

Jesus Through Jewish Eyes

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty, and then for three years was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed on a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was dying, and that was his coat. When he was dead he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Over nineteen wide centuries have come and gone, and today he is the centerpiece of the human race and the leader of mankind's column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that were ever built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that have ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as has that one solitary life. [\[1\]](#)

Judaism's appreciation of him has often been just as glowing. The highly respected Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote:

From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Savior has always appeared to me a fact of the highest importance which, for his sake and my own, I must endeavor to understand...I am more than ever certain that a great place belongs to him in Israel's history of faith and that this place cannot be described by any of the usual categories. [\[2\]](#)

In an interview, Albert Einstein observed:

As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene...No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life. [\[3\]](#)

One-time President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Hyman Enelow noted:

Who can compute all that Jesus has meant to humanity? The love he has inspired, the solace he has given, the good he has engendered, the hope and joy he has kindled—all that is unequalled in human history. [\[4\]](#)

The former president of Hebrew Union College, Rabbi Kaufman Kohler addressed Congress in 1893 in the following fashion:

No ethical system or religious catechism, however broad and pure, could equal the efficiency of this great personality, standing, unlike any other, midway between heaven and earth, equally near to God and to man...Jesus, the helper of the poor, the friend of the sinner, the brother of every fellow-sufferer, the comforter of every sorrow-laden, the healer of the sick, the up-lifter of the fallen, the lover of man, the redeemer of woman, won the heart of mankind by storm. Jesus, the meekest of men, the most despised of the despised race of the Jews, mounted the world's throne to be earth's Great King. [5]

While not acknowledging Jesus' messiahship, just what is it that significant and influential Jews have seen so clearly in him? What makes him stand head and shoulders above the rest and yet roots him so deeply among his own people? Abraham Lincoln perceptively points to part of the answer:

I doubt the possibility, or propriety, of settling the religion of Jesus Christ in the models of manmade creeds and dogmas." [6]

David Flusser, former department chair at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, indicates a major portion of the rest of the answer:

As a Jew he [Jesus] fully accepted the Law. The community he founded, comparable in some ways to the Essenes, saw itself as a movement of reform and fulfillment within Judaism, not as a secession from it. [7]

Rabbi Stephen Wise, one of the founders and leading lights of Reform Judaism, said it quite succinctly, Jesus is "the Jew of Jews." [8]

Little wonder, then, that former Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson could stress:

"There is something shallow about a Christianity that has lost its Jewish roots." [9]

Or, more pointedly:

To wrench Jesus out of his Jewish world destroys Jesus and destroys Christianity, the religion that grew out of his teachings. Even Jesus' most familiar role as Christ is a Jewish role. If Christians leave the concrete realities of Jesus' life and of the history of Israel in favor of a mythic, universal, spiritual Jesus and an otherworldly kingdom of God, they deny their origins in Israel, their history, and the God who loved and protected Israel and the church. They cease to interpret the actual Jesus sent by God and remake him in their own image and likeness. The dangers are obvious. If Christians violently wrench Jesus out of his natural, ethnic and historical place within the people of Israel, they open the way to doing equal violence to Israel, the place and people of Jesus. This is a lesson of history that haunts us all at the end of the 20th century. [10]

So, it becomes even more vital to take a look at Jesus through Jewish eyes. [11]

The Jewishness of His Life & Teaching

The Testament accounts stress that Jesus was brought up as a Jew in the traditions and faith of his ancestors. At the very outset, he was given a common Jewish name which reflected his mission, Yeshua (Mt. 1:21). This was not only the third most commonly used boy's name in the late Second Temple period of Judaism, it connected directly with prophetic expectation (Isa. 62:11 literally reads: "Your Yeshua is coming..."). His parents came to the Temple with the born Yeshua for his b'rit milah (circumcision), for pidyon haben (redemption of the firstborn), and for the ritual purification of his mother (Lk. 2:21-24). The family apparently came to Jerusalem yearly to observe the traditional festivals (Lk. 2:41). This habitual practice is an indication of the family's especially devout observance; not all families of that period could or did observe this practice. On one such journey when he is twelve, Yeshua interacted with the rabbinic teachers, asking penetrating questions as an unusually wise, but typical, pre-bar mitzvah student (Lk. 2:42f.).

Like his childhood, his later life was also stamped by his Jewish heritage. He respected the Temple and its worship, expecting his followers to offer the usual sacrifices (Mt. 5:23, 24) and going out of his way to pay the Temple tax (Mt. 17:24-27). Like the devout Jews of his day he attended synagogue regularly on the Sabbath (Lk. 4:16 et al.), first being taught there as a child, and later doing the teaching himself. He consistently observed the Jewish festivals and holidays and used these occasions to indicate how they highlighted his mission (Jn. 2:13; 5:1; 7:2, 10, 37-39; 8:12; 10:22-23; 13:1-2).

He used and taught the traditional prayers of his time (cf. Mt. 6:9-13). "His special prayer is merely a shortened form of the third, fifth, sixth, ninth and fifteenth of the Eighteen Benedictions."^[12] And, clearly, he used the familiar blessings over bread and wine when he said grace at meals (cf. Lk. 22:19-20).

The Gospels also indicate that he was quite Jewish in his dress. When the woman with the hemorrhaging reached for him, she grabbed the hem of his clothes (Mk. 6:56; Mat. 9:20; Lk 8:44). The Greek term used here, kraspedon, commonly translates the Hebrew, tzitzit or fringes,^[13] which God had commanded the Jewish people to wear (Num. 15:37-41).

His way of life reflected other Jewish customs as well. He followed the custom of not only preaching in the synagogue but in the open air like the rabbis who "preached everywhere, on the village square and in the countryside as well as in the synagogue."^[14] The frequent use of baptism associated with his ministry was also quite common to his time, as the Talmud itself testifies (Sanhedrin 39a). As it has been pointed out,

Whether one accepts it or not, it is a fact attested to by the Gospels...that to his final hour Jesus did not stop practicing the basic rites of Judaism.^[15]

Perhaps, most significant was his relationship to the Law and traditions, which some have described as "entirely orthodox."^[16] He declared the permanence of the whole Torah (Mt. 5:17-19) and even accepted Pharisaic extensions (Mt. 23:2-3). Some of these include: tithing of herbs (Mt. 23:23; cf. Maaserot 4.5), grace at meals (Mk. 6:41;

8:6), blessings over wine, and the recitation of the Hallel Psalms at the Passover seder (Mk. 14:22-23, 26).

This relationship to the traditions and practices of his day prompted David Flusser to write in the Encyclopedia Judaica:[\[17\]](#)

...the Gospels provide sufficient evidence to the effect that Jesus did not oppose any prescription of the written or oral Mosaic Law.

The fact that Yeshua preached regularly in the synagogues, which would not have been possible if his lifestyle or teachings had been recognizably different from the current teaching or accepted halakah (authorized opinions), substantiates these observations. The incident in Matthew 9:18f. provides further corroboration. The "ruler"—in Lk. 8:41 and Mk. 5:22, the "head of the synagogue" (rosh kneset?)—comes to Yeshua. Both his request and his posture (kneeling) indicate this religious leader's ready acceptance of and profound respect for Yeshua as an observant Jew and important religious leader.

Another author further noted:

Jesus...represents a point of development running unbroken from the Hebrew Bible and linked to it through an interpretive supplement that is characteristic of the great literary creation of the Rabbis, the Oral Torah. As Yehezkel Kaufmann put it: "The attitude of Jesus to the Torah is the very same attitude one finds among the masters of halakah and haggadah who followed in the Pharisaic tradition."[\[18\]](#)

In fact, even the Sermon on the Mount, often viewed as the essence and epitome of Yeshua's teaching, reflects concepts familiar to the Jews of his day and consistent with rabbinic teaching. To begin with, it is quite similar in style. Much of the sermon consists of illustrations of the proper understanding of the Law, or Torah, spelling out its wider implications and describing its broader principles. Many of the illustrations he used were common to the "rabbis" of his day, and the whole is carried out in the style of a midrash—an interpretive supplementing of Scripture—much as is exemplified in the Oral Torah which later became the Talmud.[\[19\]](#) Much like Yeshua these teachers felt that the morally sensitive must go beyond mere conformity to the Torah (cf. Baba Mezia 88a; Mekilta on Ex. 18:20).

As each expounded the Torah, the things they taught paralleled each other. One example of this parallel teaching comes from the Talmud: "He who has mercy on his fellow creatures obtains mercy from heaven" (Shabbat 151b; cf. Mt. 5:7). Other similarities to the Beatitudes could be cited as well.[\[20\]](#)

Scholars frequently cite the famous "turn the other cheek" passage (Mt. 5:38-48) as an example of the radical ness of Yeshua's teachings. But even here

...it will not do to maintain that Jesus' spirit of forbearance, of gentleness, of goodness, of charity, is wholly opposed to the teaching of the Rabbis. It is the same spirit which inspired the best teaching of the Rabbis...[\[21\]](#)

The point Yeshua emphasized here is the proper response to insult, "the slap in the face." A person is not to seek redress or retaliation but should endure the insult humbly. With this the rabbis agreed, and counseled that a person struck on the cheek should forgive the offending party even if he does not ask forgiveness (Tosefta Baba Kamma 9:29f). The Talmud commends the person who accepts offense without retaliation and submits to suffering and insult cheerfully (Yoma 23a). In fact, one can find parallels in the rabbinic material to almost all of Yeshua's statements in this paragraph (5:38-42).[\[22\]](#)

The next paragraph (vv. 43-47) builds on "loving your enemy". Here, too, statements expressing similar ideas can be found in the writings of the rabbis. For example, "if anyone seeks to do evil unto you, do you in well-doing pray for him" (Testament of Joseph XVIII.2; cf. Mt. 5:44). While it is true that the rabbis did not always agree over how to treat an enemy, there are indications that many of them taught perspectives similar to Yeshua.[\[23\]](#)

The following assessment of the parallels between the teachings of Yeshua and those of the Pharisees acknowledges this commonness but also recognizes the independence:

We have noted that the teachings of Jesus ... are expressive of the method and substance of the Oral Torah as developed by the great masters of rabbinic Judaism. If, in some details, Jesus hewed an independent line, this was normal in rabbinic Judaism, which allowed a wide latitude for individual teachers to think independently. If, in some instances, his views might have aroused opposition from contemporary teachers, this too, was a normal phenomenon in Judaism. The debates between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel on the interpretation of the tradition and its application to contemporary life were sometimes fiercely acrimonious, but there was never any doubt that both were legitimate lines for the exposition of Judaism.[\[24\]](#)

The Conflict Examined

As the previous quote illustrates, while Yeshua was very much in tune with his times and his people, there were points of conflict between him and some of the religious leaders. Just what was the nature of this conflict?

Yeshua taught in a period of flux and transition, of various developing and occasionally conflicting interpretations of the Torah. In taking advantage of this liberty in interpretation, he nevertheless remained thoroughly Jewish and mainstream at that. For example, he accepted the laws concerning the Sabbath but differed in the interpretation of some of those laws concerning certain conditions which justify its suspension.[\[25\]](#) "In minor points ... he showed a freedom from traditional custom which implied a break with the stricter rule of the more rigorous adherents of the Law at that time."[\[26\]](#) However, "some of this, of course, may be allowable violation of traditions which, far from having a binding force, were subject to free and continuing intramural debate."[\[27\]](#)

It must be remembered then that he did not violate generally accepted customs and practice; he simply disagreed with certain specific pronouncements put forward by some teachers. The Sabbath question illustrates this.

... there is proof that Jesus never openly broke the Sabbath; when he appeared before the Sanhedrin, there is no trace of such an accusation which would certainly not have failed to be produced had it had the slightest foundation...in the case of the Sabbath, as in every case of this sort, Jesus took the clear position, not against the Law, not even against ritual practices, but against the excessive importance that particular Pharisee doctors attributed to them; not even against Pharisaism, but against particular tendencies in Pharisaism, especially the tendency to put the letter before the Spirit.[\[28\]](#)

One other consideration deserves mention. A number of Yeshua's comments indicate that he interacted with the discussion between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, and therefore would be in conflict with one or the other.[\[29\]](#) For example, the statement about tithing mint and dill (Mt. 23:23f.) reflects one of the things included for tithing by Shammai but not by Hillel (Maaserot 1.1 cf. 4.6; Eduyyot 5.3; Demai 1.3). This shows the extent of Shammai's zeal and commitment to the law of tithing (Dt. 14:22-23). The reference to enlarging the tzitzit alludes to another discussion between the schools. In response to the command to make tzitzit (Dt. 22:12), Shammai wanted to make broader tzitzit than Hillel (Menahot 41b).

What then was the major focus of the conflict between Yeshua and some of the religious leaders of his day? Was it simply differing interpretations or applications of the Torah? Or, was it something deeper?

The aura about Yeshua differs greatly from that about the religious leaders of his day. He comes as a sovereign figure making supreme claims. He claimed exceptional authority and made extraordinary claims, issuing "demands" consistent with them. His authority was so radically different from that of the leaders (cf. Mk. 1:22) that conflict was inevitable. While he spoke with his own authority, this did not constitute a break with Judaism. He did not challenge it but called attention to its proper intent, a process also central in rabbinic tradition. But he did so with a ringing authority that was quite unparalleled.

... the tone adopted in recommending these variations was altogether novel in Jewish experience ... he emphasized his own authority apart from any vicarious or deputed power from on high.[\[30\]](#)

The key to the conflict, then, revolves around Yeshua's uniqueness and authority as the Divine Messiah and as the Second Moses. In his ministry "I say" replaced "thus says the Lord." As the Messiah and initiator of the "Age to Come", he brought in a order of things.[\[31\]](#) Yeshua's messiahship implied something had come for Judaism. This formed a basis for his authority and for whatever appropriate adaptations or interpretations he might have made, or for the challenges he leveled against certain interpretations which obscured the intended meaning of the Torah. As Divine Messiah and Second Moses he was the authoritative interpreter of the Law. In fact, the Talmud indicates that Messiah's authority is so great that: "Even if he tells you to transgress any of the commandments of the Torah, obey him in every respect"

(Yebamot 90). Ultimately, Yeshua's identity and authority as the Divine Messiah placed him at odds with the religious leaders of his day (cf. John 11:48-50). However, his teachings remained firmly rooted within Judaism.

Yeshua's Basic Premise

Yeshua said quite directly: "Observe the commandments of God" (Mk. 10:17-19; Mt. 19:16-19; Lk. 18:18-20). He also indicated that the Torah would not pass away with his coming (Mt. 5:18). Often his statements beginning with "but I say" are put forward as evidence for his setting aside the Torah. But, these statements—as will shortly be seen—appear to function more as an unfolding of the deeper, fuller meaning of the Torah, rather than as a sweeping away.^[32] In fact, when compared with the traditions which serve as the foundations of the Oral Torah in classical Judaism,

The interpretations [Jesus gives are]...compatible with the structure of the Oral Torah and with the method by which its provisions were drawn from the written text. ^[33]

However, Matthew 5:17-20 remains the crucial passage in understanding Yeshua's perspective of his relationship to the Torah. It is here that he described his purpose or intent ("I have come/not come") with respect to the Torah. He stated that his purpose was NOT to abolish the Torah. The term abolish (*kataluo*) carries the idea of: do away with, annul, make invalid, repeal, terminate.^[34] Yeshua came to do none of the above. In fact, he mentioned "not abolish" twice so as to emphasize his intent. The strength of his statement is further reinforced by the phrase, "Don't think that", which has the thrust of "Never think that".^[35] He wanted people to clearly understand that he would not annul, repeal or terminate the Torah!

Next, he set up a stark contrast with this statement. In using the particular construction for "but" (*ouk ... alla*), Yeshua was presenting "fulfill" as a direct opposite of, or strong contrast to, his previous statement. In effect, everything "abolish" is, "fulfill" is not, and the reverse; any explanation of fulfill that even resembles the thrust of abolish is therefore out of the question. Now, in the passive, "fulfill" (*pleroo*) is used in the sense of things—particularly Scripture—being fulfilled. However, in the active, as it is here, the sense is different. Here it carries the idea of: cram full, make complete, confirm, show clearly the true meaning, bring to full expression; in other words "to fill full."^[36] The image seems to be that of a treasure chest, packed full of valuables (cf. Mt. 13:52.).

The probable linguistic backgrounds of the Greek in the text here help fill out the implications of fulfill, particularly in light of the context of this passage. In the Septuagint, the term translates *mala*, *taman*, and *sava* with the sense of "make completely full, fill up the measure."^[37] (In the Targums, *male* and *kum* are used interchangeably.)^[38] The probable Hebrew term behind the Greek is *kiyyem* (the equivalent of the Aramaic *kum* of the Targums), which means "uphold, sustain, preserve."^[39] The term implies that the teaching given agrees with the text of the Scripture in question. This fits admirably with the discussion of verses 21-48. The likely Aramaic equivalent, *la'asuphe*, means "to add"; and it connotes the idea of preserving the intended meaning of a statement by including all the actions or prohibitions implied in it.^[40] Yeshua's discussion in verses 21-48 pointedly

illustrates this emphasis. Thus, both the Aramaic and Hebrew backgrounds reinforce the idea of fullness as filling full or filling out.

As it turns out, "abolish" and "fulfill" are actually terms used at that time as part of scholarly debate and rabbinic discussion.^[41] A sage was accused of abolishing or canceling the Torah if he misinterpreted a passage, nullifying its intent. If he fulfilled it, he had properly interpreted Scripture so as to preserve and correctly explain its meaning.

The remainder of this paragraph (vv. 18-20) further reinforces this understanding of fulfill. When Yeshua talked of not even the "smallest letter" or "least stroke of a pen" passing away, he spoke in terms similar to the Sages:

If the whole world were gathered together to destroy the yod which is the smallest letter in the Torah, they would not succeed (Canticles Rabbah 5.11; cf. Leviticus Rabbah 19). Not a letter shall be abolished from the Torah forever (Exodus Rabbah 6.1).

And, he added that no one can break or set aside even the least of the commandments, without jeopardizing his future status (v.19). As if this were not enough, he concluded this section (v.20) by emphasizing that his followers needed to be even more observant and devout than the Pharisees, going beyond even their exemplary practice of the traditions!

Therefore, it appears that Yeshua said:

... not only do I not overthrow the Law ... or empty it of its content, but on the contrary I increase that content, so as to fill the Law full to the brim.^[42]

So, Yeshua came to bring the correct interpretation and understanding of the Law, i.e. to indicate the full implications and complete meaning of the commandments. Therefore, a person who obeyed his teachings obeyed even the least of the commandments (v. 19) because he was teaching their intended import (cf. Rom. 8:4). The context following (v. 21f.) expands on this foundational principle (vv. 17-20) in typical rabbinic fashion, i.e., a listing of cases demonstrating or illustrating the principle. ^[43] Basically, in this section, Yeshua was saying:

I say to you: do not stop halfway in obedience to God and his holy commandments; go beyond, always beyond the letter of the commandment, to the spirit that gives it life, from the literal to the inner meaning; "...be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5:47); and may the Law at last be carried into effect, in its fullness.^[44]

In effect, Yeshua built a "fence around the Law"—as indicated by the Aramaic and Hebrew underlying "fulfill"—much as the earlier sages cited by the Talmud did (Pirke Avot 1.2). And, his fence is remarkably similar to that of the sages.^[45]

Problem Passages

Much of the discussion about Yeshua's relationship to the halakah revolves around apparent or alleged violations of the Torah and/or traditions. Several passages raise the question of possible violation. How are they to be viewed?

Matthew 5:21-48

Frequently, the formulation "You have heard it said,,...but I say to you...", found in the Sermon on the Mount, is presented as evidence of his opposition to the traditions. Actually, this statement reflects a rabbinic formula used to indicate that a particular interpretation of the Bible may not be valid in the fullest sense. In other words, it implies: "One might hear so and so ... but there is a teaching to say that the words should rather be taken in this sense." In fact, this is a phrase that Rabbi Ishmael—a contemporary of Yeshua and one of the foremost scholars cited in the Talmud—used frequently (cf. Mekilta 3a, 6a, et al.).[\[46\]](#) The point being made by the formula is that to some people Scripture appears to have a certain meaning, but that apparent meaning is an incomplete, or inaccurate understanding. So then the first part of the formulation implies a specific interpretation of Scripture held by some, and is not intended as a quotation of Scripture. As such, this is a rabbinic way of refuting an inaccurate or incomplete understanding.[\[47\]](#)

Further, the translation "*but* I say to you" implies a contrast not supported by the text. The Greek used here is de, which more normally designates a coupling, "and," rather than a contrast, "but." A better translation would therefore read: "And I say to you." This corresponds directly to the common Hebrew phrase va ani omer lachem. This phrase never introduces a contradiction to the Torah; it begins an elaboration of the text. In fact, it is a rabbinic phrase and common concept with parallels in the Talmudic writings. They are an interactive pair of technical expressions that derive from basic rabbinic rhetoric.[\[48\]](#) The first means "Up to this point you have understood the text in this way." Then, the literal translation, the common interpretation, or a colleague's opinion would be cited. After this, would come the complimentary phrase, "And I say to you," thereby introducing the speaker's elaboration of the passage in question.

Normally what followed the second phrase was a logical deduction introduced by a form of the verb "to say": "you must say," or "there is a teaching to say." However, Yeshua used no logical argument or development to validate his interpretation; he simply said: "I say." He went beyond the usual emphasis, and instead of a rabbinic exposition of the Torah, he presented the more complete sense in an authoritative proclamation that implied he was the supreme or final authority. (Yet, even in this, the specific formulation was quite rabbinic and paralleled that found in Abot DeRabbi Nathan (XIII, p. 16a—aval ani omer leka.) Significantly, in the rabbinic literature God is the one who occasionally undertakes these "corrections" (Midrash Tanhuma, Jer. 4:2 on goodness)![\[49\]](#)

The previous discussion implies that Yeshua did not oppose the old Law with a one, but contrasted two interpretations, his—based on his personal authority—and some commonly accepted one. His was fuller—explaining the intent and ideal underlying the Scripture and using the very teachings and traditions common to his contemporaries—not setting aside the other, but including and expanding it.[\[50\]](#) In

effect, as the Sermon on the Mount aptly illustrates, he intensified the Torah with his declarations. Therefore,

... we cannot speak of the Law being annulled in the antithesis, but only of its being intensified in its demand, or reinterpreted in a higher key.[\[51\]](#)

As Geza Vermes, the Oxford University Jewish scholar astutely observed,

...the only logical inference is that Jesus freely insisted, even in a purely ritual context, on strict adherence to the Torah.[\[52\]](#)

Matthew 9:16-17

However, Yeshua's statements in Matthew 9:16-17 seem to contradict this perspective. Normally this passage is cited to oppose the use of traditional or rabbinic practices. However, a reconsideration of this passage indicates that Yeshua—consistent with his lifestyle, and with his statements in Matthew 5:17-20—did not oppose the observance of the traditions. [\[53\]](#) Upon closer examination, Yeshua is not saying the same thing—namely, setting aside the "old"—in two different ways; he is speaking of two different, but related, issues focused on combining faith in Yeshua with Judaism.

Verse 16 pictures Judaism as an old coat, and unadapted Messianic faith as an unshrunk patch. "Shrinking" in this context does not imply "diminishing" but "adapting" to the framework of Judaism. If unadapted Messianic faith is combined with traditional Judaism, disaster results; the patch tears away from the coat! It leaves a worse hole; and both patch and coat are now rendered near useless. In other words, faith in Yeshua, wrenched from its Jewish context, can be quite harmful. Yeshua implies that it is essential to shrink the patch—adapt Messianic faith to Judaism—because there is nothing wrong with mending an old coat. At this time and in this culture, old clothes were not thrown away as soon as possible, as modern society tends to do. They were valued, restored, and worn. The early Messianic Jews adapted their faith to the framework of Judaism. Unfortunately, the later "church" did not; they "tore away" from the "coat," leaving both worse off. In fact, some forms of Christianity became paganized precisely because they devalued the Torah or ignored their Jewish roots.

While verse 16 teaches that Messianic faith needs to be adapted to Judaism, verse 17 indicates that Judaism needs to be adjusted to faith in Yeshua. Yeshua compares wine to Messianic faith and the old wineskins to traditional Judaism. If wine is put into old wineskins, the wine is lost and the skins are ruined! But if the wineskins of traditional Judaism are reed, or reconditioned—as wineskins were in those days—to accommodate trust in Yeshua, both the Messianic faith and reed Judaism "are preserved."

Levi's (Matthew's) careful choice of words here reinforces this understanding. He speaks of (Greek: neos) wine and fresh (kainos) skins. The former indicates with respect to quantity, i.e. time; the latter, with respect to quality. Neos implies immaturity or lack of development; kainos indicates "" or "reed," contrasting "old" or "not reed."[\[54\]](#) Old wineskins lose their strength and elasticity, so cannot withstand

the pressure of wine fermenting. However, an old skin can be "reed" and thus restored to service. In ancient, conservation-conscious societies, restoring old items—such as wineskins—was highly desirable; therefore, it was important that this be done.

Yeshua's statement implies that the Messianic faith cannot be poured into old religious concepts if they remain rigid. But, if the old religious ideas become fresh and flexible, they can accommodate Yeshua. In this context (i.e. vv. 1-15), the necessary accommodation involves refining the understanding of Messiah to fully incorporate the concepts of the Supernatural Son and the Suffering Servant. Too frequently, the inference is drawn that Judaism cannot possibly be an appropriate context for trusting Yeshua—only the wineskins of Christianity will work. However, here Yeshua makes the point that the container which can best hold the wine of Messianic faith is a Jewish one, a properly reed, refreshed and reconditioned Judaism flexible enough to acknowledge him.

Taken together, these verses suggest that both Messianic faith and Judaism need to adjust to each other. In verse 16, the "old" has its life and usefulness extended by the proper adjustment and application of the "." In verse 17, the "old" is revitalized and reed for further service and becomes an effective vehicle for conveying the "." In both cases, the "old" is not set aside but has a continuing and continual use. The point is that without the "old," the "" would be lost as well as the "old"; now, "both are preserved."

The larger context of this passage points to the nature of the mess and refining Yeshua has in mind. Verses 14-15 indicate that the concept of Messiah must have a significant place for the Suffering Servant found in Isaiah, akin to the Mashiach ben Yosef of the Rabbis. Verses 1-8 emphasize that a complete understanding of the Messiah must also account for the supernatural Son of Man pictured in Daniel and in the Second Temple literature (and perhaps somewhat along the line of the Melchizedek of the Dead Sea Scrolls).[\[55\]](#)

Both the subsequent paragraph (vv. 18-19) and the earlier context (8:18-22) reinforce the perspective presented here. In the one case, a synagogue "ruler"—a traditional, observant Jewish religious official—shows Yeshua profound respect. In the other case, "Torah teachers" are among his disciples! Both cases demonstrate Yeshua's association with, and acceptance by, the traditional elements of Second Temple Judaism.

The Sabbath Controversy

The gospels record a number of discussions and differences between Yeshua and some of the religious leaders regarding activities appropriate to the Sabbath. Some people have seen in these accounts teachings of Yeshua that appear to violate or set aside certain laws concerning the Sabbath. In analyzing these passages, it is important to remember that certain 'violations' of the Sabbath were allowed. The prevailing view went like this: "It is right to violate one Sabbath in order that many may be observed; the laws were given that men should live by them, not that men should die by them."[\[56\]](#) Considerable concessions were made, although there was much debate as to the limits of such concessions. The fact that saving life, alleviating acute pain, curing snake bites and cooking for the sick were all allowed on the Sabbath (Shabbat

18.3; Tosefta Shabbat 15.14; Yoma 84b; Tosefta Yoma 84.15) shows leniency, not absolute rigidity. Quoting Isaiah 58:13, the Rabbis also allowed acts of service to others—for example, meetings for the purpose of deciding on grants to charity and making arrangements for engagement or for a child's education. They viewed these acts of service as God's business, not their own. Since good deeds were God's business, they were allowed (Shabbat 150a). However, these relaxations were not extended indiscriminately for fear of destroying the rest for which the day was set aside by God.^[57] Nevertheless, the basic rabbinic principle remained: "The Sabbath was made for you; you were not made for the Sabbath" (Mekilta on Ex. 31:14, 104a).

Others question the propriety of Yeshua healing on the Sabbath. The most clear example would be in John 5:8, where he commands the man to work on Sabbath by saying: "Pick up your bed and walk." However, upon examining early Jewish sources, we find that what constitutes work was yet to be fully defined. So for example, carrying things within a walled city (Jerusalem), was not always considered work. What we learn then from John 5:8 is that Yeshua was portrayed as the one who has the correct understanding of how to keep the commandment: "You shall not do any work on the Sabbath day". A paralytic man who carries his bed on the Sabbath was nothing but a testimony to the mighty acts of God. In other words, rabbinic rulings of his day WOULD allow his Sabbath hearings. As Safrai concludes: "Jesus' Sabbath healings which angered the head of the synagogue were permitted by tannaitic [early rabbinic] law."^[58]

Several other considerations are worth mentioning. Josephus' writings imply that many of the Sabbath—and other—regulations were not in force in Yeshua's time.^[59] They were still under discussion. Yeshua, therefore, in his interaction on the Sabbath question, did not deny the validity of the Torah or halakah but merely countered these extreme interpretations propounded by some. In this he usually opposed the views of Shammai in favor of those of Hillel (cf. the discussion by Lee).^[60]

As it turns out, even the content of his replies were not as revolutionary as first imagined but were "in harmony with the views of the modern scribes."^[61] And he made these replies in typical rabbinic fashion and form as well, frequently using a specific kind of homily called yelammedenu. This involves a question addressed to the teacher, followed by his answer based on a midrash (interpretation) or halakah (authorized opinion). The Sabbath passages (Mt. 12:1-8; 12:9-13; Mk. 2:23-28; 3:1-6; Lk. 13:10-17; 14:1-6; Jn. 5:1-16; 7:22-23) record Yeshua's response in this form, in which he cited an interpretation of Scripture or an accepted rabbinic opinion, e.g. "Is it lawful to save life or let it die on the Sabbath?" (Yoma 35b). In fact, his argument closely paralleled that of the somewhat later Rabbi Ishmael (Yoma 85a), particularly in Mark 3.^[62] In typical rabbinic fashion he also frequently cited both the principle and an example which helped clarify it. In making his case in situations such as this, he used a variety of familiar Jewish concepts, halakic conclusions and rabbinic methods.

Jesus justified the action impugned, adducing a piece of teaching which his opponents also recognized as valid: a wise saying ... a passage from Scripture ... an established ordinance ... in other words, he starts from the same basis as his antagonists. If he did not ... it would not have put them to silence.^[63]

Therefore, both the form of his replies and the content he communicated in these situations struck familiar chords in the hearers—consistent with the teaching they had received—which, because of their cogency, left them without a comeback.

Several implications arise from the previous discussions. First, there was disagreement and discussion in Yeshua's time over what was and was not lawful; it was not a settled matter. He entered this discussion and proclaimed his teachings. In them he acknowledged the prohibitions against working on the Sabbath and explained their applications and qualifications. But then, this is exactly how the Sabbath regulations were handled by the religious leaders. [64] Second, the fact that he took the trouble to argue and to declare certain things lawful, and did not just say the Sabbath and its traditions were suspended, is significant. It means he acknowledged that certain actions were unlawful on the Sabbath and, therefore, did not set aside the Sabbath commandments and practices. (Compare with Matthew 24:20, where he assumed the continuance of the Sabbath laws when he said: "Pray that your flight is not in winter or on Sabbath.") If he had broken the Sabbath and its traditions, as previously noted, evidence of this would have been used against him at his trial before the Sanhedrin. This kind of evidence would have been presented if there had been the slightest foundation for the accusation; yet there is no trace of it (Mk. 14:55-64). Third, in the cases of controversy Yeshua took a clear-cut stand, not against the Torah or the customs, or even against Pharisaism and the traditions, but against certain tendencies or interpretations among some of the Pharisees, frequently siding with one school of the Pharisees against the other. [65] Finally, when Yeshua entered the debate and presented his case, he did so in the typical rabbinic fashion, using halakic arguments and examples familiar to his hearers, and coming to conclusions they found both consistent with what they had been taught and quite compelling. So the following assessment is quite appropriate.

What is puzzling to Jewish students is that the attitude about the Sabbath as reflected in rabbinic Judaism is near to that ascribed to Jesus and remote from that ascribed to his opponents. [66]

Mark 2:23-28; Matthew 12:1-5

The argument Yeshua presented here was familiar to his "opponents" for several reasons. The key phrase, "Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," as has already been pointed out, appears in the rabbinic material (Mekilta 103b, Yoma 85b). Also, the Rabbis frequently used the quotation from Hosea 6:6 to argue that helping people was of greater importance than observing the rituals and customs (e.g. Sukkah 49b, Deuteronomy Rabba on 16:18, etc.) as Yeshua did here. In fact, they used the same examples Yeshua presented—David's eating the Tabernacle bread and the Temple offerings made on the Sabbath—to demonstrate the same general principle, that the needs of life override the Sabbath restrictions (Y'lomm'denu, Yalkut II, par. 130, Tosefta Shabbat 15b.). [67]

In the first century, it was also apparently the general opinion, at least in Galilee, that it was acceptable not only to pick up fallen ears of grain but also to rub them in one's hand to get to the grain. Some Pharisees objected to this practice, but according to others it was perfectly permissible. [68] The Talmud itself says: "Bundles which can be taken up with one hand may be handled on the Sabbath ... and he may break it with

his hand and eat thereof" (Shabbat 128a). This certainly allows for what the disciples did; their actions fall well within the bounds of acceptable practice.

Matthew 15:1-18; Mark 7:1-19

In pre-Pharisaic times the washing of hands was necessary for handling holy objects (Shabbat 14b). This was later extended to handling food. But once again there was a debate between Shammai and Hillel. Shammai insisted on washing the hands before filling the cup.^[69] Yeshua referred to this when he said: "They clean (declare pure) the outside of the cup." Actually, the precept about hand washing states: "Washing hands before a meal is a matter of choice, ablution after a meal is obligatory" (Tosefta Berakot 5.13). And, even this may not have been binding on all, but only on those who accepted it voluntarily.^[70] Hand washing was not, then, a universal command although some chose to live under such restrictions. Apparently, at this time "the majority of purity laws applied only to priests, or to laymen who had occasion to enter the Temple."^[71] As the previous citation indicates, although hand washing was important in some circles, its exact extent was a matter of dispute at this time, and continued to be until the compiling of the Talmud. And, even then, it was not determined how much of hand washing was compulsory and how much meritorious.^[72]

Yeshua's response to this situation compared favorably with others of his time.

...their hands and hearts are all corrupt, and their mouths are full of boasting—and yet they complain: Do not touch me lest you make me unclean. (Assumption of Moses 7.9-10)

The famous first century rabbi, Yohanan ben Zakkai, stated: "In life it is not the dead who make you unclean; nor is it the water, but the ordinances of the king of kings that purifies."^[73] Much later, Maimonides made the same comment:

For to confine oneself to cleaning the outward appearance through washing and cleaning the garment, while having at the same time a lust for various pleasures and unbridled license...merits the utmost blame. ^[74]

In fact, even the very form and style of Yeshua's discussion here also parallel the rabbis. ^[75] There is a technique of rabbinic instruction that can be labeled "Public Retort and Private Explanation." Dating from the first century, it consists of four parts. The following encounter by Yohanan ben Zakkai provides a clear example.

1] A question by an opponent: "Is it sorcery to purify a person unclean from a corpse with water containing ashes from a red heifer?"

2] A public retort (by Yohanan): "The water of separation has the same efficiency as the roots which pagans burn to drive away evil spirits."

3] A question for further explanation (by his followers): "Him you pushed away with a fragile reed; what will you answer us?"

4] The private explanation (for his disciples): "Neither was uncleanness caused by the corpse nor cleanness by the 'water of separation,' but the statute of the red heifer was one of those which had to be accepted as the will of God though no rational basis for it could be discerned."

In Mark 7, Yeshua's interaction follows this very same pattern.

1] A question by an opponent: "Why do your disciples eat with unwashed hands?" (verse 5)

2] A public retort (by Yeshua): "There is nothing from outside a person that entering into him can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things which defile the person." (verse 15)

3] A question for further explanation (asked by his followers in private): "And when he entered into the house away from the people, his disciples asked him further concerning the parable." (verse 17)

4] The private explanation: "Food passes into and out through a person's body without affecting the heart; but from out of the heart come evil things...These are what defile a person." (verses 18-23)

So, Yeshua's analysis and response were quite thoroughly Jewish and most appropriate.

Many have interpreted the next section, Mark 7:17-19, to mean that Yeshua set aside the food laws. But by doing so he would have contradicted himself. His detractors had just accused him of not observing their traditions, and he had responded that they did far worse; they did not observe the commandments of the Torah (vv. 9-13). To choose this time to set aside other commandments of the Torah would have undercut his whole response. It would have left him open to the charge they made, and which he implicitly denied. It would also have shown him to be inconsistent.[\[76\]](#)

But then, what did he mean here? As Flusser aptly notes:

The passage about the washing of hands does not justify the assumption that Jesus opposed the Jewish legal practice of this time; but by the third century, Origen understood it as signifying the rejection of Jewish dietary laws by Jesus. The overwhelming majority of modern translators thoughtlessly accept Origen's interpretation when they take Mark 7:19b to mean "Thus he declared all foods clean," although the Greek original can hardly be read in this sense.[\[77\]](#)

As Flusser pointed out, "the Greek original can hardly be read in this sense." The nominative participle (katharizon) modifies "drain" or "latrine" (accusative). This is just one example of a construction "in which the grammatical object of the sentence is regarded as the logical subject."[\[78\]](#) Or, it is quite possible that since the entire process of digestion and elimination is in view as the subject of consideration, the participle takes on the nominative case to indicate this. What Yeshua stated, then, is what is physically true: the latrine removes that part of the food which cannot be used for nourishment and in this way "purges" the food. As Alford goes on to note:

The aphedron (latrine, drain) is that which, by the removal of the part carried off, purifies the meat; the portion available for nourishment being in its passage converted into chyle, and the remainder being cast out.[79]

The passage should then read: "Do you not understand that whatever enters a man from without cannot defile him because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and then passes out of it, thus purging (i.e., "eliminating") the food." [80] Yeshua's lesson here is directly stated in Matthew's rendition (Mt. 15:17-20):

Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man "unclean"...eating with unwashed hands does not make him "unclean."

The issue Yeshua addressed is not kosher on non-kosher food, but eating with unwashed hands. [See the Appendix for a further analysis.]

Further, if the disciples had understood Yeshua to mean he had set aside the dietary laws, why did Peter—who put the question to Yeshua and received the answer (Mt. 15:15f.)—react so strongly against the possibility of eating non-kosher food when he saw the vision (Acts 10)? He expressed great indignation and shock. And why did he not later say, especially when explaining these events (Acts 11), "Now, I remember the words of the Lord, making all foods clean"? [81] He said nothing of the sort, because Yeshua had not in fact set aside the dietary laws.

As Phillip Sigal rightly reflected:

It is apparent that Jesus did not abolish the dietary practices. [82]

Yeshua and the Traditions

Several examples from Yeshua's life help illustrate his approach to the traditions. A significant passage is Luke 4:15f. Here Yeshua attended a synagogue, participated in its service, and read the Haftorah portion (the Scripture reading from the prophets) of the day.

Much of the traditional synagogue service was intact during Yeshua's time, as the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm. Fragments of scrolls of both daily and festival prayers dating to the Hasmonean period (second to first century B.C.E.) from the fourth cave at Qumran show striking parallels with the traditional prayers in content, structure and texts. Since the prayers in these scrolls exhibit nothing sectarian—unlike the other documents which contain specific Qumran terminology and ideas—these prayers were apparently part of the traditions of the broader Jewish community. [83] That means:

Research of recent decades has established the antiquity of the Jewish prayer tradition. Many elements of the Siddur go back to the Second Temple period, and thus to the days of Jesus.... The Qumran scrolls have brought a impetus to the research of early Jewish prayer. For example, recent scholarship demonstrates that...the Jewish Year liturgy has roots in the post-biblical community as far back as c.200 BC. [84]

Concerning Yeshua's life as a whole, two passages are most characteristic and instructive. In the first situation, Yeshua challenged the crowds, which INCLUDED the religious leaders, "Who among you can accuse me of any wrong?" (John 8:46) No one came forward to claim he had violated any of the biblical laws OR any of the Jewish traditions. Not one religious leader was able to point to a flaw in his behavior or conduct, even with respect to the traditions! The same holds true in the second situation. Yeshua stood before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:55-56). Some of the religious leaders tried to find something of which to accuse him. Nevertheless, they were unable to find ONE thing in his life that they could present as a violation; he had lived flawlessly according to the traditions. Finally, they found something. As a man he had claimed to be God, blasphemy from their perspective. They could accuse him of NO other violation of the Torah or the traditions!

This perspective about Yeshua is further reinforced by his statements in Matthew 23:2-3, where he instructed his followers, "Whatever the Pharisees teach, that do." Since the Pharisees and their allies were the religious traditionalists and proto-rabbis of the first century, Yeshua's instruction certainly encompasses the "rabbinic traditions" of his day. Many of the traditions, or halakot (as they were already called in the Hasmonean period), were definitely in place during the Second Temple period. As Schiffman notes, based on the evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls,

The talmudic materials are far more accurate than previously thought ... the terminology, and even some of the very laws as recorded in rabbinic sources (some in the name of the Pharisees, and others attributed to anonymous first-century sages), were actually used and espoused by the Pharisees. In other words—and this is extremely important—rabbinic Judaism as embodied in the Talmud is not a post-destruction invention, as some scholars had maintained; on the contrary, the roots of rabbinic Judaism reach back at least to the Hasmonean period. [\[85\]](#)

Or, as two Hebrew University scholars observe:

Talmudic literature, used in a careful way, can provide trustworthy historical material pertaining to the Second Temple Period. [\[86\]](#)

...the rabbinic sources...preserve evidence of an earlier stage which gave birth to the Testament concepts and motifs....Thus the specific character of rabbinic literature not only permits us, but even obligates us to include post-Christian rabbinic sources as an inseparable part of the investigation of the Jewish roots of Christianity. [\[87\]](#)

And so—in light of this and Matthew 23—it is not surprising to find virtually all of Yeshua's teachings, from the Sermon on the Mount on, paralleled in the rabbinic materials. [\[88\]](#) Several examples should suffice at this point.

He who is merciful to others shall receive mercy from Heaven (Shabbat 151b; cf. Mt. 5:7)

Let your yes be yes and your no be no (Baba Metziah 49a; cf. Mt. 5:37)

Do they say, "Take the splinter out of your eye"? He will retort, "Remove the beam out of your own eye." (Baba Bathra 15b; cf. Mt. 7:3)

But, didn't Yeshua condemn the Pharisees? Yes, he did in Matthew 23, for their hypocrisy, NOT for their teachings. But this was only after his instructions at the beginning of this chapter, where he urged his followers to FOLLOW their teachings (vv. 2-3). And, his criticism was no more severe than the Pharisees' own criticism of themselves in the Talmud. Here they call the hypocrites and insincere among themselves "sore spots" and "plagues" and "destroyers of the world" (Berakot 14b; Hagigah 14a; Sotah 3.4). Their main concern here, as it was for Yeshua, was hypocrisy and lack of sincerity.

After reviewing Yeshua's relationship to the Judaism of his day [89], it would not be inappropriate to describe Yeshua as a Pharisee in good standing. [90] So appropriately, the Orthodox Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide described Yeshua as a traditional, observant Jew, as cited earlier:

Jesus never and no where broke the law of Moses, nor did he in any way provoke its infringement—it is entirely false to say that he did...In this respect you must believe me, for I know my Talmud more or less...This Jesus was as faithful to the law as I would hope to be. But I suspect that Jesus was more faithful to the law than I am—and I am an Orthodox Jew. [91]

To this may be appended the evaluation of Klausner: "Despite all the Christian antagonism to the Pharisees, the teaching of the Pharisees remained the basis of Christian teaching." [92] Quite clearly, Yeshua remained an observant, traditional Jew, halakic both in his life and in his teaching.

That his followers understood Yeshua is clearly seen in subsequent apostolic history. Reflecting on the first century, Isidore Epstein accurately described the apostolic and early Messianic Jewish practice:

The earliest adherents ... regarded Jesus as the Messiah. They made NO OTHER changes. They continued to go to the Temple, and presumably to the synagogue, as they had been accustomed to do ... they conformed in EVERY respect to the usual Jewish observances. [93] [Emphasis mine]

Quite clearly the apostles and their followers remained a part of the "traditional" Jewish community, as Yeshua had instructed them. [94]

A Note on Grace in Judaism

The traditional Jewish liturgy invites us to come before God in repentance, expecting him to respond to us because of his grace. So the sixth benediction of the daily Amidah expects us to pray: "Forgive us our Father for we have sinned; pardon us our King for we have transgressed, for you pardon and forgive. Blessed are you, O Lord, GRACIOUS and ever ready to forgive."

In fact, a major portion of the liturgy teaches or describes God's grace. During Shacharit (the daily morning prayers) we pray: "Sovereign of all worlds! Not because of our righteous acts do we lay our supplications before you, but because of your abundant mercies." During Minhah (the daily afternoon service) we add: "Our Father, our King, be gracious to us and answer us, for we have no good works of our own;

deal with us in graciousness and lovingkindness, and save us." Finally, during Ma'ariv (the evening service) we include Psalm 51, which so clearly expresses our need to rely on God, not ourselves, because we are sinners.

Therefore, doing good deeds to obtain a reward was opposed by the Rabbis, not just by Yeshua. The Midrash expounds it this way:

David said, "Some trust in their fair and upright deeds, and some in the works of their fathers, but I trust in you. Although I have no good works, yet because I call upon you, you answer me."[\[95\]](#)

Likewise, the Pharisees criticized those among them who continually asked, "What good deed may I do?" They caricatured themselves by speaking of seven types of Pharisees. The fifth type, one of those severely critiqued, was the "Calculating Pharisee" who was always saying, "Tell me what good deed I can do to offset the bad deed."[\[96\]](#)

In their discussions and commentaries, the Rabbis repeatedly refer to God's graciousness. For example, in the Midrashim they reflect:

"Deal with your servant according to your grace" (Psalm 119:124). Perhaps you take pleasure in our good works? Merit and good works we have not; act toward us in grace.(Tehillim Rabbah, on 119:123)

Statements such as this prompted C. G. Montefiore to comment about the Rabbis' perspective:

One might almost say that man was created in order to give opportunity for God to display His forgiveness, His lovingkindness, His mercy, His grace.[\[97\]](#)

His remarks form part of a very extensive selection of passages on God's grace drawn from the rabbinic sources.

Montefiore accurately assessed the importance of God's graciousness in the rabbinic materials; it is a significant and representative aspect of the Rabbis' thinking, not an isolated stream. Lapidé makes this quite clear: "It is evident to all Masters of the Talmud that salvation, or participation in the coming world, as it is called in Hebrew, can be attained only through God's gracious love (grace)."[\[98\]](#)

To this, only one more thing needs to be added, the statement of the rabbis of the Talmud: "...then came the prophet Habakkuk and reduced all the commands to one, as it is written: 'the just shall live by his faith'." (Makkot 23-24)