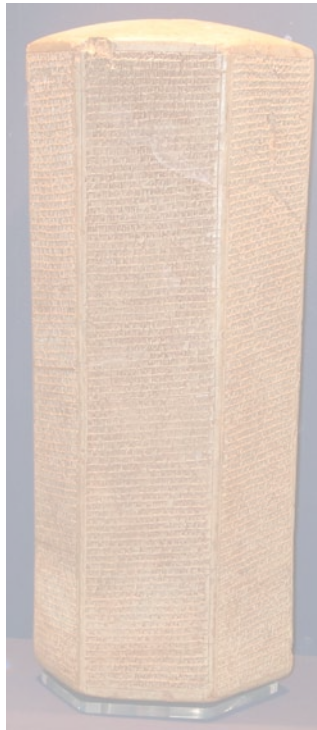


Instead, Micah 3:12 began to see its fulfilment at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. Jerusalem's overthrow was continued by Antiochus in the period between the Testaments. But the prophecy was not fully exhausted until the Romans desolated the city in A.D. 70 and beyond. During the reign of the Emperor Hadrian a plough was driven across the temple mount in order to symbolise the foundation of a new Roman city, given the name of Aelia Capitolina. A temple devoted to the worship of Ashtoreth was erected on the site of the temple, and Jews were prohibited from entering the city of Jerusalem.

Thus the mountain of the house became as the high places of the forest, even as Jesus himself had foretold that it would:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I



Picture: Lawrence Cave

have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Mt. 23:37-39). Nevertheless in these words of the Lord there was also hope. Whilst terrible times were approaching for the city of Jerusalem, the day would ultimately come when its inhabitants would say, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord". That day has not yet arrived, but it assuredly will, and Micah continues to speak of that great day in chapter 4.

(To be continued)

**Sennacherib's prism recording his military exploits. There is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem at that time.**

## History

# Jesus, the rabbis and the Mishnah

Malcolm Edwards

*"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time . . ."*

**M**OST READERS would recognise that the above words were spoken several times by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:27,33,38,43). The words "heard" and "said" were both precise and deliberate, for it is generally accepted that Jesus was not referring to the words of the Old Testament prophets but to the mass of oral tradition, known as the Mishnah, which had developed around the Jewish Torah (or Law), and which had become more important to the rabbis of his day than Scripture itself. There was also an oral commentary on the Mishnah called the

Gemara; when both were eventually written down in the third to fourth centuries A.D. they became the basis of the Jewish Talmud, which means 'instruction'.

Who were these historical teachers whose comments so influenced the Jews of Christ's day? One of the earliest was Jochanan son of Nappacha, who, around 250 B.C., as head of the Academy of Tiberias, is said to have begun a collection of discussions and reports that eventually formed the Mishnah.

Concurrently, rabbis in Babylon were creating their own traditions around the Torah, which later developed into the Babylonian Talmud. It is not

surprising, therefore, that the common people in the time of our Lord were unable to distinguish between the Word of God and the commandments of men.

### Hillel and Shammai

Two of the rabbis who much influenced Jewish thought some thirty or forty years before the birth of Jesus were Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai. Hillel was brought up in the rabbinical schools of Babylonia, and was not of priestly origin but of the line of David. He is said to have arrived in Jerusalem from Babylon with his brother Shebna and remained a comparatively poor man. He nevertheless founded a rabbinical school in Jerusalem and became a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. He is said to have been highly regarded by King Herod, and his descendants included teachers such as Simon, Gamaliel and a junior Hillel.

The latter's only serious rival during his lifetime was Rabbi Shammai, who was of a stricter order and tended to excel on many issues. But Hillel, being more liberal and more spiritual in his teaching, was the more popular with the people, creating a common proverb: "Be as gentle as Hillel and not as harsh as Shammai". Hillel taught: "Be of Aaron's disciples, who loved peace, pursued peace, loved all creatures and attracted them towards the Law".

It is not surprising that there are many stories of Hillel's chivalry towards others and quite contrary stories about Shammai, but their differences were rarely extreme. One of them was about the process of the resurrection. The school of Hillel believed that the formation of the new body in the resurrection would begin with skin and flesh and end with sinews and bones; Job 10:11 was cited as proof: "Thou hast clothed me with skin and flesh, and hast fenced me with bones and sinews".

The school of Shammai, however, believed that it would begin with sinews and bones and end with skin and flesh; proof for this was taken from Ezekiel 37:8: "And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them [the bones], and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them".

This rabbinical nit-picking with textual scrutiny was why Jesus said they made Scripture "of none effect" and why he admonished them with words that are more meaningful in modern versions: "Ye search the scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they

which bear witness of me; and ye will not come to me, that ye may have life" (Jno. 5:39,40, ASV).

It seems that, to many of them, Torah study became an end in itself that, if pursued diligently, would automatically give life. The Talmud reflects this in many places, as the following two examples show:

"The more Torah the more life . . . He who has acquired for himself words of Torah has acquired for himself life in the world to come"; "Great is the Torah which gives life to those that practise it in this world and in the world to come".

Whilst there is much intrinsic truth in such words, we can also understand how they were unable to see the Messianic wood for the textual trees, in that the promised Messiah, of whom the Torah spoke, was now standing unknown and unbelieved amongst them.

### As the sages said . . .

The panel opposite shows a few beginnings of Talmud quotations taken from Judah Goldin's book *The Living Talmud* to illustrate how such men "of old time" are still highly revered by religious Jews today, and their sayings still quoted more than Scripture itself. The fully quoted passage from each sage is then laboriously explained phrase by phrase, sometimes word by word, extending at times into several pages. These 'comments on comments' are exactly what the Gemara itself was, long before both it and the Mishnah were written down to form the Talmud.

### But I say unto you . . .

Much of this teaching was basically sound, but became a substitute for Scripture, and when Scripture was quoted it was frequently inaccurate. Thus, in exposing the rabbinical misquotes of his day, Jesus showed how his own teaching far exceeded it spiritually. For example:

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment" (Mt. 5:21).

Although most modern versions read "to", rather than "by", them of old time, it does not alter the case very much. The passage is clearly not an exact quote from either Exodus 20:13 or Deuteronomy 5:17. But Jesus went to the heart of the matter by teaching that *anger* is where the control should really begin.

It is well known that the schools of Hillel and Shammai differed on the matter of divorce, the

## Talmud sayings

“Rabbi Hananiah Ben Jacob says: ‘If one is kept awake at night by words of the Torah, it is a good sign for him’”

“Ben Zoma says: ‘Who is a wise man? He that learns from all men . . .’”

“Rabbi Levitas says: ‘Be of an exceedingly humble spirit, for the end of man is the worm’”

“Rabban Gamaliel says: ‘Provide thyself with a teacher and eschew doubtful matters’”

“Rabbi Eleazer says: ‘Let the honour of thy fellow be as dear to thee as thine own’”

“Rabbi Yose says: ‘He who honours the Torah will himself be honoured by men’”

former being more liberal and the latter permitting it only on the grounds of unfaithfulness. But in Matthew 5:27-32 Jesus again went to the root of the problem, teaching that control starts within the human heart:

“But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (v. 28).

The quotation from the Mishnah in verse 38 about “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” was misapplied from Exodus 21:24 and other places. It was simply a judicial rule teaching that retribution had prescribed limits; but the Mishnah used it to approve the general use of vengeance. The Lord again went to the heart of the matter by teaching nonresistance of evil:

“But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain” (vv. 39-41).

The Mishnah’s teaching to love one’s neighbour and hate one’s enemy (v. 43) was a travesty of Scripture teaching, which Jesus countered with the hitherto unheard of doctrine of “Love your enemies”.

In conclusion, the Mishnah, as an oral code, had either strayed from the Mosaic Law over time or was slowly altered to suit the convenience of some of the rabbis (or possibly a mixture of both). How much of those particular sections quoted by Jesus in Matthew 5 survived to become part of the written Talmud is uncertain, but it would be nice to think that the teaching of Jesus had a corrective effect on some of it.

Whatever was the case, this oral rabbinical teaching handed down from “them of old time” provided a wonderful opportunity for the Lord’s teaching to be sharply contrasted as much more

commonsense, extremely practical, and spiritually necessary for salvation.

Thus the Gospel writers record that the common people heard Jesus gladly, for they all knew that this extra-special rabbi from Nazareth “taught them as one having *authority*, and not as the scribes” (Mt. 7:29).

### These sayings of mine

Finally, in stark contrast with the garbled rabbinical teaching of his day, the Master’s teaching was so authoritative that, unless his claim to be the Son of God were true, his assertions would have been interpreted as sheer arrogance, and especially so since, besides contrasting what the men “of old time” said with, “But I say unto you”, he regularly said, “my words”, “my doctrine”, “learn of me”, etc. Yet none could question his Divine authority, because of his mighty works; for, as Nicodemus confessed, “no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him” (Jno. 3:2).

It was the Lord’s miracles that confirmed his teaching, and so he was able to say, “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock” (Mt. 7:24,25). Thus the distorted sayings of “them of old time” were no real foundation compared with the gracious words of the Son of God, which to know and to do is the sure and stable rock on which he invites us to stand.

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