

Resurrection and Judgment in Early Rabbinic Judaism

Pharisees, the Rabbinic Movement, and Resurrection:

- The destruction of the Second Temple caused a power vacuum within Jewish society. Previously, the Temple had been at the center of religious disputes, important both to those groups that drew their authority from this institution (e.g., priests like the Sadducees) and to those who critiqued the purity and/or operation and/or idea of the earthly Temple (e.g., Qumran community; Jesus Movement; and to some degree the Pharisees; some Pharisees were involved with the Temple, partly because individual Pharisees happened to be priests too [like Josephus] and partly because this group developed expertise in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, including its laws pertaining to sacrifice and purity).
- After the Temple's destruction, a new movement – the Rabbinic Movement – emerges, growing in part from the Pharisees and sharing with them key ideas. Most notable, for our purposes, is their shared belief in the Resurrection of the dead in bodily form at the end of time (something in which Sadducees, for instance, did not believe), which continued to be a hallmark of Rabbinic theology even despite their general lack of interest in eschatology (see below).
- Rabbis rooted their authority not in priestly genealogy or position, but rather in knowledge of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish law; accordingly, they focused in the early period on reinterpreting biblical laws (which conceive of worship with the Temple standing) to fit a new time, with no Temple to be the center of Judaism.

The Bar Kokhba Revolt and Rabbinic Attitudes towards Messianism:

- Consistent with earlier forms of Judaism (as well as the Jesus Movement), Rabbinic Judaism holds a belief in the coming of one or more Messiahs at the End of Time.
- Especially after the Bar Kokhba Revolt (see below), however, we find a reticence towards messianic expectations and a wariness to predict or explore precisely what will happen in the messianic age.
- Especially in light of the involvement of some Rabbis in this Revolt (and their martyrdom after it), it is possible that their later distaste of these types of inquiry was connected to first-hand knowledge of the military and social chaos that can be caused by messianic pretenders and the zeal that some (e.g., Bar Kokhba) can inspire.
- In contrast to the Jesus Movement and early Christianity, moreover, the Rabbis saw the dawning of the messianic age as something that would happen in the far, far distant future.

Cosmology and Eschatology:

- For Rabbinic understandings of death and the afterlife, it is also important to note their apparent reaction against apocalyptic literature and the forms of Judaism explored in that literature: the Rabbis seem to react against both [1] eschatology, esp. the detailed interest in what exactly would happen at the End of the Time (and the claim, moreover, to know this), and [2] cosmology, esp. the interest in (and claim to know about) the structure of the cosmos, heaven above and Gehenna below, and the exact details of divine realms.

BRIEF TIMELINE OF CLASSICAL RABBINIC JUDAISM

66-70 BCE – Jewish Revolt against Rome.

70 CE, Roman Destruction of the Second Temple, which marks the end of the Second Temple period. Tradition holds that the Rabbinic Movement (a group with roots in the Pharisees, centered in cities in the Galilee, in the same northern area of Israel that was Jesus' "homebase") immediately reacted to this catastrophe by beginning to innovate new forms of religious worship apart from sacrifice and the Temple and reinterpreting biblical laws and stories for the challenges of a new era.

70-110 CE –Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John written

81-96 CE – 4 Ezra and Revelation written

132-135 CE – **BAR KOKHBA REVOLT**: Jewish messianic uprising lead by “Bar Kokhba,” brutally quelched by Rome; at the end, Jews are no longer permitted even to enter Jerusalem, which the Romans even turned into a “pagan” city, erecting a temple to Jupiter on the Temple Mount. Tradition holds that the Roman Emperor Hadrian, moreover, forbade key aspects of Jewish observance, such as circumcision, Torah study, Sabbath observance, Jewish courts, and congregating in synagogues. At this time, many Jews were martyred, including leaders in the rising Rabbinic Movement, such as Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. After this point, however, (and likely in reaction to it) the Rabbinic Movement can be characterized by its relative lack of interest in messianism and eschatology; beliefs in both continued (esp. Resurrection of the Dead), but the Rabbis seem to discourage Jews from dwelling too much either on the coming of the Messiah or on the dawn of the End of Time and depict both as events that shall happen in the far future.

ca. 200 CE – Compilation of the **MISHNAH**, foundational document of Rabbinic Judaism, by Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi (Judah the Prince/Patriarch).

CHRISTIANIZATION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE:

312 CE - Battle of Milvian Bridge; the Roman general Constantine adopts Christ as his patron and defeats his rival Maxentius to become sole ruler of Italy, Africa, and the entire western half of the empire.

313 CE - EDICT OF MILAN. The Roman persecution of early Christians comes to an end, as Constantine assures full restitution of all confiscated Christian property and full rights for Christian worship in both halves of the Roman empire.

324 CE - Constantine becomes ruler of the entire Roman Empire.

Fourth to seventh centuries CE – Flourishing of **MIDRASH** (Rabbinic biblical interpretation) among Rabbis in the Land of Israel; from this period come classical collections of Midrash that collect oral and written traditions about the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

425 CE - Abolishment of office of the Patriarch (Nasi) by the Christian Roman Emperor Theodotius; beginning of shift of Rabbinic Jewish culture and learning from the Land of Israel (which, since Constantine, is part of the now Christian Roman Empire) to Babylonia (which is in the Persian Empire, where the dominant religion is Zoroastrianism)

ca. 500/600 CE – Completion of the **BABYLONIAN TALMUD**, an expansive commentary on the Mishnah, which becomes authoritative for Rabbinic Judaism. By this point, the Rabbinic Movement’s influence is so marked as to shape fundamentally all forms of Judaism thereafter, even to the present day.

Selections from the Mishnah

Mishnah Hagigah 2.1

It is not permitted to expound:

the laws of prohibited sexual relationships [i.e., Lev 18:6-23] among three [i.e., likely because their explicit content makes them unfitting for public discussion],
nor Ma’aseh Bereshit [lit. "Work of Creation" = Gen 1; i.e. cosmogony/cosmology] among two
nor the Merkavah [lit. "Chariot" = Ezek 1; 10; i.e., the structures of the heavens and the dwelling places of God and angels] among one, unless he is wise and understands on his own.

Anyone who speculates about four things, it would be merciful for him if he had not come into the world:

what is above, [i.e., heaven]
what is below, [i.e., Sheol/Gehenna/Hell]
what is before, [i.e., what happened before God created this world]
what is after. [i.e., what will happen at the End of Time]

Anyone who has no concern for the honor of his Creator, it would be merciful for him if he had not come into the world. [i.e., implying that the above rules are motivated by the need to honor and respect God]

Mishnah Sanhedrin 10

All Israel has a portion in the World to Come [i.e., the eschatological world, as inherited by those resurrected from the dead], for it is written [i.e., written in the Hebrew Bible]: *Your people are all righteous; they shall inherit the Land forever, the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, so that I may be glorified* (Isa 60:22).

The following, however, have no portion therein:

He who maintains that Resurrection cannot be proved from the Torah, [he who maintains that] the Torah was not divinely revealed, and an Epikoros (i.e., Epicurean).

R. Akiba added: He who reads in the “outside books” [i.e., non-canonical books, whether Jewish books outside the Hebrew Bible, like the Book of the Watchers, Wisdom of ben Sira, and 4 Ezra, or Christian books like the Gospels].

Also one who whispers over a wound and says, “I will bring none of these diseases upon you which I brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord who heals you”(Ex 15:26). [i.e., those who use the Hebrew Bible for magical purposes]

Abba Saul says: Also, one who pronounces the divine name as it is spelled [i.e., the Tetragrammaton: YHWH].

Three kings and four commoners have no portion in the World to Come.

The three kings are Jeroboam, Ahab, and Manasseh.

R. Judah said: Manasseh hath a portion therein, for it is written, *and he prayed unto him, and was entreated of him, and he hearkened to his supplication and they restored him to Jerusalem, to his kingdom* (2 Chron 33:13).

They [the Sages] answered him: they restored him to his kingdom, but not to the World to Come.

Four commoners: Balaam, Doeg, Ahitophel, and Gehazi.

The Generation of the Flood has no share in the World to Come, nor will they stand at the Judgment [i.e., the Last Judgment, at the End of Time], as it is written, *My spirit will not always abide with man* (Gen 6:3); there will be neither Judgment nor spirit for them [i.e., spirit in the sense of the spirit that God breathed into Adam when He created him, which He shall similarly breathe into the bodies of the dead to resurrect them].

The Generation of the Dispersion [i.e., those dispersed in the story of the Tower of Babel in Gen 11] have no portion in the World to Come, as it is written, *so the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth* (Gen 11:8). *So the Lord scattered them abroad*, refers to this world; *and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad* [refers] to the World to Come.

The men of Sodom have no portion in the World to Come, as it is written, *but the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the lord exceedingly* (Gen 13:13). *Wicked* in this world, and *sinners* in the World to Come. But they will stand at Judgment.

R. Nehemiah said: Neither will stand at Judgment, as it is written, *Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous* (Ps 1:5). *The ungodly shall not stand in the judgment*, refers to the Generation of the Flood; *nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous*, to the men of Sodom. [i.e., this argument seems to presume that only the righteous will be resurrected at the End of Time]

They [i.e., the Sages] answered him: “They will not stand in the congregation of the righteous, but they will stand in the congregation of the wicked.” [i.e., this conflicting interpretation presumes that both righteous and wicked will be resurrected, then judged and split into separate groups, in contrast with R. Nehemiah’s interpretation]

The Spies [i.e., those sent to scope out the Promised Land during the period of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness right after the Exodus from Egypt] have no portion in the World to Come, as it is written, *even those men that did bring up the evil report upon the land, died by the plague before the Lord* (Num 14:37). *Died*, in this world; *by the plague*, in the World to Come.

The generation of the Wilderness [i.e., the generation of Jews who wandered in the wilderness right after the Exodus from Egypt, but whom God punished for their wickedness by not permitting them entry into the Promised Land] has no share in the World to Come and will not stand at the Judgment, as it is written, *in this wilderness they shall be consumed, and there they shall die* (Num 14:35).

This [i.e., above] is R. Akiba’s view. But R. Eliezer said: “Concerning them it is said, *gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice* (Ps 50:5).” [i.e., R. Eliezer disagrees with R. Akiva, holding that these Jews will inherit the World to Come, perhaps because their sins were already been punished in this world]

The congregation of Korah [i.e., who sinned and were punished by being swallowed up by the earth while still alive] is not destined to ascend [i.e., from Sheol], as it is written, *and the earth closed upon them* (Num 16:33) in this world, *and they perished from among the congregation* (Num 16:33) in the next.

This is R. Akiba’s opinion. But R. Eliezer said: “Of them it is written, *the Lord kills and makes alive: He brings down to the grave, and brings up* (1 Sam 2:6).” [i.e., R. Eliezer here too holds that mercy will be shown on sinners punished in life]

The Ten Tribes [i.e., those tribes of Israel who were dispersed when the Assyrian Empire conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE] will not return, for it is said, *and cast them into another land, as is this day* (Deut 29:28): just as the day goes and does not return, so they too went and will not return.

This is R. Akiba’s view. But R. Eliezer said: *as is this day* — just as the day darkens and then becomes light again, so the Ten Tribes — even as it went dark for them, so will it become light for them. [i.e., here too R. Eliezer offers another interpretation, which stresses God’s mercy, esp. towards sinners punished in life].....

Avot d’Rabbi Natan 31

Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai taught: If you have a fruit-tree on your hands and someone says to you: Here is the Messiah. Go and finish planting your fruit-tree just the same, and afterwards go out and welcome the Messiah.