

# Dictionary Early Judaism

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## Yavneh

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Yavneh (in Hebrew), or Jamnia (in Greek), is a town located west by northwest of Jerusalem near the Mediterranean coast. The name Yavneh is regularly used by modern scholars in connection with the first generation of mishnaic sages, who allegedly met there after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. (these sages are "Yavnean," as is the layer of the Mishnah which they composed or in which they are cited), and, by extension, to the efforts of the sages in the land of Israel to reconstitute their religion and society in the wake of the destruction (these efforts are the work of "the council [in some modern accounts: synod] of Yavneh"). Modern scholarly usage is based in the first instance on the following six sources: (1) the legend of Yoḥanan ben Zakkai's escape from Jerusalem, in which (at least according to some versions) he asks of Vespasian, and receives, "Yavneh and its sages" (*b. Giṭṭin* 56b); (2) several rabbinic traditions which locate "R. Gamaliel and his court" at Yavneh (*t. Ber.* 2:6), R. Gamaliel being the putative successor to R. Yoḥanan b. Zakai; (3) R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai's self-conscious transfer of the ritual blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah from the Temple to the court at Yavneh (*m. Roš Haš.* 4:1-2); (4) the story in the Tosefta that "When the sages gathered at the vineyard in Yavneh, they said, 'The time will come when a person will seek a word of the words of Torah and will not find it, of the words of the scribes and will not find it . . . ' so they said, 'Let us begin with Hillel and Shammai'" (here follow the opening words of *m. 'Eduyyot*; *t. 'Ed.* 1:1); (5) the talmudic report that R. Gamaliel and his court established the central prayer of the daily liturgy, the "Eighteen Benedictions," including the benediction against heretics (*b. Berakot* 28b-29a); (6) the talmudic report that the disputes between the Houses of Hillel and Shammai came to an end at Yavneh (*b. 'Erubin* 13b). Of these, numbers (1), (2), (4), and (5) support the idea that there was a gathering or council or court or school at Yavneh, an idea that seems to be confirmed by many other texts that feature sages of the Yavnean period. Numbers (1), (3), (4), (5), and (6) support the idea that the Yavnean sages were establishing the basis for a new Judaism for a

temple-less world. In addition, the debates among some sages of the Yavnean period about the status of some biblical books (*m. Yad.* 3:5) has suggested to some modern scholars that the council of Yavneh was responsible for the "canonization" of the Hebrew Bible.

Much of this reconstruction has unraveled in recent years, as there is substantial debate about the dating, historicity, and interpretation of these traditions. In particular, the legend about R. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai seems to be just that, a legend of dubious historicity; the blessing against heretics, in all likelihood, was not originally an anti-Christian prayer, contrary to a widespread view, and has nothing to do with the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue (John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2); the canonization of the Hebrew Bible was probably complete generations before the Yavnean sages.

The significance of Yavneh lies in the fact that the rabbinic sages after the destruction of the Temple began the process that would, about a century later, produce the Mishnah. That book became the basis of a new and distinctive kind of Judaism, a Judaism that would endure one way or another from that day to this. Synod or no synod, this is an accomplishment.

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## Yoḥanan Ben Zakkai

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Yoḥanan ben Zakkai belonged to the generation of Judean Jews that experienced firsthand the Jewish Revolt against Rome in 66-74 C.E. He is remembered in

rabbinic tradition as having been instrumental in reconstituting Judaism as a viable postsacrificial religion in the wake of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. But while rabbinic sources offer a profusion of traditions concerning his words and deeds, they also highlight the profound empirical and epistemological impediments to writing traditional rabbinic biography and history.

Evidence for the life of Yoḥanan ben Zakkai is exclusively literary and rabbinic. In the chain of tradition in *Pirque 'Abot*, he is named as the recipient of the traditions of Hillel and Shammai and credited with having been the teacher of five important tannaitic sages (2:8). He is thus imagined as the bridge between the “named pairs” of sages (*zuggôt*) who flourished during the Second Temple period and the *tannaim* of second-century Palestine. Tannaitic and later rabbinic sources describe him as a leader of the Pharisees prior to the Destruction, actively opposing the teachings of both Sadducees and priests regarding cultic practice (e.g., *m. Šeqal.* 1:4; *m. 'Ed.* 8:3; *m. Yad.* 4:6; *t. Para* 3:8; *b. Baba Batra* 115b; *b. Menaḥot* 65a). A couple of passages suggest, however, that he may himself have been of priestly stock (*t. Ohol.* 16:8; *t. Para* 3:7), a possibility affirmed by some modern historians (Schwartz 1980-1981). Yoḥanan ben Zakkai is thus a liminal figure: while his social and ideological profiles bear a resemblance to those of various Jerusalem-based scribal and perhaps sectarian groups, he does not fit comfortably into existing taxonomies. Nor is it certain that, in the period after the revolt, he can properly be considered a “rabbi” as that term would later be defined within the rabbinic movement.

Yet, despite these considerable uncertainties, tannaitic texts do provide clear and consistent testimony for a series of ordinances (*taqqānôt*) enacted by Yoḥanan ben Zakkai that aimed at altering Jewish ritual practices in response to the loss of the Temple (*Sifra*, *'Emor* 16:9; *m. Sukk.* 3:12; *m. Roš Haš.* 4:1-4; *m. Menaḥ.* 10:5; *t. Roš. Haš.* 2:9). Significantly, these *taqqānôt* did not address matters of purity law, which hold a central place in Pharisaic and early tannaitic legal discourse. Rather, they ordained that certain practices that had been restricted to the Temple precincts — such as blowing the *shofar* when the New Year falls on the Sabbath — could also be performed elsewhere. It is not certain whether Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and his colleagues initially envisioned these innovations merely as stopgap measures, though later rabbinic tradition would present them as the foundation for a new post-Temple Judaism.

Indeed, rabbinic literature provides far more than merely a series of tantalizing biographical details and isolated legal rulings. Yoḥanan ben Zakkai is the hero

of a rich vein of rabbinic narrative tradition that recounts his flight from Jerusalem to Yavneh during the revolt (*'Abot R. Nat.* A 4; *'Abot R. Nat.* B 6; *Lam. Rab.* 1:5; *b. Giṭṭin* 56a-b; *Midrash Proverbs* 15). Having been carried out of the besieged city in a coffin by his disciples, the sage is taken to the Roman camp, where he prophesies the ascension of Vespasian to the imperial office and receives permission from the flattered general to establish an “academy” at the coastal town of Yavneh (Jamnia) under Roman auspices. Earlier generations of scholars sought to determine the precise historical events and intentions from this cycle of stories (Alon 1977). But Jacob Neusner and others have convincingly argued that the narrative underwent considerable literary expansion and differentiation during subsequent centuries and therefore cannot be dissected for the purposes of naïve historical reconstruction (esp. Neusner 1970). In recent years, even the basic historical significance of the “council” at Yavneh has been subject to revisionist interpretations and remains hotly debated (compare Cohen 1984 and Boyarin 2000).

Rather, these narratives of escape and foundation can be better read as reflecting the historical perceptions of crisis and renewal on the part of the generation of those who lived through the Destruction, as filtered through a rabbinic worldview (Schäfer 1979). It has similarly been argued that these stories not only reflect the ideology of rabbinic elites, but also encode folkloric elements that illuminate the process by which the continuity between Second Temple Jerusalem and post-destruction Judaism was crystallized in the Jewish imagination (Hasan-Rokem 2000: 171-89).

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