

# *“Understanding the Life & Ministry of Jesus From a Hebraic Perspective”*

A Resource Guide for Appreciating  
The Jewish World of Yeshua



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## I. Introduction

It has been said, “*the roots of Christianity run deep into Hebrew soil.*”<sup>1</sup> All that we read in the Gospels about the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth has a *Hebraic* context. Hence, “*the place to begin searching for Jesus is in the world in which he grew. His roots were first-century Judaism.*”<sup>2</sup> This historical reality has been under-valued and to a certain extent suppressed and ignored, obscuring a plain view of whom Jesus was and is to us today.

The study of the Jesus of Nazareth that has occupied scholarship throughout the nineteenth century fall into three eras.<sup>3</sup> First came the search for the *historical Jesus*. This search came to an end when scholar Albert Schweitzer demonstrated that the “*biographers of Jesus were not really describing a first century Jew, but a nineteenth century German liberal philosopher.*”<sup>4</sup> Then began the *new search* for the historical Jesus, lasting approximately until the 1970’s. The scholars of the new search tried to avoid the errors of the past by carefully analyzing their source materials for accuracy. Their conclusions were less than adequate, implying that there is almost nothing that the reader of Scripture can say with confidence about the actual life and teaching of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), p. xv.

<sup>2</sup> Expressed by Rabbi David Wolpe, See Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. xii.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen M. Weyl, *The Jews in the Time of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3.

Thirdly, a new approach has surfaced primarily over the last three decades that brings us new discoveries about the person of Jesus. This new approach will be the approach reflected in this paper, an approach that attempts to understand Jesus by returning to the study of the world in which He lived, namely, the study of the First Century Jewish culture, religious rabbinical heritage, the social and political environment of the day, the language<sup>5</sup>, and the place and importance of *Second Temple Judaism*.<sup>6</sup> One of the most common of the Gospel passages, Matthew 6:9ff, may be used to illustrate the value of such new approach.

For instance, virtually every Christian is familiar with the phrase from Mt. 6:9b, "*Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.*" This sixth chapter of Matthew records the familiar words of what is traditionally called worldwide the *Lord's Prayer*. It is a prayer which has been recited by generations of Christians irrespective of denominational affiliation. Anyone who has studied this prayer has also in essence, knowingly or not, studied shortened forms of the third, fifth, sixth, ninth, and fifteenth benedictions of what has been called the Eighteen Benedictions.<sup>7</sup> Every phrase of this prayer

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<sup>5</sup> The study of the language includes the study of *Hebraisms*, namely, a *Hebrew phrase, idiom, custom, or thought* as it would have been used and understood by the first century Jew living in Israel. Given the erroneous assumption that the entire New Testament was originally communicated in Greek and not in Hebrew, this has led to a considerable amount of misunderstanding on the part of scholars and laypersons alike. This makes the study of *Hebraisms* that much more significant (See David Bivin, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 1983), p. 5

<sup>6</sup> The term, *Second Temple Judaism*, represents the Jewish theological beliefs of primarily the first century A.D. Even though the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem by Herod the Great is actually in a Biblical sense the *third* Temple to be built (the first being built by Solomon, the second by Zerubabel in the post-Exilic period)

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Jacobs, "Jesus of Nazareth in History," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. VII, (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1916), p. 102.

reverberates the liturgical heritage of traditional Judaism.<sup>8</sup> At its core, the prayer in which Yeshua taught his disciples is rabbinical and expresses fundamental affirmations of traditional Jewish faith.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, the *Sermon on the Mount* (Mathew 5-7) embodied several rabbinical illustrations that would have been common to the rabbis and religious community of Yeshua's day.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that Yeshua illustrates to promote a proper understanding of the Torah, delivers his message in the style of *Midrash*<sup>11</sup>, much the same way *Oral Torah* eventually became the Talmud.<sup>12</sup> Hence, Yeshua, like the rabbis of his day, taught that the morally sensitive needed to go beyond the letter of the Torah.<sup>13</sup> All in all, Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> For example, Rabbi Eliezar (a younger contemporary of Yeshua) says, “*May your will be done in heaven above, grant peace of mind to those who fear you [on earth] below, and do what seems best to you. Blessed are you, O Lord, who answers prayer.*” *Babylonian Talmud*, Berachot 29b. See Dr. Tom Tribelhorn's *A Survey of the Jewish Roots of the New Testament and Some Implications for Biblical Faith*, given at the 52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 16, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob J. Petuchowski and Michael Brocke, Eds. *The Lord's Prayer and Jewish Liturgy* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. vi.

<sup>10</sup> See Tribelhorn's work, p. 4

<sup>11</sup> Midrash is the interpretive understanding of Torah teaching, used by rabbis to supplement Torah and add to its value.

<sup>12</sup> The *Mishnah* (compiled by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi in 200 A.D. in Sepporis) is essentially the collection of Jewish Oral Torah in discussion format from the first century before Christ to the following two centuries after Christ. In the *Mishnah*, the name for the sixty three tractates in which Rabbi Yehuda set down the Oral Law, Jewish law is systematically codified, unlike in the Torah. The tractates are organized into 6 Orders (*Sederim*): *Zera'im* (Seeds), *Moed* (Festivals), *Nezikin* (Damages), *Nashim* (Women), *Kodashim* (Holy Things), and *Taharot* (Purity). Although the *Mishnah* reads as dry legal recitations, it is still used today in the Jewish community. During the centuries following Rabbi Yehudah's editing of the *Mishnah*, this compilation of rabbinic discussions was studied exhaustively by generation after generation. Eventually, some of these rabbis wrote down their discussion and commentaries on the *Mishnah*'s laws in a series of books known as the Talmud. The rabbis of *Erez Israel* (e.g. the land of Israel) edited their discussions of the *Mishnah* about the year 400 A.D., becoming known as the *Palestinian Talmud*. More than a century later (500 A.D.), some of the leading Babylonian rabbis compiled another editing of the discussions of the *Mishnah*. The Babylon edition was far more extensive and was viewed as more authoritative than its Palestinian counterpart, and became known as the *Babylonian Talmud*. The *Mishnah* and the rabbinic discussions (known as the *Gemara*) comprise the *Talmud*, although in Jewish life today the terms *Gemara* and *Talmud* are used interchangeably. The legal discussions are called *Halakhah*, while the ethical discussions are referred to as issues of *Haggadah* or *Aggadata*. The rabbis who are cited in the *Mishnah* are known as the *Tanna'im* (Aramiac for “teachers”) while the rabbis quoted in the *Gemara* are known as the *Amora'im* (“explainers” or “interpreters”).

<sup>13</sup> From Tribelhorn's *A Survey of the Jewish Roots*, quoting John Fischer, *Jesus and Early Judaism* (Clearwater, FL: Menorah Ministries), p. 12.



was thoroughly Jewish, thus making it prudent for today's Christian (and especially for the traveler to the *Holyland*) to understand the ministry and message of Jesus from this Jewish perspective.

The overall purpose of this resource paper is to help you both understand as well as appreciate the Jewish roots of the world of *Yeshua*<sup>14</sup>, as well as encourage you to cultivate a *Hebraic* perspective<sup>15</sup> of the New Testament, primarily the Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Christ. To accomplish this intended purpose, the content of this resource paper will address the following topics, each having relevance in helping us understand the life and ministry of Yeshua through Hebraic eyes: Jewish Life and Culture; The Role of Torah and Rabbinic Theology, Thought and Practice; Jewish Teaching Methodology, the Sects of Yeshua's Day, and the Primary Ministry Focus of Yeshua: The Kingdom of Heaven.

## **II. Topics**

### **A. Jewish Life and Culture**

Not only do the Hebrew Scriptures<sup>16</sup> but the Christian Scriptures also reflect a view of reality, which is essentially Hebraic.<sup>17</sup> More specifically, the

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<sup>14</sup> *Yeshua* is the Jewish name for Jesus. It derives from the Old Testament form of *Joshua*. From this point on and for the point of consistency with our *Hebraic* intentions, the name *Yeshua* will be used in reference to Jesus of Nazareth, our Lord and Savior.

<sup>15</sup> Some say that to think Hebraically, it takes two hands: "*On the one hand.... On the other hand.*" Where there is an opinion on an issue of Torah or theology, one can count on having two opinions articulated.

<sup>16</sup> Also called the *Tanakh* or *Tanach*, that is what is commonly called the *Old Testament*. This is what we also call the *Hebrew Bible*. It consists of 3 main sections: The Law (Torah), the Writings (Ketuvim), and the Prophets (Neviim). The author contends that it is more proper and respectful to refer to the *Old Testament* as the *Hebrew Scriptures*, while references to the *New Testament* may be made by the term *Christian Scriptures*.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, p. 12.

Gospels reflect a life and culture that is thoroughly Jewish in context. Mary and Joseph maintained a traditional Jewish home. It is Luke who mentions some of the details concerning their observance of Jewish traditions within Israel.<sup>18</sup> While circumcision on the eighth day is biblical,<sup>19</sup> the naming of a boy child on the eighth day and the gathering of family members and friends to celebrate that occasion is a Second Temple period Jewish custom that remains to this day.<sup>20</sup> In addition, one can follow Mary to the Temple as well, offering a sacrifice at the time of her purification and Joseph paying the ransom required for his firstborn son.<sup>21</sup> The fact is the parents of Yeshua did everything required by the Law of Moses,<sup>22</sup> for they lived within the context of Jewish life and culture.

The culture of Jesus' day evolved around the people's covenant relationship with God. Yeshua grew up in a home that honored the religious culture. They would have regularly attended synagogue services<sup>23</sup> each Shabbat,<sup>24</sup> observed all of the Jewish holidays and festivals,<sup>25</sup> and

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<sup>18</sup> In Second Temple times, the name of the Jewish state was Judah. This was also the geographical name for that part of the land from Jerusalem south to the desert, and from the beginning of the hill country in the west to the Dead Sea in the East. The name *Palestine* only was used as a result of tempered Roman authorities who wanted to upset the Jewish revolters (about 70 A.D.) with an insulting change of the name of the land. The word *Palestine* comes from a form of the name *Philistines*, Israel's darkest enemy of more than a millennium before.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Leviticus 12:3 and Genesis 21:4 with Luke 2:21.

<sup>20</sup> Chana Safrai, "Jesus' Jewish Parents," Jerusalem Perspective, vol. 40 (September/October, 1993), pp. 10,11,14. See also Luke 1:59-63; the circumcision and naming of John.

<sup>21</sup> A firstborn son can be redeemed from his thirtieth day. See Numbers 18:14-16.

<sup>22</sup> Luke 2:39.

<sup>23</sup> Luke 4:16

<sup>24</sup> Or in English, the *Sabbath*, a day of rest. It began at sunset Friday night and ended on sunset on Saturday night. Every Shabbat of the year, there are prescribed readings from the Torah. In one year, the Torah is read.

<sup>25</sup> There are three primary Jewish Feasts: *Pesach* (Passover, in the spring), *Shavu'ot* (Festival of Weeks, coming 50 days after Pesach), and *Succot* (Tabernacles, in the fall).

respected the Temple by making pilgrimage to Jerusalem.<sup>26</sup> As a boy, Yeshua would have reflected His Jewishness in His dress. This is later evidenced by the account of the woman with the issue of blood. While most translations indicate that this anguished woman grabbed Yeshua by the *hem of His garment*,<sup>27</sup> the Greek term used here typically translates into the Hebrew (*tzitzit*), meaning *fringes* or *tassel* of Yeshua's *tallit*,<sup>28</sup> or mantle. Thus, Yeshua, a Jew of the First Century, wore both *tephillin* and a *tallit*.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, the Jewish culture of the first century would find Yeshua speaking Hebrew as well as Aramaic. Ever since the findings of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, the evidence for Hebrew being the primary language of the people and of Yeshua is quite overwhelming.<sup>30</sup> Professor Frank Cross of Harvard University, the leading authority on the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, has stated, "*The dominant language of Palestine beginning about 130 B.C. was Hebrew.*"<sup>31</sup> Attending religious studies as a young boy, there is also much

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<sup>26</sup> It seems as though Jesus traveled to Jerusalem on at least 3 separate occasions for religious and cultural reasons.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 9:20

<sup>28</sup> A Jewish *tallit* is a prayer shawl that is worn when praying. Many Orthodox Jews today wear what is called a *talit katan* (e.g. small talit) underneath their shirt, with only the 4 fringes or tassels (or in Hebrew, *tzitzit*) showing. The tradition of wearing a *talit* comes from Numbers 15:37-41. As a point of interest, an interesting numerological aside is interesting to be considered: Each fringe consists of 8 strands and 5 double knots, for a total of 13. When taken with the numerical value of *tzitzit*, 600, the total is 613, the number of commandments in the Torah.

<sup>29</sup> *Tephillin* are the *phylacteries* used in times of prayer. They are wrapped on one's forearm as well as around one's head as an exercise representing one's dedication in heart and mind to God. See Deuteronomy 6:8. At Qumran where the *Dead Sea Scrolls* have been discovered, *tephillin* from the time of Yeshua have been found, providing archaeological light on Matthew 23:5. See also Wilson, p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> David Bivin, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 1994), p. 11. The mounting evidence that Hebrew was the primary language of the day stands against the traditional *Aramaic* or *Greek* Theories.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20. Jesus certainly used Aramaic terms and words, but recent linguistic research indicate that Hebrew stood primary. This is an important conclusion to make, for many scholars in Israel are now convinced that the *Synoptic Gospels* (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were derived from original Hebrew, not Greek, sources. Even though we use our Greek New Testaments today in research, the Gospels were first



cultural evidence to conclude that Yeshua would have had at least the Torah<sup>32</sup> memorized if not the entire Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>33</sup> Memorization of Scripture as well as *Oral* Tradition was an integral part of a Jewish education. According to the Mishnah, there were four type of students, the first likened to a sponge (e.g. as one who soaks up all the facts but has no discernment); a funnel (e.g. as one who is quick to perceive, but equally quick to forget; a strainer (e.g. as one who forgets the essential teachings, but remembers the unessential teachings); and a sifter (e.g. the one who memorizes the good, but rejects the worthless and unimportant.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the religious heritage of Yeshua prepared Him well for the task and ministry ahead of Him.

Contrary to what unfortunately surfaces in any discussion of the issues of *law and grace*, Yeshua observed the Law. He was from a family and culture who abided by the Torah. From being born *under the Law*, Yeshua was taught the Law. Professor David Flusser suggests, "*Many people think keeping the Law constituted a problem with Jesus. But these problems dealt with minutia.*"<sup>35</sup> As Yeshua's ministry began,<sup>36</sup> He did not in any way set out to break the Law of Moses. Most of His arguments with the religious

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written by the Gospel authors in Hebrew. This may account for the numerous mistranslations of the New Testament. See p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> The first 5 books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

<sup>33</sup> Tanakh or Tanak.

<sup>34</sup> *Mishnah*, Avot 5:15. Hillel said that a student cannot be timid. Good students asked questions. Today, some rabbis have the entire 18 volumes of the Talmud memorized.

<sup>35</sup> David Flusser, in a lecture given in Jerusalem entitled, *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity*.

<sup>36</sup> At the age of 30, the typical age for a rabbi to be identified by his community as one who now spoke with authority.



leaders of the day came over *fine point* incidental issues, for these leaders looked for ways to dispute, as was their educational custom.

As an example, there is an incident when Yeshua and His disciples were criticized for not washing their hands before a meal.<sup>37</sup> To a Western reader of this text, it appears on the surface that the Pharisees had Yeshua cornered in breaking the Torah, the same way, as they will attempt to corner Him on *healing on the Sabbath*.<sup>38</sup> However, both these religious leaders as well as Yeshua would have known that the *Oral Traditions*<sup>39</sup> said that hand washing was only required *after* a meal.<sup>40</sup> What Yeshua will ultimately object to in this religious culture in which He lived were not the *Traditions*, but the *hypocrisy*. All throughout Yeshua's life, He was observant in fasting, alms giving, tithing, and blessing. After all, Yeshua came not to *abolish the Law*,<sup>41</sup> but to *fulfill* it.

According to a Hebraic perspective of the language used in this verse, perhaps a better paraphrase of this verse that would reflect the Hebraic meaning of it would read as follows: "*Do not suppose I have any intentions of undermining Scripture by miss-interpreting it, but my purpose is to establish and maintain the knowledge and observance of Gods Word, not undermine it.*"<sup>42</sup> This brings us to Yeshua's view of the role of Torah.

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew 15:1ff.

<sup>38</sup> John 7:23ff.

<sup>39</sup> e.g. What will eventually become part of the *Mishnah*, compiled in 200 A.D. in Sepporis.

<sup>40</sup> Although in some regions of Israel the custom was to wash one's hands before a meal.

<sup>41</sup> Matthew 5:17.

<sup>42</sup> David Bivin's paraphrase as it was told in a lecture given to the *Center for Hebraic Studies*. For the Jew of that day, to misinterpret a text of Scripture was to indeed *abolish* it. All that Jesus was implying was that He had come put the Torah on a *firmer foundation* so that it would not be interpreted incorrectly or incompletely.

## ***B. The Role of Torah and Rabbinic Theology, Thought, and Practice***

There are essentially four perceptions of the Torah in theological circles today. First, a *Hebraic viewpoint* that sees Torah as God's Wisdom and Blueprint for all creation. The Torah reveals God's nature and character. It is loving instructions from the Heavenly Father to His children to be blessed.

Secondly, there is the *Christian viewpoint*. This view sees the Torah, or *Old Law*, as nothing but legalism and bondage. We are free from the Torah and all its laws and requirements because of Jesus. Torah is seen only as *all Jewish stuff anyway*.

Thirdly, there is the *Christian viewpoint of the Hebraic view*. Unfortunately, this viewpoint is the most perverted one. It views Torah as a *salvation by works system* that leaves no room for the Messiah and His work. It is a works salvation and a religious system of bondage and dead ritual.

Fourthly, there is Yeshua's viewpoint of Torah, the correct view. His views surface from His own contextual understanding of Torah as a result of being trained in Jewish religious education as well as correlating the role of Torah with the purpose of His coming as the *Living Torah* of God.<sup>43</sup>

Yeshua was raised in the milieu of early Judaism and skillfully employed the traditions and faith of His ancestors in every phase and aspect of his

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<sup>43</sup> See John 1:1-14. To walk in Torah is to walk in *kodesh* (holiness), *teshuva* (repentance), *emunah* (faith, and humility (Hebraically, the opposite of iniquity, not pride).



brief adult ministry.<sup>44</sup> At the very center of Jewish religious thought and practice was the teaching of Torah. Jews applied the teachings of the Torah to every area of human life, not only the cultic and ritual service of God, but also agriculture, business, family relations, sexuality, the intellect, personal relationships, and more.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Jews in Yeshua's day "perceived the extension of Torah law into every realm of life and being as a divine benefit, not a burden."<sup>46</sup> In the words of a later sage, Rabbi Hananiah ben Akashya said, "*The Blessed Holy One was pleased to make Israel worthy, therefore God gave them a copious and extensive Torah, as it is said (Is. 62:21), 'It pleased Adonai for the sake of His righteousness (i.e. to justify the righteous ones) to make the Torah great and glorious.'*"<sup>47</sup>

As it was mentioned above, the learning of Torah was something Yeshua experienced as a young boy in the course of His Jewish education. He was taught to both respect and honor the teaching of Torah. This is best exemplified in Yeshua's encounter with the Pharisee.<sup>48</sup> As this inquisitive religious leader asked Yeshua, "*Which is the most important of the Laws?*" Yeshua responded by quoting two passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (The *Shema*<sup>49</sup>) as well as Leviticus

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<sup>44</sup> Tribelhorn, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Wylen, p. 95.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 95.

<sup>47</sup> *Mishnah*, Makkot 3:16.

<sup>48</sup> Mark 12:28ff.

<sup>49</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4, "*Shema Israel Adonai Elohanu Adonai ehad.*" (Hear, O Israel the Lord your God, the Lord is one.)

19:18 which alludes to the second most important command, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*"<sup>50</sup>

During the first seven decades of the First Century A.D., there were primarily to *schools of theology* present within the religious culture of the Jewish people. The more conservative school was represented by the teachings of Rabbi Shammai, while the more progressive school of theology was represented by Rabbi Hillel.<sup>51</sup> Yeshua, perhaps viewed as a Pharisee, someone who was himself versed in the theological perspectives of the School of Hillel,<sup>52</sup> simply reflected much of his rabbinic learning through His ministry. While Yeshua's teaching on divorce coincided with those of Rabbi Shammai<sup>53</sup>, His teaching of the *Golden Rule* as well as other kingdom teachings coincided with more with Rabbi Hillel.<sup>54</sup>

There are incontestable parallels between Hillel's teaching and Yeshua's teaching. Compare this one example of Hillel's comments with what is recorded in Luke's Gospel. First, commenting about the importance of humility with the notion of where to seat oneself at a feast, Hillel says,

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<sup>50</sup> It is interesting that the great Rabbi Hillel (40 B.C.- 10 A.D.) commented on this verse as well. The setting of this quote finds a certain Gentile man who decided to mock Judaism on this given day. First, he came to Rabbi Shammai and said to him, "*I will convert if you can teach me all of Judaism while standing on one foot.*" Hastily, Shammai pushed the man away with a cubit-stick he had in his hand. Then the man came to Hillel saying the same thing. Hillel then said, "*What is hateful for yourself, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole law, the rest is commentary; go and learn.*" Taking the negative implications of Leviticus 19:18, the man converted on the spot. The converted man said of Hillel, "*Hillel's kindness saved my life, while Shammai in his strictness nearly lost me my soul.*" (See the *Mishnah*, Shabbat 31a).

<sup>51</sup> The theological positions and viewpoints of Shammai and Hillel are typically viewed as the two mainstream orders of Jewish religious thought and practice. In recorded rabbinic literature we have over 350 disputes between the School of Hillel and the School of Shammai. Their influence seems to have lasted from the time of their founders (c. 30 B.C.) until the time of the *Bar Kochba* rebellion (132-35 A.D.).

<sup>52</sup> William Phipps, Jesus, the Prophetic Pharisee," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, XIV, 1977, pp. 30-31. Also see John W. Bowker, *Jesus and the Pharisees* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:23 with Gittan 9.10

<sup>54</sup> cf. Matthew 7:12 with Shabbat 31a.

*“Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin in the name of Rabbi Levi expounded the verse, [Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among great men;] it is better for him to say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman’ [Prov. 25:7]. Rabbi Akiva taught in the name of Rabbi Shim’on ben Azzai: ‘Move two or three places lower and there sit down. Move down so that you will be told, ‘Move up,’ rather than move up and be told, ‘Move down.’ It is better for you to be told, ‘Move up, move up.’ Than for you to be told ‘Move down, move down.’”<sup>55</sup>*

Now compare the teaching of Yeshua,

*“When he noticed how the guests were trying to secure places of honor, he spoke to them in a parable, ‘When you are asked by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the place of honor. It may be that some person more distinguished than yourself has been invited; and the host will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then you will look foolish as you begin to take the lowest place. No, when you receive an invitation, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he will say, ‘Come up higher, my friend.’ Then all your fellow guests will see the respect in which you are held.”<sup>56</sup>*

There are other places where there are striking affinities between Hillel’s statement regarding scattering and gathering in *Sifre Zutta* and Yeshua’s statement regarding scattering and gathering in Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23. Here, Yeshua actually quotes Hillel, adapting the saying for His own purposes.<sup>57</sup> He says, *“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does gather with me scatters.”<sup>58</sup>* Also, whereas Hillel said, *“Where there are two or three gathered to study Torah, there is God also in their midst,”* Yeshua said, *“For where two or three come together in my name, there I*

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<sup>55</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 1:5.

<sup>56</sup> Luke 14:7-10. New Living Translation

<sup>57</sup> Tribelhorn, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. The *Mishnah*, Tractate Berakot 6:24 with Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23.

*am with them.*"<sup>59</sup> In addition, Yeshua's public retort of asking a question to answer a question is thoroughly rabbinical, following upon the practices of Hillel. The fact of the matter is, Hillel and his school of Jewish thought and practice have had a lasting impact upon early Jewish thought. In addition, Hillel's influence is strongly felt in many facets of Yeshua's theological and ethical teachings.<sup>60</sup>

Yet another example of the similarities between Yeshua and Rabbi Hillel can be in the area of love. While Yeshua's teaching on love was radical departure from the teachings of the Essenes at Qumran as reflected in the *Damascus Document*<sup>61</sup> as well as in their own *Manual of Discipline*,<sup>62</sup> His teachings paralleled Hillel's perspective of loving one's neighbor as oneself. Hillel is quoted as saying, "*Be disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them near to the Torah.*"<sup>63</sup> Whereas the Qumran attitude was one of hatred to the sinner with full absence of the concept of loving people for the sake of "*drawing them near to the Torah,*" Yeshua shared Hillel's attitude. This is reflected in Mathew 5:43-47:

*"You have heard that it was said (e.g. at Qumran), 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies,*

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<sup>59</sup> Matthew 18:20.

<sup>60</sup> Tribelhorn, p. 9. See also D. Flusser, *Hillel and Jesus: Two Ways of Self-Awareness*, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Pres, 1997), p. 71.

<sup>61</sup> The Damascus Document interprets Leviticus 19:18 as follows: "*as for the passage that says, 'Take no vengeance and bear no grudge against your kinfolk', any covenant member who brings against his fellow an accusation not sworn to before witnesses or who makes an accusation in the heat of anger or who tells it to his leaders to bring his fellow into repute, the same is a vengeance-taker and a grudge-bearer.*" (Damascus Document 9,2).

<sup>62</sup> The *Manual of Discipline* served as the *guidebook* of behavior at the Essene community of Qumran. It appears that the Essene community limited the word *neighbor* to any covenant member, for hatred towards outsiders seems to have been taught... "*bear unremitting hatred towards all men of ill repute...*" (Manual of Discipline Ix, 21-26).

<sup>63</sup> *Mishnah*, Avot 1:12)

*bleed those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? So not even the tax collectors do so?"*

Yeshua here begins by quoting the Hebrew Scriptures, "Love your neighbor," (Lev. 19:18), but then gives the Qumran corollary "hate your enemy." Thus, to Yeshua (and Hillel), the issue is the interpretation of *neighbor*. In His Parable of the Good Samaritan<sup>64</sup> Yeshua argues that we cannot be sure who our *neighbor* is, so in order to make sure we do not violate Leviticus 19:18, we should love everyone.

As to Yeshua's overall concern and treatment for Torah, even contemporary scholars cannot find any substantial points of disagreement between Yeshua and His contemporaries.<sup>65</sup> With the fact that Yeshua regularly taught in synagogues throughout *Erez Israel*<sup>66</sup> points to the conclusion that this would not have been possible if His teachings had been recognizably different from the current teaching of the rabbis of His day, namely Hillel and Shamaï.

Other observations characterizing rabbinical thought that prevailed in Yeshua's day include issues of religious lifestyle and practice. What the rabbis of Yeshua's day taught concerning one's walk of faith with God can be divided into two categories, *Halakhah* and *Haggadah*.<sup>67</sup> *Halakhah*

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<sup>64</sup> Luke 10:29-36

<sup>65</sup> Chana Safrai, "Jesus' Jewish Parents," *Jerusalem Perspective*, vol. 40 (September/October, 1993)p. 55.

<sup>66</sup> The "Land of Israel."

<sup>67</sup> Or sometimes spelled *Halakah* and *Aggadah*.

comes from the Hebrew word for *walk* or *way*. It refers to the application of *Law*. The *Talmud* is full of *Halakhah* (e.g. rabbinical offering of practical rulings on *Torah*) essentially, it refers to what to do and not to do, or, if you may, the *norm* of what was expected as to behavior and lifestyle. Simply understood in a Jewish way, it refers to the *way of walking in the Law*.

On the other hand, *Haggadah* refers to everything in Jewish tradition that cannot be categorized under legal descriptions and guidelines. Thus, *Haggadah* includes legends, theology, biblical interpretation, ethical standards, sermon material, parables, folk lore, and commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures called *Midrash*.

What is this important? What the Western world does not appreciate about Yeshua is that He was the *master of Haggadah*! While Yeshua did not spend much of His time in dealing with legal decisions (*Halakhah*), even when the Pharisees pressed Him in areas concerning the legal implications of the Law, He was more focused and concerned about the *ethical* implications more than the *legal*.<sup>68</sup> He was concerned more for the overall welfare of the person than the legal implications of Law. Yeshua's actions on the Sabbath best reflect this approach. Did Yeshua ever break the Sabbath for sake of *Haggadah*? Yeshua never broke the Shabbath, even though the example of Luke 6:1 (e.g. Yeshua and His disciples walking in the field of grain) is often quoted as doing so. It boiled down to the question of Yeshua breaking *Written Law* or *Oral Law* and the Jewish *interpretation*

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<sup>68</sup> This again may reflect Hillel's influence upon Yeshua. While Shammai was more concerned with the *legal*, Hillel was more concerned with the *ethical*. Could this be why Yeshua spends 3 entire chapters (Mt. 5-7, the *Sermon on the Mount*), addressing issues of *Haggadah*?



of both. This is why Yeshua was less concerned with *Halakhah* (e.g. like the Pharisees were) than He was *Haggadah*.

### C. ***Prayer and Giving Thanks***

Among the other aspects of *normalized* Jewish thought and practice prevalent in the culture of Yeshua included such routines as prayer and giving thanks. Other than the study of Torah being the highest form of worship for the First Century Jew, prayer was also an integral part of Jewish religious life. Prayer was the means by which Jews -- both ancient and modern -- have stayed attuned to the concept that all of life is sacred.<sup>69</sup> The Jewish prayers of Yeshua's day tended to be short because the entire working day of an observant Jew is punctuated with sentence prayers. More than one hundred of these *berakhot*<sup>70</sup> would have been recited throughout the day. The essence of one's prayer life evolved around the acknowledgment of God's continual abiding presence at all times and in every aspect of daily life. As the *Babylonian Talmud* says, "*It is forbidden to a man to enjoy anything of this world without a benediction, and if anyone enjoys anything of this world without a benediction, he commits sacrilege.*"<sup>71</sup> Hence, one can imagine Yeshua following these standards of the day, reciting prayers with other Jews contemporary of His day upon hearing bad

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<sup>69</sup> Wilson, p. 157.

<sup>70</sup> Or *Blessings*, customarily begun with "*Baruch attah Adonai*" – Blessed are You, O Lord. See Wilson, p. 157ff. See also the *Mishnah*, Berakhot 9:1-5. Interestingly enough, there was even a specific blessing or thanksgiving offered to God after urination, thanking God that one's bodily functions work properly. The prayer reads, "*Blessed is He who has formed man in wisdom and created in him many orifices and many cavities. It is fully known before the throne of Thy glory that if one of them should be [improperly] opened or one of them closed it would be impossible for a man to stand before Thee.*" (Bab. Talmud, Berakhot 60b).

<sup>71</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 60b.

news and good news, when smelling fragrant plants, when eating food and drinking wine, in the presence of thunder, lightning, rainbows, and comets.<sup>72</sup>

Along with prayer came the practice of *meditation* as well. Whereas prayers were often short, longer amounts of time was reserved for uninterrupted meditation. As instructed in the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>73</sup> the Hebraic approach to meditation would also have included an *undertone* or *murmur*. The Hebrew word for meditation is *hagah*, meaning *to emit a sound or murmur*. Thus, meditation was not a silent practice, but one that included speaking in an undertone. Hence, those times of isolated meditation and prayer for Yeshua were not silent times before His Father, but times of verbalizing His thoughts before God.<sup>74</sup> Today, this practice of *verbalizing* meditation and prayer can be observed in the *Hasidim* community.<sup>75</sup>

When it comes to the specific recorded prayers of Yeshua, He used the traditional Jewish blessings over bread and wine, and recited the *Hallel Psalm* at the Passover Seder.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Wilson, p. 157.

<sup>73</sup> Joshua 1:8, Ps. 1:2, 77:12. Also, the Hebrew word *hagah* is used in Isaiah 31:4 and 38:14 to indicate such varied sounds as the *growl* of the lion and the *moaning* of a dove, respectively.

<sup>74</sup> Mark 6:47, Luke 9:36.

<sup>75</sup> It is the *Hasidim* who practice *hitdoddadut*. This Hebrew term means “*to be alone*,” or “*to seclude oneself*” for purposes of meditation. Each day is it customary for an observant *Hasid* to make time to be alone for a while so he can meditate by talking aloud to God. Interestingly, the rabbis of Yeshua’s day recommended *hitboddadut* at night in an open field. Tevye, the dairyman, portrays a familiar illustration of this personal articulation of thoughts to God in Fiddler on the Roof. See Wilson, p. 155.

<sup>76</sup> See Luke 22:19-20; Mark 6:41, 8:6; Psalm 136; and Mark 14:22,23,26. Referring to the *Hallel Psalms*, the Hebrew word *hallel* means praise. The word is used in the Talmud as a term for a group of Psalms, 113-118, and 136. Psalms 113-118 are called *Hallel ha-Mitzri*, the Egyptian Hallel. Psalm 136 is called *Hallel ha-gadol*, the Great Hallel and is recited during the morning service of Sabbaths and festivals, as well as at the Passover Seder. See Tibelhorn, p. 8.

Perhaps the most well known prayer of Yeshua is what has been called *The Lord's Prayer*. Upon observation, both the form and content of the prayer Yeshua taught to His disciples are thoroughly Hebraic. As all Jewish prayers were to be offered in a spirit of *emunah* and *teshuvah*,<sup>77</sup> this prayer reflects the Hebraic theology of Yeshua. Clearly, Yeshua shared in the Jewish belief of the coming *advancement* of the *kingdom* of God. His prayer included a request for an increase of the reign of God in the hearts and lives of His contemporaries.<sup>78</sup> But the way Yeshua begins this prayer, “*Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Thy name....*”<sup>79</sup> As well as the content of the prayer itself is strongly reminiscent of Jewish prayers used already in rabbinic circles. The following is an example of a rabbinic prayer that parallels Yeshua’s prayer,

*“May Your will be done in heaven above, and grant peace and contentment to those who fear You, and do whatever seems best to You. May it be Your will, O Lord, my God, to make me familiar with Your Law, and cause me to adhere to Your commandments. Do not lead me into sin, nor into iniquity, not into temptation, nor into dishonor. Compel me impulses to serve You, and keep me far from an evil man or evil companions. Give me good desires and good companions in this life. And let me this day and every day find grace, favor, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see me, and grant me Your best blessings. Blessed are You, O Lord, who grants Your best blessings to Your people, Israel.”*<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Emunah* is a Hebrew word which means *faith*, while *teshuvah* is a Hebrew word which means *repentance*. See Habbakuk 3:17-19.

<sup>78</sup> The phrase, “May your kingdom come” in Hebrew reads, “*Talich malchut cha*” or “*may your reign increase*”. The following phrase in parallel, *Thy will be done*, affirms this interpretation. More will be said later on the theology of the kingdom as seen by Yeshua.

<sup>79</sup> Matthew 6:9.

<sup>80</sup> As found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tosefta Berachot 3:7, and Berachot 60b. See Bivin, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, p. 46.

#### D. *Yeshua's Teaching and Technique*

Early on in Yeshua's ministry, His disciples referred to Him as *rabbi*. The term *rabbi* during the days of Yeshua was not yet used as an official title of someone who held an official position. Not until the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. did the term *rabbi* hold official significance. The term *rabbi* simply was used of Yeshua and others as a term that identified them as a *teacher*. Like all the other past and present rabbis of this time period, it is not coincidental that Yeshua assumed His ministry during His adult years. According to the *Mishnah*, age 30 was when Levites were ready for service.<sup>81</sup> An overview of the pattern of Jewish education that Yeshua would have encountered to this point of His life may be helpful:

*"At 5 years of age, one is ready to study the Scripture. At 10, one is fit for the study of Mishnah/Oral Law. At age 13, one is fit for the fulfillment of the commandments. It is now the children who become morally accountable to the Law. At the age 15, one begins studying Talmud. At the age of 18, one is ready for marriage. At the age of 20, this is the age of pursuing a vocation. At the age of 30, one is ready to enter into one's full vigor. At the age of 40, one is ready for understanding. At the age of 50, one is ready for counsel. At the age of 60, one attains old age. At the age of 70, one attains a hair-free head. At the age of 80, one receives special strength. At the age of 90, one is ready for bending under old age. At the age of 100, it is as if one is already dead."<sup>82</sup>*

Thus, fully trained in *Written Law* as well as *Oral Law*, rabbis of the First Century were itinerate or traveling teachers. Other than having a

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<sup>81</sup> See Numbers 4:47

<sup>82</sup> The *Mishnah*, Avot 5:21, paraphrased. Yeshua at this point would have been deemed a recognizable teacher and one who now speaks with certain authority. This is why Yeshua's ministry did not begin until the age of 30. In doing so, it gave the opportunity for His culture to embrace His teaching.

temporary place of residence,<sup>83</sup> rabbis, like the pattern of the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures,<sup>84</sup> taught in homes, in synagogues among the local villages, and in open and rural places.<sup>85</sup> Rabbis like Yeshua also would have taught in the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem. In good Jewish form, a rabbi who had only something brief to say would be able, as the saying goes, be able to *balance oneself on one foot*. However, when a teaching rabbi had something longer to say, he would sit down to teach. This is exactly what Yeshua is seen doing in Matthew 5-7 known as the *Sermon on the Mount*. Very simply, Yeshua wanted to be around people, and to convey the transforming message of the kingdom to His own people.

Rabbis in that day were also poor. They were dependent on the hospitality and generosity of others. They would carry around with them a bag of grain and a few olives, just enough to get them from one small village to another.<sup>86</sup> Rabbis also dressed modestly, consisting of an inner garment called in Hebrew a *haluk*, and an outer garment called a *tallit*.<sup>87</sup> Because of their poorness, rabbis were dependent upon others to meet their daily needs. According to the *Mishnah*, Rabbi Yose Ben Joezer is recorded of saying, *“Let your house be a meeting place for the sages.”*<sup>88</sup> Once arriving at someone’s home, one would deem it a privilege to be able

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<sup>83</sup> For Yeshua, Capernaum served as His Galilean home town following His expulsion from His childhood town of Nazareth.

<sup>84</sup> Elijah, Elisha. Notice the term *son of the prophets* See II Kings 2.

<sup>85</sup> It would not have been uncommon for Yeshua to teach as He did on hillsides, in boats along the Sea of Galilee, and in remote places. See Matthew 5-7, Luke 5:3ff.

<sup>86</sup> This is why Yeshua and His disciples were seen without any food at the time of the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000.

<sup>87</sup> As mentioned before, a *tallit*, as previously mentioned, was a prayer shawl worn by observant Jews.

<sup>88</sup> The *Mishnah*, Tractate Avot. Rabbi Yose Joezer was someone who lived about 150 years prior to Yeshua. He was crucified on a cross as well.

to *sit at the dust of their feet*, an idiomatic Hebrew expression used of disciples who would follow a rabbi for the sake of sitting under his teaching.

Rabbis also were known by the disciples who followed them. The *Mishnah* states, “*Be deliberate in judgment and be fair; rise up many disciples; make a fence around Torah.*”<sup>89</sup> To have disciples or followers were necessary expectations of rabbis of Yeshua’s day, for a rabbi would be known by the number of his disciples or students.<sup>90</sup> Simply disciples followed their rabbi or teacher in order to study with him. A serious follower would literally be covered with the *dust of the rabbi*. Hence, the response of a serious disciple would be to follow his rabbi regardless of the circumstances.<sup>91</sup>

Furthermore, the teaching techniques of Yeshua modeled the Jewish sages. First of all, what did the rabbis teach? As previously mentioned, they taught both *Halakhah* and *Haggadah*.<sup>92</sup> Primarily, while the teaching sage or rabbi would focus upon the *legal* implications of Torah (e.g. *Halakhah*), Yeshua seemed to focus upon the *ethical* implications of Torah (e.g. *Haggadah*). In doing such, *parables* were used widely in rabbinical teaching. About one-third of Yeshua’s teaching was done in parabolic form, something that would have been common at all. Over 5,000 Jewish

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<sup>89</sup> From the *Mishnah*, Avot 1:1, paraphrased.

<sup>90</sup> The Hebrew word for student is *talmid*, or *talmidim* in plural form. According to Acts, Rabbi Gamaliel had 500 students, although the *Mishnah* states he had up to 1,000 disciples. After Yeshua’s crucifixion, the Christian Scriptures mention that Yeshua had 120 disciples.

<sup>91</sup> Luke 5:27ff records the call of Levi, “*Follow me.*” The cost of being a disciple was to leave everything. Thus, Yeshua says, “*If you want to be my disciple, you must love your mother and father less than me.*” It was a matter of commitment. Also, for married men to be gone more than 30 days at a time from their wife, they needed special permission from her in Yeshua’s culture. See also Luke 9:61.

<sup>92</sup> As mentioned above, sometimes spelled *Halakah* and *Aggadah*.

parables from the time period contemporary with the life of Yeshua have been discovered thus far.<sup>93</sup> Essentially, parables were *wide dramas* sometimes written but more commonly simply told in story form with a specific function. This function was to be determined by the context as well as the by the storyteller himself. Parables as *teaching aids* for the first century Jewish audience always illustrated and illuminated, never intended to be *allegorized* as the Early Church Fathers erroneously did. As Dr. Young adds, “*The parables of Jesus are intimately related to the religious heritage, culture, language, agricultural life and social concerns of the Jewish people during the Second Temple Period.*”<sup>94</sup> In other words, Yeshua was not the first to teach in parables. Later in this paper, a few examples of the parabolic teaching of the rabbis will be compared and contrasted to the parabolic teaching of Yeshua.

Secondly, how did the rabbis and Yeshua teach? Yeshua taught in many other ways. As Rabbi Hillel laid out 7 principles of biblical interpretation and application, some think that Yeshua modeled Hillel’s methodology. One of these methods involved what has been called in Hebrew *Kol v-khomer*. This is the principle of teaching the Scriptures from the simple and understandable to the complex.<sup>95</sup> In other words, an interpreter of Scripture must first begin with and build upon the passages

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<sup>93</sup> Dr. Brad Young’s book, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*, essentially served as Dr. Young’s dissertation project. Dr. Young has studied each of these parables and compared them to the parables of Yeshua. At Hebrew University in Jerusalem today, the class that teaches Jewish parables is a class that primarily studies the parables of Yeshua more than any other First Century rabbi.

<sup>94</sup> Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables* (Tulsa, OK: Gospel Research Foundation, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>95</sup> Matthew 7:9 serves as an example of this. The key phrase is *how much more...* Yeshua’s teaching starts with what is obvious, and proceeds with what is more complex. Matthew 10:24ff is another example.

that can be clearly understood without confusion before one can proceed with the more difficult passages.

Yet another teaching principle used by Yeshua is what is known as *Ramez*. The principle of *Ramez* is a technique of *referencing to or alluding to or hinting at* something that would have been known in that day. It may also be a type of *cross-referencing*. With the understanding that the majority of the Jewish culture knowing the entire Hebrews Scriptures (often by memory), Yeshua often *assumed* His audience knew the referencing texts He would allude to. Yeshua would use the *Ramez* principle to make the *connection* for His listeners back to the Hebrew Scriptures. He did it in a way that made people understand who he was and what he came to teach about the coming kingdom.<sup>96</sup>

All in all, Yeshua was a Jewish teacher who taught in a Hebraic fashion. The place to begin searching for understanding of Yeshua's teaching is in the rabbinical world in which He was a part. Just as First Century Judaism was filled with debate, diversity, and argumentation (which was the order of the day as a normal part of rabbinical Judaism), Yeshua's teaching, both in form and content, as well as the way He delivered His message of the kingdom, must be seen within this contextual world of Hebraic thought and practice.

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<sup>96</sup> For examples, see Luke 19 (the story of Zaccheus) and the referencing back to Daniel 7:13-14 in regard to the reference of the title "*the Son of Man*" as well as to the function of the Son of Man in *seeking and saving the lost*, as mentioned in Ezekiel 34:11-16.



## E. *The Sects of Yeshua's Day*

As one speaks of the diversity of thought and practice, we must also take into consideration the various *sects* of First Century Judaism. Any serious student of the Gospels must take into consideration that in any given teaching setting of Yeshua, His audience most likely would have comprised of at least 3 different *sects* of people, all of whom would have viewed Yeshua and His teaching differently. Specifically, Josephus mentions the presence of 3 major *sects*. He comments, “*At this time there were three sects among the Jews, who had different opinions concerning Jewish actions. The one was called the sect of the Pharisees, another the sect of the Sadducees, and the other the sect of the Essenes.*”<sup>97</sup> However, this is not to imply that there was an absence of tolerance for diversity within First Century Judaism. Overall, obedience to Torah was of first importance for each *sect*, and each group regarded it as such. Hence, a Hebraic understanding of the Gospels includes an understanding of the *sects* of the First Century Jewish world.

The first two *sects* to be discussed are the *Pharisees* and the *Sadducees*. Some qualified scholars of our time make a good case for Yeshua being a *Pharisee*.<sup>98</sup> We can only be certain by His own actions, for He did not contravene the Torah as the Pharisees understood it. As a modern rabbi has stated, “*If Yeshua was not a Pharisee, then He certainly*

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<sup>97</sup> Josephus, *War*, 13:5.

<sup>98</sup> Scholars such as David Flusser, Brad Young, and Hyam Maccoby have contributed greatly to the issue.

*at the very least identified with the majority of their interpretations of Torah.*<sup>99</sup>

The Pharisees constituted at the very least the most popular sect among the Jewish populace, although some scholars argue that numerically they were in the minority. According to some estimates, there were 6,000 who belonged to the Pharisaic sect.<sup>100</sup> The Pharisees had two doctrines which became central to later Judaism and to Christianity – a belief in the *oral interpretation* of Scripture and the doctrine of *bodily resurrection*.<sup>101</sup> There is no doubt that Yeshua understood and was even taught from His childhood years what has been referred to as the *traditions of the Pharisees*.<sup>102</sup> Whereas Biblical Judaism had no belief in an afterlife, the Pharisees, as summarized by Wylen, “*taught that sometime in the future everyone who ever lived will return to bodily life on earth. Each person will rise from the grave. Then God will judge every human being according to his or her earthly deeds. The wicked will die again, this time, forever, while the righteous will receive a grant of a thousand years of life, followed by an indescribable world to come.*”<sup>103</sup> Unlike Greek philosophy that held a belief in a separation of body and soul, *resurrection* as seen by the Pharisees was an actual return to bodily life. There was no separation

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<sup>99</sup> A quote by Rabbi Edward L. Nydle, in an untitled Internet article on the Jewish Roots of Christianity.

<sup>100</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 311.

<sup>101</sup> Wylen, p. 58.

<sup>102</sup> See Mark 7:4-9. This records a most interesting dialogue among the Pharisees and Yeshua. The point of this passage is Yeshua’s disregard for the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, not necessarily their interpretation of the Law. Theologically, Yeshua was primarily in agreement with them.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* p. 59.

of human body and spirit in this doctrine.<sup>104</sup> The Pharisees argued that though the doctrine of the resurrection was absent from Torah teaching, they could exegete this doctrine to derive it from every verse if they had to. Yeshua firmly believed in and preached this doctrine of the resurrection.<sup>105</sup>

The Sadducees, on the other hand, were vigorously opposed to the new doctrine of bodily resurrection. Some attribute this to a theology that matched more ancient Jewish beliefs.

Functionally, the Pharisees were the ones appointed as the judges, teachers, and civil administrators throughout the country. In Jerusalem, they also were the one who oversaw the ritual functions of the high priests, men of God who were Sadducean in theology and practice. According to the Talmud, both Pharisees and Sadducees were part of a larger organizational body called the *Sanhedrin*.<sup>106</sup> On the other hand, the Sadducees were priestly and aristocratic. Their high class of society compared greatly to the common class of the Pharisees. Since they favored the Romans and cooperated with them in ruling the country, they were not popular with the masses. Also, while the Sadducees probably maintained their own priestly traditions that went back to the pre-

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<sup>104</sup> This belief in the doctrine of the bodily resurrection is called in Hebrew, *t'hiyyat ha-may-tim*. The first explicit argument for this doctrine is in the second book of Maccabees, a book in the *Apocrypha*. Chapter 7 of this book tells the tale of a mother and her seven sons who were executed in turn on a single day before the eyes of Antiochus because they would not bow down to his idol nor eat his pork. Each son, and the mother, give brave speeches in which they express their faith that by forfeiting like now they are gaining *eternal life in the resurrection of the dead*.

<sup>105</sup> See Mark 12:18-27.

<sup>106</sup> Wylen, p. 70. The Sanhedrin met in the *Chamber of Hewn Stone*, a dedicated room in the Temple compound. The Sanhedrin had 71 members. The two leaders of the Sanhedrin were the President, titled *Nasi* (or Prince, Patriarch), and the Vice-President, titled *Av Bet Din* (Father of the Court). The Pharisees made up a majority in the Sanhedrin. After the destruction of the Temple, the Sanhedrin moved to a location in Western Galilee called *Yavneh*.

Hasmonean priesthood,<sup>107</sup> they denied the divine origins of the *Oral Torah* esteemed by the Pharisees. In addition, they did not believe in *divine providence*, while the third major sect, the Essenes believed in fate completely. The Pharisees took a middle position.

Lastly, it was the Pharisees who seemingly lived among the people. While the Sadducees were more concerned with the control of the Temple courts and in distancing themselves from the common folk, the Pharisees had a program for every aspect of Jewish life. These concerned ritual purity, care in tithing agricultural produce, eating only kosher food, keeping the Sabbath according to their traditions,<sup>108</sup> and marrying only women who fit their rules of pure descent.<sup>109</sup> Nonetheless, as we should expect one sect of the Jews to criticize Yeshua for various actions and beliefs, Yeshua seemed to have no argument with the Pharisees' broader program of scholarship and obedient devotion to God.<sup>110</sup> He also found affinity with the Pharisees in the ways they openly and with flexibility interpreted the *Law*. Clearly, the *Hillelite School of Pharisaism* that became the basis for rabbinic Judaism best reflected Yeshua's approach to the use and application of Scripture.<sup>111</sup> Though Christians today have an incorrect image of the Pharisees, Yeshua was closest in spirit and teaching to the Pharisees. This comes as a surprise to many.

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<sup>107</sup> Prior to 165 B.C.

<sup>108</sup> Keeping the Sabbath meant something entirely different for Pharisees in The Galilee than it did for those in Judea. Thus, as Yeshua and his disciples pick wheat on the Sabbath, while Yeshua may not have been observing a Galilean interpretation of what it means to keep the Sabbath, He cannot be accused in the technical sense of *breaking the Law*. See Matthew 12:1ff.

<sup>109</sup> Wylen, p. 142.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 142.

<sup>111</sup> Rabbi Hillel became know for his *7 Principles of Interpretation*.

The third group of sect is the *Essenes*. It should be noted that recent studies of the Dead Sea scrolls indicate that Yeshua also had ties with the people of the scrolls.<sup>112</sup> Similar to where the Essenes would settle in the *Midbar Yehudah* (Wilderness of Judah), Yeshua spent a period of time in this dessert area before starting His ministry. It can be noted that Yeshua's instructions to his disciples as regards to their dress, talk and travel, closely resembles the Essene Code.<sup>113</sup> Other parallels with the Essenes include His emphasis on the end of the age, His frequent contrasting of light and darkness, communal meals, pooling of property, loving one's neighbor, and baptism as something more than purification, that is, it must also be accompanied by *teshuvah* or repentance.<sup>114</sup>

The Essenes may have actually been not a single sect, but a variety of organized groups with similar ideals. Of all the sects, the Essenes had the strictest laws of Jewish observance. Many lived a celibate life in the wilderness, as evidenced by the archaeological finds of Qumran. While their social structure imitated that of the Temple priesthood, they thought of themselves as the true Temple priesthood in exile.<sup>115</sup> They had their own sacred calendar, a solar calendar. They departed in the Messianic views from that of the Pharisees and Sadducees, for they upheld a belief not only in one Messiah (from the royal throne of David), but yet the rising up of a

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<sup>112</sup> Tribelhorn, p. 10.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Matthew 10:9-10 and 5:37 with Josephus, *War*, 8:4.124-127; 8:6.135.

<sup>114</sup> See Tribelhorn, p. 10. Examples would include the tithing of herbs (cf. Matthew 23:23 with Maaserot 4:5), and giving thanks *before* a meal (Mark 6:41; 8:6), contrived by the Pharisees so that field workers would remember to wash their hands, rather than, or perhaps in addition to, grace *after* meals.

<sup>115</sup> Wylen, p. 139.

second Messiah (from the priestly lineage of Aaron). In addition, they also believed in a *final prophet*, and in a final cosmic battle between good and evil. Their apocalyptic expectations may have caused the Essenes to join in the rebellion against the Romans in 66-70 A.D. They would be wiped out in this war.

A fourth sect that surfaced in the First Century was the *Zealots*. Until recently, historians used the term *Zealots* to describe all the groups that rebelled against the Romans, centered in Galilee, between 6 A.D. until the war with Rome in the 60's. However, it appears that the Zealots were an organized peasant rebellion group who, according to Josephus, had as their motto, "*no ruler but God.*"<sup>116</sup> It was a peasant disciple named Simon the Zealot whom Yeshua called to be one of His twelve.<sup>117</sup> Any teaching on the coming *Malhut Shamaim* (e.g. the kingdom of heaven) was interpreted by members of this group as an overthrow of the Roman government and the bondage which they placed on the Jewish people of the land.

#### ***F. The Primary Ministry Focus of Yeshua: The Kingdom of Heaven***

At the very center of Hebraic thought was the permanence of the whole Torah for every day living. The very fact that God reigned as king in the lives of those who obeyed His commandments<sup>118</sup> was central to rabbinic teaching. At the very center of Yeshua's teaching was the *kingdom of*

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<sup>116</sup> Josephus, *War*, 13:5.

<sup>117</sup> Mark 3:18.

<sup>118</sup> In Hebrew, *mitzvot*, of which there were 613 of them, 365, which were negative, and 248, which were positive in nature.

*heaven*, and the reign of God which was active in the lives of those who embraced the Yeshua the Messiah as the *Son of Man*.<sup>119</sup> The advancement of God's kingdom among those who embraced the teachings of Yeshua and put them into practice is the primary motif of the entire Gospels. If one misses this emphasis of Yeshua's ministry, one then regrettably misses out on the focus point of His teaching. Essentially, it was not that Yeshua taught that one takes hold of the kingdom of heaven him or herself, but rather that the kingdom of heaven takes hold of you by means of a personal encounter of God's power and reign.

Yeshua's teaching on the kingdom of heaven was founded upon His understanding of the message of the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>120</sup> The main feature of the message of the prophets that was identified by rabbis contemporary with Yeshua was the coming days of the Messiah. As seen primarily in the Gospel of Matthew, Yeshua followed the common use of the phrase, *malchut shamayim*, or *kingdom of heaven* as meaning the same as the phrase used elsewhere in the Gospels, the *kingdom of God*. By the time of the Second Temple period, Jews had developed an aversion to using the name of God for fear of violating the Third Commandment. Thus the word *heaven* was substituted instead of using *God*.<sup>121</sup> Essentially to the Jewish mind, there were no distinctions between the two.<sup>122</sup> The

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<sup>119</sup> The term, the *Son of man* comes from Daniel 7:13-14.

<sup>120</sup> Or as commonly referred to as the *Old Testament*. Or in Hebrew, the *Tanakh*.

<sup>121</sup> D. Bivin, p. 59. In Luke 15:18 the Prodigal Son says, "*I have sinned against heaven...*" This is a clear substitution for "God."

<sup>122</sup> Dr. Scofield's eschatological system, a system of theology on the *end times*, was based on an erroneous understanding of this Hebrew phrase. As a result, he defined the *kingdom of God* as a present reality, and the *kingdom of heaven* as a future reality. To the Jew of the First Century, the terms were used interchangeably.

Jewish roots of Yeshua's *kingdom theology* become clear in light of how the Hebrew Scriptures were used to point to the coming or *breaking forth* of the kingdom of heaven. Specifically among the Hebrew Scriptures was the fulfillment of Micah 2:13 as seen in Yeshua's teaching in Matthew 11:12. The major rabbinical focus of Micah 2:13 is the king. Micah 2:13 reads, "*He who opens the breach (the breaker, haporetz) will go up before them; they will break through (partzu), and pass the gate, going out by it. Their king (malkam) will pass on before them, the Lord at their head.*" The image is that of sheep who have been cooped up all night in a cave in which the entrance is barricaded with a wall and closed gate. However, once the gate is broken down, the sheep *break forth* from the cave into the grazing fields nearby. It is a wonderful picture of freedom. Yeshua understood that the one who caused the kingdom to *break forth* was John the Baptist. With John the end-times began, the decisive eruption into the history of the world.<sup>123</sup> This is why Yeshua says in Matthew 11:12, "*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.*"<sup>124</sup> Hence, a First Century Jewish reader of the Gospel story would hear the Hebrew idiom from the source text of Matthew 11:12b<sup>125</sup>, with the term *harpazo* conveying the idea of *pursuing* in the sense of "*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness*" (Matthew 6:33). In other words, the *kingdom of God* was expanding

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<sup>123</sup> David Flusser in Young's *Jesus, the Jewish Theologian*, p. 52.

<sup>124</sup> This is the NIV rendering of this key verse, reflecting the original Hebrew word *paratz*. Other versions translate this verse with the phrase, "*the kingdom of heaven suffers violence...*" reflecting the Greek word *biazo*.

<sup>125</sup> Young, p. 55.



*centrifugally* and with *explosion* to all who would claim Yeshua King and allow God to take control of their lives.<sup>126</sup>

All of this technical study leads us to understand Yeshua's perspective on this matter of the *breaking forth* of God's kingdom. While there was room in Jewish theology for a future characteristic of the kingdom of heaven, Yeshua was clear on teaching from the start that at this point of redemptive history, *the kingdom of God had arrived* (emphasis mine)! The ones breaking forth with the kingdom of heaven pursue the principles of God's reign with all their might.<sup>127</sup>

When one studies the kingdom teachings of Yeshua, one also must take into consideration the Jewish messianic expectations of the day as well. Views concerning the coming of the Messiah during the days of the Second Temple period were diverse and far from monolithic.<sup>128</sup> The fact that even John the Baptist misunderstood the purpose of Yeshua's ushering in of the kingdom makes this clear. While many Jews expected a greater political dimension to the work of the coming Messiah, a politically oriented Messiah like King David was expected, along with a second Messiah who would be more of a spiritual leader like a priest.<sup>129</sup> It is interesting that virtually no one expected a Messianic figure that would one day be killed, let alone be crucified on a cross. Thus, as Young comments,

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<sup>126</sup> The word *explosion* is captured from the use of the Hebrew root word *pooratz*. It conveys the concept of *breaking through* a hole in the wall.

<sup>127</sup> Young, p. 55.

<sup>128</sup> Joseph Klausner, in Young's, *Jesus, the Jewish Theologian*, p. 59-60.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, p. 60. It has already been mentioned that the Essene theology reflected a dual perspective of the coming Messiah, one from the throne of David, while the other would come from the line of the High Priest Aaron.

*“For many religious and secular people, the life work of Jesus would have been difficult to understand fully in the context of Israel’s plurality of messianic expectations. Groups such as the Sadducees and the priests would not even go so far as to expect a messianic figure. Others, like the Pharisees, looked for divine assistance in hard times. Popularly many people expected God to liberate Israel from its Roman oppressors.”<sup>130</sup>*

The present reality of the *breaking through* of the kingdom of heaven can also be seen in Yeshua’s teaching as recorded in Matthew 3:2, 4:17, and 10:7 (paralleled in Mark 1:15 and Luke 10:9,11). In these verses the phrase, *“the kingdom of heaven is near”* is mentioned. As Hebraically understood, the *locality* of the kingdom of heaven was not time, but *space*. Whereas the Greek word (*engiken*) that is used to attempt to convey the meaning of the Hebrew word (*karav*) implies that the kingdom of heaven is futuristic and not here yet in a temporal sense, The actually Hebrew means the exact opposite, meaning, *It’s here! It has arrived.*<sup>131</sup> Bivin adds this significant Hebrew observation,

*“Karav does not imply that there necessarily has to be any distance at all between that which is coming near and that which is being approached. We can see how the Greek or English leaves the wrong concept of the Kingdom of God: futuristic. The Hebrew leaves the correct concept: present tense --- NOW. The kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God is always present tense, ‘right now,’ according to Jesus’ understanding, and in rabbinic usage as well. It is unfortunate that the Church, because of a Greek consciousness, has confused the kingdom of Heaven with Jesus’ teachings on His Second Coming (what Jesus calls ‘the coming of the Son of man’).”<sup>132</sup>*

Bivin continues concerning the *concept* of kingdom,

*“The concept of kingdom is perhaps the most important spiritual concept in the New Testament. In English or Greek, ‘kingdom’ is*

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<sup>130</sup> Young, p. 60.

<sup>131</sup> Bivin, p. 62.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

*never verbal. It is something static, something to do with territory. But in Hebrew, 'kingdom' is active, it is action. It is God ruling in the lives of men. Those who are ruled by God are the kingdom of God. Kingdom is also the demonstration of God's rule through miracles, signs, and wonders. Wherever the power of God is demonstrated, there is His 'kingdom.' Jesus' disciples were now to literally be the kingdom of God by demonstrating his presence and power in their lives.*"<sup>133</sup>

Again, it was not necessarily that people in Yeshua's day reached out and grabbed hold of this spiritual kingdom, but rather it was that this kingdom of heaven took hold of them (most of the time by surprise) with power and in the might of God's Spirit. This is why the God's advancement of the kingdom of God was the passion of Yeshua and the focal point of His ministry. For us today, it is the kingdom of God that takes hold of us when we repent and allow the King to take control of us!

It should be of no surprise to consider why Yeshua performed so many miracles (opportunities for the kingdom of heaven to decisively break onto the scene with the supernatural potency), and taught so much about the kingdom, both in *sermonic form*<sup>134</sup> and in *parabolic form*.<sup>135</sup> To come into the kingdom meant to join in the flow of God's reign among His people. As Yeshua said to the little children, "*Do not hinder them for to such as these is the kingdom of heaven.*"<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Bivin, p. 64-65.

<sup>134</sup> The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, focusing on the ethical or *Haggadah* application of the kingdom principles of God's reign.

<sup>135</sup> Many parables are "kingly" in scope. This parallels rabbinic parables. Of the 5,000 Jewish parables, 800 or so are "kingly" in scope.

<sup>136</sup> Young, p. 98. See Mt. 19:14.

Since understanding Yeshua's central focus on the kingdom of heaven is such an important topic to consider, allow these additional observations be the concluding thoughts on this subject.

It must be understood that in a Jewish way of thinking, the *Festival of Shavu'ot* is inseparably connected with the coming of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>137</sup> It was on *Shavu'ot* that God came down upon Mt. Sinai and enclosed His will and plan to His people. According to the rabbis, the end or *telos* or God's redemption was divine *revelation*, and the goal of divine revelation was ruling, God's ruling in the lives of those who would honor Him with obedience. Essentially, God redeems in order to rule. If He redeems and his people do not accept His ruling, then one does not come into completeness of one's redemption.<sup>138</sup> This meant that to the rabbi, the kingdom of God is first proclaimed not in the Book of Genesis, but in the Book of Exodus when God gives the Torah to Moses. According to rabbinic theology, this is the first time when God became the proclaimed king over Israel.<sup>139</sup> Whereas God is universally sovereign over the whole earth as

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<sup>137</sup> *Shavu'ot* is a celebration of the receiving of Torah on Mt. Sinai. It is also called in the Hebrew Scriptures the *Festival of Weeks* or *Hagshavu'ot*, for it comes 7 weeks after *Pesach*, or Passover. It is also called the Feast of the *First Fruits* (the first offering of the summer wheat harvest). Additionally, it is also called simply the *Feast of Harvest* (from Exodus 23:16). In Acts, this festival is called Pentecost. Whereas there are 7 Feasts (*Moedim* in Hebrew) mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures, only 3 are deemed as Pilgrim Festivals. They are *Shavu'ot*, *Pesach*, and *Succot*.

<sup>138</sup> A quote from a lecture series by Dwight Pryor, Director of Judaic Studies. The tape is entitled, "*Shavu'ot, Yeshua, and the Kingdom of Heaven, 2000*."

<sup>139</sup> The term taken from Deut. 33:5, *Yeshurun*, is another name for Israel. Also, the concept of the kingdom of God is first seen in Exodus 15, when God's victory is proclaimed and celebrated. God is seen as the victorious king over evil.

creator and judge, God's kingship over his people extends to only those who submit to His authority and obey His will.<sup>140</sup>

Hence, when Yeshua began teaching about the kingdom of heaven, the common Jew as well as the educated student of Torah would have been engrained with this concept of God's reign over His people. In fact, the essence of what the Torah was all about could be captured into one word: *kingship!* A day is coming, according to the prophet Zechariah<sup>141</sup> when the whole earth will recognize Yeshua as King. This day began the moment that John the Baptist served as the *breaker* of the kingdom, proclaiming the coming of the Messiah King. After Yeshua's return to heaven, the Church became a partial fulfillment of this prophecy, for it was at *Shavu'ot/Pentecost* when God's Spirit was sent out, and God began to reign redemptively in people of many nations who submitted to Yeshua as King.

This is why it must be considered that the teaching and building of the kingdom of heaven was Yeshua's passion, for he longed to see the kingdom of God *break through* into the lives who would yield to God's will. Building upon a Hebraic *matrix* of the teachings of the Sages on this subject of kingship, the kingdom for Yeshua was the redemptive work of God in people's lives.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Dwight Pryor, tape series. The lecturer refers to the Sinai event as the "*most climatic cosmic crack in human history.... when the God of heaven came down and revealed Himself before an entire nation, and gave them His Torah.*"

<sup>141</sup> See Zechariah 14:9.

<sup>142</sup> This kingdom perspective of Yeshua was consistent with the common teaching of First Century Judaism on the issue of grace and salvation. E. P. Sanders comments, "*Although one might not always get this impression by reading certain sections of Paul's letters, but election and ultimately salvation are considered*"

In summary, the kingdom of heaven for Yeshua was all about a *person*. He was the King. The kingdom of God slowly like a mustard seed came in power through His teaching and healings. While Yeshua did indeed speak of a future kingdom during the course of His ministry,<sup>143</sup> the presence of a spiritual kingdom of God was a *process* in which the reign of God laid hold of those who were willing and ready to receive Yeshua as Messiah. At times the process was quite visible and dramatic, while other times the process was quiet.<sup>144</sup>

But ultimately, the kingdom of heaven is a *people*. The ministry of Yeshua confirms this, for the kingdom of heaven was nothing more than Yeshua *breaking in* and *taking charge*.<sup>145</sup> This is why when Yeshua prays, “*May your kingdom come...*”<sup>146</sup> The purpose of God’s kingdom is to both bring redemption but also to rule in us. According to the Sages, the essence of what the Torah was all about could be summarized in one word: Torah.<sup>147</sup> In a wonderful way, Yeshua came as the *Living Torah*<sup>148</sup> preaching the sharing the Good News of the Kingdom of the Gospel!

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*to be by God’s mercy rather than human achievement”* (in *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), p. 422. Thus, the breaking forth of the kingdom was entirely viewed by Yeshua’s audience as God’s prerogative.

<sup>143</sup> When Yeshua spoke of the kingdom of Heaven as a future reality, He used different language. See Matthew 24:30ff. Here he uses the phrase *the coming of the Son of Man*. Also see Luke 21:8-11, 25-27ff – “*At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with great joy...*” Again, notice the use of the phrase from Daniel 9, “*Son of Man*.” The use of this term or title was consistent with First Century rabbinic theology.

<sup>144</sup> Visible and dramatic through healings (e.g. “*Take up you r bed and walk...*”). Other times it came quietly, like leaven working *under the surface*.

<sup>145</sup> Dwight Pryor, Lecture Series.

<sup>146</sup> See Matthew 6:10. Literally in Hebrew, “*May your reigning increase...*” The prayer was for God’s will to be accomplished. Notice the Hebrew parallelism in the phrases, “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*”

<sup>147</sup> See Zechariah 14:9.

<sup>148</sup> See John 1:1-14.

### III. **Specific Examples of the Hebraic Background of the Life and Ministry of Yeshua**

As one can imagine, there are numerous examples from the Gospel accounts that would serve to give evidence of the Hebraic background of the life and ministry of Yeshua. To deal with such numerous examples would be interesting, but not realistic given the nature of this paper. However, the following *short listing* of examples are meant to highlight the Jewish context in which Yeshua was born, the Hebraic world in which He lived and ministered.<sup>149</sup>

#### **A. Yeshua's Birth**

Brad Young states, "*The texts of the Gospels are grounded in the rich diversity of Jewish messianic thought which characterize the late Second Temple period.*"<sup>150</sup> As one examines the meaning of the birth of the Messiah in the context of ancient Jewish thought, the description of the birth narrative of Yeshua becomes a beautiful recording of God's intervention into human history. According to the rabbis, prophecy and divine intervention accompanied the birth of Moses, becoming a model for the messianic idea.<sup>151</sup> From the perspective of the common Jewish shepherds who were watching their flocks by night, the descriptions of *supernatural happenings*<sup>152</sup> were associated with important events in Jewish history. In addition, the appearance of angels, who offer a threefold blessing, was by

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<sup>149</sup> Brad Young's book, *Jesus, the Jewish Theologian*, is rich in providing a detailed discourse on these examples. Any student of the teachings of Yeshua would highly value this book as an invaluable resource.

<sup>150</sup> Young, p. 3.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

no means foreign to popular belief.<sup>153</sup> As parallels of the usage of the word translated as *goodwill*<sup>154</sup> have been seen in the Dead Sea community, the threefold blessing reflects a Jewish liturgical tradition. Hence, even in the birth narrative of Yeshua we observe the presence of a Hebraic background.

### ***B. Yeshua's Baptism***

When one begins to talk about the baptism of Yeshua, we must enter John the Baptist into the picture. Upon recent discoveries, the Dead Sea Scrolls<sup>155</sup> offer us light into the living conditions and norms within the Essene community. This community of people who referred to themselves as *sons of light*<sup>156</sup> underwent intense training, observed strict guidelines for purity, and had to prove their holiness and election before they were officially accepted into the community. The ritual of baptism was necessary for personal piety and holiness. Immersion<sup>157</sup> was performed twice a day to secure this standard of *kodesh* or holiness. In the Jewish teachings of the *Mishnah*, living water, defined by rivers and seas, was the highest grade

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<sup>153</sup> The threefold blessing is characteristically Hebrew: *Glory to God in the Highest; on earth peace; and Goodwill toward men*, from Luke 2:14.

<sup>154</sup> From the Hebrew, *ratzon*. The Dead Sea community of Qumran used this word in a sectarian sense to imply that the elect are predestined or appointed to receive God's goodwill.

<sup>155</sup> First found in 1947 by a small Arab boy. They were found in a series of caves. The scrolls were preserved in clay jars, which were sealed.

<sup>156</sup> As opposed to the *sons of darkness*.

<sup>157</sup> Baptisms took place in one of several *miqvot* (Hebrew plural for *miqva*: ritual bath). Most were deep enough for full immersion, while others were not. But generally full contact of all part of one's body with water was required. *Miqvot* can still be seen at Qumran as well as other Dead Sea area sites such as Masada.



of cleansing for ritual immersion.<sup>158</sup> Repentance<sup>159</sup> of the heart preceded the ritual of baptism.

This was perhaps the context of John the Baptist's ministry along the Jordan River. Perhaps being a former member of the Essene community himself, John's theological perspective of baptism as evidenced in the Gospels seem to be quite similar to that of the Qumran Essenes. Thus, when Yeshua approaches the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by John, the ritual itself had precedent at nearby Qumran. Once He enters the waters, John is awaiting Him. Upon the act of baptism, a voice is heard, a heavenly voice, marking Yeshua a special individual. It is interesting that in the Talmud a story is told of a heavenly voice being heard in a gathering of sages. The story is told,

*"Once when the Rabbis were met in the upper chamber of Gurya's house at Jericho, a heavenly voice was heard, saying: 'There is one amongst you who is worthy that the Shekhinah (Holy Spirit) should rest on him as it did on Moses, but his generation does not merit it.' The Sages present set their eyes on Hillel the Elder. And when he died, they lamented and said, 'Alas, the pious man, the humble man, the disciples of Ezra [is no more].'"<sup>160</sup>*

The heavenly voice at Yeshua's baptism was meant to highlight the special mission of the Messiah. Upon hearing the voice, no doubt the Jewish crowd of people knew exactly the significance of this event. Once again, the Hebraic background surrounds the life of Yeshua and sets the context in which the world of the First Century saw Him. He lived in a thoroughly Jewish world and religious culture.

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<sup>158</sup> Young, p. 15.

<sup>159</sup> Or in Hebrew, *Teshuvah*.

<sup>160</sup> See b. San. 11a.

### **C. Yeshua's Temptation**

It is quite often that the temptations of Yeshua were three specific events of Satan asking the Messiah to prove Himself. A more Hebraic perspective would suggest otherwise. Young suggests, *Rather than trying to prove that Jesus is the Son, as affirmed at the baptism, the test concerns God and his purpose.*<sup>161</sup> Young continues, *"The temptation of Jesus focuses on the divine character and the messianic task. Who is God? How will his redemptive purpose be accomplished? The issue of the three temptations centers on the nature of God and the identity of the one worthy of complete trust and total faith commitment."*<sup>162</sup> Satan, the tempter, wants nothing more than to foil God's redemptive plan divinely appointed for the Messiah to accomplish, and this was his strategy.

All the temptations<sup>163</sup> were aimed to deny the oneness of God, a primary and valued theological truth to the Jew.<sup>164</sup> The third temptation, however, only can be appreciated for its significance in light of the common *messianic expectations* of the day, for the temple was closely related to the activities of the messianic deliverer who would use the forum of its sacred courts to proclaim his message of salvation.<sup>165</sup> Although later in date than the time of Yeshua's temptation, a Jewish *Midrash* describes the actions of the anticipated Messiah in the Temple,

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<sup>161</sup> Young, p. 27.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p. 27.

<sup>163</sup> Turning stone into bread, bowing down to Satan, and jumping from the Temple heights.

<sup>164</sup> See Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

*“Our teachers taught, at the time when the King Messiah will appear, he will come and stand upon the roof of the temple. He will proclaim to Israel and will say to the humble, ‘the time of your redemption has arrived! If you do not believe – behold my light which shines upon you...’”*<sup>166</sup> Within this Jewish context, one can only appreciate the significance of Yeshua standing on the pinnacle of the Temple declaring that the time of Israel’s redemption had arrived! In other words, this third temptation was not *accidental*, but was God’s way of stating that Yeshua’s purpose would clearly be redemptive in nature.

#### D. ***Yeshua’s use of Miracles***

Whereas the baptism and temptations can be observed as events that had a defined beginning and end early on in Yeshua’s ministry, His use of miracles extend over a three year period. Essentially, the use of miracles was strongly embraced by the Jewish world of the First Century, for miracles embraced a strong sense of the sovereignty of God. For Yeshua, the use of miracles pointed to the *breaking through* of the kingdom of God in the lives of those who received them.

There are many parallels between the miracles that appear in the Hebrew Bible that with the miracles recorded in *Talmudic literature*. In the worldview of the rabbis in Yeshua’s day, God could not be exiled from human

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<sup>166</sup> From *Pesikta Rabbati* 36, translated by a German scholar named P. Billerbeck, as it appeared in Young, p. 31.

existence.<sup>167</sup> The use of miracles was an integral part of Jewish culture. In other words, Yeshua was not necessarily doing anything out of the ordinary in performing miracles from a Jewish perspective. The Jewish scholar Geza Vermes references a strong Jewish movement of what he calls *Charismatic Judaism as a pious religious movement in which people believed in miracles and experienced supernatural answers to prayer.*<sup>168</sup> Whether the miracle was for praying for rain,<sup>169</sup> or for the healing of a family member, miracles were seen as evidence of God's intervention and sovereignty over the created order.

This is not to say that there was no tension between the more scholarly-oriented rabbis and the other rabbis who claimed, like Choni the Circle Drawer, over the argument of the role and function of miracles. As recorded in rabbinic literature, the more scholastic rabbis often criticized the pious *wonder-workers* of miracles.<sup>170</sup> Should it be of any surprise then to read in the Gospels the many times Yeshua was criticized for performing miracles, whether the miracles be related to nature or to the healing of disease.<sup>171</sup> Indeed the role of faith<sup>172</sup> played an integral part in God answering the prayers of His people in regard to the supernatural evidence of the miracle.

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<sup>167</sup> Young, p. 36.

<sup>168</sup> See Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1974), p.p. 58-82. See also David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988), p. 535-42.

<sup>169</sup> There is a common story about *Choni the Circle Drawer* {Onias} who drew a circle on the ground, vowing to stand within it until the rains for which he asked God came. His prayer was, "*O Lord of the universe, your children have turned their faces to me, for that I am like a son of the house before you. I swear by your great name that I will not stir from here until you have mercy upon your children.*" After praying this, the rains came so violently that it filled even the dry cisterns and pits. He would later in the prayer *revise* his prayer so that it would only rain in *moderation*. See the *Mishnah*, Ta'an 3:8.

<sup>170</sup> Rabbi Simeon ben Shetah strongly criticized Choni. In some cases, the miracle-working rabbis were banned from performing the regular Jewish religious acts of the day.

<sup>171</sup> See Mark 2, 4 and 6; Luke 5, John 5 & 9, and many others.

<sup>172</sup> In Hebrew, *emunah*.

Furthermore and more specifically, *“the rabbinic parallels to the Gospel story of the healing demonstrate the rich cultural heritage for the events in the life of Yeshua (Jesus).”*<sup>173</sup> In many ways, Yeshua would be very comfortable to live right beside Choni the Circle Drawer, for they both saw the sovereign hand of God upon His people offering blessing by means of the miracle.

Furthermore, it is said that an early Jewish benediction was commonly said when God displayed His goodness to people through a miracle. The following benediction reflects a specific gratitude for God’s goodness, *“Blessed be God who has done so great wonders for the children of me.”*<sup>174</sup> It was the heritage of the First Century Jews of Yeshua’s day to acknowledge God’s grace.<sup>175</sup> Thus, when one reads of the healing of the paralytic,<sup>176</sup> even though the people who were present with Yeshua did not grasp the full meaning of the word of Yeshua until He healed the paralytic, they responded with praise to God in typical Hebraic form. It was a requirement to respond by giving thanks to God. Even though there is not a recording of a specific utterance of praise and thanks to God in each and every passage where Yeshua performed a miracle, it is safe to assume that it took place. Just imagine the level of thanks that would have been offered in the miracles involving bring people back to life?<sup>177</sup> Indeed, the miraculous healings performed by Yeshua revealed the powerful advancement and force of the spiritual kingdom of God, designed to

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<sup>173</sup> Young, p. 42.

<sup>174</sup> This benediction appears early in Jewish rabbinic literature. See *Sukkah* 4:2.

<sup>175</sup> Young, p. 42.

<sup>176</sup> Mark 2:1-12.

<sup>177</sup> Luke 7:11-17 and John 11:1-44 as two examples. The passage in Luke records the actions of the people, *“They were all filled with awe and praised God, ‘A great prophet has appeared among us,’ they said. ‘God has come to help His people.’”*

bring wholeness to people as well as to display God's divine sovereignty over everything effected by the fall of mankind.

### ***E. Yeshua's Parables***

There is now evidence for nearly 5,000 Jewish parables that were recorded in Jewish Literature. Of the 5,000 recorded Jewish parables, it is suggested that between 800-1,000 of them are *kingly* in nature. This reveals to the student of the Bible that Yeshua once again ministered within the confines of the rabbinic culture of the day, not only using parabolic genre to convey the truth of His teaching but also knowing that those who listened to Him teach would be familiar with this style of teaching.

Essentially, Yeshua used *word pictures* to illustrate His message concerning the progressive growth and advancement of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>178</sup> Rabbinical Literature reveals the same practice of the use of word pictures. As it was said by the ancient sages, "*Our rabbis say, 'Let not the parable be lightly esteemed in your eyes, since by means of the parable a man can master the words of the Torah.'*"<sup>179</sup>

The Hebrew word for parable is *mashal*.<sup>180</sup> The *mashal* was used to create a *word* picture of how to live before a holy God. It was meant to inspire holy conduct and living. Parables also were first employed as oral teachings

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<sup>178</sup> Young, p. 77. The parables of the *Mustard Seed* and the *Leaven* (Luke 13:18-21) illustrate the growth of the kingdom clearly.

<sup>179</sup> Song of Songs Rabba 1:1, 8-9. See Brad Young, *Jesus and His Jewish Parables*.

<sup>180</sup> The Greek word is *parabole*. A *mashal* was defined as the telling or describing a certain likeness.

and discourse as opposed to being transmitted in written form in later decades following the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

Yeshua approached the use of parable or *mashal* in the same in His teaching.<sup>181</sup> Yeshua's parables also had a specific way of conveying a specific Jewish concept of God, one of painting God as a God of grace. The parable of the *Laborers in the Vineyard* as well as the *Prodigal Son* parable.<sup>182</sup> As a student of the Gospels may be familiar with the parable of the *Laborer in the Vineyard*, it is interesting to compare this specific parable of Yeshua with a well-known rabbinic parable that would have been used in that day. First, the parable from Matthew 20:1-16.

*"For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' "Because no one has hired us," they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to*

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<sup>181</sup> See Matthew 13:33 and 16:11-12.

<sup>182</sup> Matthew 20:1-16, Luke 15:11-32. A better Hebraic title for this parable may be *The Loving Father*. From a Hebraic point of view, the main character is not the wayward rebellious son, but the gracious father.

*do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."*

Now compare this parable with a rabbinic one that would have been in existence in Yeshua's day.

*"To what may Rabbi Bun bar Chaya be compared? To a king who hired many laborers. One of them was extremely industrious in his work. What did the king do? He took him and walked with him the lengths and breadths [of the field]. In the evening the laborers came to take their wages. But [to the one with whom he had walked – the king] gave a full day's wage. The laborers murmured and complained, 'We worked all day long, but [the king] has given this one who only worked two hours a full wage like us.' The king answered the, 'He has done more in two hours than what you did for the entire day.' Thus, though R. Bun labored only twenty either years, he did more than a learned scholar could have studied in a hundred."<sup>183</sup>*

Another examples of not only observing Yeshua following rabbinic custom and teaching in parables, but also observing Him using parables very similar in content of that of the rabbis are numerous. Take the following rabbinic *kingly parable* with Yeshua's *Parable of the Banquet* in Matthew 22:1-14. First, the Gospel parable:

*"Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet. But they paid no attention and went off-- one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he*

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<sup>183</sup> See Rabbi Zeira, j. Ber. 5c, chapter 2, hal. 8.



*asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are invited, but few are chosen."*

Now the rabbinic parable. Notice the similarities:

*"The matter may be compared to a king who arranged a banquet and invited guests to it. The king issued a decree which stated, 'Each guest must bring something on which to recline.' Some brought carpets, others brought mattresses or pads or cushions, while still others brought logs or stones. The king observed what they had done, and said, 'Let each man sit on what he brought.' Those who had to sit on wood or stone murmured against the king. They said, 'Is it respectful for the king, that we, his guests, should be seated on wood or stone?' When the king heard this, he said to them, 'It is not enough that you have disgraced with your wood and stones the palace which was erected for me at great costs, but you dare to invent a complaint against me! The lack of respect paid to you is the result of your own action. Similarly, in the Hereafter, the wicked will be sentenced to Gehinnom and will murmur against the Holy One Blessed Be He, saying, 'We sought His salvation. How could such a fate befall us?' He will answer them, 'When you were on earth did you not quarrel and slander and do evil? Were you not responsible for strife and violence? That is why it is written, 'All you that kindle a fire, that encircle yourselves with firebrands, walk in the flame of your fire and among the brands that you have kindled [Isaiah 50:11].'"<sup>184</sup>*

As other examples or parables could be shared, let it be sufficient to again emphasize that the Jewish concept of God and His grace permeates the parables of Yeshua. The core meaning of Yeshua's parables is discovered in the rich heritage of Jewish *Aggadah* (or *Haggadah*) that is, telling an illustrative story for the purpose of teaching a higher theological truth to be applied in every-day life in covenant with God. The parable of the *Good Samaritan*<sup>185</sup> is a good example of this.

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<sup>184</sup> Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:9. See David Bivin, *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus*, pp.48-49.

<sup>185</sup> Luke 10:29-37. This is an example where a parable may have been an actual happening or event simply used by Yeshua for teaching purposes.

#### IV. Conclusion

It has been a goal of this paper to both *engage* you as well as *encourage* you to see and understand Yeshua our Lord from a Hebraic point of view. It is also a goal of this paper to inspire the *Church* to explore the Jewish background of the life and ministry of Yeshua. On the one hand, there are so many exciting things to explore about the Hebraic world of Yeshua that would literally change the way we approach the Gospel accounts of Yeshua's life and ministry. In my own personal experience, there has not been a more exciting study of the Gospels than my own investigation of the Hebraic backgrounds of the Gospels. Complementing the study of Biblical Archaeology and Historical Geography of the land of Israel,<sup>186</sup> the exploration of the Hebraic roots of the Scriptures is what opens up a whole new contextual world of Biblical study. However on the other hand, it is such a misfortune that so much understanding and cultural perspective is being missed when the student of the Scriptures fails to see Yeshua from a Hebraic perspective.

The question then must be raised, "How has most of the Western Christian world missed the importance of the study of the Hebraic background of the Scriptures? Perhaps Tom Tribelhorn has part of the answer, "*The Jewish roots of the Christian faith have not simply been left unexplored, but they have too often been purposefully and willfully ignored and as a direct result of the very powerful and perhaps inevitable historical development of Jewish-Christian polemics.*"<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> The study of these two disciplines is also essential for understanding the Bible competently. This is why personal travel to Israel, the *land of the Bible*, is so valuable. Quoting my favorite professor in Jerusalem, Jim Monson, the land of Israel is *the playing board* on which all the history of the Bible takes place. Hence, one must know the playing board before one can completely understand and appreciate the biblical history that takes place.

<sup>187</sup> Tribelhorn, p. 37.

Marvin Wilson adds, *“The crop of our knowledge about Hebrew heritage and Christian-Jewish relations that we continue to reap within the Church is quite lean. Time has come for the Church to have a renewed biblical vision. It has sown the seeds of neglect long enough.”*<sup>188</sup>

Learning to think and read *Hebraically* is only a start, but a wonderful start in the process of seeing and appreciating the life and ministry of Yeshua in a new and exciting way. I trust that this paper has not only helped you begin this specific journey of Hebraic exploration of the life and ministry of Yeshua, but also that this paper will inspire you to reexamine your Jewish roots as a believer in Christ.<sup>189</sup>

Whereas this paper scratches only the surface of the study of the Hebraic background of Yeshua, there is so much more to explore. In the meantime, may the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob pour His blessing upon you in abundant measure as you begin this journey of Hebraic study. Exciting discoveries await you!

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<sup>188</sup> Wilson, p. xv.

<sup>189</sup> See Romans 4:16, Galatians 3:7,29.

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