

Paul in the School of Hillel

In about the year 61, writing from Roman confinement while he awaited imperial judgment, Paul of Tarsus wrote several letters to the churches he had founded. In one of his last ecclesiastical letters, he wrote to the beloved church in Philippi, in which he says, "(I am) of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless" (Philippians 3:5-6). Why would Paul, an apostle of Christ for about twenty-five years, continue to associate himself with the Pharisees? Hadn't he heard about Jesus' harsh criticism of this group? Wasn't he aware that Jesus had called Pharisees "a brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7; 23:33), "hypocrites" (Matthew 23:13, 15, 23, 27), "blind guides" and "blind fools" (Matthew 23:16-17, 24), and "white-washed tombs" (Matthew 23:27)? Didn't he know that Pharisees had accused Jesus of consorting with Satan (Matthew 9:34) and plotted against Him (Matthew 22:15)?

It is easier to understand why Paul claimed to be a Pharisee in front of the Jewish Council in Jerusalem two years earlier. "*Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees,*" he said, but in this case, he was cleverly using his background to create a rift between the Pharisees and the Sadducees on the Council. It is also easy to understand why Paul made the same claim to Agrippa while he was imprisoned in Caesarea, telling the king his opponents "*have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee*" (Acts 26:5). Agrippa might have at least some respect for the popular Jewish sect. But why would Paul cite his Pharisaical roots to other Christians? Wouldn't he want to distance himself from a group so vilified by His Lord?

Then

The key to understanding his continued association with the Pharisees comes from Paul's own mouth. He had come to Jerusalem, despite warnings, to deliver a collection from the churches of Macedonia for their impoverished brothers in Judea. When Paul arrived in the city, he immediately met with church leaders, who advised him to have his head shaved (see also Acts 18:18) and undergo seven-day purification rites in order to mollify the Jewish Christians. Paul readily complied, but some Asian Jews accused him of bringing a Gentile (Trochimus) into the areas of the Temple reserved for Jews (Acts 21:27-29). A riot ensued as Jews, incensed by this perceived insult to their traditions, dragged Paul from the Temple and began to beat him. Paul would surely have died that day had the Roman tribune, whose role was to maintain order in the city, not intervened. When Paul convinced the tribune that he was not a notorious rebel leader, he was allowed to address the crowd. In beginning his defense, Paul testifies to his own Jewish heritage:

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day" (Acts 22:3).

In this simple testimony lies an important fact about Paul if we are to understand this central figure in the seminal history of the church: Paul was a student of Gamaliel, who played a critical role in the survival of the early church. From the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost, the apostles aggressively preached the Gospel in Jerusalem, bringing thousands of Jews into the Christian fold (although they were not called "Christians" at that time, they were simply following "the Way"). Not surprisingly, the Sadducees, who represented the Jewish institutional elite and who thought they had squelched the Jesus sect by getting its leader crucified, were distraught about this development and sought to silence the apostles.

The High Priest has the apostles arrested and thrown into prison, but an angel released them and instructed them to return to the Temple and preach. Hearing of this, the High Priest, who had previously ordered them not to speak of Jesus, had the apostles brought before him again because the Sadducees feared they would be blamed for Jesus' execution. "*We strictly charged you not to teach in this name,*" the High Priest told the apostles (Acts 5:28), to which the apostles answered simply, "*We must obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). The apostles' defiance of the High Priest so infuriated the Jewish Council that most wanted to kill the apostles immediately, but one of its members, Gamaliel, a Pharisee and a teacher of the Law, offered a voice of reason:

"Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:35-39)

The Council took Gamaliel's advice, although they beat the apostles and again ordered them not to preach in Jesus' name. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that Gamaliel's words that day saved the church. Had the High Priest gotten his way, could the church have survived the death of all the twelve apostles? Of course, God certainly had a hand in this, but why would the Council go against the wishes of the High Priest, who certainly seems to have sought the apostles' death, and follow Gamaliel? Wouldn't the influence of the High Priest be greater than that of a mere teacher?

The answer lies in the fact that Gamaliel was no ordinary teacher. He was **the** teacher, the head of the most influential religious school in Jerusalem, one that bore the name of his grandfather, Hillel, who was the most revered Jewish teacher of the inter-Testamental period and is today celebrated as the father of the rabbinical tradition. History tells us very little more about Gamaliel, who is referred to in Jewish history as Gamaliel I since many of his descendants who were notable rabbis also bore his name, but we know a great deal about Hillel. Gamaliel's historically pivotal advice in Acts 5 reveals that Gamaliel was very much his grandfather's grandson; consequently, understanding Hillel will help us also understand Gamaliel. Before we look more deeply at Hillel, however, it is useful to look briefly at four Jewish sects.

[Note: Much of the information presented in this issue of *ET&N* is based on *The Life and Teachings of Hillel*, Yitzhak Buxbaum (© 1994) , Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. which I highly recommend for those who seek to understand more about Hillel

and the Jewish context of ancient Christianity. It is available at Amazon through the Peculiar Press bookstore at www.peculiarpress.com/index_bookstore.htm]

Jewish Sects

In first centuries before and after Christ there were four primary sects within Judaism: Herodians, Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees. **Herodians** were essentially the traitors - like their king, they sided with the Romans and sought to make Judea acceptable to their conquerors. Shammai's predecessor, the *Av-Beitdin* when Hillel first rose to *Nasi*, was Menahem, about whom the Babylonian Talmud reports: "Menahem went into the service of the King (Herod) and eighty pairs of disciples, all dressed in silk robes, went with him" (*Hagigah* 16b). The Jerusalem Talmud says that Menahem "stalked out of his [Hillel's] presence..." While the tradition gives no further details, there is a distinctly disapproving tone to these passages. Herodians, as "enemy conspirators" were not particularly popular.

Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament either, although some have suggested both John the Baptist and Jesus Himself were Essenes. We have gleaned most of our information about the Essenes from the Dead Sea Scrolls. They were radical separatists, forming a closed community away from the rest of the Jewish nation, and practiced extreme asceticism. Jesus' ministry among the Jewish people belies any Essene tendencies.

The **Sadducees** were the ruling religious elite, the remnants of a now soiled and tattered priesthood. Like Herodians, they were largely secularists, although they maintained the appearance of religiosity in order to hold onto their power. They were probably in control of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling council of the Jews, but Herod had stripped it of any political decision-making authority.

The **Pharisees** were by far the most popular of the sects among the common people, most of whom had no formal ties to any of them. According to Josephus, the first century (Romanized) Jewish historian, there were only about six thousand Pharisees in Judea, but there were many more sympathizers. According to Buxbaum, "the basic conditions for membership in a Pharisaic association were "a commitment to special ritual purity in food and meals and strict adherence to the laws of tithing" (p. 46).

Hillel and Shammai

But to view the Pharisees as a unidimensional group would be oversimplifying the situation. During that period, Jewish tradition tells us that pairs (*Zugoth*) of dominant teachers emerged in Jerusalem. One would serve as *Nasi* (prince or president) of the Council, the other as *Ab Beth Din* (father of the court of law or vice president). Together, they also headed the School of Torah in Jerusalem. The two figures often served to counterbalance one another, most notably with the last of five great *Zugoth* - Hillel and Shammai, who represent the two distinct strains of Pharisees - one which Buxbaum calls *hasid* (pious), the other *parush* (separate). In a sense, both are pious, but the *hasid's* piety is motivated by love of God, whereas the *parush's* is motivated by fear of God. The word "Pharisee" is derived from *parush*. Between these two groups, there were numerous disagreements about a broad range of topics, and there were even power plays that resulting in temporary shifts in control.

Hillel was an immensely popular figure in his own day and exerted considerable influence because of his personal piety, thorough Torah knowledge, exemplary living, and practical wisdom. His son, Simon, succeeded him as leader of his School of Torah, and Simon was in turn succeeded by Rabbi Gamaliel (Paul's teacher), but virtually no Jewish traditions have come down about them. Josephus says of Simon, he "was a Jerusalemite of a very noble family of the sect of the Pharisees, who are considered to excel others in their accurate knowledge of the laws of their country" (*Antiquities of the Jews* XV.1.1; 10:4). Of Rabbi Gamaliel, Luke says, "(he was) a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people" (Acts 5:34). They appear to have followed in Hillel's footsteps, but Jesus' usually negative interactions with "Pharisees" suggest that perhaps during Jesus' ministry the *parush* wing was dominant. Their extreme zeal for the literal letter of the Law relates to most of Jesus' challenges to Pharisees, whereas His interactions do not with Hillelite *hasid* Pharisees.

Jesus wasn't the only one who had a problem with some Pharisees. The Jerusalem Talmud, in fact, describes seven different types of Pharisees:

1. The **Shoulder Pharisee** paraded his good deeds before men like someone wearing a badge on his shoulder.
2. The **Wait-a little Pharisee** would ask someone to wait for him while he performed a good deed.
3. The **Blind Pharisee** would bruise himself walking into a wall because he had to close his eyes to avoid seeing a woman.
4. The **Pestle Pharisee** walked with his head hanging to avoid seeing temptations.
5. The **Ever-reckoning Pharisee** kept count of his good deeds to ensure they offset his failures.
6. The **God-fearing Pharisee** who was truly righteous. Shammai was this type of Pharisee.
7. The **God-loving Pharisee**, who had a true affection for God. Hillel was this type of Pharisee.

Only the last two types were viewed as good Pharisees, but Jesus' objections lay even with them, primarily because they elevated the "traditions of the elders" to the level of Scripture. For the Pharisees, this was justifiable because they believed in two sources of God's wisdom - Written Law (the Torah) and Oral Law, which was not to be written down (but later was) and which was supposedly delivered to Moses along with the Torah. The Oral Law was more flexible than the Written Law, and therefore more adaptable to immediate cultural imperatives. Hillel, for example, essentially nullified the release of debts in the sabbatical year (see Deuteronomy 15:1-3) with an ordinance called the *Prosbul*, by which creditors could transfer collection of debts to the courts, which were not subject to the release law. He justified the *Prosbul* by claiming that the Law was no longer fulfilling its intention of protecting the poor because creditors were increasingly hesitant to advance loans as the seventh year approached.

While we do not know whether or not Jesus specifically disapproved of the *Prosbul*, we know that He accused Pharisees of voiding the Word of God with other traditions (see Matthew 15:1-9). On the other hand, Jesus generally approved of Pharisaical teaching, saying, "*The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so practice and observe whatever they tell you--but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice*" (Matthew 23:2-3).

The Life and Times of Hillel

Hillel was born in Babylonia, sometime around 80 B.C. He seems to have been born into a respected family, from which he learned the traditions of his ancestors, perhaps particularly from his maternal grandfather. As a young man, Hillel abandoned his comfortable life in Babylonia to dedicate his life to Torah study in Jerusalem. He lived in poverty throughout his studies, working occasionally as a woodcutter to make just enough money to pay the daily entrance fee into the School of Torah. Despite a custom for brothers to form a partnership in which one would work to provide the other with the financial support needed for full-time Torah study, Hillel rejected just such an offer from his brother, Shebna. Hillel apparently believed that the arrangement would demonstrate a less-than-full commitment to God.

One early story about Hillel relates that his zeal for his studies was so intense that one day, when he did not have the admission fee, he climbed to the school roof and listened through a skylight. Fully focused on the lesson, Hillel did not even notice snow begin to fall. He soon lost consciousness and lay on the roof all night under a blanket of snow. When the School leaders arrived the next morning (the Sabbath), they wondered why the hall was so dark, looked up to the skylight, and saw Hillel. They rescued him from what was reportedly a four feet layer of snow and revived him. When they learned why Hillel came to be on the roof, they commented, "Someone like this is truly worthy that the Sabbath be violated for his sake" (*Yoma* 35b). Sometime shortly thereafter, admission fees to the School of Torah were abolished.

Hillel learned Torah from the two prominent Pharisee sages of the time, Shemaya and Avtalyon. After their death two men known only as the Sons of Bathyra succeeded to the leadership positions. Hillel had returned to Babylonia for unknown reasons but he was visiting Jerusalem some years later when a controversy arose over sacrificial practices the Sons of Bathyra could not resolve. The Council consulted Hillel, who they knew to be the most knowledgeable student of Shemaya and Avtalyon. When he cited the tradition, they immediately elevated him to *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin. Throughout his long tenure, beginning three years after the rise of Herod the Great to the throne and overlapping the birth and childhood of Jesus, Hillel's fame grew, and he became exceedingly popular with the people. So profound was his influence that his descendants dominated Jewish scholarship for the next four centuries! His disciple Yohanan ben Zakkai essentially saved Judaism, having sneaked out of Jerusalem during the Roman siege and negotiated with Vespasian, general of the Roman army. Thanks to his (correct) prediction that Vespasian would become Emperor, he was given three wishes, one of which resulted in the establishment of the Jewish center at Jamnia after Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D.

Hillel and Jesus

Hillel died about 10 A.D., at which time Jesus which probably about thirteen. Luke records Jesus' visit to Jerusalem for the Passover feast at age twelve, when he disappeared from his parents' group and was found interacting with teachers in the Temple (Luke 2:41-50). If Hillel was able at the time, he certainly would have been at the Temple during the holiday, but there is no evidence that he ever talked with Jesus. Certainly, some of those who were "amazed at his [Jesus'] understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47) were some of the many disciples of Hillel (and Shammai). One wonders if God granted Hillel, honored in Jewish tradition as a "second Ezra" for his role in returning Israel to the Torah at a low point in its history, at least a hint of the coming of the long-promised Messiah.

There are numerous parallels between the teaching of Hillel and that of Jesus, at least one of which deserves some discussion here. Unlike Shammai, Hillel and his successors believed that the Torah was for all mankind, not just Israel. Hillel frequently mingled with the common people, urging them to learn God's Law, and he was open to Gentile proselytes, even those with silly demands. One story tells of a Gentile who was willing to convert if he could be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. He first approached Shammai, who chased him away with a measuring stick. Hillel's response to the same demand was, "What is hateful to you, don't do to your fellowman. That is the whole Torah, the rest is just the commentary. But go now and learn it."

There are those who suggest Jesus stole the Golden Rule from Hillel, but there are some distinct differences between Hillel's comment to the presumptuous Gentile and Jesus' corresponding teachings. The Gentile's question to Hillel relates most closely to that of the Pharisee lawyer who asked Jesus, "*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?*" (Matthew 2:36). Both questions ask the teachers to boil God's Word down to its basic essence. Jesus had two answers: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind* [quoting Deuteronomy 6:5]. *This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself* [quoting Leviticus 19:18]" (Matthew 22:37-39). We should not make too much, however, of Hillel's failure to mention loving God because to Hillel, the highest expression of a love of God lay in the love of one's fellow man. For Hillel, genuine love of other people presupposed love of God.

Jesus delivered what we call the Golden Rule in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), saying, "*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them*" (7:12). The difference in form is immediately recognizable: Jesus calls us to actively do good for others, whereas Hillel advises against doing anything hateful to others. Baxbaum explains the difference by suggesting that Hillel knew the Gentile would not be prepared to hear the positive form, but another possibility exists. People were probably not that different then, and we humans have a tendency to look for the easiest way to fulfill requirements. Perhaps in the twenty or so years between Hillel's death and Jesus' ministry, people came to insist on a literal interpretation of Hillel's Golden Rule. It's easy to imagine people saying, "Hey, I don't do things that hurt other people. According to Hillel, I'm following the Law." Hillel routinely practiced active acts of kindness to others, so he certainly understood that love goes beyond a mere Hippocratic "do no harm" version, but throughout His ministry, Jesus was always calling His listeners to a higher standard than a literal reading of the Law demanded.

The Golden Rule is one of those universal truths that find expression in all religions that concern themselves with moral interactions between human beings. Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism all have versions of the Golden Rule. This only provides evidence that God's goodness and his hopes for Mankind suffuse the world, touching even those who do not know Him.

Hillel and Paul

As a student of Gamaliel, Paul attended the School of Hillel that carried on the traditions of the great teacher. There is ample evidence that Paul learned his lessons there well, combining those studies with the revelations he received directly from the risen Christ to present a message that was both compelling and persuasive. The

parallels that follow are not always exact, but they often show remarkably similar strains of thought.

Hillel's Rules of Torah Interpretation

- Paul: • "...*present yourself to God as one approved...rightly handling [Greek, orthotomeo, to dissect] the word of truth*" ((2 Timothy 2:15).
Paul, as well as other apostles, offered some innovative interpretations of Scripture (Old Testament) to explain the truths of the Gospel. In doing so, Paul may well have been applying the "Seven Rules of Hillel"
- Hillel: • Hillel formulated seven rules for interpreting Scripture, gleaned from Scripture itself:
1. Light and heavy (How much more...)
 2. Equivalence of expressions (same meaning)
 3. Building up a "family" from a single text (a consideration in one applies to all)
 4. Building up a "family" from two or more texts (relating texts together)
 5. The general and the particular (the general restricted by particularization or the specific generalized by other verses)
 6. Analogy made from another passage (seemingly conflicting passages clarified by a third)
 7. Explanation obtained from context (total, not just isolated)
- For more information about Hillel's Seven Rules, see
<http://www.nazarene.net/Hermeneutics/Hillel.html>

Superiority of love

- Paul: • "*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law*" (Romans 13:10).
• "*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13, as well as the rest of the chapter).
• "*And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony*" (Colossians 3:14).
- Hillel: • "What is hateful to you, don't do to your fellowman; that is the whole Torah..." (*Shabbat* 31a, discussed above)
• "Be a lover of your fellow-creatures" (*Avot* 1.12). In using fellow-creatures (**Hebrew**, *briyot*), Hillel was making it clear he was referring to Jew and Gentile alike.

Going beyond conventional religiosity

- Paul: • "*And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment...*" (Philippians 1:9).
- Hillel: • "He taught his disciples that you cannot compare someone who repeats his Torah lesson one hundred times to someone who repeats it one hundred and one times," using a comparison to the going rates for a donkey, about which he said, "It costs one *zuz* to hire an animal for ten miles, but to hire it for eleven miles - just one extra mile - you pay two *zuzim*" (*Hagigah* 9b) .

Faith in God's Providence

- Paul: • "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*" (Romans 8:28).
- Hillel: • "When Hillel the Elder was once on the road approaching the city and heard a loud outcry, he said to those with him, 'I am certain that this is not coming

from my house.' About him, and such as him, does the verse say [quoting Psalm 112:7], 'He will not be afraid of threatening news, his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord'" (*Berachot* 60a). The *Mishnah* expands on this story, stating that "Someone who cries out to God over what has already occurred is praying an empty prayer. An example given of such an empty prayer would be the prayer of a father for a male child when the mother is already pregnant. If the woman is pregnant, the gender is already determined and God will not answer such a prayer.

Everyday holiness

- Paul: • *"Let all that you do be done in love"* (1 Corinthians 16:14).
• *"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day"* (2 Corinthians 4:16).
• *"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"* (1 Corinthians 10:31).
- Hillel: • "The House of Shammai used to say: 'From the first day of the week after the Sabbath, look ahead and prepare for the next Sabbath.' But the House of Hillel said: 'Blessed is the Lord day by day'" (*Betzah* 16a). Hillel even consider such mundane tasks as washing and going to the bathroom to be holy. He sought to honor God in everything he did, not just the tasks that were part of religious ritual.

Service to others

- Paul: • *"For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'"* (Galatians 5:13-14).
• *"...may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you..."* (1 Thessalonians 3:12).
- Hillel: A Jewish commentary on Deuteronomy 15:7-8 asks, "Why does the verse end with what seems to be a superfluous phrase: "in that which he needs" [ESV: "*whatever it may be*"]? This teaches that you shall supply him with his needs even if they are a horse to ride on and a servant to run before him. It was related of Hillel the Elder that he bought for a man of a wealthy family who had become poor (not only his basic necessities but) a horse to ride upon. And he would see to it that the man had a servant to run before him. One day Hillel was not able to find a servant to hire, and he himself ran before him for three miles (*Ketubot* 67b). In distributing charity, Hillel did not stop to decide what was reasonable but gave what the person needed.

Contentment in every situation

- Paul: • *"I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need"* (Philippians 4:12).
- Hillel: • "The unity of experience - acting, and receiving everything that happens - in love, gave Hillel a supernal peace of soul that allowed him to transcend all the trouble and tribulations, all the commotion and tumult of this world" (Buxbaum, p. 189). Hillel was almost completely unflappable. One story is told of a wealthy man who bet another that he could make Hillel angry. He badgered Hillel with inane, sometimes insulting, questions, but he could not get Hillel's goat. In the end, the man said he hoped there was no one else like Hillel who had cost him a lot of money.

Disposition to teaching all

- Paul: • *"Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved" (1 Corinthians 10:32-33).*
- *"This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).*
- Hillel: • *"'Raise up many disciples' - The House of Shammai held: A man should only teach someone who is intelligent and cultured, from a good religious family, and wealthy. The House of Hillel said: Teach all men because many transgressors in Israel were attracted to Torah study and became good people, and some even came to be counted among the perfectly righteous and the *hasidim*" (ARN-A, chapter 3).*
- Hillel also routinely visited the gathering places of the common people, such as the city gate, and encouraged people to learn the Torah. Other, such as Shammai, believed that Torah study should be reserved for those with the capacity and time to devote to full-time study.

Teaching approach (starting where people are)

- Paul: • *"For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).*
- Hillel: • Hillel believed in teaching anyone who sought to learn, as evidenced in the story about the Gentile who asked to learn the Torah on one foot. But he did not immediately present the advanced version. Another similar story tells of a Gentile who wanted to convert on condition of being high priest. Rather than responding with the ridicule the man's request deserved, Hillel agreed to teach him, advising "Is it possible for someone to stand and serve a king if he does not know the court ceremonies? Go then and learn what the duties of the high priest are." When the man encountered the restriction of the priesthood to the sons of Aaron, he recognized his error and withdrew his demand, but he continued to be a disciple of Hillel.

Anti-separatist

- Paul: • In a letter that preceded 1 Corinthians, Paul had advised Christians in Corinth *"not to associate with sexually immoral people"* and they apparently misunderstood, prompting Paul to provide a clarification - *"not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world,"* adding, *"For what have I to do with judging outsiders?"* (1 Corinthians 5:9-12). Separating from sexually immoral people would mean Christians could not share the Good News with a lot of people - both then and now. Paul wants Christians to share their faith and quickly corrects the Corinthians misperception.
- Hillel: • *"Do not separate from the community" (Avot 2:5).* Shammai and his disciples separated themselves from those they considered "sinners" - not to

the extent the Essenes did, but from a Hillelite perspective, Shammite separation may be even worse - they remained in the community but refused to mix with others, maintaining an aura of superiority. They worried about the negative influence the less righteous might have on them, but *hasidim* like Hillel hoped their faith and good deeds to rub off on those same "sinners."

Humility

- Paul: • *"So to keep me from being too elated by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).
- Hillel: • *"My humiliation is my exaltation; my exaltation is my humiliation"* (*Leviticus Rabbah* 1:5, compare to Luke 14:11) Hillel understood that only through humility could one be raised up by God. A later rabbinic tradition, in a teaching remarkably similar to one of Jesus (see Luke 14:7-11), used Hillel's saying along with advice to "seat yourself two or three places lower (at a feast) than what your honor might demand, and wait until they say to you, 'Come up, come up!' and not 'Go down, go back down!'"

Possessions

- Paul: • *"We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything"* (2 Corinthians 6:8-10).
- *"As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share..."* (1 Timothy 7:17-18).
- Hillel: • *"What is mine is not mine. What need have I of what belongs to others?"* (*ARN-B*, chap. 27)

Peace

- Paul: • *"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding"* (Romans 14:19)
- Hillel: • *"Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace"* (*Pirke Avot* 1:12). Hillel believed so deeply in peace and harmony among people that he advocated "social lies," such as praising the beauty of a bride regardless of her appearance. Of course, pursuing peace can be taken too far, as Aaron did in permitting the people to make the golden calf while Moses was on the holy mountain. That's why people like Shammai, who believe in speaking the truth, regardless of its impact, are needed to counterbalance those who stray from peace to appeasement.

The body as the temple of the Holy Spirit

- Paul: • *"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"* (1 Corinthians 3:16)

Hillel: • A story about Hillel relates that, when leaving his disciples, Hillel repeatedly told them he was going "to show some kindness to my house guest." After several days of this, they asked, "Do you have a guest in your house every day?" "Is not this poor soul of mine a guest within my body," he replied, "for it is here today, and gone tomorrow." Hillel did not have the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but he had an innate sense of the immortality God offers and that he was therefore only a guest in his body.

- Jewish tradition suggests that the ancient *hasidim*, including Hillel, were vessels for the holy spirit, particularly during the Rejoicing of the Water-drawing on *Sukkot* (the Festival of Booths). During this time, *hasidim* were witnessed being caught up in ecstatic dancing and speaking prophetic sayings.

There is at least one area in which Paul betrayed his Hillelite training - the persecution of the church. He went dead against the wise advice of Gamaliel and even conspired with Sadducees in doing so. The only reasonable explanation comes from the hand of Paul himself (Philippians 3:5, quoted above): his zeal got the better of him. Eventually, Paul repented of that behavior, blaming his former unbelief for his ignorance (1 Timothy 1:12-15).

Paul, Hillel and Gamaliel provide three examples of Pharisees who do not conform to the general impression we get of Pharisees in the New Testament, but there are others. Joseph of Arimathea, who donated the tomb in which Jesus' body was placed, may have been a Pharisee. Mark calls him a "*respected member of the Council*" (15:43), and Matthew notes that he was wealthy (27:57). To have been a member of the Council at that time, Joseph would have been either a Sadducee or a Pharisee. Because I know of no other biblical example of a Sadducee being, as Joseph was, or becoming a disciple of Jesus, I suspect he was a Pharisee.

Simon the Pharisee (see Luke 7:36-50) seems to have been willing to give Jesus a fair hearing in inviting him to dinner and apparently wondered if He was a prophet. He became rather judgmental when he saw the "sinful" woman anoint Jesus, but at least he understood Jesus' resulting lesson about forgiveness. It's even possible that this Simon, although highly unlikely given the popularity of the name, was the son of Hillel.

Finally, we know that Pharisees became Christians. Some were involved in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:4-30), when the question of circumcision was debated. Not surprisingly, the Pharisaical Christians supported the practice, but we shouldn't be too critical of that. Pharisees were committed students of the Torah and abandoning a long-held, biblically-based belief is extraordinarily difficult. From the outcome of the meeting, we can also surmise that the Pharisees did not insist on having their way. When Paul refers his difficulties with those of the "circumcision party" (Galatians 2:12; Titus 1:10), we can't be sure if he's referring to Jews or Jewish Christians.

We can be certain of a few things about Pharisees: at least some were hypocrites, at least some were opponents of Jesus, and at least some became disciples of the Jesus. We can also certainly be grateful to Gamaliel for heading off the murderous intentions of the Sanhedrin. And finally, we can be grateful to the influence of Hillel for preparing Paul for his Damascus Road experience. From his instruction in the School of Hillel, Paul already knew the value of love, peace, humility, service, holiness, and sharing God's truth with everyone. He only needed a challenge and commission from the Risen Lord to apply those lessons to His service.

Hillel and Kairos (καιρός)

"For while we were still weak, at the right time [kairos] Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). **Kairos** is one of two primary Greek words used for "time." The other, **chronos** (χρόνος) refers most often to chronological time as humans perceive it; whereas **kairos** generally refers to an appropriate time such as the time of harvest. Paul tells us that Christ came at the opportune moment in history. Typically, this is interpreted in reference to the spread of the Roman Empire.

It was the right time because Rome was expanding throughout the Mediterranean world, bringing a peace (the *Pax Romano*) to that area that was unprecedented and would not be repeated for centuries after the fall of Rome. The Romans built roads that criss-crossed the Mediterranean world. They largely banished pirates from the Mediterranean, making sea travel relatively safe. Their expansion brought a universal language, Greek (later Latin), to their Empire. Their attitudes brought a general tolerance of foreign religions.

It was also the right time because of the Diaspora, the dispersion of Jews throughout the Roman Empire. Some of this spread was the result of the Syrian and Babylonian conquests of Israel and Judah, but there was also a voluntary migration of Jews. By the first century A.D., there were Jewish communities in virtually every city in the Roman Empire. Paul made use of this fact as he arrived at new cities, typically going first to the synagogue, where he would encounter fellow-Jews with sufficient background in Scripture to understand his allusions to the Law and the Prophets. Some rejected his interpretations, but the synagogue was still the most likely place in any Roman city to find those who would listen to Paul's account of the coming of the Messiah. God, therefore, in causing Israel to disperse from its tiny nation, creating pockets of opportunity for His messengers.

But it was also the "right time" in Jerusalem. The attitudes that Hillel and his successors infused into Jewish society cultivated the Judean fields with both a renewed devotion to Scripture and a new openness to interpretation that viewed the spirit of the Law at least as important as the letter of the Law. It is apparent to me that God deliberately raised up this obscure Babylonian to the most influential teacher of his time in order to lay vital groundwork for the ministry of Christ Jesus. That Hillel popularized a version of what we know as "The Golden Rule" only serves to underscore the fact that there was a divine connection between him and Jesus, one that we cannot fully understand, but one by which we can be awed.

Hillel lived at a low point in Jewish history, when the Herod the Great allied himself with the Roman Empire and began a concerted program to Romanize Israel. The nation would sink even further when Trajan destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70, but one hundred years earlier, when Hillel rose to become *Nasi*, Israel had largely turned its collective back on God and His Word. Hillel brought them back, first through his own dedication to Torah, and later through his missionary spirit. In doing so, he was God's instrument in furrowing the fields of Israel for the sowing of the Gospel and for preparing the heart of Paul for Damascus Road.

Now

In Jewish tradition, perhaps imperfectly displayed today, Hillel's way of love won out over Shammai way of judgment. While both perspectives are rightly viewed as manifestations of God's character, love of God was ruled superior to fear of God

because it leads His followers to actions that are better imitations of God's. That fact, combined with God's ultimate expression of love in the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, makes it all the more incomprehensible that the Hillel-Shammai debate should have resurfaced in Christianity and continue to today. Still, we have those who shape the Gospel as a form of judgment and seek to motivate others through fear. Divine judgment is a fact, but it is precisely that - divine. When human judgment enters the picture, it obscures God's overriding love for humanity.

The stories of the two presumptuous Gentile proselytes, who attempted to impose inappropriate conditions on their conversion, surely have uncounted modern corollaries. "You can't be a Christian until you _____. Fill in the blank - "accept Jesus as your personal savior," "are baptized," "manifest charismatic gifts," "go through catechism," or whatever. The Gentiles converts claimed that such a Shammite approach, "would have driven us out of this world and the World-to-Come" even though it was biblically correct. How many well-meaning Christians, trying to serve God, are so inwardly focused that they drive others out of the blessings of the Christian life and eternity with the Creator? Paul learned his lessons well in the School of Hillel, and they, combined with the incredible power of the Gospel message itself, explain his amazing success in converting people from a broad range of backgrounds. We can do the same, but only if we too assume the loving mantle of Hillel and gently lead others "under the wing of the Divine Presence."

Modern cynics scoff at Luke's claims of the number of Jewish converts to Christianity in Jerusalem immediately after the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Some point to the opposition Paul frequently faced when he presented the gospel in Jewish synagogues in Asia, Macedonia, and Greece as evidence that Jews did not accept the apostles' message so readily. The discrepancy, however, becomes highly credible if one factors in the influence of Hillel and his descendants. Of the perhaps one hundred thousand Jews living in Jerusalem in the 30's, many would have had at least some familiarity with the School of Hillel and its teachings. Jews in such cities as Iconium, Ephesus, Philippi, and Corinth, however, separated from their homeland, would have minimal knowledge of occurrences in Jerusalem - even those who made periodic pilgrimages to the holy city. I submit that the difference in Jewish conversion rates between Jerusalem and the diaspora cities is explained by the impact of the School of Hillel.

For this reason, and because of his life, I could easily have included this installment of *ET&N* in the Early Father series. Hillel's attitudes were so Christlike that in many ways, he serves as a better model for the Christian life than the vast majority of second and third century Christian leaders. But Hillel died before the death, burial and resurrection of Christ Jesus.

In closing, I offer this saying of Hillel:

The more Torah, the more life;
the more sitting in study, the more wisdom;
the more counsel, the more understanding;
the more charity, the more peace.

He who has acquired a good name [through study, wisdom, understanding, charity, and peace],
has acquired it for himself;

and he who has acquired words of Torah,
has acquired life in the World-to-Come (*Avot* 2.4, 7).

Replace the two instances of "Torah" above with "Christ" and you get a pretty good summary of the Christian life. Considering that Torah and Christ are both manifestations of the Word of God, that's not surprising.

Discussion

[\(Early Church Fathers: Ignatius\)](#)

Comments posted on the [ET&N](#) blog at blog.peculiarpress.com



Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now*? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament: Caesarea (Aug 22)

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