

# PATIENT CHANGE, SLOW INFLUENCE: THE MODEL OF THE RABBIS OF LATE ANTIQUITY

## THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

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Dr. Kraemer is a prolific author and commentator. His books include *A History of the Talmud*; *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages*; *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*; *Reading the Rabbis: The Talmud as Literature*; and *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature*. In addition to his books, he has written influential articles on the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Mishnah, and other subjects.

Before the Rabbis:

Temple, no Rabbis

# SO WHAT WAS THERE?

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- Pharisees
- "Lawyers"
- Scribes

# DESTRUCTION OF TEMPLE (70 CE)

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- How to respond?

- Stick with the old—to the extent possible
- Give up; admit it was a losing proposition.  
Assimilate to Roman culture and religion
- Try something new (but not entirely new)! =  
the Rabbis

## SHORT TERM (2<sup>ND</sup>-5<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES), NON-RABBINIC EVIDENCE

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- Archaeology (burial sites, remains of urban life)
- Written testimony (Latin writers on Jews)

# SHORT-TERM RABBINIC EVIDENCE

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- The Mishnah
- Specific examples: Kashrut, Shabbat and Eruv law, prayer and blessings

# SLIGHTLY LONGER TERM (5<sup>TH</sup>-6<sup>TH</sup> CENT.)

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- On the one hand: Galilean synagogues (mosaics, “pagan” images), burial sites (“pagan” images and decorations); earliest rabbinic evidence: probably 6th-7th century
- On the other hand: Midrash, Talmuds; BUT: exclusively rabbinic, elitest



# SO HOW DID THE RABBIS GAIN INFLUENCE IN PALESTINE?

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- Education
- Literacy
- Torah expertise
- Connections with Nasi (patriarch)

# AND HOW DID THE RABBIS GAIN INFLUENCE IN BABYLONIA?

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- Education
- Literacy
- Torah expertise
- Connections with Resh Galuta (exilarch)

## STILL, HOW DID THE RABBIS ACQUIRE A FOLLOWING AMONG COMMON JEWS?

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- Obvious, necessary answer: by giving their Jewish lives meaning, purpose, foundation

- Prayer
- Blessings
- Home practices
- Just market practices
- *NOT AN AREA OF LIFE WAS “OUTSIDE” OF THIS SYSTEM*

# THE OUTCOME?

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- By the dawn of the Muslim era, perhaps half of Jews were rabbinized. Many remained what would later come to be called “Karaites,” that is, followers of scripture, as they had long been.

# HOW DID THE RABBIS ACCOMPLISH THIS?

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- They were patient, they were slow
- They worked at their own level (elite), but they also met people "where they were at" (difference between Talmud and Midrash, study hall and life in the community)
- They were flexible, adaptive, bold, willing to experiment
- They had a clear vision
- They were committed to and confident in their vision
- What else?

# WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

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- How is our age similar to/different from the rabbinic age?
- How are our leaders similar/different?
- What is our vision for Jewish life?
- How does living after the Holocaust and the birth of the State of Israel affect our considerations?