

The Founder of Judaism

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Most people, including most Jews, understand the relationship between Judaism and Christianity to be that of mother and daughter religion, Judaism being the mother and Christianity the daughter. In our own day, this notion fosters excellent relations between Christians and Jews: Christians admire Judaism as the original source of their own faith, and Jews are proud of the influence and antiquity of our tradition.

Truth be told, though, the notion of Judaism as daughter and Christianity as daughter religion is rooted in medieval anti-Semitism. In Christian art of that period, the synagogue is often depicted as an elderly woman, at death's doorstep; while the Church is depicted as her healthy, vibrant successor.

I'm reminded of the most common misconception of Darwin's theory of evolution. Most people imagine that Darwin taught that humans are descended from apes. Darwin would be dismayed. Instead, Darwin taught that humans and apes, chimpanzees, monkeys, and orangutans are all descended from a common ancestor species, primates who preceded all modern-day varieties. Perhaps those primates of an earlier epoch looked and behaved more like apes than like humans, but they were not apes as we know them.

Similarly, Christianity did not descend from Judaism as we know it – Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. Instead, both were born of a common ancestor, the religious beliefs and practices of ancient Israel.

Our Israelite ancestors served Adonai by bringing sacrifices to the Temple in Jerusalem. Beginning in the first century, B.C.E., a group of Jewish leaders began to question the priests who conducted that sacrificial cult. They wondered if the priests were out to enrich themselves. They charged that the sacrifices had become an end in themselves rather than a means to serving God and to fulfilling the sacred ordinances of Torah.

These rebels taught that God would be best served by studying and observing Torah. Since the Torah includes sacrifices, they did not argue that the cult should cease. However, they staked out a powerful position: Torah is at the center of Judaism, not the Jerusalem Temple, and not the sacrificial cult.

Oh, and what do we call these rebels? They called themselves *rabbanim* – “rabbis” in English – meaning “masters,” in this case master teachers of Torah. In

Greek, they were called Pharisees. Their opponents were the Sadducees, who insisted on a never-changing sacrificial service.

The first generations of rabbis toiled under the most adverse of conditions. They struggled to gain traction among their own people, tied to the sacrificial cult. They battled the stubborn and sometimes vicious Sadducees. All of the people of Judea suffered mightily under the oppression of the Roman overlords, who taxed them into penury and treated them with inhumane cruelty.

By the middle of the first century of the Common Era, the people of Judea were in open revolt against the Romans. The rabbis, though, advocated for peace. They worried that they could be massacred, with massive loss of life. They argued that no foreign power could overcome the truth of Torah or the fortitude of a people who would be loyal to it.

As the rabbis had predicted, the Romans besieged Jerusalem, starving many of its residents. Any rational prognosticator could predict that the Temple would be destroyed. The Sadducees, though, insisted on keeping up the fight, protecting the sacrificial cult at all costs.

The Sadducees had their reasons: Time and again, one people after another in the Ancient Near East had been conquered, their Temples destroyed. The gods worshiped at those shrines were no longer revered, and the people had assimilated into those who conquered them. Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple might mean the end of service to the one true God.

The rabbis were determined that should not happen. However, they had a problem. Under the Roman siege, nobody was permitted to enter or to leave Jerusalem. Most of the rabbinic sages of the day lived in the beleaguered capital city, where the Sanhedrin met. However, another rabbinical academy existed near the Mediterranean coast in the city of Yavneh. How would Jerusalem's sages survive the siege and join their colleagues in Yavneh? And if they did succeed in that improbable endeavor, how would they continue to serve God with no Temple?

One rabbi, Yochanan ben Zakkai, had an idea. The Romans didn't allow living men and women to leave the city. They did, however, permit caskets to be brought out for burial. Rabbi Yochanan therefore instructed his students to place him in a coffin and carry him beyond the siege walls, directly into the Roman camp. Some say that Roman custom was to run spears through those caskets, to

make sure that the person inside was dead. If that's true, Rabbi Yochanan nevertheless escaped that fate.

Once in the Roman camp, Rabbi Yochanan met the General Vespasian, who would later ascend as Emperor of Rome. Rabbi Yochanan was apparently known to Vespasian as one Jewish leader who had counseled his people not to rebel against Rome. The general was therefore favorably disposed when the rabbi asked him a small favor: Would Vespasian facilitate safe passage for Yochanan and his students to Yavneh, where they could join the fledgling rabbinical academy there. The general agreed.

Ancient Israelite religion, the common ancestor of Judaism and Christianity, would die with the destruction of the Temple in the year 70. In the decades that followed, Judaism and Christianity would be born, separately, not mother and daughter religions but siblings, each seeking its own very different way of serving the one true God their adherents shared.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai merits no lesser title than, "the founder of Judaism." No, he did not receive God's first call to the Promised Land, establishing the Covenant originally. Abraham and Sarah earn that distinction. No, he didn't receive the Torah at Mount Sinai. Moses is the original teacher of Judaism. Still, even Moses gets his title from Yochanan ben Zakkai and his contemporaries. The rabbis of the first century dubbed Moses, *Moshe Rabbeinu*, "our Rabbi Moses." They called him "rabbi," the original master teacher of Torah.

Until the days of Yochanan ben Zakkai and his colleagues came along, though, that Torah was the private possession of the priests. Like kings and priests throughout the Ancient Near East, they did not share its words with the people, except to serve their own goals and priorities. By the first century, the priests' goal was to retain their prerogatives, to cement the Temple as the center of Israelite religious service.

Judaism, though, is not the religion of Temple sacrifices. Instead, Judaism is the study and observance of Torah. The rabbis took the most precious possession they received, the Torah, and created a new religion around it.

Chief among their creations is the sacred service we pray tonight. Yochanan ben Zakkai is credited with perhaps the most important innovation: *T'filah bimkom avodah*, "Worship takes the place of sacrificial worship." The offerings of our lips have taken the place of the sacrifices of flocks and herds, fields and farms.

I often ask my students, “Which was greater, Ancient Egypt or Ancient Israel?” Students don’t like to respond. If the rabbi is asking, the answer must be Israel. No! The answer is that Ancient Egypt was a far greater, richer, longer-lasting civilization than Ancient Israel. Which was greater, Ancient Babylon or Ancient Israel? Ancient Greece or Ancient Israel? Ancient Rome or Ancient Israel? The answer is never Israel. All of those peoples? Conquered. Including Israel and Judea. All of their Temples? Destroyed. Including the one in Jerusalem. Twice. And yet, who today worships Amon-Ra or Ba’al, or Zeus or Jupiter? And how many, by contrast, worship the one God of Ancient Israel? Billions. True, we Jews are mere millions, hardly registering in any global religious population study. But billions of Christians and billions of Muslims worship that one God of Israel, albeit in very different ways from ours.

Because of Yochanan ben Zakkai, Judaism was established as Ancient Israelite religion met its certain death at Roman hands. Let us, tonight and always, honor the memory of Yochanan ben Zakkai. While there is a time for war, let us remember that a decision not to fight can sometimes bring greater and more lasting victory. We honor Rabbi Yochanan’s victory when we pursue peace and live to praise God another day. Let us honor Rabbi Yochanan’s memory by coming to this synagogue and others, to offer our praise, just as our ancestors offered the best of their crops and livestock. Let us honor the founder of Judaism by studying Torah, making God’s word ever new as we live our lives by its teaching every day.

Amen.