

How the Bible Came to Us - #10

Jews Living Under Christianity and Islam

1. When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, the Jewish community shifted its emphasis and the core of their community's existence from offering sacrifices at the Temple to the study of the Hebrew Scriptures. They developed an oral Torah, or teaching, around A.D. 200. Later, a much more extensive interpretation of the Scriptures in the form of a Babylonian and a Palestinian Talmud was codified around A.D. 450. Those formed the basis for Jewish life, community, and worship through the next 1000 years of the Middle Ages.
2. The Jews found themselves marginalized in both Christian Europe and Islamic Asia. They had little influence in the political or economic settings in either community. More than that, when Christians began the Crusades against Islam, the Jews were often caught in the middle. Some of the Christian Crusaders felt that it was necessary to blame the Jews and to torture and even to kill Jews while they were on their way to fight the Muslims in Palestine.
3. As we have mentioned earlier, Pharisaism and its teachings through the Talmud became the core thinking in the Jewish community. In some places Jews were, in fact, required to live in separate sections in cities and those sections came to be known as ghettos. So, Jews found themselves attacked from all sides.
4. But the Jewish community was not at a loss. They developed a significant set of arguments against Christians in particular. A book was written called the *Nizzahon Vetus*, or *Old Polemic*, which was a virtual encyclopedia of Jewish anti-Christian responses to Christianity's claims of superiority.
5. But fortunately, not all Christians and Jews were at war. There were times, particularly at a school in Paris, where Christians sought out Jews to help them understand the Hebrew of the Old Testament.
6. There were also challenges from within the Jewish community itself:
 - 1) In the 8th century, a movement called *Karaism* arose. It was a "back to the Bible" reformation among Jews. It was in response to the multitudes of rules that had been proposed in the Mishnah. This group wanted to go back and take only the Scripture and interpret the Scripture in meaningful ways for their lives. They were led by a gentleman by the name of Onan ben David.
 - 2) Particularly in the context of Islam, some Jews began to interpret Judaism primarily from a philosophical basis, somewhat after the example of Aristotle, in response to Arabic and Muslim philosophers. The goal was to provide a sensible, rational approach to their religion in contrast to Islam.
 - 3) Another group tended to move away from the literal interpretation of Scripture and instead, to believe various mystical interpretations. That movement was called *Kabbalism*.
7. But, in order to better understand those internal movements, we need to understand the social setting in which Jews lived in the Middle Ages. Fortunately for us, an interesting event took place in the 9th century. In earlier centuries, the Jewish community in Babylon had been the predominant Jewish force. They had developed their own Talmud. But under Islam, they seemed to be losing their way. So they wrote a letter to a rabbi in Spain who responded with

a book entitled the *Seder Rav Amran Gaon*. In that work is spelled out how that Spanish Jew thought the Jewish community should carry out its study of Scripture and its worship of God. Rabbi Rav Amran Gaon said that there should be three worship services every day. The morning service, entitled the *ha shaharith*, was the most extensive. The afternoon service, which was similar, was called the *mincha*. The evening service was called *maariv*.

8. The services began with a “benediction,” or blessing from God. That was followed by a reading of passages from the book of Psalms. Often, those were actually sung. It was concluded by the singing of a doxology, called the *kaddish*. The next order of service was three *berakoth* or “benedictions.” They praised God specifically for 1) His creation; 2) His gift of the Torah or Scripture; and 3) His faithfulness to His people, the Jews. Between the second blessing and the third blessing, there was a recital of the *shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4.
9. That was followed by a series of prayers, mostly from Scripture, called the *tefilla*. The most famous of the *tefilla* was the *shemoneh esre* which included 18 benedictions. There were prayers for every aspect of life. This group of prayers was sometimes also called the *amidah* because they were recited while standing.
10. Finally, these publicly recited prayers were followed by individual requests or *tahanum*.
11. Next in the service came more reading from the Scripture, first from the *Torah*, then from the prophets or *haftorah*, and then came a period of preaching—an explanation of the Scriptures that had been read. That preaching often took the form of explanations about how the Scripture that had been read should be applied to the daily lives of Jews.
12. As already mentioned, the second and third services of the day were shorter versions of the morning service.
13. In cities or areas where Jews had places of meeting, there was a special room where the Torah was kept. That would serve also as a school or house of study, a *beth ha midrash*, where students could be taught not only to read the ancient Hebrew but also what the Hebrew was supposed to mean. Two different emphases were given in that teaching: 1) The actual interpretation of the text, and 2) How it should apply to people’s lives.
14. Often connected with those synagogues or schools was a special small cupboard or closet, known as the *geniza*. In the *geniza* or cupboard were kept old manuscripts that were somewhat worn out and, therefore, subject to decay. Also in the *geniza* were kept manuscripts that were considered less than authentic or perhaps even heretical but which could be studied at times. It was from a document in one of those *geniza* closets in the synagogue in the city of Cairo that we first learned about the Essene community when the *Damascus Document* was found. The *Damascus Document* spelled out the history and some of the responsibilities of the Essenes in their community.
15. While we, as Christians, are more familiar with what happened to the Jews in Western Europe, there was a parallel movement in Asia in response to Islam. Saadia ben Joseph “Gaon,” who lived from 880 to 942, translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Arabic. Then he produced an Arabic commentary on many books of the Bible and emphasized not only the interpretation of the Scriptures but how it should be applied to people’s lives.
16. In the west certain great Jewish scholars led out in biblical interpretation.

1) Probably the greatest of those was Rabbi Solomon Ben Isaac, known by his acronym, Rashi. His main emphasis was on interpreting the Scriptures correctly and literally. That came to be known as *peshat*. His goal was to counter the attacks from Christianity on the outside and also to counter the attacks from the Karaites within the Jewish community itself. He wanted to show the many possible interpretations of the ancient Hebrew text. To the Karaites, he demonstrated that the text of the Hebrew Bible had many deeper prophetic or even figurative interpretations. That also helped in refuting claims by Christians. Rashi's interpretations were sensible, relatively easy to understand, and provided many good arguments against Christians and Karaites. Rashi's grandson, Samuel Ben Meir, also known as Rashbam, followed his grandfather's work by writing a commentary on the Torah.

Other biblical interpreters in the Jewish tradition took different approaches. Abraham Ibn Ezra lived and wrote in the 12th century. His writings were terse, elusive, extremely technical, and difficult. But he was incredibly intelligent.

2) In response to Islam, Moses ben Maimon (Moses Maimonides), or Rambam, became a fierce defender of Judaism. He wrote a book entitled *A Guide for the Perplexed* and provided philosophical arguments in favor of Judaism over Islam. His tradition was carried on by Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, called Ralbag, in the 14th century.

3) Finally, there were some in the Jewish community who took the mystical approach. That was referred to as *sod*, meaning "secret" or "mystery." They focused on interpreting passages in Exodus and particularly Ezekiel about the future glory that God had planned for his people. They talked about heavenly throne-chariots such as the one that transported Ezekiel as well as other mystical ideas. They even taught that God's very being was distributed in radiations or emanations, called *sefirot*. In the 13th century, a mystery book entitled the *Zohar* or *The Book of Splendor* was distributed by Moses ben Shemtov de Leon. That book formed the basis for Jewish *Kabbalah*, a word which means tradition. However, in effect, it was a way of reading and interpreting the Torah according to a mystical view.

17. So we see that during the Middle Ages, Judaism was "fighting for its life" against the overwhelming competing forces of Christianity and Islam. Great Jewish scholars did their best and often did very well in competing against the "invading" forces. They provided a philosophical, communal basis on which the Jewish people could experience a sense of meaning and community that kept them from being dispersed and lost in the larger communities in which they lived.

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