



Adult Ed February 2nd, 2008

“When in Rome...”

Jewish Life during the Roman Empire and Beyond

Our last class took us to the fall of the Second Temple, the beginning of the Second Diaspora, the beginning of Christianity. These events all occur during the beginnings of Jewish interaction with the Roman Empire, an interaction that continues on for hundreds years. How did Judaism fare under Rome and what are the implications for us as contemporary Jews?

In the tradition of Jewish teachers, let's start with a question: Who was the wife of Joseph, son of Jacob? We know that Abraham was married to Sara; Isaac was married to Rebecca; Jacob was married to Leah and Rachel. But who was the wife of Joseph? And also in the tradition of Jewish teachers, I won't answer the question...yet.

As the focus of this class is modern Jewish identity and we began in our very first class by discussing that there are “internal” and “external” definitions of Jewish identity, we will also discuss anti-Semitism, which began during the Roman period.

Rome would conquer Israel in 63 BCE. The Roman interaction actually begins earlier, under the time of the Hasmoneans. Let's start with a recap of the proceeding period.

When the Jews returned from the first Diaspora, the exile in Babylon, they were “permitted” to rebuild their Temple. It is important to note that this was with the consent of and with the aid of the Persian kings. Cyrus the Great had issued a proclamation in 538 BCE that begins “Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia “All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord, the God of heaven, given me; and He hath charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.” (2 Chronicles 36:23) That is quoted in the last verse of the Bible.

This was the first time that the Jews would make alliance with a foreign power, but not the last time. There would be others and these alliances would have repercussions.

Remember also that not all the Jews had gone into exile in Babylon, now Persia. Only a small portion had been taken away, but they were the nobility and the priestly class.

The Jewish aristocracy would return after 70 years of exile. Some would elect to remain in Persia. The Purim story characters of Esther and Mordecai were the descendants of Jews who chose to remain in Persia. The Jewish community in Babylon would grow and thrive and Babylon would become a focal point for Jewish philosophers. And Judaic beliefs would change as the result of interaction with the Persians.

When the Jewish aristocracy returned, they came in three waves, led by Sheshbazzar, then Zerubbabel and then finally by Ezra. They found that the Jews who had remained had begun to mingle with and intermarry with the Samaritans. Among the returning Jews, males outnumbered females by two to one, so they too began to intermarry. The name Samaritan means “keepers of the Law” and the Samaritans claim descent from the ancient Jewish tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, who had survived the destruction of the Northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians. The Samaritans view themselves as the true keepers of the Laws of Moses and that it is we who have deviated from the law.

When Ezra returned, he saw two threats to the restoration of the Jewish nation. The first was intermarriage and the second was ignorance of the laws. Bear in mind that in competing with the Samaritans for the “hearts and minds” of the Jewish people, Ezra was facing competition not from a pagan religion, but from a monotheistic faith similar in many ways to Judaism. This was perhaps a foreshadowing to the Jewish conflict with Christianity.

Using the power granted him by the Persians, Ezra convened a national assembly and decreed that foreign wives must be divorced. As you can imagine, this did not sit well with the Samaritans and they would attack Jerusalem and try to halt the rebuilding of the Temple, which they saw as a threat. The Bible records that the Samaritans offered to help with the rebuilding, but their offer was rejected.

Ezra would also convene the Great Assembly to collate the scattered writings of Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, the schools of Hezekiah and Ezra, and to add their own writings. Not content with beginning the process that would result in the Bible; Ezra also dispatched teachers and learned men to out into the countryside to offer exposition. This is the first attempt to teach “orthodox” beliefs to the common man and came about because during the period between the First and Second temples and with the absence of a priestly class prayer had become a substitute for Temple sacrifice.

It should also be noted that Ezra also changed the ancient Hebrew alphabet, replacing it with the square shaped letters used since, an alphabet that he had brought with him from Persia. This served to further separate the Jews from the Samaritans.

Here we see the foundations of modern Jewish identity. The Jews live as a people apart, somewhat exclusionary, who have a Book containing their laws and beliefs. Ezra had established schools to discuss and interpret the sacred writings and sent out teachers to explain and to lead the people in prayer.

Skipping ahead more than 200 years, the Jewish state is conquered by the Ptolemaic Greeks. A project, under the Septuagint, is begun in Alexandria to translate the Book of the Jews into Greek. The Bible is read and some Greeks find it to their liking. Conversions are not uncommon. With the Bible now translated into multiple languages and with centers of Judaism in Alexandria and Babylon, Judaism has become a world religion.

Not everyone accepts the Jews or their ideas. Greek writers such as Theophrast and Manetho were very critical of the Jews. Theophrast wrote how the Jews sacrificed living animals. Manetho wrote a sort of counter-Exodus. In his version the Jews were shepherds, intolerant people who refused to accept the gods of Egypt and lepers that were forced to leave the ancient land of Egypt. As we will see, when the Romans conquer Egypt and the Jews make common cause with the Romans, anti-Semitism will become virulent in Egypt and throughout the Greek world.

Eventually the Ptolemaic Greeks will be replaced by the Syrian Greeks as masters of the Middle East. Led by the Hasmonean family, the Maccabees will eventually drive the Greeks out. It was during this period that the Jews

first allied themselves with the Romans. Judah Maccabee would sign a treaty with Rome. Of the sons of Mattathias, Elazar, and Judah would die in battle. Jonathan would be treacherously murdered by the Syrians at a peace conference. Simon would become Nasi or president of the Sanhedrin and would unite the offices of secular leader and high priest. The Sanhedrin is the Greek word for the Council of the Jews, a group of priests and laymen that formed the ruling council. The Sanhedrin was charged with interpreting the Torah, passing laws and meting out justice.

Simon would be murdered by his son-in-law. During the Hasmonean dynasty, Sadducees would become the new priests. They rejected everything except the Five Books of Moses and wrote their own book of law called the Book of Decrees. In comparison the Pharisees would be much more liberal.

In the meantime, the Pharisees continued the work of Ezra, going out into the countryside and teaching. Whereas one had to be born into the priestly class of the Sadducees, you became a Pharisee through study and piety. The places where people went to study and pray with the Pharisees were called synagogues, the name derived from the Greek word meaning “house of assembly.”

The conflict between the Sadducees and the Pharisees was not just philosophical. One of the later kings of the Hasmonean dynasty, Alexander Jannai, expanded the land of the Jews across the river Jordan, something the Pharisees opposed. During a celebration at the Temple, the Pharisees accused him of having desecrated the ritual. The assembled crowd began pelting him and Jannai turned his mercenaries loose, killing some 6,000 worshippers. His opponents would appeal to the Syrian Greek king Demetrius III and would join his army when he entered the country. Shocked by the brutality with which Jew fought Jew in the civil war, Demetrius would leave. Jannai would celebrate his victory by crucifying 800 opponents during a feast.

As we also discussed, the Hasmoneans wanted to restore the glory of the Biblical kingdom. Toward this end, they conquered the Idumean people of the Sinai Peninsula and forced them to convert. It is from this group of “Jews who were not Jews” that Herod would come. He would come to power under the rule of Rome.

When Julius Caesar entered Egypt to put Cleopatra on the throne, the Jews supported Rome. One of the Jews that won favor under Caesar was Antipater, the father of Herod. The Jews would be guaranteed religious freedom by Caesar, incurring the enmity of the Egyptians. Antipater would be appointed Rome's representative for the area and would in turn appoint his son Herod the Great as Prefect of Jerusalem. He would put down a national rebellion with great cruelty, earning the enmity of the Sanhedrin and the gratitude of Rome. Herod the Great lived from 77 BCE to 4 BCE. It is his brother Herod Antipas who presides over the trial of Jesus. Herod Agrippa executes James the Elder and brings Peter to trial.

Caesar would be killed on the Ides of March in 44 BCE and the next decades would be a bewildering maelstrom of plot and counter-plot, both in Jerusalem and in Rome.

The Jews did not live easily under the yoke of Roman conquest. Rebellion was an almost constant condition and each rebellion was put down with increasing cruelty. Yet at the same time, it was a Golden Age in terms of spirituality. Great academies were formed by Shammai and Hillel. It is from Hillel that the commandment from Leviticus 19:18 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is interpreted to mean "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." If this sounds like something from the New Testament, remember that Jesus and Hillel were close to being contemporaries.

Hillel's grandson, Gamliel, is the first to be given the title of Rabban, meaning "our master" or "our teacher." Paul the Apostle, known as Saul at that time, was a student of his. I emphasize this to point out the common roots of Judaism and Christianity.

In Acts 23:6 Paul says of himself "I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee." Elsewhere he says that he was "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."

In 68 CE, Jerusalem is destroyed. The loss of life is estimated between 600,000 (Tacitus) and 1 million (Josephus.) The destruction of the Temple ends the Sadducees as any kind of meaningful force. It is the academies of the Pharisees that maintain Jewish tradition. Gamliel is succeeded by Johanan ben Zakkai, who in turn is succeeded by Gamliel of Javneh. His

son, Simon ben Gamleil, is not ready and so the mantle passes to the scholar Akiva, the first to be called Rabbi.

The Bar Kochba revolt beginning in 132 CE is the last attempt at revolt. One unintended effect of the Second Diaspora is that Judaism and Christianity, both beginning in the land of Israel, are now spread through the Roman Empire.

Both Judaism and Christianity actively seek converts at this time. Both are particularly appealing to women.

Back to the question that I posed, the wife of Joseph was an Egyptian woman, Aseneth. The daughter of an Egyptian priest, Potipherah, she is given to Joseph by Pharaoh. She is the most beautiful woman in the land. Hearing that she is to be wed to a barbarian Hebrew, she rejects him out of hand. One day, gazing out the window, she sees a strange man and is overcome by his handsome form. She falls immediately and hopelessly in love. Surprise! The handsome stranger is none other than Joseph. Now it is his turn to reject her. He can't marry a shiksa.

Aseneth secludes herself in a tower, repents her idolatry, embraces the God of the Hebrews as the one true God. There follows a visit from an angel, a strange ritual involving bees and a honeycomb and a miraculous conversion.

The cult of Aseneth was very popular around the first century CE. It offered hope to all the formerly pagan women who wanted to convert to Judaism.

Helena, the Queen of Adiabene in modern Iraq, was a famous convert. She moved to Jerusalem around 45 CE, built a palace to live there with her husband and children. Her husband fought against the Romans and after her death was buried in the Tomb of the Kings.

Not all converts were women. Flavius Clements, a cousin of the Emperor Domitian, also converted, following his wife. This enraged Domitian to the point that he enacted a law banning conversions. Rabban Gamliel journeyed to Rome and won a respite from the law.

It is estimated that by the year 100 CE, one tenth of the population of the Roman Empire, some 4 million people, were Jewish.

After the Bar Kochba revolt, Rome enacted laws proscribing the observance of Jewish festivals, public prayer, conversions and the ordination of disciples. Rabbi Akiva was one of the first martyrs for disobeying these laws. These laws were aimed at the Jews in punishment for their rebellions and consequently gave the Christians something of an advantage in gaining converts, although the Christians were also being persecuted. But remember that because of Paul, Christianity did not require the sacrifices of circumcision and the foregoing of pork.

One could make the point that the course of modern Judaism was set at this point. With the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sadducees were effectively gone. Jews were spreading through the Roman world. They were learning about their religion and praying in synagogues, being taught and led by Rabbis. The discussions of the great schools of Shammai and Hillel would be written down in the Midrash, which would form the base for the Talmud.

As Christianity evolved, it became more anti-Semitic. Works by authors such as Justin Martyr (100-165 CE) suggest that Jews, all Jews, bear eternal guilt for the death of Jesus. The destruction of Jerusalem was evidence of God's wrath.

The logic behind Christian anti-Semitism goes as follows: Once the Jews were the Chosen people and were given Torah, they sinned and corrupted the Torah, they failed to recognize Jesus and condemned him to death. They were hated in the eyes of God and all evil that befell them was only partial punishment. As time went on, the ideas became even worse. The Jews had turned to Satan and were his children. The synagogues were place of bestiality and evil. The Anti-Christ would be a Jew, in fact from the tribe of Dan.

One could almost understand this animosity if it occurred during the time when Judaism and Christianity were competing. But by the middle of the 3rd Century, the Emperor Constantine had accepted baptism and Christianity had become the state religion of Rome. For a Jew to try to convert someone was a crime. At Nicea, the first Ecumenical council of the Christian church, the date of Easter was changed to disassociate it from Passover. This was a symbolic way of severing the ties between the religions.

We can distinguish between local anti-Semitism, as in the form of riots and pogroms, and state sponsored anti-Semitism. In 315 CE, Constantine made it unlawful for Jews to live in Jerusalem. In 337, the penalty for intermarriage or sexual conduct became death. In 388, we have the first recorded burning of a synagogue. Roman Jews had to pay a special tax called the *fiscus judaicus*. Throughout the Roman Empire and after the Fall of Rome, Jews were singled out for punishment. Beginning with the Crusades, things would get worse still.

The Jewish history of the Middle Ages is an endless series of cycles of anti-Jewish laws being passed, and then periods of tolerance. Why the tolerance? Because Jews played a critical role in the commerce of the time. Far flung Jewish communities were in communication. Jews were not forbidden from charging interest, as Christians were, so they would make the loans that were necessary for commercial transactions. Jewish communities would be destroyed and then later rebuilt.

Then began the expulsions. In 1261, the Jews were expelled from Belgium. In 1290, England. In 1306 and again in 1394, France. 1492 and 1507 mark the Jewish expulsions from Spain and Portugal. The Jews would be expelled from Poland and we ended up in Russia.

What were the crimes of the Jews? They lived as a people apart. They spoke their own language and married among themselves. Their religious beliefs were hard to understand and their holy books written in Hebrew. The Talmud was rumored to contain anti-Christian sentiments.

But more than anything else, they refused to convert. If you look at Martin Luther and Mohammed, both expected the Jews to accept their beliefs. They honored, to one degree or another, the Old Testament. Both reached out to the Jews (before Muslims faced Mecca for prayer, they faced Jerusalem) and could not understand why they were rebuffed.

Among today's Science Fiction writers, alternate histories are popular. Here are some "what if" scenarios to think about:

What if the Jews had accepted the Samaritans?

What if the Jews had accepted Roman rule?

What if Jesus was accepted as a reformer?

Bibliography:

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Day / Walter Laqueur**