


Who was Gamaliel in the Bible?

Gamaliel was a first-century Jewish rabbi and a leader in the Jewish Sanhedrin. Gamaliel is mentioned a couple of times in Scripture as a famous and well-respected teacher. Indirectly, Gamaliel had a profound effect on the early church.

Gamaliel was a Pharisee and a grandson of the famous Rabbi Hillel. Like his grandfather, Gamaliel was known for taking a rather lenient view of the Old Testament law in contrast to his contemporary, Rabbi Shammai, who held to a more stringent understanding of Jewish traditions.

The first biblical reference to Rabbi Gamaliel is found in Acts 5. The scene is a meeting of the Sanhedrin, where John and Peter are standing trial. After having warned the apostles to cease preaching in the name of Jesus, the Jewish council becomes infuriated when Simon Peter defiantly replies, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29). Peter had no intention of ceasing to proclaim the gospel, regardless of the possible repercussions. Peter’s defiance enrages the council, who begin to seek the death of the apostles. Into the fray steps Gamaliel. The rabbi, “who was honored by all the people” (Acts 5:34), first orders the apostles to be removed from the room. Gamaliel then encourages the council to be cautious in dealing with Jesus’ followers: “In the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39). The Sanhedrin is persuaded by Gamaliel’s words (verse 40). That the council acquiesced to his advice speaks to the influence that Gamaliel possessed.

Later rabbis lauded Gamaliel for his knowledge, but he may be better known for his most

famous pupil—another Pharisee named  Saul of Tarsus (Acts 22:3), who later became the apostle Paul. It was under the tutelage of Rabbi Gamaliel that Paul developed an expert knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul's educational and professional credentials allowed him to preach in the synagogues wherever he traveled (see Acts 17:2), and his grasp of Old Testament history and law aided his presentation of Jesus Christ as the One who had fulfilled the Law (Matthew 5:17).

Gamaliel is also mentioned by the historian Josephus, who wrote of the nobility of Gamaliel's son, Simon (Vita, 38). Josephus' description of Gamaliel's family is consistent with the picture we see of him in the book of Acts. The Talmud also mentions Gamaliel, but there is still much that we do not know about him. As with many figures from ancient history, our knowledge of Gamaliel is limited. From the sources that we do possess, it is clear that Gamaliel and his family were revered as men of wisdom and prudential judgment. In God's sovereign plan, this Jewish rabbi preserved the lives of the apostles in the early church and helped equip the greatest Christian missionary.