

The Life & Teachings of Yeshua

*Learning about the real Jesus, his message, his culture
and the people he taught and loved.*

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Hanging the Torah

By Jim Myers

Comments & Notes

(1) See discussions about the writing down the Oral Law (Mishnah). Don't you wish Yeshua had recorded his teachings in writing! Did you know that the rabbis who lived at the same time didn't write theirs down either? At that time the Jewish teachers probably prohibited their teachings from being recorded in writing. The belief was that as long as they were passed along orally they remained alive. But if they were written down and studied outside of the presence of a teacher who was one in a long line of teachers who had received it, the words became dead.¹ Teachings traveled down an uninterrupted chain of teachers to the current generation. A person who only read a lesson was limited by his finite knowledge. It was the teacher's responsibility to make sure the student understood the true meaning of the lesson. This tradition may have been one reason that Yeshua did not record his instructions and that it took another five years after his execution before they were written down in the Hebrew language.²

(2) Papias (*Eccles. Hist.* 3.38.16)

(3) See The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus' Genius by David Flusser © 2007 (pgs. 1-5)

Jesus Rabbi & Lord by Robert L. Lindsey © 1990 (pgs. 18-22)

The Jesus Sources: Understanding the Gospels by Robert Lindsey © 1990

(4) Jesus and His Jewish Parables by Brad H. Young © 1989 (pgs. 151-152)

(5) In previous articles we have discussed the chronological order in which the Synoptic Gospels were written – (1) Luke, (2) Mark and (3) Matthew.

Scholars³ believe that copies of the Hebrew Gospel (not to be confused with the book of *Hebrews*) were made by different congregations so they would have a record of what Yeshua taught. But, as more Gentiles joined the movement who could not read a Hebrew text, pressure grew to translate it into the more popular Greek language. The new translation was very similar to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint. The Septuagint is a very literal word-for-word translation that preserved the underlying Hebrew characteristics of the original text, i.e., word order, euphemisms, culturally specific terms, etc.

The Greek translation was popular and copies circulated among the congregations. Christians didn't always copy the entire text; many copied the portions that were most important to them. As time passed fewer individuals and congregations possessed the complete text. At some point, attempts were made to reconstruct the original account,⁴ but this produced texts which much of the same information, but in a different order. In other words, what came before and after a specific portion was different. This is clearly seen when we compare the Synoptic Gospels.⁵

A good example of the confusion that arose from the above reconstruction process is seen in one of Yeshua's well-known teaching about which is the greatest commandment of all. It is easy for readers to think that the story is the same since it is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. This, however, is not the case. As a matter of fact, the accounts are very different. Our challenge is to do our best to determine which account has the highest probability of being the earliest and closest to the original one. A challenge that is never easy.

In this study we will see that each version begins with a question, followed by at least one response, which is then followed by a closing section. Please pay close attention to who the participants are and which words are attributed to them in each account.

Luke 10:25-37

Question asked by a lawyer: “Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

Yeshua’s Response: “What is written in the law? How do you read it?”

Response by lawyer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

Yeshua’s Response: “You have answered right. Do this and you shall live.”

Closing of section: The Good Samaritan Parable.

Mark 12:28-34

Question asked by a scribe: “Which is the first commandment of all?”

Yeshua’s Response: “The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Scribe’s Response: “Well, Master, you have said the truth; for there is one God; and there is no other but he. And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbor as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Yeshua’s Response: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Closing of section: And no man after that did ask him any question.

Matthew 22:37-40

Question asked by a Pharisee: “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”

Yeshua’s Response: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Yeshua ask a group of Pharisees: “What do you think about the Anointed One? Whose son is he?”

Pharisees Response: “The son of David.”

Yeshua’s Response: “How then does David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit on my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool? If David then called him Lord, how is he his son?”

Closing of section: And no man was able to answer him a word, neither did any man from that day forth ask him any more questions.

Discussion

Did you notice that two different questions were asked by three different people? It was a lawyer in Luke, a scribe in Mark, and a Pharisee in Matthew. Next, did you notice that two different opening questions were asked? In Luke the lawyer wanted to know what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. But, in Mark and Matthew, the scribe and Pharisee wanted to know which commandment was the greatest one of all the commandments in the law. Interestingly, even though there were two different questions, the answers were the same:

“Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

(6) Most people miss the fact that it was the lawyer in Luke.

Did you notice that the lawyer gave the above answer in Luke, but in Mark and Matthew it was given by Yeshua?⁶ Since the question that appeared in Matthew and Mark concerned the law, or more accurately the Torah, doesn’t it seem that the Torah should be source of Yeshua’s answer?

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:18b).

(7) Combining portions of verses or sections of texts was a very common teaching tool of the rabbis. Examples are seen in the Mishnah (Oral Law).

Interestingly, instead of identifying just one commandment as the greatest, Yeshua made the combination of both commandments equal. The way he did it provides us with an important cultural clue. The rabbis used a teaching technique in which they combined Hebrew Scriptures that began with the same word or phrase in order to make a specific point. In this case, it was the phrase “you shall love,” which was at the beginning of both commandments. Yeshua’s method clearly fits within the historical and cultural context of first century Israel.⁷

In Bible College I had an experience related to this study, which I have never forgotten. The teacher was lecturing on his concept of biblical love and used the above verse from Matthew to make his point -- “Love you neighbor as yourself.”

After reading the verse he told us that this was the first time mankind had ever heard this profound divine revelation! He then said that it created the irreconcilable difference between Christianity and Judaism. The Jews were under the law, while Christians were simply required to love! He continued to discuss the superiority of Christian “love” to Jewish “law” for another 10 or 15 minutes.

(8) Nave’s Study Bible: King James Version © 1978

I used a huge study Bible⁸ back then, so while he lectured I read the footnotes. I saw that the verse in Matthew was a quote from Leviticus. Now I had a problem. If Jesus was simply quoting the Old Testament it clearly wasn’t a new revelation that had never been heard by human ears before. Obviously, it was a very well known verse from Torah. Without thinking about the consequences, I raised my hand and shared my new found discovery with the entire class.

I didn’t make that mistake again! After class I was invited down to the Dean’s office to meet with the teacher and a couple of faculty members. I will never forget the teacher’s face when he finally realized that even his Bible contained the same footnote which identified it as a quote from Leviticus. He had been a pastor for at least 30 years and had probably given many sermons based on the same material he used for his lecture. In the end, he just looked at me and said, “I never saw that before!” It was suggested that in the future I should discuss things with my teacher in private, instead of contradicting him in front of the class.

(9) Our beliefs about who Yeshua was greatly affect how we view his words. Those beliefs range from him being a mortal man to the inerrant and infallible creator of the universe.

The reason I included the above experience is because a lot of people view everything that Yeshua taught as a new and original revelation, just like my former teacher.⁹ They completely remove him from the historical and cultural environment in which he lived. What would happen if, two thousand years from now, someone discovered the words of Obama, but had no information about Clinton, McCain, Bush, the US economy or Iraq? The more we know about all of the parties involved, their agendas, and the circumstances of that time period, the more accurately we will be able to understand the ancient words.

(10) For more information about individual sects use the Jewish Encyclopedia online.

If you have read the Gospels you couldn’t help but notice that Yeshua kept bumping into Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, scribes and lawyers.¹⁰ They all seem to have a problem him. They also had a problem with each other, as well as a group that isn’t mentioned, the Essenes. Modern readers of these accounts seem to view the different groups in much the same way they view modern Christian denomination, i.e., Baptists and Methodists. This, however, is a big mistake because of the violent histories they have had with each other. The political and religious climate of first century reflects an acute awareness of these long held sectarian tensions.

“By 100 B.C. they (Pharisees) were clearly a force to be reckoned with. So much so that by the early decades of the first century B.C., they were thrust into a civil war with the Sadducees over the direction of society. Alexander Jannaeus, the king and high priest who governed Israel from 103 to 76 B.C., was a ruthless ruler who slew six thousand of his citizens, including Pharisees and their supporters, during a Succoth festival. Apparently, as a Sadducee, he had not carried out the rites properly. He poured water on his feet rather than on the altar as the Pharisees preferred. This incident sparked

an ensuing revolt during which Alexander slaughtered fifty thousand of his subjects. Later on we find Jannaeus crucifying eight hundred Pharisaic leaders as their wives and children were killed before their eyes.

(11) How Jesus Became Christian by Barrie Wilson © 2008 (p. 35)

As these events indicate, disputes between Pharisees and Sadducees were bitter and often deadly. These were not just religious in nature but, as so often happens with religion, they were fierce political battles as well – so much so that virtual civil war erupted from time to time between the Sadducees and Pharisees. . . .”¹¹

(12) See the Jewish Encyclopedia online.

The Jewish Encyclopedia¹² provides historical information about the rise of the power of the Pharisees after the death of Alexander Jannaeus.

Under his widow, Salome Alexandra (&8—69), the Pharisees, led by Simeon ben Shetah, came to power; they obtained seats in the Sanhedrin, and that time was afterward regarded as the golden age, full of blessing of heaven (Sifra, Behukkotai, I; Ta’an 23a). But the bloody vengeance they took upon the Sadducees led to a terrible reaction, and under Aristobulus (69-63) the Sadducees regained their power (“Ant.” xiii. 16, § 2-xiv. 1, § 2).

Amidst the bitter struggle which ensued, the Pharisees appeared before Pompey asking him to interfere and restore the old priesthood while abolishing the royalty of the Hasmoneans altogether (“Ant.” xiv. 3, § 2). The defilement of the Temple by Pompey was regarded by the Pharisees as a divine punishment of Sadducean misrule (Psalms of Solomon, i., ii., viii. 12-19). After the national independence had been lost, the Pharisees gained in influence while the star of the Sadducees waned. Herod found his chief opponents among the latter, and so he put the leaders of the Sanhedrin to death while endeavoring by a milder treatment to win the favor of the leaders of the Pharisees, who, though they refused to take the oath of allegiance, were otherwise friendly to him (“Ant.” xiv. 9, § 4; xv. 1, § 1; 10, § 4; 11, §§ 5-6). Only when he provoked their indignation by his heathen proclivities did the Pharisees become his enemies and fall victims (4 B.C.) to his bloodthirstiness (“Ant.” xvii. 2, § 4; 6, §§ 2-4).

Professor David Flusser provides additional information that will shed more light on where Yeshua’s response fit into the prevailing climate.

(13) Judaism and the Origins of Christianity by David Flusser © 1988 (p. 471)

The latter-day Judaism as well as Christianity did not evolve from the religion of Israel in the Old Testament, but from the Jewish religiosity that flourished during the intertestamental period. This type of religiosity is no longer identical with the creed reflected in the Old Testament. . . .¹³

Tradition hands down this logion of Antigonos of Sokho with the conclusion: “And let the fear (or awe) of Heaven be upon you!” In the days of Antigonos, the awe of God was synonymous with the love of God. This equation can be traced to the doctrines of Deuteronomy, and can be followed up through Ben Sira – who lived prior to the Maccabean uprising and who writes interchangeably and indiscriminately about the love and the awe of

(14) *ibid*, p. 472.

God – up to Rabbi Meir of the second century CE. . . .¹⁴

In the book of Jubilees (Ch. 36) Isaac is reported to have addressed his sons Jacob and Esau before his death:

And love one another, my sons, your brothers even as a man who loves his own soul (himself), and let each seek in what he may benefit his brother. . . . And I shall make you swear a great oath – for there is no oath which is greater than it by the glorious, honored, great, splendid, wonderful and mighty name of him who created heavens and earth and all therein – that you fear him and worship (serve) him, and that each will love his brother with affection and righteousness (justice) . . .

(15) *ibid*, p. 474.

Thus the book of Jubilees is the earliest document for the juxtaposition in Midrash fashion of two Torah commandments which start with the word *ve'achavta*, “you shall love”: i.e., you shall love him, your God (Deut. 6:5); and you shall love your neighbor (or fellow man – Lev. 19:18).¹⁵

(16) *ibid*, pgs. 487-488.

The Great Commandment of Jesus is according to the spirit of certain Pharisaic circles; therefore, as we have said, it is strange that the midrashic combination of the two biblical verses, speaking about the love of God and the love of neighbor, is not preserved in rabbinic literature. We know this sublime midrash only from the mouth of Jesus – and from the semi-Essene literature, namely from the Jewish “Two Ways,” and from the Testaments of the Patriarchs. . . . Jesus’ precept of love is both historically and theologically connected with the fact that the Judaism of the Second Temple period abandoned the gallant idea of righteousness of the Old Testament.¹⁶

Yeshua jumped into a debate that began at least a century before his birth – Which is the most important; “to fear God” or “to love God”? Regardless of which position one took, the way that one “feared” or “loved” God was understood to be by “keeping His commandments correctly.” The problem was that the Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes disagreed about how they should be kept in order to be correct. And, as we have already seen, Jews harmed and murdered their fellow Jews over how and where water should be poured during a Temple ritual. Even if it had been done incorrectly, do you think that the penalty should have been death?

Did God really want one sect of Jews to murder members of another Jewish sect because they disagreed about how his commandments should be performed, especially when God Himself hadn’t provided detailed instructions?

(17) How Jesus Became Christian by Barrie Wilson © 2008 (p. 36)

What does observing the Sabbath require?, people would have asked their teachers. What kind of things could they do and not do on the Sabbath that would enable them to “keep it holy”? This was a practical question by homemakers, farmers, craftsmen, traders, and merchants scattered across the land who were concerned to take the precepts of the law seriously. But how should it be interpreted? Could they cook, for instance? Travel? Look after livestock? Repair tents? Buy or sell fish? Do home repairs? Discuss business? Fetch water?

Moreover, when did the Sabbath start? When did it end? In the world before clocks, this was an important question. In time, Jewish groups would determine temporal markers – counting the number of visible stars in the sky Friday evening, for one thing, to mark the onset of the day of rest. In Jerusalem people had an advantage. On the southwest corner of Temple Mount, there was a “place of trumpeting,” that is, an area where a trumpeter stood to announce the onset and the close of the Sabbath. The stone sign for this location exists to this day.

The Pharisees used oral law to help answer these practical questions. Other groups were also addressing these issues, by different means. One surviving document of the Dead Sea Scroll community laid out its interpretation of what the commandment meant in actual practice. The Damascus Document prohibited such activities as: making financial decisions, doing business, preparing food, taking things out of the house or bringing goods into it, walking more than two thousand cubits, spending the Sabbath in a place near to Gentiles, and so on.¹⁷

This was the world in which Yeshua lived and taught. The account in Matthew provides us with two very important cultural clues that fit into that world. They may also indicate that Matthew’s version is the closest to what Yeshua actually said two thousand years ago. The clues are found in the following verse.

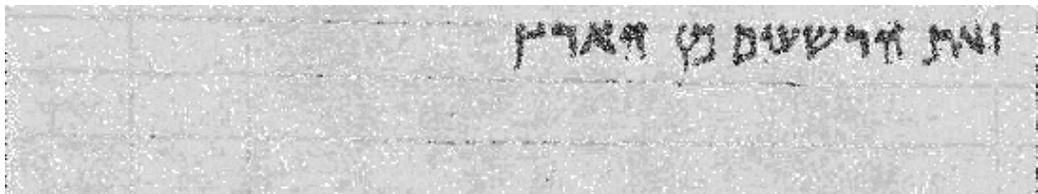
On these two commandments hang all the Torah and the Nevi’im.

(18) The books of the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, are arranged in a different order than in the Old Testament. Since the Hebrew Bible existed before Christianity, doesn’t it make you wonder why the Church would rearrange them.

You probably noticed that I changed the traditional translation “the law and the prophets” to “the Torah and the Nevi’im.” This is a much more culturally accurate translation of what Yeshua said. It is also our first cultural clue. What would a person in Yeshua’s audience have thought if they heard those words? Just open any Jewish Bible and you will find that it is divided into three sections – **Torah** (Instructions or Law), **Nevi’im** (Prophets) and **Ketuvim** (Writings).¹⁸ Yeshua was clearly referring to the well-known names of two sections of the sacred texts which made up the Hebrew Scriptures in the first century CE.

(19) Scrolls From Qumran Cave 1.
From photographs by John C. Trever

The second clue is the use of the word “**hang**.” In order to understand its importance one must understand how the Hebrew words are written on the scrolls by the scribes. When the parchment is ready, horizontal faint lines were engraved into it so that the lines of text are straight. Vertical lines were also drawn to mark the margins. Unlike in our schools, where we were taught to write on the line, the Jews were taught to hang each letter from the line. The top of the letters hangs from the line with the taller letters extending above the line. This is easily seen in the picture of the *Peshar to Habakkuk* (1QpHab) scroll found at the Dead Sea.¹⁹



The two commandments -- “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind;*” and “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” – are compared to the lines from which every letter in the Hebrew Bible is hung. According to Yeshua, they are the foundation upon which all of the commandments must be observed. His was not the only Jewish group involved in debates about issues such as this.

(20) See “Hillel & Shammai” online at jewishvirtuallibrary.org

Second Temple Judaism at the time Yeshua lived had been influenced by two dominant traditions. The school of Shammai was the more rigid and conservative group that emphasized adherence to the letter of religious law. Their key ethical principle seems to be adherence to its very detailed, highly legalistic interpretation of the Torah. The other was the school of Hillel, which was the more liberal and compassionate side.

Hillel was the more popular of the two scholars, and he was chosen by the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish court, to serve as its president. While Hillel and Shammai themselves did not differ on a great many basic issues of Jewish law, their disciples were often in conflict. The Talmud records over 300 differences of opinion between Beit Hillel (the House of Hillel) and Beit Shammai (the House of Shammai). Hillel's rulings were often based on concern for the welfare of the individual.²⁰

A very famous story is recorded in the Talmud about a Gentile who said that he would convert to Judaism, if someone would teach him the whole Torah while he stood on one foot. He goes to both Shammai and Hillel with his unusual request.

(21) Babylonian Talmud

On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, 'What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.' (Shabbat 31a)²¹

(22) The Golden Rule is found in Matthew 7:12 & Luke 6:31

You probably recognized the similarity between Hillel’s advice and Yeshua’s Golden Rule – “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Torah and the Prophets.”²² The original followers of Yeshua would have probably known the above story about Hillel long before they heard Yeshua’s new rule. Hillel and Yeshua seem to be very much alike and share many of the same beliefs. If we put the both rules together we would have a very good guideline that is just as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago:

“What is hateful to you; do not to your neighbor.
Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

There are many close parallels to Yeshua's teachings in Jewish writings, such as *the "Sayings of the Fathers."* Clearly, Yeshua was actively involved in the issues of his day. It has been said that if Jerusalem had not been destroyed, we might have found Jesus quoted along with other Rabbis in Jewish literature. **BHC**

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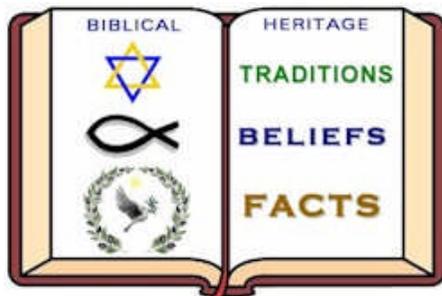
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