

JESUS THE JEW

A. INTRODUCTION

If Jesus returns as the Messiah he will be circumcised in the flesh, will require kosher food to eat and insist on a Synagogue to pray on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, not a Church with crosses representing his crucifixion on a Sunday.

Jesus was not a Christian; he was a Jew. He lived his entire life as a Jew and died as a Jew. On what Christians today celebrate as Easter Jesus came to Roman occupied Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Pesach – Passover. He had a traditional Passover ceremony and meal called a ‘seder’ which after his death Christians called his ‘Last Supper’. To most Jews of Jesus’ age (although not necessarily to Jesus himself) ‘salvation’ meant ‘regime change’. Those advocating regime change were often called Messiah’s by the Jews. The Romans crucified those who advocated such change. It was their customary death penalty; thousands of Jews were put to death in that manner for a host of reasons.

As a Jewish Rabbi, I understand Jesus’ Jewishness. This article treats the Historical Jesus and not the Jesus of Christian Faith who is ‘the Way and the Truth and the Life’. That is not part of my or Jesus’ tradition. Those definitions of faith to Jews are the Tnakh (Old Testament) and its oral commentary which continues until today. What is acceptable in my tradition is Jesus as a potential Jewish Messiah who was crucified in 30 CE. ¹ From my perspective and analysis of the scriptures and other texts I view Jesus as a charismatic radical Jewish Rabbi. In some ways he is comparable to the radical Prophet Jeremiah almost killed by the Jews several times, the Priests from Qumran who rejected the Temple and its Priesthood, Rabbi Hillel the Elder, the greatest sage of his day who lived during Jesus’ lifetime and was considered a dangerous radical and Honi Ha’magil (the Circle Maker) a charismatic and miracle worker who called God ‘Abba’ – Father - and who made demands of his Abba. ²

B. JESUS:

Jesus the Jew was born probably in Nazareth or the nearby still existing village named ‘Bethlehem in Galilee’. He had several brothers and sisters, some of whose names we know (Matt. 13:55, Mk. 3:34-35, Jn. 2:12). He had a typical Galilean Jewish education including studying the Hebrew Bible, the traditions of the people after the biblical period and he undoubtedly went to synagogue. One can safely assume his family as religious Jews kept the commandments; dietary laws, circumcision, tithing, laws of purity and the pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Jesus dressed like a Jew, prayed like a

Jew, taught and argued in parables like a Jewish Rabbi ³ and was crucified as were many first century Jewish radicals. If one wishes to understand the historical Jesus and early Christianity one must understand first century Judaism. During this historic era the Roman occupiers of the land were particularly oppressive and there was much opposition to them particularly in the Galilee.

In his mid 20's Jesus met John the Baptist and was baptized by him in the Jordan River. Baptism was a form of accepting repentance – it still is. John could be compared to a biblical prophet calling on Israelites to repent for the Day of Judgment was imminent.

Shortly after his baptism Jesus began preaching a related message – the Kingdom of Heaven was imminent. He may have chosen twelve disciples to represent the twelve original ancient tribes of Israel; including the ten tribes lost hundreds of years earlier. This symbolism suggested to many the restoration of Israel's independence as prophesized by the prophets.

Jesus amassed followers who viewed him as a miracle worker; he did exorcisms expelling evil from those possessed and cured the sick. He empowered the underclass by preaching that the Kingdom of Heaven was more accessible to them than to the rich. His view of the 'law' was not rigid; morals and ethics were of greater import to him than ritual. ⁴ He emphasized the oneness of God and loving your neighbor and strangers as key principals of righteousness. During his time Jewish law was not rigidly defined, many variants of Judaisms were acceptable. ⁵

The Jewish sages during Jesus' lifetime were conservative and the High Priest was (against Jewish law) chosen by the Roman oppressors. Jesus soon appeared in Jerusalem where he conflicting over the law with some leading 'Pharisees' (a group of scholars) controlled by the conservative party called 'Shammaites' (followers of Rabbi Shammai) and with the 'Sadducees', the Priestly class in charge of the Temple. Jesus attracted opposition by his teaching particularly his tolerant views of the law and his attachment to the underclass. More importantly Jesus antagonized the Sadducees when he overturned the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, immediately prior to the Passover festival. The Sadducees were less concerned about the law than Temple rituals which they controlled.

It is remarkable to note the similarities between Jesus' statements at the Temple and Jeremiah's. During the pilgrimage festival of Tabernacles (Succoth) Jeremiah called on the people to repent. 'Reform the whole pattern of your conduct, so that I [God] may dwell with you in this place. . . Do not pit your trust in that lie: This is the Lord's Temple, This is the Lord's Temple, This is the Lord's Temple. . . No! Only if you really reform your whole pattern of conduct - if you really behave justly one towards

another . . . No longer oppress the alien, the orphan and the widow nor shed innocent blood in this place, nor follow other gods to your own hurt . . . Only then can I dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers of old for all time to come. . . Is my Temple a den of thieves? . . . I will make Jerusalem like [the destroyed] Shiloh'(Jer. 7:3-12).

Jeremiah begs the people not to delude themselves into a false sense of security. He exposes their unfounded belief that the existence of the Temple will protect them. Jeremiah was jailed three times and sentenced to death (by his Jewish co-religionists) for his opposition to the Temple establishment.

The Romans were particularly concerned about crowd control during the pilgrimage festivals when many hundreds of thousands of Jews (according to Josephus) descended on Jerusalem. Many were opposed to Roman rule and crowds tended to encourage and escalate the opposition. The Sadducees cooperated with the Romans to suppress any opposition. The High Priest (Caiaphas) was a Roman appointee, not from the priestly family of Zadok (appointed by King David - 2 Sam. 8:17). When Jesus overturned the tables at the Temple the Sadducees had him arrested. Pontius Pilate the Roman Prefect was led to believe he claimed to be a Messiah; a pretender to the throne of Caesar. There were at the time Jewish pretenders claiming to be the King of Israel. At his trial before Pilate Jesus probably spoke of God and his being God's agent. Pilate and Jesus could hardly understand each other. Pilate had Jesus crucified as a royal pretender.

After Jesus' death several of his disciples at different times and different places claimed to have seen him. This news spread and shortly people began to believe that he was the resurrected Messiah God had promised who would bring in the Kingdom of God.

The documents we have in the New Testament about Jesus' life are not in chronological order, Paul's letters beginning approximately fifteen to twenty years after Jesus' death. Paul – who may never have met Jesus - gives little information about the historic Jesus; he focuses on the resurrected Jesus. Paul was a Roman citizen coming from a Greek environment; as such he differed greatly from the historic Jesus. The four Gospels written forty to seventy years after Jesus' death tell of the historic Jesus from varying traditions. There is some contradictory information in the four gospels. They are composite documents. The first Gospel is written as the Temple is being destroyed (70 CE); the remainder after its complete destruction. Many significant events transpired during these forty to seventy years. Paul and others had missionized Gentiles. James, Jesus' brother and his followers missionized Jews to be believers in the Messiahship of Jesus. They understood their own identity and the crucified

Jesus as Jewish. That Jesus understood himself as a Jew is clear in Matthew when he states 'do not make your way to Gentile territory' (Matt 10:5) and 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel' (Matt. 15:25). The Gospel writers wrote in Greek and read the scriptures in Greek, not the language of Jesus – Hebrew and Aramaic. It is unclear to what extent each of these authors understood the Galilean Jewishness of Jesus. ⁶ I as a Jew can easily understand Jesus crying out 'Eli, eli, lama sabachtani' (Matt. 27:47). I can not nor do I believe the historical Jesus could understand much of the Gospel of John (3:19-21; 5:16-18; 8:39-44; 15:20-23; 16:23). ⁷

C. HILLEL:

Rabbi Hillel, the Elder the most famous Pharisee of his generation was born in 65 BCE in Babylon. As a young adult he went to Jerusalem to further his studies. When the sages in the Sanhedrin (Jewish assembly of sages and legal authorities which did not include the Sadducees) met in Jericho they heard a heavenly voice (bat kol) 'There is a man who is predestined for the holy spirit except that his generation is not righteous for such. And they put their eyes on Hillel.' (Tosefta Sotah 13:3)

Hillel had a major opponent within the ranks of the Pharisees Rabbi Shammai. They disagreed on almost every aspect of Jewish law. Shammai interpreted Jewish Law most rigidly and left little room for flexibility. Hillel's view was the opposite; he was flexible in his interpretation of the law. Hillel taught "love peace, seek peace, love mankind and thus lead them to the law." The Talmud writes 'always be as gentle as Hillel and not as impatient as Shammai' (BT Shab. 30b). The Talmud describes their conflict as fierce. One can compare the differences as similar to between Jeremiah and Ezekiel – both prophets and priests; the former emphasized ethical behavior and the latter ritual behavior. ⁸

With Hillel's death (10 CE) the Shammaites took control of the Sanhedrin and remained in control until the destruction of the Temple. It is the Shammaites who disputed Jesus on the law and who in cooperation with the priestly aristocracy – the Sadducees - handed him over to the Romans. Following the Temple's destruction, the Sanhedrin was reorganized under Yohanan ben Zakai one of Hillel's disciples. That movement over a long period of time developed into Rabbinic Judaism. It succeeded due to Hillel's view that the Rabbis had the right and obligation to interpret the Torah and the majority ruled. Shammai was a fundamentalist who believed only his way was true.

Many basic beliefs and attitudes were shared by Hillel and Jesus. Both attempted to humanize the Halacha of Judaism. Both believed that love of humanity was the key to Jewish life. In that sense both were leaders of

renewal movements in sharp contrast to the isolationists of the Qumran community, the political zealot movements in Jerusalem and the legally stricter Shamaite movement. All of these were seeking to impact people to different definitions of holiness. ⁹

Hillel who died when Jesus was young was, according to Prof. David Flusser and Rabbi Harvey Falk, influenced strongly many facets of Jesus' theological and ethical teachings. ¹⁰ This does not imply that Jesus was a student or disciple of Hillel; Hillel's views were well known and embodied as one of the more acceptable Jewish views of Halacha particularly among the populace.

D. HALACHIC DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES:

When Jesus was questioned by a Pharisee as to which commandment he viewed as the most basic he responded "the first is 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength' (Deut. 6:4-5). (The first verse, the doxology is known to Jews as the 'Shmai'). The second is this 'love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev. 19:18)." (Mark 12:28-34, Matt. 22:34-40, Luke 10:25-28). These replies of Jesus were a typical Pharisee proclamation. Rabbi Akiva the major second century sage called love your neighbor as 'the major principle of the Torah (JT Nedarim 9:4).

A basic teaching of Hillel said: 'What is hateful to yourself do not do to another, that is the whole law, the rest is commentary' (BT Shab. 31a). Jesus said 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you . . . for this is the law and the Prophets (Matt. 7:12). Both Hillel's statement "judge not your fellow man until you yourself come into his place" (M. Abot 2:5) and Jesus' statement "do not judge, and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37) are based on loving your neighbor.

When Jesus said 'For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:20), might it be that he was referring to Hillel and his disciples?

When Mark tells of the women who touched Jesus' clothing his reaction not seeing who had touched him said 'Who touched my clothes' (Mark 5:31). Why his concern about being touched? Because being touched by a menstruating woman raised the question of ritual impurity for a religious Jew especially when going to the Temple. Matthew tells of a Canaanite woman who cries of her daughter's illness, Jesus reacts with 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matt. 15:24). The woman replies 'help me', Jesus replied 'It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' she retorted 'Ah Yes, Lord, but even little dogs eat the

scraps that fall from their masters table' and Jesus reacted with love; 'you have great faith and healed the daughter' (Matt. 15:26-28). Both stories are remarkable in remaining in the Christian Bible for their suggestion about Jewish law and a rejection of Gentiles.

In one case Jesus followed the Halacha of the more zealous Galileans.

"It was also said, 'whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce;. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress.'" (Matt. 5:31) In the Galilee according to Larry Shiffman, divorce was forbidden; Jesus was from Galilee. ¹¹ In addition a document was found in Qumran that forbids divorce (11Q Temple 57:17-18). According to Shmuel Safrai some of the 'commandments [were] being observed more scrupulously and strictly [in the Galilee] than in Judea'. ¹²

In other cases Galileans were less strict. As an example fowl for ancient Judean Jews was considered as meat, in the dietary laws, not allowing it to be cooked with milk or milk products. For Galileans like Jesus fowl was the equivalent of fish, neutral (called in Hebrew 'parve') for dietary laws and could be cooked with milk. Maimonides asks why chicken was considered a meat product and says it is not logical, but it is the Halacha. It is clear that Jesus like his brother James never ate non-kosher food (Gal. 2:12-13).

Issues such as healing on the Sabbath and picking or crushing from the field, issues greatly debated in the Gospel of Matthew (as well as other Gospels), were within the acceptable range of interpretations found in the many sides of Judaism in the first century. On healing on the Sabbath when Jesus said to the man with a withered hand "hold out your hand" and he healed him (Matt. 12:13) he did nothing to violate Jewish law. As stated in Luke while the Leader of the Synagogue criticized Jesus the 'entire crowd of Jews [rejecting the Leader] rejoiced' (Luke 13:17). Praying for crippled man is not a violation of ancient Hillelite Jewish law on the Sabbath, although followers of Shammai ruled that one ought not to pray for the sick on the Shabbat. Today Jews often pray for a sick relative or friend on the Sabbath in front of the Torah. There is nothing in Jesus' position regarding the Sabbath suggesting abrogating the law.

Jesus is doing what the Prophets did in criticizing sacrificing and the Temple, concentrating on the ethical content of Judaism rather than its ritual law.

A bat kol ended the debates between the school of Rabbi Hillel and those of Rabbi Shammai. It stated 'These are and those are the words of the living God, but the Halacha is in accordance with Bet Hillel' (BT Erubin 13b). After the Bat Kol, the Halacha was almost always in accordance with

the words of Bet Hillel. The sages note that 'anyone transgressing the words of the House of Hillel is guilty of death' (JT Yebomoth 1:6) and those 'who observe the teaching of House of Shammai deserve death' (BT Berachot 1a and JT Berachot 1:4).

It is worth noting that even today many, perhaps a majority of Christian scholars find that the disputes over the law led to Jesus' death while almost all Jewish scholars find the arguments inconsequential. E.P. Sanders, a Christian scholar, quotes Eduard Schweizer as a Christian scholar who stated that the disputes over the law led to Jesus' death and Geza Vermes as a Jewish scholar who claimed they were inconsequential. Sanders states "Schweizer's is without foundation, Vermes is hard to fault."¹³ David Flusser (like Vermes a major Jewish scholar on Christianity) stated 'the Gospels provide sufficient evidence to the effect that Jesus did not approve any [change] of the written or oral Mosaic law'.¹⁴

E. RELATIONSHIP TO GENTILES:

According to the Talmud three Gentiles came to Shammai asking about converting to Judaism. He rejected them all. They then approached Hillel; he said to the Gentiles "what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary; go study" (BT Shabbat 31a). Does this seem like the Pharisees described in the Gospels? All three Gentiles were eventually converted to Judaism by Hillel. Hillelites believed in spreading the word of God; it was God's universal message to all mankind, Shammaites were more exclusive about the Torah and nationalistic about the nation.

One of the major disputes between the two schools was whether salvation was available to non-Jews. The School of Shammai held that only Jews or full convertees who submitted to all 613 Jewish commandments could receive salvation. The School of Hillel held that those who followed the seven Noahide laws could receive salvation. What else would a 'kingdom of Priests, a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6) mean if not to teach the gentile nations salvation? That is how the Talmud (BT San. 105a) as does Maimonides in his Code of Jewish Law (Melakhim, 8:11). Such a person is a 'righteous gentile' and even if he accepts them as not God ordained but ethical he is a wise man (Melakhim 8:14).

The Noahide laws include prohibition against idolatry, blasphemy, killing, stealing, illicit sexual relations, cruelty to animals (described as strangled animals in the Talmud) and establishing courts of law. Several of these are noted in the Book of Acts (15:19-20). In the Book of Jubilees, a very early text the list of laws Noah told his sons included those above and 'honor your father and mother' and loving your neighbor' (Jub. 7:20). The Noahide

laws are intended as universal laws that guaranteed salvation and did not require belief in a particular revelation.

F. CONCLUSION:

The Jesus movement eventually took two paths; one led by Jesus' own brother James as a Jewish Messianic movement (referred to in the literature as the Jerusalem Church) and the second by Paul who moved the movement into the Gentile world. James' road was eventually rejected by what would eventually become Christianity. Paul's law free Church (except for the Noahide laws) was for Gentiles which was appropriate for them. ¹⁵ While Jews believed that Righteous Gentiles would enter the Kingdom of God Paul recognized that they would be considered (at least by most religious Jews) as second class citizens.

I as a Jew and co-religionist of Jesus am certain he had the 'Shmai'' on his lips as he died.

¹ Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe died in 1994 and continues to be considered by many of his disciples the Messiah who will return.

² Honi 'Ha'maggil', the circle maker - First Century BCE - a native of the Galilee, made the rains come. He did this by making a circle in the sand, entering into it and saying to God: "Lord of the world, your children have turned to me because I am a son of the house before you. I swear by your great name that I will not move from here until you are merciful to your children." At first mere rain drops appeared. Honi said "Abba I did not ask for this, but for rains sufficient to fill cisterns, ditches and caves." So the rains fell in sheets. Honi said "Abba I did not ask for this, but for rains of benevolence, blessing and graciousness." The rain came in the form he requested. In the Talmud, Honi often addresses God as Abba - father. We will discuss the use of Abba in discussing the concept of 'Son of God' later in this chapter. Honi, as we read, was known as the 'son of the house - the house of God. The Sages said of him 'You will decree and it will be fulfilled - you decreed below and the Holy One, blessed be He, followed your word above.' Shimon ben Shetah, President of the Sanhedrin, said to him "what can I do with you, since even though you importune God, he does what you wish in the same way that a father does whatever his importuning son asks him? Were it not Honi, I would excommunicate [you]" (B.T. Taanit. 19a).

³ Young, Brad, *The Parable as a Literary Genre in Rabbinic Literature and in the Gospels*, N.Y., Paulist Press, 1989.

⁴ Reiss, Moshe, *Jeremiah, The Suffering Prophet and Ezekiel, the Visionary*, *The Jewish Bible Quarterly*, Oct. 2004, Vol. XXXII:4.

⁵ Neusner, Jacob, Green W.S. and Frerichs, E.S., *Judaisms and Their Messiahs at the Turn of the Christian Era*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

⁶ Vermes, Geza, *Jesus, the Jew*, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1981, Vermes, Geza, *The World's of Judaism*, Philadelphia, Fortress 1983, and Freyne, Sean, *Galilee From Alexander the Great to Hadrian: 323 BCE to 135 CE*, Wilmington, Glazier, 1980.

⁷ See also Bieringer, R., Pollefeyt, D., and Vandecateele-Vanneuville, eds., *Anti-Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, The Netherlands, Royal Van Gorcum 2001.

⁸ See footnote 3.

⁹ Borg, Marcus, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*, Lewiston, Queenstown, Edwin Mellen Press, 1989, pgs. 73-74.

¹⁰ Article by David Flusser in Charlesworth, J.H. and Johns, L.L., eds., *Hillel and Jesus*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1977, *Hillel and Jesus: Two Ways of Self Awareness*, pgs. 71-107 and Falk, Harvey, *Jesus, The Pharisee*, N.Y., Paulist Press, 1985.

¹¹ Lee, B., *The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus* N.Y., Paulist Press, 1988, pg. 115.

¹² Lowe, M., *The New Testament and Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, *Studies in Honor of David Flusser*, Immanuel, 24/25, 1990. Article by Shmuel Safrai, *The Jewish Cultural Nature of Galilee in the First Century*, pgs. 176.

¹³ Sanders, E.P., *Jewish Law From Jesus to the Mishna*, London, SCM, 1990, pg. 2.

¹⁴ Flusser. David, *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10:13. Jerusalem, Keter Publication, 1971, pg. 10:13.

¹⁵ The views of Paul and James in Gal. 2:2-9 and Acts 15:2-20 are discussed by the author in

http://www.moshereiss.org/christianity/05_paul/05_paul.htm.