

Gamaliel

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Gamaliel, 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.”¹ 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 trammled by the narrow bigotry of the sect.² 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,³ 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 heart. But he lived and died a Jew; and a well known prayer against Christian “heretics” was composed

¹This title is the same as *Rabboni*, addressed to our Lord by Mary Magdalene.

²He 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.

³Acts 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.

or sanctioned by him.

He died eighteen years before the destruction of Jerusalem,⁴ 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 sup-

posed 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.

⁴His son Simeon, who succeeded him as president of the Council, perished in the ruins of the city.