

Cantor: The Roots of Messianic Judaism

We know from Scripture that the Messianic Community in Jerusalem (and Lod, the Sharon, Joppa and the Galilee) was thriving in the first decades after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. When Paul comes back to Jerusalem to greet the apostles, they report to him:

“On hearing it, they praised God; but they also said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many tens of thousands of believers there are among the Judeans, and they are all zealots for the Torah’ (Acts 21:20 CJB).

There are two interesting points worth noting. First, they are Torah-honoring Jewish believers. This does not mean that they necessarily followed all the traditions of Pharisaical Judaism, but that they suddenly found deep meaning in the laws that they previously only kept out of religious guilt. This is reported to Paul as a *good thing*. There is no hint that they are moving away from Torah or their Jewishness, but closer.

Secondly, many translations use the English *thousands* for the Greek *myriads*. However a *myriad* is 10,000, so *myriads* plural, as is used in this verse, is correctly *tens of thousands*!

The congregation continued to grow under the leadership of Jacob (there were no first century Jews named James) the brother of Yeshua until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (some believe that Jacob died earlier).

Flee to the Mountains

Now this is where things start to change drastically for the Jewish believers in Israel. Yeshua had told His disciples less than 40 years before that when they see the armies surrounding Jerusalem they should flee to the mountains.

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation is at hand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let those who are in the middle of her depart. Let those who are in the country not enter therein” (Luke 21:20-21, WEB).

“The Great Revolt” took place in 66 CE when the Jews rebelled against Roman rule. The Romans responded by leveling the city and destroying the Temple in 70 CE. As many as one million Jews died all over Israel.

However, the Messianic Jews, heeding the warning of Yeshua, fled. This is most likely a dual prophecy that will have a greater fulfillment before the coming of Yeshua. However, the believers in Jerusalem assumed, as many of us today, that they would see the return of Yeshua. Seeing that the prophetic warnings (Matt. 24; Luke 21) came from Yeshua as He was teaching on the end times, they were sure that His return was near.

They fled across the Jordan River and settled in a mountainous area called Petra.

“The [Messianic Jewish] community in Jerusalem escaped this terrible catastrophe by fleeing to Petra in Transjordan and the countryside of Gilead and in expectation of ... the second coming of [the Messiah].”

When the war ended and Yeshua had not yet returned, the Messianic Jews returned to Jerusalem where they suffered persecution from the Jews who had fought the Romans—they were labeled as traitors. Of course, there were many other Jews who opposed the fighting, including Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai.

How Pharisee Judaism Survived—Ben Zakkai

One main factor in the survival of Pharisaical Judaism, which became what we know today as Rabbinic Judaism, was the surrender of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. He opposed the war and

would have been killed by the Jewish military leaders for treason had he not been smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin. He surrendered to the Romans.

“They carried the coffin to [General] Vespasian’s tent, where ben Zakkai emerged from the coffin. He told Vespasian that he had had a vision (some would say, a shrewd political insight) that Vespasian would soon be emperor, and he asked Vespasian to set aside a place in Yavne (coastal city south of Tel Aviv) where he could start a small school and study Torah in peace. Vespasian promised that if the prophecy came true, he would grant ben Zakkai’s request. Vespasian became Emperor within a year, and kept his word, allowing the school to be established after the war was over” (Jewish virtual library).

A Fatal Blessing

More than anyone else, ben Zakkai was responsible for the survival of Pharisaical/Rabbinic Judaism. In Yavne he put to paper the Oral Law (what Yeshua referred to as the Traditions of the Elders). In the year 80 CE, he was succeeded by Gamaliel II. On his orders, a paragraph was added to the *Amidah* or *Shmoneh Esri* (18 blessings). This is *the* central prayer in Jewish liturgy.

The 19th benediction was added to weed out Messianic Jews. It was a denunciation of heretics or sectarians—which the Messianics were accused of being. To pray this, the Messianic Jew would pray a curse on himself. Thus, the Messianics were further pushed out of the Synagogue.

Prayer Replaces Sacrifice

One more note on ben Zakkai. He convinced the newly relocated Sanhedrin, from Jerusalem to Yavne, to replace the need for sacrifice with prayer, quoting Hos. 6:6, “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” This took away the need to rebuild the Temple for nearly 2,000 years. Before this, sacrifice was central to Judaism.

Temple ritual was replaced with prayer service in synagogues which built upon practices of Jews in the Diaspora dating back to the Babylonian exile.

Sadly one of the main arguments that Orthodox Jews use today to try and refute Messianic Judaism is that prayer and repentance are enough to atone for sin. Of course, this was not the Jewish view until after the Temple was destroyed.

“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life” (Lev. 17:11, NIV).

So what happened to the Messianic Community? Tune in next week to part 2.

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