stories is unmistakable. Notably both name the Flavians as "Titus and Vespasian". It is unusual to mention the son before the father. They both have something about a seven year period of the Flavian siege.

Conclusion

Both religions are intimately connected to the House of David and Galilee. Perhaps Christianity was just another one of these First Century Flavian Jewish projects? A covert operation supporting an underground Jewish sect which diluted and Hellenised the Jewish Diaspora: a countervailing sect which later got out of control and two centuries later became a religion in its own right, under Flavius Constantine!

However it occurred, the propagation of both Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism happened in the same place and at the same time - under the Flavians: "... but it was only after the rise of the Flavians that we Romans believed in such stories." [Tacitus, *Histories*, I. 10.]

1. Flavius Josephus has been a centre of our interest for many years as the only source we have for the history of the crucial common development of both Rabbinic Judaism and the fostering of early Christianity. Herein is a study of the Roman (Flavian) support for both.

Cliff Carrington is an autodidact and owner/librarian of Carrington’s Classical &

Christian Library. This small private library contains some 3,000 primary sources of the

Western literary tradition and is freely available to students and academics who wish

freedom of study without any denominational or religious bias.

Source: Gesher