

Chapter 6 was the last chapter that Prof. Rigberg was able to complete before his death. The following "Conclusion" was intended to sum up these chapters and several more which he was unable to finish.

CONCLUSIONS

Some Jewish historians assume that Abraham lived in the first half of the second millennium B.C.E. (that is, between 2000 and 1500.) It seems reasonable to me to place him midway in this period, or approximately at 1750 B.C.E.¹ For the purposes of our understanding, then, Jewish history extends from 1750 B.C.E. to the present day. Fully the first half of this period, from Abraham up to 135 C.E., except for one long hiatus, is marked by ceaseless military confrontations. Military prowess, however, is an aspect of Jewish history that is not well remembered today.

There are some exceptions to the general omission of warfare from the study of Jewish history. One of these exceptions, dealing with the Israelite struggle against the Philistines for the possession of Canaan, is commemorated in Saint-Saen's melodic opera, *Samson et Delilah*. Another exception is the story of David and Goliath, idealized in Michelangelo's statue of David holding his sling. Yet another is the living memory of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and again by the Romans in 70 C.E. Why, despite the history embodied in these exceptions, has this knowledge of the Jewish military past been shunted aside? The three unsuccessful Jewish rebellions against Rome provide the answer to the question.

The submergence of Jewish military history coincides with the rise of the rabbinate. In the first and second centuries C.E., the rabbis began to transform Judaism from a religion based upon Temple ritual, involving the priesthood and animal sacrifice, into a faith that emphasized prayer and the study of Jewish Law. The Torah became the centerpiece of the formulation of laws and derivative commentary. The destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by Rome hastened this transformation. That catastrophe made changes inevitable if Judaism were to survive.

¹ In ancient Jewish history there is nothing more controversial than the question of accurate dating. There has been much division of opinion on the dating of the Patriarchs' lives. Indeed, as is noted below, there is no archaeological evidence of the Patriarchs' existence. However, understanding the Biblical narratives of Abraham and the other Patriarchs is vital to grasping the fundamentals of Jewish history. This is because these narratives mark ancient Israel's consciousness of itself as an ethnically and spiritually distinct people in the western Fertile Crescent.

The destruction of the Second Temple obliterated the power of the priesthood. The rabbis, the successors of the priesthood, emerged as the leaders of a Judaism based on study, interpretation of the law, and prayer. As Shaye J.D. Cohen states:

Prayer, Torah study, the daily performance of the Commandments, the promise of individual reward in the hereafter -- all these became the distinguishing characteristics of Judaism, and all these minimize, or at least reduce, the centrality of the Temple and the priesthood.²

Knowledge of the Torah and its commentaries was now to be regarded as the worthiest achievement. Nowhere in the entire *Tanakh*, however, except possibly in several psalms, is there any reference to the love of learning and study as primary objectives of Judaism.

Between the second and sixth centuries C.E. the rabbis erected a vast superstructure on the foundation of the *Torah*, consisting of the *Mishnah*, the two Talmuds, Babylonian and Jerusalem, the *Tosefta*, and the *Midrashim*.³ The rabbis taught that the Talmud, which they referred to as the Oral Law, had been given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and that the Judaism they espoused had existed forever. The rabbinic leadership that was now emerging is exemplified in the careers of the two greatest rabbis of ancient Judaism: Hillel (latter part of the first century B.C.E. and into the first century C.E.) and Akiva (c. 50-135 C.E.). Hillel became famous for advocating moderation in the application of religious law and for formulating seven rules of hermeneutics, or interpretation of the Bible. Akiva laid down the basic principles for the organization of what later became the Talmud. In time, legends magnified the achievements of these two men.

As an example, Hillel's love of learning was so great that when, as a young man on the Sabbath eve of the Winter Solstice, he lacked the daily entrance fee required for admission to the study house, he climbed up to the roof and lay down against the skylight, in order not to miss the following day's rabbinic

² Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, p. 160.

³ *Tosafot* (singular, *Tosefta*,) are additions to the Talmud, the body of laws and commentaries expatiating on the precepts of the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses. A Midrash (plural Midrashim) is a commentary, often in the form of a story, designed to illuminate a legal point.

exposition. He stayed on the study house roof the entire night, and the next morning the Rabbi and teacher

...Shemaiah said to [Rabbi] Avtalion, “Brother Avtalion, every day this house is bright with light, but today it is dark. Is the day cloudy?” When they looked up, they saw the figure of a man in the skylight. They climbed the roof and found Hillel, covered by three cubits [approximately 4.5 feet] of snow. They removed the snow from him, bathed and anointed him, and, as they seated him in front of an open fire, they said, “This man deserves to have the Sabbath profaned on his behalf.”⁴

The following legend illustrates Akiva’s great love of learning: Rachel, the daughter of a very rich man named Kalba Savua, fell in love with Akiva, a poor shepherd in her father’s employ. Some say that Akiva may even have been illiterate. Rachel regarded Akiva as an extraordinary man and said to him, “If I am willing to be betrothed to you, will you attend a house of study?” Akiva answered, “Yes.” They were married, and her father drove her out of his house and cut her off from his will. Akiva went away to study, leaving his new family in the poverty to which his father-in-law had reduced them.

At the end of twelve years, he arose and returned home, bringing with him twelve thousand disciples. Everyone went out to meet him. When his wife heard [of his arrival], she too went out to meet him. Her neighbors said to her, “Borrow some clothes, put them on, and make yourself presentable.” But she replied, “A righteous man will recognize his loyal creature.” (Prov.12: 10) When she came near him, she fell upon her face and was about to kiss his feet. But his disciples sought to push her aside. Rabbi Akiva shouted at them, “Let her be — mine and yours are rightly hers.”

Her father, on hearing that a great man had come to town, said, “I shall go to him, perhaps the great man will release me of my vow.” [The vow refers to Kalba Savua’s severance of relations with the young couple.] When the father came to him, Rabbi Akiva asked, “Would you have made your vow if you had known that her husband was to become a great man?” The father replied, “[Had her husband known] even one chapter, even one *Halakhah* ⁵[I would not have made such a vow].” Rabbi Akiva then said, “I am your daughter’s husband.” The father fell upon his face and kissed Rabbi Akiva’s feet. Presently, he gave him half of his wealth.⁶

⁴ Bailik and Ravnitzky, p. 204.

⁵ A law.

⁶ Ibid., pp.

The teachings of the rabbis now urged the renunciation of warfare as a means of ensuring Jewish survival. As their compilations developed, the contents tended to disparage military figures like Samson and Bar Kochba. It is noteworthy that when the canon was established (probably late in the first century C.E.), the Books of I and II Maccabees were excluded. Was this because the rabbis shunned the idea of glorifying the Jewish military victories which these books depicted?

The substitution of prayer, learning, and study for animal sacrifice, as noted earlier, pointed towards a much more profound shift: a substitution of Biblical and Talmudic study for the study of history and other secular subjects. Throughout the history of the Israelite nation, warfare had been a constant. Warfare, however, had brought the Jews to the edge of extinction. In now shifting Judaism's emphasis, rabbinical teachings steered Judaism away from other worldly pursuits as well. Most important among these was the writing of history. In fact, for many centuries after Josephus (c. 37 – 100+ C.E.), there was no writing of Jewish history.⁷ This is well documented. Salo W. Baron, the greatest of the modern Jewish historians, states that, "...In contrast to its ancestors' imposing production during the Biblical and Hellenistic antiquity, medieval Jewry failed to bring forth any major historical work in the true sense of the term." This applies to the Moslem period in Spain as well..⁸ Maimonides (1138-1204 C.E.), one of the two greatest rabbis of the Middle Ages, considered the writing of secular history a waste of time.⁹ It was not until the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century C.E. that the study and writing of Jewish history were resumed.

Because the rabbis had assumed the dominant position in Jewish intellectual life during the long Medieval period, scholars who might have become involved in the writing of history were instead drawn into the debates and disputes that were to constitute the Mishnah and the Talmud. There is indeed some history in these works, but they were meant to serve as guides for religious observance and not as

⁷ Josephus was the greatest Jewish historian of the ancient world and the chronicler of the war that led to the destruction of the Second Temple. See below.

⁸ Salo W. Baron, *History and Jewish Historians: Essays and Addresses*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1964), p. 205. See also Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982) pp. 16-85.

⁹ Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, pp. 32-33.

historical treatises. After 500 C.E., the center of Jewish learning shifted to Babylonia (Iraq). The great Mesopotamian (Iraqi) academies of Sura and Pumbeditha became involved in discussions of ritual law, and therefore they did not provide the encouragement, intellectual, spiritual or material, for the writing of history. Instead, these academies led the great battle against the Karaites, the Jewish sect of considerable influence from the eighth to the twelfth centuries C.E., which accepted the Tanakh but not the Talmud. Internecine theological disputes, rather than the writing of history, occupied the scholars of this long era.

The decision to emphasize disputations over the meaning and practice of Jewish law kicked to the sidelines all focus on Jewish military exploits. That partly explains the absence, over the centuries, of celebration of Jewish military valor. That absence further stemmed from a recognition by the Jewish scholarly elite that the Jewish people no longer enjoyed political autonomy, and that Jewish survival could only be found in the codification of Jewish law, not in Jewish military prowess.

This view was further sustained by their belief in the coming of the Messiah, as explained in Chapter 6. If the Jewish people looked to the Messiah, there would be no need for them to fight bloody battles in the present. The rabbis believed that that would only lead to more bloody suppressions. Thus the rabbis set the example for Jewish withdrawal from the secular world.

In his very thoughtful book, *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish History*, David Biale reaches a similar conclusion. He states that it is "...precisely the ability of the Jews to survive in a hostile imperial world [after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E.] that constitutes their political genius."¹⁰

¹⁰ Biale, p. 12