

BIOGRAPHIES OF EARLY TANA'IM - HILLEL THROUGH AKIVA

The Mishnah was completed in the year 200. It quotes the opinions of 138 rabbis. Of these, the most notable who lived during the first century are listed in the accompanying chart: Hillel, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai (RYBZ), Rabban Gamliel (RG), Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenus (RE), Rabbi Yehoshua (RY) and Rabbi Akiva (RA).

HILLEL

Starting with Hillel: Hillel was born in Babylonia. He was a woodcutter, and became a renowned rabbi in Babylonia. A little before the year 0, he moved to Jerusalem where he headed the Sanhedrin and started a yeshiva. His most famous contemporary was Shamai, who also headed a yeshiva. Whereas Shamai was known for being strict in his personality and rulings, Hillel was known for being his lenience in personality and rulings. Hillel died in the year 10.

RABBI YOCHANAN BEN ZAKAI (RYBZ)

One of Hillel's least-prestigious students, RYBZ, took over his dean of the yeshiva. RYBZ is most famous for an incident that occurred in the year 68, when Jerusalem was under siege by the Roman army. As described in the Talmud, RYBZ wanted to speak with the Roman general Vespasian (Aspanyanus) but couldn't get past the Jewish sentries to leave the city. So, he had some of his students, including RE and RY, carry him out of the city in a coffin so as not to be stopped by the sentries. RYBZ met Vespasian. When speaking with Vespasian, RYBZ predicted that Vespasian would be appointed the next Roman Emperor, a prediction that amazing turned out to be true, which impressed Vespasian. RYBZ requested that the Romans not destroy the city of Yavne, 30 miles west of Jerusalem near the Mediterranean Sea, so that RYBZ's yeshiva could relocate there. RYBZ promised the general that the people of Yavne would not oppose the Romans if the Romans leave them in peace, and the general agreed. RYBZ's yeshiva relocated from Jerusalem to Yavne, probably during a short break in the siege when the general returned to Rome to become emperor. Later, Vespasian's son, Titus, returned with the Roman army to Jerusalem to continue the siege. The Talmud describes a touching scene in which the RYBZ's students were studying in the yeshiva's study hall in Yavne in the year 70. A messenger rushed into the hall, announcing the tragic news that Jerusalem was captured by the Romans, its inhabitants were massacred, and the Temple, which stood for 420 years, was destroyed. RYBZ died 10 years afterward.

RABBAN GAMLIEL (RG)

RYBZ's disciple, RG, took over as dean of the yeshiva and the Sanhedrin. RG was known for his insistence on unity. He believed that for every religious disagreement, the rabbis should argue it out, then vote on it, and from then on everyone must follow the decision of the majority. RG might have learned the importance of unity from the Jewish war with the Romans, in which their defeat by the Romans, the massacre of the population and the destruction of the Temple might have all been averted had the Jews been united.

RG was also known for his strickness. For example, he punished one of his students, RA, at least 45 times, even though RA was an older man at the time. As another example, he instituted a restrictive admissions policy for his yeshivah which limited admissions to only high level students. In fact, some his students were so high level that they were great rabbis in their own right.

Another example of RG's stickness and insistence on unity is the following incident (Rosh Hash 25a): The Sanhedrin under RG once proclaimed when Yom Kippur would fall out that month. They later found out that their calculation was based on mistaken information, that the Yom Kippur should have been proclaimed for the NEXT day. RY urged that Sanhedrin correct its error. But RG refused to announce a correction, saying that once a day is designated to be Yom Kippur, it cannot be

changed even if designated in error. RG insisted on unity by essentially telling RY, "I want to see you keeping Yom Kippur on the day WE announced (admittedly in error) it will occur and NOT on the day you believe it should occur." RY sadly complied. RA consoled RY by reminding him that RY himself once taught that a proclamation of that month's holidays remains valid even if it was proclaimed in error.

RG was also known for his knowledge of astronomy. He is quoted in the Talmud as stating that the time period between one new moon and the next (i.e., from one alignment of the sun, earth and the moon to the next) is 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes and 3.5 seconds. This number can be determined experimentally, accurate to 3 seconds, even without a telescope or watch, by noting the elevation of the sun in the sky during an eclipse, waiting about 87 years, and noting the elevation of the sun during another eclipse, and then dividing the number of hours that passed between the two eclipses by the number of lunar months (1080 months) that had passed between the 2 eclipses.

RG commissioned Rabbi Shimon Hapekuli (Megila 17b) to compose Shmoneh Esrei, which we pray 3 times a day even now – 1900 years after it was composed. Although all 4 of these rabbis contributed to it.

Similarly, RY, RE and RA commissioned a Babylonian convert to Judaism, named Aquila, or Unklus, to translate the Bible into Aramaic. It is a famous Unklus Aramaic translation that is included in most Hebrew Bibles even now – 1900 years after it was composed.

RABBAN GAMLIEL'S SISTER

RG's sister was known for being smart and assertive. She is quoted several times in the Talmud. In one incident, a gentile approached her and said "According to your own Torah, your god is a thief, because he took one of Adam's ribs while Adam, the first man, was sleeping." She asked, "If someone took from you something of value, and left in its place something else of more value, would you complain?", and he said "No". She said, "Well, when Adam awoke, he found that Gd had taken one of his ribs and left him a woman in its place. Would you complain if that happened to you?" and the gentile said "No".

RG's sister married his classmate, RE.

RABBI ELIEZER (RE)

RE tended to do what he thought was right and not always follow the decision of the majority, which put him at odds with RG's policy for unity. For this, RE was excommunicated by his own brother-in-law, RG. RG sent RA to inform RE that he was excommunicated. But excommunication didn't seem to harm RE's reputation. RE simply left RG's academy in Yavneh and started his own in Lod (Sanh 32b), and ended up being one of the most quoted rabbis in the Talmud.

RABBI YEHOASHUA (RY)

Of the four rabbis,, RY was the most humble and conciliatory. Even though RY was a student in RG's academy, he was a venerated rabbi in his own right. In fact, RY lived in Jerusalem as an adult rabbi even while the Temple was still standing and even sang in the Levite choir in the Temple. In later years, RY would speak fondly of what a wonderful time he used to have in the Temple during the Succos holiday, when they would pray and offer sacrifices all the morning, study Torah all afternoon, and celebrate all night until morning.

Like RG, RY must have been an expert in astronomy. The Talmud quotes him as saying that of all the comet sightings that occur in the sky over the course of years, some of them are re-appearances of the same comet, that returns once every 70 years. It is interesting that this fact was later forgotten, and rediscovered 1600 years later by an astronomy professor at Oxford University, Edmond Halley. They called it Halley's comet. Except that Halley more accurately determined the comet's repeat period to be 76 years.

RY was known for his humility and avoiding confrontation, even if it meant telling a white lie. For example, the Talmud tells a story of RY staying at a bed-and-breakfast. The hostess gave him soup for supper. After eating a little of it, he realized he couldn't finish it because it was too spicy. But to avoid embarrassing the hostess, he told a white lie and said he couldn't finish it because he was too full from eating just beforehand.

In another example of telling a white lie, which was also an example of RG's strictness, RY was attending a lecture given by RG. During the class, a student asked RG whether Maariv is compulsory or optional. RG answered "Obligatory. Does anyone in this class disagree?" No one answered. RG said "RY, to stand up. Do YOU know anyone who disagrees with my ruling?" RY said "No". Then RG asked "Then why did this student here tell me just before the lecture that you previously told him that Maariv is optional?" RY essentially answered "You're right. You caught me telling a white lie." Then RG continued lecturing without informing RY he could sit back down. So RY was left in the embarrassing position of standing up like a fool through the rest of the lecture.

RG's colleagues were so offended by RG's treatment of RY, especially since RY was a venerated rabbi and this was the 3rd time RG demeaned RY, that they fired RG from his deanship. In his place, they appointed an 18-year old named Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaria (REBA, who is mentioned in the Passover Hagadah). They chose REBA, because the dean had to periodically travel long distances to visit Roman officials in far off cities, and REBA was rich enough to pay for the travel expenses himself. When REBA became dean, he eliminated the yeshivah's admission requirements that RG had instituted, and made the yeshivah open to whoever wanted to enroll. This led to a drastic increase in yeshivah's enrollment. Later, after RG apologized to RY and was forgiven, the students re-appointed RG to be dean. When he returned to the yeshivah, RG must have been insulted to find that while he was fired and away from the yeshivah, the yeshivah had grown drastically without him. He must have been even more insulted by the fact that his colleagues did not fire the 18-year-old who they had just hired, so the venerated RG had to share the deanship with an 18-year-old. Eventually, RY left RG's yeshivah and started his own in Peki'in (between Yavneh and Lod) (Sanh 32b)

After the Temple's destruction, the Jews worked hard to maintain good relations with the Romans. For that purpose, the Jewish community would periodically send emissaries, including RG and RY, to Syria to visit the Roman governor and to Rome to visit the Roman emperor.

The Talmud tells how a Roman official once ate supper at RY's house on Shabbos. The official stated "RY, this soup is delicious! What spice you put in it?" RY answered philosophically "The special spice is the Shabbos." The official responded, "Please give me some of this Shabbos spice to take home with me."

The Talmud (Ta'anis, 7a bottom) also recounts an incident when RY was visiting Rome. The Roman emperor's daughter once paid an awkward compliment to RY. She told him "It's amazing how such a brilliant mind can be housed in such an ugly body." RY answered, "That's not so odd. Rich people often keep their prized possessions in plain containers. For example, they keep their best wine in plain earthenware jars." Then, the emperor joined the conversation and asked "See here RY. Are you telling me you have never seen a smart men who are handsome?" and RY answered "Yes, I have seen smart men who are also handsome. But they would have been even smarter if they were born ugly."

In the Talmud, it seems that whatever RE is quoted as saying, RY is quoted as disagreeing with. In one of the hundreds of examples, the Talmud asks: We know that rain comes from the sky, but how did it get there in the first place? Rabbi Eliezer derived from the Bible that rain water is fed from water that evaporated from the oceans; But RY asked, "If that's so, then why isn't rain water taste salty like the ocean? It must have instead been in the sky from the time of the creation of the world."

RABBI AKIVA (RA)

RA started out as a poor illiterate shepherd who hated rabbis. He married his rich boss' daughter. His boss was so upset with his daughter marrying a poor illiterate rabbi-hating man, that he disinherited his daughter. On his new wife's insistence, RA started learning the aleph bes, how to read Hebrew, at the age of 40. He then became a rabbi, and abandoned his wife for 24 years to learn in RG's academy in Yavne. He later learned under RE and RY. After the deaths of his teachers, RA later started his own in Bnai Berak. (Sanh 32b), and apparently became more popular than his teachers in terms of number of students. Various sources indicate he had somewhere between 12,000 and 48,000 students.

In RA's lifetime, the Romans became intolerably oppressive to the Jews. The Roman emperor Hadrian prohibited the teaching of Judaism under pain of death. In the year 132, the Jews rebelled against the Romans. RA supported the rebellion, and believed that its leader, Shimon Bar Kochba, might be even be the messiah. After the Jews won some initial battles, their revolt faltered after the Romans called in massive reinforcements. The Romans eventually crushed the revolt and massacred many hundreds of thousands of Jews. RA was imprisoned for a year or two for teaching Judaism and was then tortured to death.

