

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [237]

The Donkey Came and Kicked the Lamp

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 116a

Thanks to Rabbi Uri Romano for bringing this story to my attention



Background to Our Story

Rabban Gamaliel II



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamaliel_II

Rabban Gamaliel II (רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל דִּיבְנָה) was the first person to lead the Sanhedrin as Nasi after the fall of the second temple, which occurred in 70 CE. Gamliel was appointed nasi approximately 10 years later. Gamaliel II was the son of Shimon ben Gamaliel, one of Jerusalem's foremost men in the war against the Romans, and grandson of Gamaliel I. To distinguish him from the latter he is also called Gamliel of Yavne.

In [Yavne](#), during the [siege of Jerusalem](#), the scribes of the school of [Hillel](#) had taken refuge by permission of [Vespasian](#), and a new centre of [Judaism](#) arose under the leadership of the aged [Johanan ben Zakkai](#), a school whose members inherited the authority of the [Sanhedrin](#) of Jerusalem. Gamaliel II became Johanan ben Zakkai's successor, and rendered immense service in the strengthening and reintegration of Judaism, which had been deprived of its former basis by the destruction of the [Second Temple](#) and by the entire loss of its political autonomy. He put an end to the division which had arisen between the spiritual leaders of Judaism by the separation of the scribes into the two schools called respectively after Hillel and [Shammai](#), and took care to enforce his own authority as the president of the chief legal assembly of Judaism with energy and often with severity. He did this, as he himself said, not for his own honor nor for that of his family, but in order that disunion should not prevail in Israel.

Gamaliel's position was recognized by the Roman government also. Towards the end of [Domitian's](#) reign (c. 95 CE), he went to [Rome](#) in company with the most prominent members of the school of Javneh, in order to avert a danger threatening the Jews from the

action of the emperor. In Rome, as at home, Gamaliel often had occasion to defend [Judaism](#) in polemical discussions with [pagans](#), and also with professed [Christians](#). In an anecdote regarding a suit which Gamaliel was prosecuting before a Christian judge, a converted Jew, an appeal to the Gospel and to the words of [Jesus](#) in [Matthew 5:17](#) is made, with one possible reading of the story indicating that it was Gamaliel making this reference.

Gamaliel was a controversial leader. He excommunicated his own brother-in-law, Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. In a dispute about fixing the calendar, Rabban Gamaliel humiliated Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah by asking him to show up with his "stick and satchel" (weekday attire) on the holy day which according to Rabbi Joshua's calculation was Yom Kippur. Later on, another dispute broke out regarding the status of the nightly prayer, and he humiliated him again by asking him to stand up, and to remain standing while teaching to his students. This incident shocked the Rabbis, and subsequently led to a rabbinic revolt against Gamaliel's leadership of the sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin installed Rabbi Eleazar Ben Azariah as the new Nasi. After reconciling with Rabbi Joshua, Rabban Gamaliel was reinstated as Nasi, with Rabbi Eleazar serving along with him in a rotation every third week. According to the version recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer served as Av Bet Din, effectively as a viceregent.

Ima Shalom



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ima_Shalom

Ima Shalom (1st Century C.E.) is one of the few women who are named and quoted in the [Talmud](#). She was the wife of [Eliezer ben Hurcanus](#), a prominent [Mishnaic](#) sage, and the sister of [Rabban Gamaliel II of Yavneh](#), the first person to lead the [Sanhedrin](#) as [Nasi](#) after the fall of the second temple, which occurred in 70 CE.

Eliezer ben Hurcanus



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eliezer_ben_Hurcanus

Eliezer ben Hurcanus (Hebrew: אליעזר בן הורקנוס), was a kohen and one of the most prominent Sages (tannaim) of the 1st and 2nd centuries in Judea, disciple of Johanan ben Zakai and colleague of Gamaliel II, whose sister he married, and of Joshua ben Hananiah. He is the sixth most frequently mentioned sage in the Mishnah.

Gospel



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel>

A gospel is a written account of the career and teachings of [Jesus of Nazareth](#). The word originated as a contraction from old English "god spel" meaning "good news", "glad tidings (of the kingdom of God)" and is comparable to the [Greek](#) [εὐαγγέλιον](#), *evangelion*.) The word originally meant the Christian message itself, but in the 2nd century it came to be used for the books in which the message was set out.

The four gospels of the [New Testament](#) — [Matthew](#), [Mark](#), [Luke](#) and [John](#) — are almost our only source of information on [Jesus](#), and thus occupy a uniquely important place in Christianity. For various reasons modern scholars are cautious of relying on them uncritically, nevertheless, they do provide a good idea of the public career of Jesus, and critical study can attempt to distinguish the original ideas of Jesus from those of the later authors.

Split of early Christianity and Judaism



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Split_of_early_Christianity_and_Judaism

The split of early Christianity and Judaism took place during the [first centuries CE](#). It is commonly attributed to a number of events, including the [rejection and crucifixion of Jesus](#) (c. 33), the [Council of Jerusalem](#) (c. 50), the [destruction of the Second Temple](#) and institution of the [Jewish tax](#) in 70, the postulated, and largely discredited, [Council of Jamnia](#) c. 90, and the [Bar Kokhba revolt](#) of 132–135.

While it is commonly believed that [Paul the Apostle established a primarily Gentile church within his lifetime](#), it took centuries for a complete break with Judaism to manifest, and the relationship between [Paul and Second Temple Judaism](#) is still disputed with a wide range of views.

At the time of the [Destruction of the Second Temple](#), Judaism was divided into antagonistic factions. The main camps were the [Pharisees](#), the [Saducees](#), and the [Zealots](#), but they also included other less influential sects.

According to most scholars, the followers of Jesus were composed principally of apocalyptic [Jewish](#) sects during the late [Second Temple](#) period of the [1st century](#). Some [Early Christian](#) groups were strictly Jewish, such as the [Ebionites](#) and the early church leaders in [Jerusalem](#), collectively called [Jewish Christians](#). During this period, they were led by [James the Just](#). Paul of Tarsus, commonly known as [Saint Paul](#), persecuted the early Jewish Christians, then [converted](#) and adopted the title of "Apostle to the Gentiles" and started proselytizing among the [Gentiles](#). He persuaded the leaders of the Jerusalem Church to allow Gentile converts exemption from most [Jewish commandments](#) at the [Council of Jerusalem](#), which may parallel [Noahide Law](#) in [Rabbinic Judaism](#).

Historians continue to debate the precise moment when Christianity established itself as a new religion, apart and distinct from Judaism. Some scholars view Christians as much as Pharisees as being competing movements *within* Judaism that decisively broke only after the [Bar Kokhba's revolt](#), when the successors of the Pharisees claimed hegemony over all Judaism, and – at least from the Jewish perspective – Christianity emerged as a new religion. Some Christians were still part of the Jewish community up until the time of the Bar Kochba revolt in the 130s.

Scrolls of Heretics



[Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Shabbat Part 2. Koren publishers Jerusalem](#)

The heretics were members of various dissenting sects that existed during the time of the Mishnah. The reference in this context is specifically to the Christian sects. Rabeinu Hananel writes: The heretics who existed at that time had not yet developed the customs that they practice today. Rather they were misguided. Some of them observed the Torah while others did not, yet they all read it. Rabeinu Hananel describes a period in the history of Christianity during which it was not yet a distinct religion.

Jewish Laws of Inheritance



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inheritance#Jewish_laws

The inheritance is patrilineal. The father —that is, the owner of the land— bequeaths only to his male descendants, so the Promised Land passes from one Jewish father to his sons.

If there were no living sons and no descendants of any previously living sons, daughters inherit. In Numbers 27:1-4, the daughters of Zelophehad (Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah) of the tribe of Manasseh come to Moses and ask for their father's inheritance, as they have no brothers. The order of inheritance is set out in Numbers 27:7-11: a man's sons inherit first, daughters if no sons, brothers if he has no children, and so on.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 116a

אימא שלום דיביתיהו דרבי אליעזר
 אדחיהו דרבן גמליאל הוא. הנה הוה
 פילוסופא בשבבתייה
 דהוה שקיל שקמא דלא מקבל שוחדא.
 בעו לאחוכי בית; אעיינא ליה שרגא
 דדחבא. ואזיל לקמיה. אמרה ליה:
 בעינא דניפליגי לי בנבסי דבי נשי. אמר
 להו: פלוגי. אמר ליה. כתיב לן: במקום
 ברא ברתא לא תירוד. אמר ליה: מן
 יומא דגליתון מארעבון איתגטלית
 אורייתא דמשה. ואיתגיהבת עון גליון.
 וכתיב בית: ברא וברתא בתרא ירתון.
 למחר הקדר עייל ליה איהו חמרא
 לוכא. אמר להו: שפילית לקיפיה דעון
 גליון וכתב בית: אנא לא למיפחת מן
 אורייתא דמשה איתתי [ולא] לאוספי
 על אורייתא דמשה איתתי. וכתיב בית:
 במקום ברא ברתא לא תירוד. אמרה
 ליה: נהוד נהודין כשרגא! אמר ליה רבן
 גמליאל: אנתא חמרא ובטש לשרגא.

Context to Our Story

Rabbi Meir would call the Christian writing, the Evangelion, the wicked folio [*aven gilyon*]; Rabbi Yohanan called it the sinful folio [*avon gilyon*].

The Story

Imma Shalom, the wife of Rabbi Eliezer, was Rabban Gamliel's sister.

There was a Christian philosopher [*pilosofa*] in their neighborhood who disseminated about himself the reputation that he does not accept bribes. They [Imma Shalom and Rabban Gamliel] wanted to mock him and reveal his true nature.

She [Imma Shalom] privately gave him [the philosopher] a golden lamp as a bribe, and she and her brother came before him, approaching him as if they were seeking judgment.

She [Imma Shalom] said to the philosopher: I want to share in the inheritance of my father's estate.

He [the philosopher] said to them: Divide it.

Rabban Gamliel said to him [to the philosopher]: It is written in our Torah: In a situation where there is a son, the daughter does not inherit.

The philosopher said to him [to Rabban Gamliel]: Since the day you were exiled from your land, the Torah of Moses was taken away and the *avon gilyon* was given in its place. It is written in the *avon gilyon*: A son and a daughter shall inherit alike.

The next day, privately, Rabban Gamliel brought the philosopher a Libyan donkey as a bribe.

Afterward, Rabban Gamliel and his sister came before the philosopher for a judgment. He [the philosopher] said to them: I proceeded to the end of the *avon gilayon*, and it is written: I did not come to subtract from the Torah of Moses, and I did not come to add to the Torah of Moses. And it is written there (in the Torah): In a situation where there is a son, the daughter does not inherit.

She [Imma Shalom] said to him [to the philosopher]: May your light shine like a lamp, alluding to the lamp she had given him.

Rabban Gamliel said to him [to the philosopher]: The donkey came and kicked the lamp, thereby revealing the entire episode.



Explaining the Story (What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Why was the Christian philosopher disseminating about himself the reputation that he did not accept bribes?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why were Imma Shalom and Rabban Gamliel interested in revealing the true nature of the philosopher?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Please explain the strategy of Imma Shalom and Rabban Gamliel to expose the philosopher.

Extra Bonus ? In his arguments, the philosopher uses different contradicting verses from the *Evangelion* to make different contradicting cases. As you may know, sometimes the Torah also presents us with different contradicting verses, which the Sages might use to make different contradicting cases. If so, what is problematic in what the philosopher does?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What did Rabban Gamliel mean by saying "the donkey came and kicked the lamp"?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! Corruption and Arrogance: Two sides of the Same Coin

"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18)

! By adding "arrogance" to any hidden character flaws you may have, you are encouraging everybody to make them public!

EPILOGUE

The context of our story is the religious polemics between early Christian and Jews. The moral of our story, however, goes beyond this particular interesting context. Not only is our philosopher a corrupt judge (he was not the first or the last one), he also likes to brag about himself as an incorruptible person, thus inviting Imma Shalom and Rabban Gamliel to prove him wrong by exposing him in public. While the main agenda of our story is to challenge the worth of the Christian texts in a time of deep religious controversies, the more subtle but nevertheless important agenda of our story is to warn the reader of the perils of corruption and arrogance, two character flaws that more often than not travel together.