
Gamaliel

From "The Life and Epistles of St. Paul" by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, Eerdmans

Gamaliel ¹

also called RABBAN GAMALIEL (RABBAN, MEANING "TEACHER"), a tanna, one of a select group of Palestinian masters of the Jewish Oral Law, and a teacher twice mentioned in the New Testament.

According to tradition--but not historic fact--Gamaliel succeeded his father, Simon, and his grandfather, the renowned sage Hillel (to whose school of thought he belonged), as nasi (president) of the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court. It is certain, though, that Gamaliel held a leading position in the Sanhedrin and that he enjoyed the highest repute as teacher of the Law; he was the first to be given the title RABBAN. Like his grandfather, Gamaliel also was given the title ha-Zaqen (the Elder).

The New Testament (Acts 5:34-39) relates that Gamaliel intervened on behalf of the Apostles of Jesus when they had been seized and brought to the Sanhedrin, and another passage (Acts 22:3) tells how St. Paul, in a speech to the Jews, tried to influence them by stating that he had been a student of Gamaliel ("I am a Jew, . . . brought up . . . at the feet of Gamaliel").

Gamaliel established a number of lenient ordinances, in particular, laws affecting women and non-Jews. Of his teaching, only one saying is preserved in the Talmud; it enjoins the duties of study and scrupulous observance of religious ordinances. Gamaliel's renown is summed up in the words recorded in the Talmud: "When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, regard for the Torah [Jewish Law] ceased, and purity and piety died."

Of the two schools, that of Hillel was by far the most influential in its own day, and its decisions have been held authoritative by the greater number of later Rabbis. The most eminent ornament of this school was Gamaliel,

whose fame is celebrated in the Talmud. Hillel was the father of Simeon, and Simeon the father of Gamaliel. It has been imagined by some that Simeon was the same old man who took the infant Savior in his arms and pronounced the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:25-35). It is difficult to give a conclusive proof of this; but there is no doubt that this Gamaliel was the same who wisely pleaded the cause of St. Peter and the other apostles (Acts 5:34-40), and who had previously educated the future apostle St. Paul (Acts 22:3). His learning was so eminent, and his character so revered, that he is one of the seven who alone among Jewish doctors have been honored with the title of "Rabban." ² As Aquinas, among the schoolmen, was called *Doctor Angelicus*, and Bonaventura *Doctor Seraphicus*, so Gamaliel was called "The Beauty of the Law;" and it is a saying of the Talmud that "since Rabban Gamaliel died, the glory of the Law has ceased."

He was a Pharisee, but anecdotes are told of him which show that he was not trammelled by the narrow bigotry of the sect. ³ He had no antipathy to the Greek learning. He rose above the prejudices of his party. Our impulse is to class him with the best of the Pharisees, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Candor and wisdom seem to have been features of his character; and this agrees with what we read of him in the Acts of the Apostles, ⁴ that he was "had in reputation of all the people," and with his honest and intelligent argument when Peter was brought before the council. It has been imagined by some that he became a Christian; and why he did not become so is known only to Him who understands the secrets of the human

² This title is the same as *Rabboni*, addressed to our Lord by Mary Magdalene.

³ He bathed once at Ptolemais in an apartment where a statue was erected to a heathen goddess; and being asked how he could reconcile this with the Jewish law, he replied that the bath was there before the statue, that the bath was not made for the goddess, but the statue for the bath.

⁴ Acts 5:34. Yet Nicodemus and Joseph declared themselves the friends of Christ, which Gamaliel never did. And we should hardly expect to find a violent persecutor among the pupils of a really candid and unprejudiced man.

¹ Grace Notes: <http://www.gracenotes.info> Editor: Warren Doud, wdoud@gracenotes.info

heart. But he lived and died a Jew; and a well known prayer against Christian “heretics” was composed or sanctioned by him.

He died eighteen years before the destruction of Jerusalem,⁵ about the time of St. Paul's shipwreck at Malta, and was buried with great honor. Another of his pupils, Onkelos, the author of the celebrated Targum, raised to him such a funeral pile of rich materials as had never before been known except at the burial of a king.

If we were briefly to specify the three effects which the teaching and example of Gamaliel may be supposed to have produced on the mind of St. Paul, they would be as follows: candor and honesty of judgment; a willingness to study and make use of Greek authors; and a keen and watchful enthusiasm for the Jewish law. We shall see these traits of character soon exemplified in his life. But it is time that we should inquire into the manner of communicating instruction, and learn something concerning the place where instruction was communicated, in the schools of Jerusalem.

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

GAMALIEL gə-mā'lēəl [Heb gamlī'ēl—'God is my recompense/reward,' indicating the loss of one or more earlier children in the family; Gk Gamaliēl].

1. **Gamaliel son of Pedahzur**, leader of the tribe of Manasseh during the census of the Israelites in the desert of Sinai (Nu. 1:10; 2:20; 7:54, 59; 10:23).

2. **Rabbi Gamaliel I**, son of Simon and grandson (according to the Talmud) of Rabbi Hillel (founder of the more liberal of the two main schools of the Pharisees, Shammai being the other). Although an alternate tradition makes Gamaliel the son of Hillel, the Talmud is surely to be preferred on this point. A member of the Sanhedrin and a teacher of the law (Acts 5:34), he was known in rabbinical writings as Gamaliel the Elder to distinguish him from his grandson, Gamaliel II. He was the first of seven successive leaders of the school of Hillel to be

honored with the title Rabban (“Our Rabbi/Master”).

While believing the law of God to be divinely inspired, Gamaliel tended to emphasize its human elements. He recommended that sabbath observance be less rigorous and burdensome, regulated current custom with respect to divorce in order to protect women, and urged kindness toward Gentiles. Scholarly, urbane, a man of great intellect, he studied Greek literature avidly. What we know of his tolerance and cautious spirit is entirely in keeping with the account of his appeal in the Sanhedrin to spare the lives of Peter and his companions (Acts 5:33–39).

TB Shabbath 30b mentions a student of Gamaliel who displayed “impudence in matters of learning,” a young man identified by some as the apostle Paul. Paul himself says, “Under Gamaliel, I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today” (Acts 22:3, NIV). Several indications from elsewhere in the NT tend to corroborate Paul's claim as recorded by Luke.

(1) Although Paul usually quotes from the LXX when referring to OT passages, he sometimes clearly makes use of the Hebrew text (Job 41:3 in Rom. 11:35; Job 5:12f in 1 Cor. 3:19; Ex. 16:18 in 2 Cor. 8:15; Nu. 16:5 in 2 Tim. 2:19).

(2) In Gal. 1:14 Paul mentions a period of advanced and specialized study of the very kind that one might expect under a teacher of Gamaliel's stature, and he does so in language strongly reminiscent of Acts 22:3: “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (NIV).

(3) In Phil. 3:6f Paul asserts that before his conversion to faith in Christ he was faultless as far as legalistic righteousness is concerned. In accordance with the Judaism of his day, Paul had earlier believed in the possibility of salvation through works, but after exercising faith in Christ he came to realize that only through Him could the righteous requirements of the law be fully met in redeemed sinners like himself (Rom. 8:3f.).

(4) Paul made use of five of the seven hermeneutical principles usually associated with

⁵ His son Simeon, who succeeded him as president of the Council, perished in the ruins of the city.

Gamaliel's grandfather Hillel. This is understandable in the light of the fact that Gamaliel consistently and faithfully perpetuated the teachings and methodology of his grandfather. For example, Paul uses the hermeneutical principle of arguing from the lesser to the greater in 1 Cor. 9:9–12, which begins as follows: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." After thus quoting Dt. 25:4, the apostle makes application—in typical Halakic fashion—by stating that if God is concerned about oxen He is all the more concerned that His faithful human servants receive the support they deserve and need.

(5) In 1 Cor. 14:21 Paul quotes Isa. 28:11f as a citation from "the law"—a statement entirely fitting for a student of Gamaliel.

Luke's characteristic restraint in his references to Gamaliel in Acts may be contrasted with two later passages that also mention him. According to Clement Recognitions i.65, the apostle Peter states that Gamaliel was "our brother in the faith," and Photius (*Bibliothecae codices* 171 [PG, p. 199]) asserts that he was baptized by Peter and Paul. But both of these traditions are now universally rejected as spurious.

Gamaliel's reputation as one of the greatest teachers in the annals of Judaism, however, remains untarnished and is perhaps best exemplified in Mish Sotah ix.15: "Since Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died there has been no more reverence for the law, and purity and abstinence [perîšût, cf. "Pharisee"] died out at the same time."

Bibliography.—J. Jeremias, "Paulus als Hillelit," in E. E. Ellis and M. Wilcox, eds., *Neotestamentica et Semitica* (1969), pp. 88–94; E. F. Harrison, "Acts 22:3—A Test Case for Luke's Reliability," in R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney, eds., *New Dimensions in NT Study* (1974), pp. 251–260.

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