

SUMMER SERMON SERIES 2016  
The Movements of Judaism and their Founders

I. Judah the Prince and Anan ben David

Shabbat shalom – and happy July!

For each of the last several years – this will be our fifth, if I’m not mistaken – I have offered a Summer Sermon series – a number of sermons devoted to a single theme. I’ve spoken about ethical dilemmas raised by some of the stories in Torah; great but mostly unknown heroes of Jewish history, and some of the great themes of Judaism. One year I covered several texts from ancient Judaism that didn’t make it into our Bible – hidden texts, as it were, in writings called “Pseudepigrapha.” Most of these are posted on our website.

This year my theme is the movements and sects of Judaism. In today’s world, of course, we know about Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Judaism, and maybe something about Reconstructionist or Hassidic Judaism, but several other expressions of Judaism are less well known. We can learn something from each of these, and in appreciating their teachings I believe that our own Judaism can be enriched and deepened.

I often get questions, from both Jews and Christians, along the lines of: “What does Judaism say about.... [some topic]?” People are sometimes surprised at how widely variant our responses can be across the spectrum we call Judaism.

Even more surprising, I suspect, is that our great diversity of expression isn’t just modern – if anything, our ancient forebears were even more diverse, with more sects and denominations than we have today. Josephus, reporting on the late Second Temple period, lists over a dozen different sects – some so at odds with each other as to approach at times the level of civil war. Indeed opinions are recorded in the Talmud that when some Jewish factions revolted against the Roman Empire in the year 67, it was the community’s own internal dissensions that led to Rome’s success three years later, when Jerusalem was breached and the great Temple destroyed in an orgy of violence – during which, even in the face of destruction, some Jewish groups were still fighting not with Rome, but with each other.

The loss of the Temple was an unimaginable crisis. At a stroke, the whole elaborate hierarchy of priests and Levites came to an end. Animal sacrifices ceased. Jews could no longer observe the festivals, which Torah required be observed by pilgrimages to the Temple and offerings there to God. Laws of ritual purity – which also demanded

offerings in the Temple – could no longer be observed. Even the calendar came into doubt, as priests were no longer available to rule on disputed interpretations. The technical term to describe these challenges was *chaos*. The crisis was so profound that its resolution literally took centuries.

One historian has written of this period: “During the first century of the common era, a truly revolutionary century, there were at least a dozen Judaisms, and one of the most obscure of them all commands today the loyalty of at least a billion people. They call it Christianity.”

We’re not going to speak of that one during this series. But let us consider two others that rose out of the ashes.

With the Temple destroyed, a small group of refugees, from the Pharisaic sect, managed to secure permission from Rome to establish a couple of study academies in the north – in Galilee. They called themselves Rabbis, a new term, and set about inventing a new Judaism not dependent on the Temple, or on priests or on sacrifices. Their work was very controversial, as remnants of the deposed priests and their supporters sought to continue the revolution against Rome – indeed, fomenting additional outbreaks against Rome several times over the next three generations, with disastrous results.

Almost the whole of Torah had to be not just reinterpreted, but supplanted by a new Judaism. After all, fully half the Torah is devoted to the laws of the temple, the priesthood, ritual purity and sacrifices (some see the Torah itself as a political document, a polemic compiled specifically to authenticate and justify the power and privileges of the priesthood, but that’s another story).

By the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the rabbis were ready to publish their work, as finally edited by one of their own, Judah, later known as Judah the Prince. They called their work “Mishnah,” or “teaching.” Mishnah became the foundation of Jewish law and rabbinic Judaism. Without exaggeration, thousands of laws are listed and categorized in Mishnah that aren’t anywhere in the Torah.

How did they get away with such a thing? Their answer was brilliant: Rabbi Judah included a short treatise in the Mishnah that justified all the rest of the newly emergent Jewish law – in a chapter that describes an oral law traceable all the way back to Moses. The rabbis called it the Second Torah – just as Moses received the written Torah, God also taught Moses all the rest of rabbinic tradition. This “tradition” was then passed down orally through the generations – bypassing the priests, incidentally, instead going through the prophets – until it wound up with – guess who? The rabbis! The rabbis

taught that the Mishnah, in its meticulous detail, wasn't just a new rabbinic document – it was Torah from Sinai – and they, the rabbis, were the authentic interpreters, just as the priests had been the interpreters of Torah. The invention of oral law was an act of genius, and enabled Judaism to evolve and develop new institutions, like synagogues for worship in place of the great Temple.

Incidentally, Mishnah was also theologically inventive. In Torah, obeying the commandments of Torah was supposed to lead to prosperity, while straying from the laws would reportedly lead to ruin. The rabbis who compiled the Mishnah knew that sometimes wicked people thrive while good people suffer. So they invented a new theology – the world to come. Whatever unfairness we might see in this world, God would make everything right in the world to come, when we would finally get our just desserts. The early Christians also adapted this same solution.

But accepting the Mishnah was not a slam dunk. Some protested against rabbinic authority, which they saw as self-appointed. Some protested against the concept of Oral Law – seeing only the written Torah as authoritative. Some, somewhat like today's Reform Jews, thought that interpreting the Torah for changing times should be the right of every Jew, not just those in leadership.

When the Talmud was completed around the year 500, multiplying the number of post-biblical Jewish laws tenfold, the purists who saw only written Torah as authoritative had had enough. If Rabbinic Judaism was a revolutionary movement in its day, here was the counter-revolution, personified under the leadership of Anan ben David. He called his group the “Qara-im,” from a root word used to designate the written Torah, the “Mikrah.” We know the “Qara-im” as the Karaites, and for centuries they did battle against normative Judaism. Even today there are tens of thousands living in Israel and in several American and European communities, and they do not recognize or observe rabbinic law. They avoid pork and shellfish but have no problem mixing milk and meat. They don't wear *tallis* or *t'fillin* when they pray, and their homes have no mezuzahs. They read Torah, but without chanting, and their prayer book has only biblical texts, with no texts from the Talmudic period. They don't need a *minyán* to pray – or a head covering, for neither is mentioned in the Torah. Their calendar depends not upon calculations, but upon actually seeing the new moon, and not following the rabbinic system of leap years means they celebrate Passover and other holidays at different times than we do.

I find much to admire among the Karaites. Women have privileges unheard of in rabbinic Judaism. Free will is far stronger than in rabbinic Judaism, and understanding Torah is up to each individual, not subject to some rabbinic elite authority. Bible study is paramount – in the rabbinic academies, the Bible is subservient to the study of Mishnah

and Talmud. One of their authors branded the unquestioning acceptance of other people's opinions as unworthy of an intelligent person; a person who doesn't question is likened to a burden-bearing ass. They ridiculed anthropomorphic passages in the Talmud. In this they sound completely modern. They are as passionately Zionist as any group in Judaism.

Not everything about the Karaites is so appealing. They take Shabbat and festival observance so seriously, as described in Torah, that they literally sit in darkness and eat unwarmed food. Karaism is austere and melancholy, as if they are always in mourning. All their holidays are filled with woe and fasting, lamenting the loss of Jerusalem and its Temple.

But here's what I find most interesting, and encouraging: with all their divergences of practice the Orthodox chief rabbinate in Israel permits Karaites to marry other Jews without conversion. Despite differences that are pretty extreme, in a land and at a time generally when extremism is becoming rampant in our world, Karaites are still part of the fold. They might be a sect, but they are us. When Judaism can even include within its big tent a group that utterly rejects the authority of its greatest sages, that to me attests to Judaism's great strength and attraction. I see today's Reform Judaism as heir to our rabbinic tradition, but just as authentically as heir to the anti-rabbinic tradition. It is the creative tension between the two that will ensure our continued survival into the future.