

Jesus the Rabbi

By

Former Pastor Dr. Joel Minto *

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Over the past few writings we have emphasized that in order to understand and interpret scripture correctly we have to make sure we approach it from a cultural and intellectual viewpoint that was prevalent during the times of these writings. In particular we need to understand scripture from the Hebrew world view and not the Greek world view. While I am not discounting that the Holy Spirit can and will reveal to us things in scripture our foundation and beginning point for study must reflect the cultural and worldview of the writers.

We must then begin with realizing that Jesus was a Jew from the region of Galilee and that He was a rabbi, a teacher who was very learned in the scriptures and religious writings of His day. Somehow as Christians we have mistakenly thought that Jesus was unlearned or unschooled. We take this from passages like: Acts 2:7 and Acts 22:3 have led us to the unfortunate assumption that the disciples and because they were students of Jesus that they were unlearned or unschooled simply because of where they came from....Galilee. Nothing could be further from the truth. The level of learning that was available in Galilee actually exceeded that of Judea in Jesus day. "Galilee surpassed even Judea in its schools of learning, and most of the famous rabbis of Jesus' day were from Galilee (Johanan ben Zakkai, Hanina ben Dosa, Abba Yose Holikufri, Zadok, Halaphta, Hananian ben Teradyon.) According to Professor Shmuel Safrai, Hebrew University Professor of Jewish History of the period of the Mishnah and Talmud, **not only did the number of 1st century Galilean rabbis known from rabbinic literature exceed the number of Judean rabbis, but even the moral and ethical quality of their teaching excelled that of their Judean counterparts (private communication).**" Bible Scholars.org "Jesus as Rabbi"

In the New Testament a lot of attention is given to Jesus birth and then nothing until His appearance in the Temple at age 12 and then nothing again until He begins His Teaching and Ministry at age 30. So what was Jesus doing during those years we have nothing written about Him. Of course we know that He was from Galilee and that He was Jewish, so it makes sense that what he did would come from the "oral law" or Mishnah. At five years of age, one is ready for the study of the Scripture, at ten years of age one is fit for the study of the Mishnah, at the age of thirteen for bar mitzvah, at the age of fifteen for the study of Talmud, at the age of eighteen for marriage, at the age of twenty for pursuing a vocation, at the age of thirty for entering into one's full vigor... (Avot 5:21). So as we understand Jesus life prior to becoming a rabbi or teacher at about the age of 30, He spent most of His time studying the scriptures. Now the study in that day dealt with raw memorization by constant repetition. Professor Shmuel Safrai, in his article, "Education and the Study of the Torah," 945-970 in Volume Two of The Jewish People of the First Century, relates:

Individual and group study of the Bible, repetition of the passages, etc., were often done by chanting them aloud. There is the frequent expression "the chirping of children," which was heard by people passing close by a synagogue as the children were reciting a verse. Adults too, in individual and in group study, often read aloud; for it was frequently advised not to learn in a whisper, but aloud. This was the only way to overcome the danger of forgetting.

As we have previously stated, Jesus was not only a Jew He was also a Rabbi. He had a very thorough education and understanding of all the religious literature of His day. He appears on the scene as a Rabbi and is recognized as such by all those around Him and by His peers. Luke 7:40, Luke 10:25, Luke 12:13 Matthew 22:22-23 and many others. If you take time to look at all of the passages that show Jesus as a Rabbi you will find that He was recognized across all levels of society of His day to include the Pharisees and Sadducees.

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So why the fuss about Jesus being a Rabbi? Well as we set out on a course to discuss “Just the red stuff” we need to understand what and how rabbi’s taught in the first century. “Because, in Jesus’ day the rabbis were accustomed to using methods of instruction that are quite foreign to the western mind of today. The term “rabbi” is derived from the Hebrew word *rav*, which in biblical Hebrew means “great.” The word *rav* is not a title in biblical Hebrew. By the time of Jesus *rav* had come to refer to a master, as opposed to a slave, or as opposed to a disciple. The word “rabbi” (pronounced ra-bee), means literally, “my master.” It was used as a form of address when speaking to a learned teacher, or sage. It was not yet a formal title. The rabbi in Jesus’ day was quite different from the present day rabbi. In Jesus’ day, the rabbi almost always had an occupation from which he derived his livelihood. He had not yet become the synagogal functionary that he became in a later period. He was, rather, an itinerant or peripatetic preacher functioning in much the same way as the prophet of the Old Testament. In an age in which there were no highly developed and sophisticated methods of mass communication as we have today, the rabbi had to travel from place to place if he wanted to communicate to the masses his teachings and interpretations of Scripture.” **Bible scholar’s .org “Jesus as Rabbi”**

So how did the rabbis of the 1st century teach? What were their methods what did they teach? So what most of them taught was the “Law”. Both the written and the oral. The written of course is the writings given to Moses at Mount Sinai and consist of the First 5 books of our Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These first five books were called the Torah. In addition to this written law Moses also received according to the traditional teaching, additional commandments or instructions that were communicated orally. These oral commandments were referred to as the “Oral Law”. The “Oral Law” is divided into two categories, the *Halachah* and *Haggadah*.

Halachah is from the Hebrew root *halach*, meaning “to walk,” or “to go.” In other words, *halachah* is that path or way in which one is to walk. *Halachah* is the term used to refer to the whole legal system in Judaism. It includes the 613 written commandments of the Torah and all of the legal rulings and decisions of the rabbis found in the Oral Law.

Haggadah, from the Hebrew root *nagad* (“to draw out; to narrate or tell”), is everything that is not *halachic*; the non-legal portion of the Oral Law; that part which does not deal with religious laws or regulations. According to the Jerusalem Talmud (Horavot 3:8. 48c), the purpose of the *haggadah*, unlike the purpose of the *halachah*, is not to state what is “forbidden” or “permitted” nor to declare what is “pure” or “impure.” *Haggadah* includes history, narrative, story, legends, fables, poetry, dirges, prayers, parables, proverbs, allegories, metaphors, hyperboles, analogies, and more. The *Haggadah* is not written as a legal textbook, nor a digest of legal precedents. It is moral and ethical instruction about personal faith and the ways of God. It strives to teach man how to live in harmony with God and in harmony with his fellow man. Its fundamental purpose is to reach out and touch the heart of man that he might “know the Creator of the world and adhere to His ways” (Sifre, Deuteronomy 49).

In Jesus’ day the stress in teaching was on the *Haggadah* rather than the *Halachah*. The rabbis focused on contemporary problems and the application of the *halachah* to everyday life. You might be surprised to know that according to Ray Blizzard and David Bivin, authors of “Jesus as Rabbi” that we have a record of more sayings and deeds of Jesus than any other 1st century rabbi. Jesus taught the common man in the classic *Haggadic* style. Ray Blizzard and David Bivin further point out that “His teaching abounds in inspirational instruction that lifts man to God. It abounds in parables, moral and ethical maxims, exhortations, words of comfort and reproof, etc. To quote the great Jewish historian, Joseph Klausner, for many years professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem:

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In his [Jesus] ethical code there is a sublimity, distinctiveness, and originality in form unparalleled in any other Hebrew ethical code; neither is there any parallel to the remarkable art of his parables. The shrewdness and sharpness of his proverbs and his forceful epigrams serve in an exceptional degree, to make ethical ideas a popular possession (Jesus of Nazareth; His Life, Times, and Teaching, 414).”

Professor David Flusser and Dr. Robert Lindsey worked together in synoptic studies and found a way to reconstruct many of the discourses of Jesus and recover their original contexts. Their breakthrough make it possible to understand more completely the style and delivery of the 1st century rabbi and of course the way that Jesus the Rabbi taught. In general their research led to a specific format as follows:

1. Jesus would see an incident and it would be affirmed by him with the use of the Hebrew word amen,
2. Jesus would then comment on the incident in the form of instruction to His disciples,
3. His instruction was then followed by two parables...for...out of the mouth of two witnesses is a thing established.

This should help us understand and frame the teachings and sayings of Jesus as we work through “Just the Red Stuff” There is much more about the haggadic method of scriptural interpretation, a wide variety of methods were used. One list of 32 haggadic hermeneutical principles is found in the Baraita of the Thirty-Two Rules, which is attributed to Eliezar ben Yose, the Galilean, CE 150. So Jesus was a 1st century Jewish Galilean Rabbi and taught as the rabbis of His time did. Understanding that helps us understand not only how our Christian lives are caught up in the Hebrew culture. We have been grafted in. To understand what it means to be grafted in is to understand our Jewish heritage.