

Part 2: The Roots of Messianic Judaism

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, mostly the Zealots, for treason, had he not been smuggled out of Jerusalem by his disciples in a coffin, where he promptly 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 (costal 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” (source).

A Fatal Blessing

In the year 80 CE, Ben Zakkai was succeeded over the school in Yavne by Gamaliel II—grandson of the Gamaliel we see in Acts 5.

Gamaliel II will be remembered for one primary act. Despite the fact, as we will soon see, that the Messianic Jews had at least one synagogue of their own, it is believed many Jewish believers still attended traditional synagogue. Gamaliel wanted them out; so he added a 19th benediction called the *bircat haminim*, a blessing against heretics (more like a curse), to the *Amidah*. Interestingly the other name for the *Amidah* is the *Shmoneh Esre* (the 18 [benedictions]), but it

should be called the *cha esre* (the 19 benedictions) for the one that was added. It was as if they wanted to quietly insert it without drawing attention.

The fact that it was placed at number 12 and not 19, adds some credence to this suspicion. It was intended to weed out Messianic Jews, who were being more and more considered heretics by Pharisaical Judaism.

Religious Jews recite the *Amidah* thrice daily and when they do, one of the prayers is directly aimed at Jewish believers, Nazarenes (as we were called then):

“For the apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days. Let the *nozerim* [Nazarenes] and the *minim* [heretics] be destroyed in a moment. And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who humblest the arrogant.”

The Messianic Jews certainly could not pray a curse upon themselves that declared them apostates and heretics to be destroyed and blotted out. It is likely that Messianic Jews in large numbers ceased to attend traditional synagogue. However, over the next generation, with the decline of the Jewish wing, if you will, of the body of Messiah, church fathers began to claim that the Jews cursed Christians in their prayers. Action was taken to clarify this.

Without exception, the word *nozerim* was expunged from all Jewish prayer rites, and in many, substitutions were made for *minim* (heretics) and *meshummadim* (apostates), as in the accepted opening in the Ashkenazi rite: “may the slanderers (*malshinim*) have no hope.” (source)

Prayer Replaces Sacrifice

More than anyone else, Ben Zakkai was responsible for the survival of Pharisee/Rabbinic Judaism. In Yavne, he birthed a

school that became the worldwide center of Jewish learning. He reformed the Sanhedrin there with the blessing of the Romans. Without a Temple, Judaism would decline.

Unlike today, first century Judaism aggressively sought to expand through converts. Ben Zakkai realized that converts would not be attracted to a Temple-less Judaism and would instead flock to Yeshua (and they did). The focus of Jewish life had been the Temple and the sacrifices. It would have been great if he interpreted the falling of Jerusalem as judgment (as Yeshua predicted) and understood that in light of Yeshua's death, the Temple was no longer needed. The writer of Hebrews said a few years before:

"By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear" (Heb. 8:13).

Bible teachers have wrongly interpreted this passage as God rendering the Torah, the Writings and the Prophets, obsolete. For two reasons this is impossible. First, Yeshua said He did not come to destroy the Torah (Matt. 5:17). Second, almost all New Testament theology is based on the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul constantly quotes them, as do the gospel writers. What was obsolete, however, in light of the death of Yeshua, was the *sacrificial system*. Yeshua was the once-for-all-time and all-sin sacrifice.

Sadly Ben Zakkai could not see this and sought to create a *new Judaism*—a bloodless, sacrifice-less, Temple-less, Judaism. He convinced the newly established Sanhedrin to replace the need for sacrifice with prayer, quoting Hosea 6:6, "*I desire mercy, not sacrifice.*" There would be no need to rebuild the Temple. 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 (source).

Whenever God condemned sacrifice, it was not because He is condemning the very system *that He Himself established*, but rather He is condemning the people for forsaking Him while still offering sacrifices. In the context of the Hosea passage, this is clear. He continues the verse about desiring mercy, not sacrifice with, “and *acknowledgment of God* rather than burnt offerings.”

God was not against sacrifice, but was seeking to confront hypocrisy; He was seeking relationship with His people.

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 Second 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).

Even in the Babylonian Exile, the dream was always to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. We see in Lamentations a broken-hearted prophet, lamenting over Jerusalem’s demise. Ben Zakkai’s response is the opposite. He cared not for Jerusalem nor the Temple, but preserving the traditions of the elders, the Oral Law. It was successful and practical, but not the biblical response that we see after the first destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

“If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
Let my right hand forget *its skill!*
If I do not remember you,
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—
If I do not exalt Jerusalem
Above my chief joy” (Ps. 137:5-6).

After Ben Zakkai, there is virtually no movement in Judaism to rebuild the Temple. Even those today who seek it are

considered extreme.

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