

Rabbinic Judaism

Forty-eight years after the exile began, Cyrus, king of the Persians, conquered Babylonia and permitted the Jews to return to their land. What turned out to be a brief experience of exile became a valuable dress rehearsal for the catastrophe that followed in 70 C.E., when the Romans crushed a Jewish rebellion, destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple, and expelled huge numbers of Jews from Palestine.

The exiles spread into the Mediterranean world, establishing small and isolated Jewish communities in a sea of “foreign peoples.” Facing persecution and pressures to convert, they clung to the Torah as their tree of life, but it needed new branches and foliage to adjust to the changing climates of the diaspora. Teachers and scholars in Babylonia and northern Palestine worked across seven centuries to develop the Talmud, which explained the Torah’s tersely written laws and expanded its concepts to accommodate the changing Jewish reality.

Where the Torah had only hinted at an afterlife, for example, the Talmud developed clear concepts of heaven and hell to comfort and guide the Jews in their difficult lives as exiles and minorities—promising that this life is only an anteroom leading to the heavenly life to come.

Over the centuries of its compilation, the Talmud refined Jewish ethical and social thinking. The punitive “eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth” acquired from Babylonian law was gentled to require compensation instead. For example: one punch equaled one shekel; one backhanded slap or pulling an ear required 400 zuzim; serious injuries necessitated punitive compensation.

Holidays such as Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot, which had formerly been biblical harvest festivals, were reexamined to take on new religious and historic meaning for the uprooted nation. Shavuot, for one, which celebrated both the spring wheat harvest and the first fruit harvest in ancient Palestine, was considered a minor holiday until the rabbis of the Talmud deemed it the holiday celebrating the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. It evolved further in the Middle Ages, when young children started Torah study

on the holiday. Another evolution: In the last two centuries, it has become the day Reform teens have celebrated their confirmation.

Challenge to Rabbinic Judaism

A challenge to the Talmud’s authority rose when the Babylonian Jewish leader Anan ben David rejected the extra-biblical laws and opinions that rabbinic Judaism had developed. Insisting that only the original Torah was God’s word, he accused the rabbis teaching Talmud of being imposters and hypocrites. Ben David believed that Judaism’s purpose was to prepare for the final redemption. So long as Jews remained in exile, they needed to mourn the loss of their land and Temple. Storming into holiday parties wearing his dark cloak of mourning, he scolded the celebrants, “How can you laugh and drink wine? Our Temple is destroyed. Our land lies desolate. Blow out the candles! Douse the oil lamps! We must sit in the dark on Shabbat as the Torah commands. We must pray for God’s forgiveness and obey every letter of every law in the Torah. Only then will we bring the redemption.”

A large group of followers called Karaites gathered around Ben David. Some found the Torah easier to follow than the commentaries and interpretations of the contentious rabbis of the Talmud.

Again Jews faced a choice. Should they try to live within the limits imposed by the Torah? Should they sit in the dark on Shabbat or enjoy the holiday by the light of a previously lit Shabbat lamp, as the rabbis suggested? Should they dedicate their lives, studies, and prayers to bringing redemption or should they enjoy God’s gifts of life, family, community, and prayer?

The continued practice of Karaism with its focus on a destroyed Temple and hopes for redemption might have led the Jews into a dead end. Rabbinic Judaism, in contrast, gave Jews guidance in adapting to new environments as well as philosophical tools to compete with Christianity and Islam. A majority of Jews chose to go forward. Karaism was eventually reduced to small sects of purists.

The following story, told by a 10th-century rabbi in the manuscript *Seder*

Eliahu Zutta, describes the rabbis’ purpose in expanding and reforming some of the original Torah text:

What is the difference between the written law (Torah) and the oral law (Talmud)? To what can the two be compared? To a king who had two servants and loved them both. He gave each of them a measure of wheat and a bundle of flax. The wise servant took the flax and spun a cloth. He took the wheat and made flour. He ground, kneaded, and baked the flour. Then he set it on the table, covered it with cloth, and waited for the king to return.

The foolish servant did nothing at all. After some days, the king returned and said to the servants, “Bring me what I gave you.”

One servant presented bread covered by cloth, pleasing the king. The other, now disgraced, displayed the wheat still in the box covered with a bundle of flax.

When the Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, He gave it only as wheat, for us to extract the flour, and flax, for us to spin a garment.

Torah text, the original wheat and flax, met the needs of farmers, shepherds, and village people living in close communities. The later explanations and interpretations of Torah (the wheat bread and woven cloth) met the changing needs of isolated, wandering, and often urban Jews. An example: When the biblical prophet Jeremiah was carried off into exile, he called on his people to “Seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried...” In the Talmud, seven centuries later, Rabbi Samuel widened the dicta and ruled, “The law of the government [of the land in which you live] is binding law,” thus ensuring pragmatic acceptance of a problematic situation.

From Maimonides to Mysticism

Through the next eight turbulent centuries, Jewish communities in Europe and North Africa faced persecution and repeated expulsions. Heart-rending problems arose that local rabbis felt incapable of resolving. They sought answers from “experts,” the renowned rabbis of Babylonia and other large centers. These answers—responsa—became part of the growing body of Jewish law. In the 12th century, Rabbi Mosheh Ben Maimon (Maimonides), the