

Hillel

Considered by some as the greatest sage and rabbi of the Second Temple Period (516 B.C.E. – 70 C.E.), Hillel the Elder was a contemporary of King Herod and Jesus (late 1st century B.C.E. – early 1st century C.E.). He was Babylonian by birth, but eventually went to Palestine where he became a great leader among the scholars. He is therefore sometimes referred to as Hillel the Babylonian.¹ The school he founded in Palestine wielded great influence in the development of Rabbinic Judaism.² In fact, Hillel was the ancestor of the patriarchs who led Palestinian Judaism up to the 5th century C.E.³ One of his descendents, his grandson, Gamaliel, of whom Saul of Tarsus was a disciple before converting to Christianity, was one of the most prominent Pharisees during the mid to late 1st century C.E. and another, Rabbi Judah the Prince, compiled the Mishnah.⁴

Hillel's contributions to Passover are many as evidenced by the numerous references to his teachings in the Passover section of the Mishnah. However, two specific contributions stand out above the rest – first, the Hillel Sandwich; and second, his teaching that the Paschal sacrifice took precedence over the Sabbath.

Hillel has been described as a humble man who found it his lifelong duty to draw others to the Torah. Once a heathen came to him promising to be converted provided that Hillel could teach him the entire Torah. Hillel responded: “O thou scoffer, who wouldst learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot, I will teach thee: What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow man; this is the whole Law; the rest is mere commentary.”⁵

A key issue in his teaching, although irrelevant to Passover, was personal cleanliness. Hillel consistently taught that each individual possessed a duty to himself to keep himself clean because he had been placed as an agent over his body, a body that was fashioned in the image of God. Such teaching is reflected in his dialogue with his students: “If the statues erected to kings in the theaters and circuses are washed and scrubbed by those in charge of them...how much more should we, who have been created in His image and likeness, take care of our bodies, as it is written: For in the image of God made He man.^{6,7} Also, with reference to himself: “This poor soul – is it not a guest in the body, here today and gone tomorrow?”⁸

A simple examination of Hillel's teachings demonstrates an obvious similarity to the teachings of Jesus, his contemporary, and Saul of Tarsus, later called Paul. “What is hateful to thee, do not unto thy fellow man; this is the whole Law” draws a striking resemblance to Jesus' words: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁹

¹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*

² Kaplan, Mordecai M. *The New Haggadah* (New York: Behrman House, 1942) 85

³ Isidore Singer, ed. *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (London: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1901-06) 397

⁴ Charlesworth, James H. “Hillel and Jesus: Why Comparisons Are Important” *Hillel and Jesus: Comparative Studies of Two Major Religious Leaders* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 24

⁵ *Talmud*. Shab. 31a

⁶ Genesis 9:6

⁷ *Talmud*. Lev. R. 34

⁸ *Talmud*. Lev. R. 24:3

⁹ Matthew 22:37-39

It is also similar to Paul's teaching: "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."¹⁰

A second similarity is found in Hillel's counsel: "He who magnifies his name destroys it." Likewise Jesus taught: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." Both these statements imply that we cannot improve by seeking our own glory. Additionally Jesus' parable of the talents¹¹ demonstrates how the talents of those who do not increase what has been given them will be taken away and given to those who do. In this parable the talents, or money, represents any type of gift that God may give us. This bears a striking likeness to Hillel's observation, "He who does not increase his knowledge decreases it."

While there are several comparisons to be drawn between the teachings of Hillel and Jesus, it is impossible to know precisely what type of interaction they had with each other given the fact that the Christian scriptures do not mention Hillel and Jewish scriptures do not mention Jesus. However, because of the constant interaction between Jesus and the Sanhedrin, we may safely assume that there must have been some contact between these two men. Perhaps one clue that Hillel and Jesus interacted, and quite possibly in a favorable manner, is that Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles tells of Hillel's grandson, Gamaliel, who stood up on behalf of Peter and the other disciples after the death of Jesus.¹² It is possible that Gamaliel inherited his approach to the disciples of Jesus at least somewhat from his grandfather's approach to Jesus himself.

¹⁰ Galatians 5:14

¹¹ Matthew 25:14-30

¹² Acts 5:34-40