

Engaging the Jewish World

Their 4000-Year Story and Why It Matters to Everyone

Lesson # 3 – The Rabbinic Age

By Bill Bjoraker, PhD

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Introduction

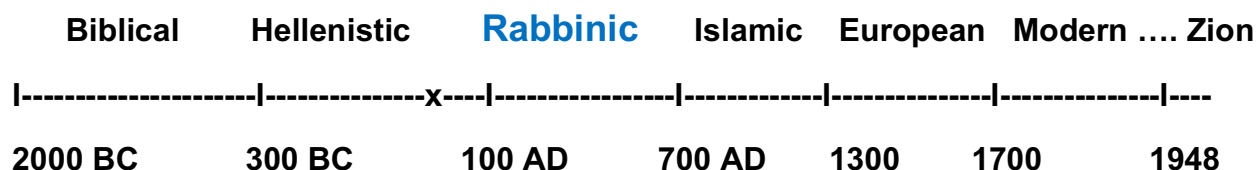
This lesson is an overview of the third era—**The Rabbinic Era**. We are dividing Jewish history roughly into seven eras, though these are necessarily fuzzy boundaries that overlap. This period covers about 600 years; from just after the Council of Yavneh in 90 AD where Judaism was reformulated after the destruction of the Temple and concluding with the decline of the great Babylonian yeshivas (rabbinic-religious academies) and the rise of Islam. **The era in brief—from the rise of Rabbinic Judaism to the rise of Islam.**

This third era is when the Jewish people are now mostly located outside the land of Israel in *the Great Diaspora* of the last 1900 years (Babylon/Mesopotamia, North Africa and Europe). After very a long, intense and often violent encounter with the Roman empire, the Jews encountered many Gentile ethnic environments in the lands of their exile. This era of roughly 600 years is the most religiously formative for the Jewish people. The Jewish encounter with the established state Christianity of the Byzantine and Roman empires was tragic.

In terms of formative significance, this third era is as much about internal community development within Diaspora Jewry and the evolution and establishment of Rabbinic Judaism, as it is about encounter with the Gentiles. The first coming of Messiah is marked with “x” on the line below.

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Each era has three developments in common: 1) Adoption of a new *Language*, 2) *Learning*; involvement in new realms of cultural activity, and 3) *Lasting Effects* on the Jewish mind and a lasting *Legacy* to the human race. Look for these as you read. Then after reading, fill in the blanks at bottom for the three developments for this **third** era.

3) The Rabbinic / Talmudic Age: Judaism Develops - 100-700 AD

The Second Temple built on the temple mount, which is Mt. Moriah, was begun by Zerubbabel and finished by Herod the Great. It was one of the wonders of the ancient world. The Temple was the innermost core of Jewish life, its most cherished and potent symbol of who they were as a people.

Destruction of the Second Temple

Though technically occurring thirty years before our era division, the destruction of the Temple was the crisis that drove all the religious and cultural shaping that unfolded in this era. The invasion of Jerusalem under the Roman general Titus and the destruction of Temple in 70 AD in the great Jewish-Roman War of 66-73 was the worst catastrophe to have so far befallen the Jewish people. It was a nadir, a null point. The burning and loss of the Temple, the center of Jewish life and worship was rock bottom devastation for Israel. With the loss of the Temple, Jewish leaders faced an existential crisis— *can Judaism and Jewish life continue without the sacrificial system and the Temple practiced since the covenant instituted by Moses?*

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Though the followers of Yeshua (the new Messianic Jewish movement and community) numbered in the “tens of thousands, ...all zealous for the Torah” (Acts 21:20), the mainline Jewish community that had not embraced the Messiahship of Yeshua reacted against them and pushed them further from the center of society. Already John had recorded that “...for the Judean leaders had agreed already that if anyone confessed that he [Yeshua] was the Messiah, that person would be put out of the synagogue.” (John 9:22). The parting of the ways was occurring, and the process would play itself out, as three new movements emerged from the matrix of Second Temple Judaism—Early Messianic Judaism, Rabbinic Judaism and Gentile Christianity.

The Council of Yavneh

Twenty years after the fall of Jerusalem, the rabbi *Yochanan ben Zakai* called a great *Council of Yavneh* (Jabneh, Jamnia) on the coast of Israel, near Jaffa (90AD). The remnants of the Pharisaic party met there to regroup and formulate a Judaism without the Temple. This was not a formalized council with official representatives, like some of the Christian councils were. It was more an informal convening over several months and even years in Yavneh, under the leadership primarily of Yochanan ben Zakkai. The Sadducees, who were tied to the Temple ritual, died out. The Sanhedrin (the ruling assembly of judges of the people of Israel) was reconstituted at Yavneh, first under Rabbi Yochanan and then under the patriarch Rabban Gamaliel II.

In certain ways, Yavneh functionally took the place of Jerusalem, for about a generation. Annual adjustments to the Jewish calendar were done there. Some Jewish pilgrims from Asia came up to Yavneh for the three pilgrim feasts those years. The shofars were blown for the Feast of Trumpets at Rosh ha Shana during those years.

The question is often asked—*How could the Jewish people answer the question of what now to do to keep faith with the Torah, specifically the sacrificial system now that the sacrificial altars of the Temple were gone? How do we do Judaism without the Temple?*

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At this council a very significant interpretation emerged credited to Rabbi *Yochanan ben Zakai*. Citing the passage in Hosea 6:6 where God says, "I desired mercy, and not sacrifice", was interpreted to mean that God no longer wanted animal sacrifices through the Temple system, but rather now desired "mercy" and good deeds. This replacement of animal sacrifice with prayer and good deeds continues to today in Rabbinic Jewish worship and practice. Prayer and performing *mitzvot* substitutes for the animal sacrifices.

This is recorded in the midrash *Avot d' Rabbi Natan*, where the dialogue is recorded between R. Ben Zakkai and R. Joshua,

"Once as Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai was leaving Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed him and, seeing the Temple in ruins said, 'Woe unto us (oy lanu)..that this place where the sins of Israel were atoned for is laid waste!'

'My son, said Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, 'Don't be grieved. We have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of lovingkindness, as it is said, 'For I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'"

Thus even on Yom Kippur, there has been and is now no literal scapegoat as sin bearer, no blood shed for remission of sin, even though Leviticus 17:11 makes clear that it is the blood that makes atonement. This is a dilemma for serious Jewish thinkers who take the Torah seriously. But this is Rabbinic Judaism's answer. The true answer of course is Messiah Yeshua's atoning sacrifice.

The rabbis at the Council made decisions as to which were the authoritative books of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament canon) and the collection established as it exists today. The apocryphal books later accepted by the Roman Catholic Church were discussed at Yavneh, some were written during this period also. Most forms of Judaism with us today had their origin here at the Council of Yavneh. The emerging religious forms became the post-Biblical-era religion of those Jews who didn't embrace Jesus as the Messiah, known as Rabbinic Judaism.

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It was here that the “*Birkat ha Minim*” (“blessing on the heretics”) was formulated. This was actually a curse on the heretics (minim). There is this version from a Palestinian siddur (prayer book) found in the Cairo Genizah,

“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* 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” <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/birkat-ha-minim>

The Bar Kochvah Revolt and End of the Second Jewish Commonwealth

The state of war with the Romans continued however until its last major campaign and climactic battle of Betar in 132-135 AD. In those years a false Messiah named *Simon Bar Kochva* (“son of a star”) arose and led a last Jewish revolt against Rome. Even the great *Rabbi Akiva* endorsed him as the Messiah, believing him to be “the Star that shall arise out of Jacob...” (Number 24:17). The Betar fortress was the last stand of the Jewish war against Roman Empire.

The Bar Kochva Revolt was a political/military movement. The Messianic Jewish believers in Yeshua of course could not switch allegiance to Bar Kochva as Messiah. They knew Yeshua to be the true Messiah. And they remembered that Yeshua had said,

“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. 21 Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are inside the city depart, and let not those who are out in the country enter it, 22 for these are days of vengeance, to fulfill all that is written. 23 Alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress upon the earth and wrath against this people. 24 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.” (Luke 21: 20-24)

Though these predictions were largely fulfilled in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-73 AD, these words apply also to the final phase of that war was in Bar Kochva Revolt

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(also called “the Second Revolt of Judea”). Yeshua’s words also predict the Great Diaspora which was to unfold across the world, lasting until the twentieth century, a key moment in conclusion of the exile being when the city was captured by Israeli forces in the 1967 “Six Day War,” and once again the Temple Mount was in Jewish hands.

The believers in Yeshua heeded his warnings that when they saw armies besieging Jerusalem, they should flee. Before 70 AD they had fled to the city of Pella, in the Jordan Valley, east of the River, in modern day Jordan. So, because the Yeshua-believers would not cooperate and because they fled, they were branded as traitors by those who led the rebellions. The Jewish community was becoming sealed in bitterness against the believers.

The Bar Kockvah Revolt was crushed by the Romans at Betar, his last stand, by the Emperor Hadrian’s forces on Tishah B’ Av. There was a bloody slaughter of the Jewish fighters by the Romans soldiers. Rabbi Akiva was captured and tortured to death. It was indeed a bitter end to the Second Jewish Commonwealth in the Land of Israel.

After the war, Yavneh ceased to be the center of Jewish life in the Land of Israel. Intending to destroy Jewish connection to the Land of Israel, the Romans renamed the land “Palestine,” after the Jews’ ancient enemy, the Philistines. Jerusalem was renamed by the emperor Hadrian as “Aelia Capitolina” and dedicated to the Roman god Jupiter. This remained the official name of Jerusalem until the Arab conquest in 638 AD. To the Jewish people, however, it has always been Jerusalem.

Tishah B’Av

An amazing fact of Jewish history is that there have been a number of major tragedies that have befallen the people on the 9th day of the Jewish month of Av. This day has become an annual national day of mourning in Judaism, recalling these tragedies. The last three of these major ones are from this era:

1. The destruction of the First Temple (Babylonians 586 B.C.)
2. The destruction of the Second Temple (Romans 70 AD)

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3. The devastating defeat of the Bar Kochvah Revolt at Betar (Hadrian 132 AD)
4. The Gemara relates that Turnus Rufus, a Roman officer, plowed the area of the Temple under on this date.

The striking fact that these tragedies and others have fallen on this date, testifies to something providential and supernatural about the Jewish story. The God of Israel is sovereign over the people of Israel.

The Jewish Way Life and its Center of Gravity Shifts

After the fall of Betar, the victory of the Roman empire over the Second Jewish Commonwealth, the next more than 500 years were a time of transition for the Jewish people. They had to transition from living in the land into which God had led them to living in exile in host nations, most of whom were not hospitable to them. Dispersed among the nations of Europe and in the Arab world, they lived as minorities without a territorial center.

Modes of spiritual life and practice that were related to the Temple collapsed with its destruction. Though there were still Jewish communities thriving in Galilee and Tiberius, there was no thriving holy city, no functioning priesthood, no sacrificial system.

With the loss of land and state, of rule and political independence, they adapted to the realities. Their focal point of national existence was now the peoplehood, Jewish society anchored in and governed by the Torah. Scholars superseded warriors. Rabbis replaced priests. Spoken Hebrew began to disappear and was used only for prayer and liturgy.

There was a measure of turning inward upon itself of Judaism. Having lost stone fortresses in the land of Israel, they now turned the Torah into a fortress of mind and spirit, where they could find refuge, order and security. They shifted from polity to a congregationalist faith community. The rabbi and synagogue became normative institutions in the Jewish Diaspora. This is the period in which the Oral tradition was consolidated and put into writing.

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It was Babylon where the institution of the synagogue took shape. God had promised the people through Ezekiel that, “Although I have cast them far off among the Gentiles, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet I shall be a *little sanctuary* (“mikdash me’at”) for them in the countries where they have gone.” (11:16). This may have been a prediction realized in the synagogue; it was a little sanctuary to replace the big sanctuary of the Temple, and the Hebrew word for synagogue is “beit mikdash.” The synagogue assured the continuity of Jewish religious life after the destruction of the Second Temple.

The two pillars of Jewish communal life became the synagogue (“beit ha mikdash”) and the house of study (“beit ha midrash”). The synagogue services were a replacement for the Temple service, but also became community assembly halls and charity centers, with similar functions as Jewish Community Centers (JCC’s) today. The house of study was for Torah study by the rabbinical scholars and their disciples.

Babylonian Centers and Academies of Judaism

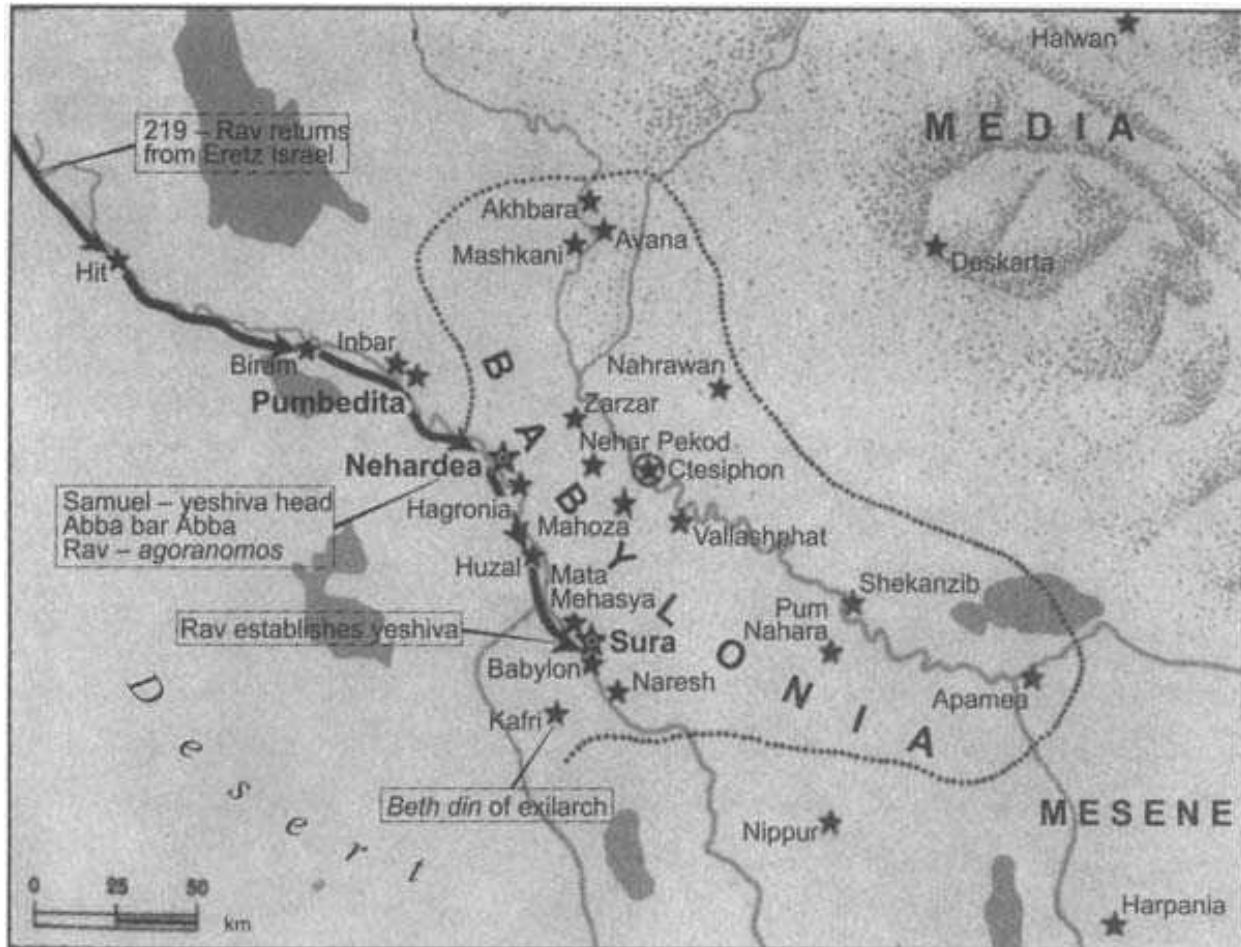
Jeremiah had told the Judean captives that when they went into exile to Babylon, they were to “seek the *shalom* of the city where I took you as captives in exile and pray to *ADONAI* for it—for in its *shalom* will you have *shalom*.” (29:7 TLV). When the decreed seventy years of captivity were over, only a minority of the people returned to the land of Israel under Nehemiah and Ezra the scribe. Most of the people continued to live in Babylon (Mesopotamia or modern-day Iraq) and indeed flourished there over the next several centuries. There was continual contact between leaders in the Babylon and the land of Israel.

As a result of the Bar Kochvah Revolt, rabbinical Judaism came to Babylonia (then ruled by the Parthians, a later version of the Persians), when refugee scholars fleeing Judea came and established academies of learning. The Parthian regime was favorable to the Jews and allowed them freedom to flourish. Such rabbinic religious academies were called “yeshivot” (“yeshiva” in singular).

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These academies were established at **Sura**, south of what is now Baghdad, **Nehardea** and **Pumbedita** further west, where they flourished until the 11th century. There were also several yeshivas in the land of Israel.



Map showing main yeshivas (academies) in Babylonia (Iraq)

The two greatest works of Talmudic literature are the *Babylonian Talmud* and the *Jerusalem Talmud* (or *Palestinian Talmud*). Interestingly, it is the Babylonian Talmud that is the largest and most influential of the two. In fact, the practice of Rabbinic Judaism in the medieval era was an expression not of the Jerusalem Talmud, but the Babylonian Talmud. The likely reason for this is that Babylonian version was developed

in Diaspora conditions it was the logical and practical model for other Diaspora Jewish communities.

The Sages

The rabbis, Torah scholars and religious teachers of the period came to be called “sages.” *Chazal* or *Hazal* (Hebrew: חז"ל), an acronym for the sages, for the Hebrew "H̄a chameinu Zikhronam Liv'rakha" (חכמינו זכרונם לברכה), ("Our Sages, may their memory be blessed"), refers to all Jewish sages of the Mishna and Talmud eras, spanning from the times of the final 300 years of the Second Temple of Jerusalem until about 625 AD. These are names given to the sages of these periods in the formation of Rabbinic Judaism:

The Tannaim (50AD- 200 AD) (Hebrew for “the Repeaters”) -These rabbis or sages of the first and second centuries of the Christian era—from Hillel and Gamliel the Elder through to Yehuda Ha Nasi, who completed the Mishnah

The Amoraim –(200-500AD) (Hebrew for “the Sayers”) –The sages who compiled the Gemara and Talmud, and who expounded the Mishnah and the Tannaim.

The Savoraim (Hebrew for "Reasoners"): Refers to the sages of *Beth midrash* (Torah study places) in Babylon from the end of the era of the Amoraim (5th century) and until the beginning of the era of the Geonim (from the end of the 6th century or the midst of the 7th century).

The Gaonim (500-1100 AD) (Hebrew for “Geniuses”) – the sages who were the presidents of the two great academies of Sura and Pumbedita.

Byzantine and Roman Christendom and the Jewish Communities in Exile

Also known as the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantium was the continuation of the Roman empire, after its split and the fall of the Western empire in 476 AD. It lasted a thousand years after the fall of the West, until the Ottoman Turks conquered. Roman Emperor Constantine had declared tolerance for Christianity in 313 AD, founded

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Constantinople in 330AD, and Theodosius made it the official state religion in 380AD. Constantine and his mother Helena inspired a movement to Christianize the land of Israel. They had many churches built in Israel; many of the shrines and holy places still seen in Israel today, like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (on the supposed site of Golgotha or Calvary), were built at Helena's decree.



The context for much of the Jewish diaspora in these centuries, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, before the rise of Islam.

As a result of the church-state fusion, many unsaved Gentiles entered the institutional church, eventually becoming the Eastern Orthodox church. It soon grew to be far larger than the entire Jewish population of the world. The church became totally Gentilized and the Jews/Judaism was seen as a competitor and a false religion. Sometimes, more so in the later medieval period and especially in western Europe and Spain, the Jewish leaders were challenged to public debates with Christian clergy about which was the true religion. These almost always went badly for the Jews.

It became impossible for a Jewish person to express publicly both a Jewish identity and a faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. In order for a Jew to enter the church, he or she was required to totally separate themselves from Judaism, the Jewish people and their customs. Many of the Greek church fathers of the early centuries were anti-Semitic and saw the Jewish people as cursed, and their theology reflected this.

As the centuries moved on, there was a hardening of attitudes toward the Jews. It became a crime to become a Jew. Marriage between Jews and Christians was prohibited. Increasingly, the Jewish people lived as an oppressed minority. They faced crippling taxes, persecution and massacres.

Soon after the rise of Islam, Muslim forces conquered ancient Israel in the late 600s AD and this ended Byzantine rule there. This was the beginning of the Islamic period for Israel and the Jewish people.

Summary: Language, Learning and Legacy of the Era

In Eras 1 & 2, **Hebrew**, then **Greek**, were the dominant new languages acquired. In the Era 4 that follows, they adopted the **Arabic** language as a major and ascendant language. In this third era, when the Jewish people were adapting to the Diaspora, life in exile, and developing Diaspora Judaism, there was one new dominant language they adopted. Latin was used due to the encounter with Romans. Greek continued to be

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used in under the Byzantine empire. Jewish communities in Europe began to learn and use the Slavic languages (especially Polish), and Germanic languages (from which Yiddish would later develop), and the Romance languages in Western Europe (like Old French, which the famous rabbi Rashi used and spoke). Hebrew and Aramaic were kept alive, used mostly for religious purposes and synagogue worship, and these languages even developed as they were used in the Talmudic writings.

The major **learning** and new cultural activity of this era was learning to live as Jews in the foreign lands of their exile, how to adapt, how to relate to their host countries, how to survive (learning the hard way which vocations and kinds of work they were allowed by the Gentile hosts to engage), and sometimes thrive.

A **lasting effect** upon the people from this era was the inculcation of the Rabbinic Jewish identity, a cohesive ethic-religious identity, and accepting a minority status in lands not their own (though those who had stayed in Babylonia had centuries of experience in this already). The intentional and rigorous adoption of fixed and uniform synagogue services and religious practice (the Jewish life cycle/rites of passage), and the Jewish calendar assured the continuity of Jewish communal life and identity. It can be fairly said that providentially, God used Rabbinic Judaism to preserve the Jewish people's identity over the long centuries of exile. As has been said, "It is not that the Jews kept the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath kept the Jews."

Quotes

Think about these quotes about apply to the essay you just read. Write out an insight you received:

"The Jews are a people with an excess of history but a lack of geography." (Unknown origin)

“The Jewish people excel in making a virtue out of a necessity.”

(Unknown origin)

“How odd of God to choose the Jews,

But not so odd as those who choose

The Jewish God and spurn the Jews.” –Paul Carlson

The Rabbinic / Talmudic Age (Judaism Develops)-100-700AD

Review of the Three Developments for Each Era:

- 1) **Language:** adoption of a new one.
- 2) **Learning:** Involvement in new realms of cultural activity
- 3) **Legacy:** to the world and/or the retained **Lasting Effects** (on the character or culture of the Jewish People).

Fill in the blanks for Era # 3 :

1) Language(s) - _____

2) Learning - _____

3) Lasting Effects/Legacy – _____

Jewish Humor- Jewish Wit and Wisdom for Life

“A medieval Jewish court astrologer prophesied to a king that his favorite mistress would soon die. Sure enough, the woman died a short time later. The king was outraged at the astrologer, certain that his prophecy had brought about the woman's death. He summoned the astrologer and commanded him: ‘Prophecy to me when you will die, Jew!’

The astrologer realized that the king was planning to kill him immediately, no matter what answer he gave. ‘I do not know when I will die,’ he answered finally. ‘I only know that whenever I die, the king will die three days later.’ ”

Reflection: This story reflects the Jewish experience in medieval Europe and the Muslim world. Jews, being talented and educated people were often tapped by the ruling kings for court service as physicians, counselors and advisors. Jewish intelligence is renowned. According to anthropologist Raphael Patai, Jewish people make up .04% percent of humanity but have received 15% of Nobel prizes. He states that wherever I.Q. tests have been administered, Jewish people always, as a group, get higher scores (*The Jewish Mind*, 1977).

This joke highlights the quick wit and applied intelligence needed to survive in hostile circumstances, which has often been part of the Jewish experience. There is a difference between high I.Q, or intellectual gifting, and wisdom. The Hebrew Wisdom tradition (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Koheleth [Ecclesiastes]) emphasizes this kind of wisdom. It is a moral wisdom, that views life from God's point of view.

In the Greek tradition, the intellect was the path to the good life. In some Eastern religious traditions, it is mystical knowledge. There is the revelatory, predictive-prophetic tradition in Hebraic tradition, and even the gift of interpreting divinely given dreams (cf. Joseph, and Daniel). But in the Hebrew Wisdom tradition, wisdom is never merely intellectual ability or cognitive information. It is a holistic knowledge (mind, will, values and actions) of how to live life before God.

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Wisdom is fundamentally moral and motivates toward righteous living. It is never merely the amassing of factual *information* but results in character *formation*. It is knowledge of reality applied to daily, practical living and in human relationships. The phrase, “*The Fear of the LORD,*” is used over 130 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is used 14 times in the Book of Proverbs alone. The overall message of Proverbs is that “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*” (e.g.1:7; 9:10). And the “fool” often described in Proverbs is not a person who is intellectually deficient, but a moral fool, one who does not fear the LORD.

The king in the joke above perceived that this Jewish astrologer had a mystical, revelatory wisdom, and evidently he did. But he also had an astute ability to judge human character, and to plan wisely how to live and to succeed in thwarting human evil. The king certainly did not exhibit the fear of God, but this Jewish court counselor indeed found a source of wisdom that allowed him not to fear man, to overcome human evil, and to continue on in living his life.

Says the Talmud, “*All is in the hands of Heaven but the fear of Heaven.*”

Says Koheleth, “*The conclusion when all has been heard, is: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Accompanying Stories/Studies to Era #3

The Formation of Rabbinic Judaism

Insights from Rabbis and Prophets About Story and Storytelling