

# **Jesus Revisited**

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## Abstract

This essay is an analysis of the life of Jesus regarding his teachings and ministry. It evaluates his words within the context of his Jewish heritage as well as within the religious climate of Judaism that existed during his time. By the process of defining Jewish philosophical norms, placing Jesus into first century Israel, and accommodating for the effects of time and language on effective translation, it argues that Jesus was a Jewish man to his very core and that the foundation of his teachings rested in the Torah.

## Jesus Revisited

The defining element of what it means to be Jewish is the adherence to and belief in the Law, or Torah. This belief has been foundational to all practicing Jews throughout history and up to the present day. As Jesus was born and raised Jewish, it would follow that the Torah would have been the foundation upon which Jesus rested all of his teachings and actions. The Torah is God's law that was handed down to Moses at Mount Sinai. It corresponds to the first five written books of the Hebrew Bible in addition to the oral law, which was later written down for fear of being lost. "Jews are first and foremost the people of the Torah..." writes Donald A. Hagner in his book *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus*; he continues "...In first century Judaism, as in much of Judaism today, the Law was virtually synonymous with authority"(Hagner 87). There is profound evidence, and firm scholarly support, that Jesus was a fully practicing Jew in his lifetime and viewed the Torah as the authoritative word of God. Analyzing Jesus' actions, intentions, and thoughts through a new lens shows that his deeds were entirely expressive of an adherent Jew in first century Jerusalem. "Jesus was and remained a Torah-true Jew, who never and nowhere (in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) transgressed against the Mosaic and rabbinic legislation," says the Jewish Theologian Pinchas Lapide (Hagner 96). Jesus was Jewish. He was circumcised (Luke 2:21), observed passover (Matthew 26:18), wore the distinguishing Jewish tassels, or *tzitzit*, (Matthew 9:20-22), and paid the temple tax (Matthew 17:24-27). Jesus had no intention of abolishing Judaism or revising the written Law. He continually uplifted the Torah, while rejecting the insincere, hollow actions of the Jewish elite, which was an acceptable and normal Jewish practice in his time.

Throughout history, controversies in understanding and accurately representing the Jewishness of Jesus have arisen from misinterpretations, imprecise translations, as well as insufficient, often altered historical evidence. The actual number of writings that have existed on Jesus and his life are quite small in number. While external, non-Christian sources, such as Josephus, Tacitus, and the Talmud itself, do exist and validate the concrete existence of Jesus, the majority of texts that describe his life and teachings are found in the Christian new testament which results in a certain level of bias towards the produced material. Fortunately, increases in technology and modern scholarship continue to allow for deeper knowledge and more accurate assessments of the underlying intentions of Jesus' ministry. A prominent and persistent disagreement separating Jesus from his Jewish heritage is the apparent conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees presented in the synoptic gospels. Several instances occur in these texts where Jesus and the Pharisees are clashing over the Law. This argument has multiple flaws.

Firstly, arguing that Jesus disagreed with the Pharisees, and is therefore at odds with the Jewish practice of affirming the primacy of Torah, is inaccurate. It suggests quite the opposite. Jesus' ability to quote and use the written Law in his discourse with the Pharisees displays his adherence to, and knowledge of, fundamental Jewish Law. Furthermore, it was, and still is, completely customary, normal, and accepted within Jewish practice to question, argue and interpret the Torah. In his book *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus*, David Klinghoffer asserts this very idea, "From the very beginning, Jews have been fighting with one another, and with other people, about the right way to serve God." He later continues this thought in regard to Jesus specifically, "Yes... He [Jesus] differed with the rabbi's on certain points of belief or practice, but then the rabbis in their discussions among themselves differed on such

questions!”(Klinghoffer 54). Jesus’ actions of dialogue and disagreement are the same actions that existed amongst the Pharisees themselves and with other Jewish sects that existed in first century Jerusalem. The time in which Jesus lived was a time full of Jews interpreting the Torah in different ways. It would not have been abnormal for Jesus to have disagreements with the Pharisees or any other Jewish sect for that matter. This point is emphasized by Rabbi Lewis D. Solomon in his essay *Jesus* where he says, “If you were to travel back in time to the first century CE, you would discover that much, but not all, of Jesus’ teachings were within the ethical boundaries of Judaism” (Solomon 151). Clearly Jesus’ actions here are Jewish in nature and relevant to the time within which he lived.

While the evidence shows that Jesus conflicting with the Pharisees is not anti-Jewish, there is still yet another error in the argument towards a Jesus that was attempting to abrogate Jewish tradition. Despite having some divergent opinions regarding interpretation of the oral Law, Jesus was actually not very different from the Pharisees in what he did teach and belief. Many of his foundational teachings that are repeated throughout the synoptic gospels are parallel teachings of esteemed rabbis in the Jewish tradition. New testament scholar EP Sanders expresses this fact when he says, “The situation seems to be this: those who presumably know the most about Judaism, and about the law in particular - Jewish Scholars - do not find any substantial points of disagreement between Jesus and his contemporaries”(Klinghoffer 55). Jesus and the Pharisees may have had arguments on the interpretation of the Tradition of the Elders, but foundationally, they were in agreement in regard to upholding the Torah. As Jesus himself says in his famous Sermon on the Mount, “ ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth

pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (*New Revised Standard Version*, Matthew 5:17-18) Jesus' intention is to uplift the Torah, and adherence to its statutes, which is no different than the goals of the Pharisees.

In comparing Jesus' teachings with the rabbinic teachings of his time it becomes evident that Jesus' thoughts were in accord with other modern and contemporary Jewish rabbis and sages that surrounded his lifetime. They had a desire to understand God's Law, to spread this knowledge, and to worship and serve God more effectively. Rabbi Herbert Bronstein provides such an example in his essay *Talking Torah with Jesus*. Bronstein discusses the practice of ancient rabbis attempting to get to the “essence of Torah” by asking “What is the most important verse of the Torah?” (Bronstein 53) In the gospel of Matthew and Luke, Jesus is asked this very question by a Pharisee to whom Jesus replies, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”(Matthew 22:37-40). Bronstein draws the parallel here to the prayer in *Shema* “You shall love the Lord your God”(Deuteronomy 6:4-6). The Shema Prayer is recited twice daily by Jews as an affirmation of their faith. Bronstein further references “the Holiness Portion” found in Leviticus 19:18 that reads “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Bronstein 53). Jesus' response to the Pharisee is a recitation of the written Law. He is using the Torah to uphold the Torah, and his answer, emphasizing that loving God, and others, as the foundation of the Law is not unique to Jesus. The Elder Hillel, before Jesus, and the Rabbi Akiba, after Jesus, both stated that loving one's neighbor was the most important aspect of Torah.

Although these new scholarly interpretations surrounding Jesus continue to assert his fully Jewish actions and nature, there are still some biblical accounts in the Christian new testament that are often used as contentions to discredit this concept. The most frequently discussed discrepancy is in respect to the events that take place in Mark chapter seven. In this account, the Pharisees see that the disciples of Jesus have not washed their hands before eating “...the Pharisees... noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them” (Mark 7:1-2). Jesus is then asked by the Pharisees why his followers are not living in accordance with the Tradition of the Elders that dictates Jews must clean their hands prior to eating “ ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ ” (Mark 7:5). At this point, in Jesus’ response to their query, is where many interpret Jesus to be breaking from Judaism and his adherence to Torah. Jesus announces, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” (Mark 7:14-15). This text is often quoted to suggest that Jesus’ statement was paramount to him eliminating the required Jewish food laws that distinguished Jews from non-Jews. However, through a re-assessment of scriptural translation, and closer analysis and understanding of Jewish law, it becomes apparent that this was not likely Jesus' intention at all.

In the dietary laws of the Torah, certain foods are either kosher (allowed) or they are forbidden for consumption by Jews. These laws refer to the “permissibility or impermissibility for eating by Jews” writes Daniel Boyarin in *The Jewish Gospels*, and while non-kosher foods are referred to as “impure”, the impurity defined by these laws does not correlate to the body of a person (Boyarin 112). In addition to the kosher laws, there are laws that determine the purity or

impurity of a food “depending on how that food was handled and what other things that may have come into contact with” (Boyarin 112-113). It is on these purity laws that the Pharisees were questioning Jesus. The practice of washing one's hands before eating was a commandment of the Tradition of the Elders, not of the written law. Jesus highlights this point when he first answers their question by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition. Then he said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!” (Mark 7:6-9)

Jesus is not in contestation with the Pharisees in regard to consuming Kosher foods, it is a disagreement in regard to how the elders have interpreted the oral law and what practices do or don't defile a person. Boyarin states:

Jesus protests, asserting that foods that go into the body don't make the body impure; only things that come out of the body have that power to contaminate. So really what the gospel describes is a Jesus who rejected the pharisaic extension of these Purity laws beyond their original specific biblical foundations. He is not rejecting the Torah rules and practices but upholding them (Boyarin 114).

Once again Jesus displays his Jewish heritage and his continued adherence to his faith by using the words of the Jewish Prophet Isaiah from the Tanakh to rebuke the Pharisees interpretations. He is utilizing the written law and prophets to affirm his interpretations of the oral law that are in contrast with the Tradition of the Elders and the Pharisees that have come to see him. His actions



here are far from being non-jewish. Jesus consistently upholds the Torah, and God, with all of his teachings.

To further clarify this passage and solidify Jesus' intentions, Boyarin additionally argues for the importance of assessing the translation and the use of the English words “clean” and “unclean” in regard to these two separate systems of laws. He states that the mutual use of these English words in biblical translations to refer to the Kosher laws and the Purity laws has led to confusion in understanding the meaning behind Jesus' pronouncement in verse 15. Boyarin says, “These translate two entirely different sets of Hebrew words, *mutar* and *tahor*. It would be better to translate the first set by “permitted” and “forbidden” and use “clean” and “unclean”, or “pure” and “impure”, only for the latter set” (Boyarin 113). The differentiation between these two words is significant because Jesus was not discussing permissibility. Jesus was Jewish and adhered to the kosher laws that restricted certain foods from being consumed by Jews. What Jesus has argued against is the ability for an external, “impure” element to cause a person to become unclean by going into them. In the context of this passage, Jesus is correlating this idea with the situation at hand, which happened to be food, however, it has much wider implications.

Jesus' discussion of purity in the content of Mark chapter seven speaks more broadly to Jesus' continual emphasis on ethics and the need for moral purity which comes from within. Jesus frequently spoke in parables, and it is likely that in this situation he was doing something similar. Hagner discusses Lapidé's interpretation of the text, “Lapidé argues that Jesus did not mean what he said to be taken literally...The formula of Mark 7:14, “Hear and understand” points “unmistakably to a deeper sense.” Jesus means in this passage merely to stress the necessity of inner purity, without which ritual cleanliness counts for little. In this emphasis he is

in perfect accord with the prophets of Israel” (Hagner 116-117). Jesus’ prime goal as a Jewish leader and teacher was a promotion of an ethical, moral Judaism. He sought to uplift love and compassion above the ritual interpretations that were prominent in the Jewish sects of his time. This aim parallels other prominent rabbis including Hillel, Akiba, and Gamaliel the Elder. There is no doubt among scholars that Jesus was a law-abiding Jew through and through. Hagner articulates Lapidé’s conclusive assessment of Jesus:

Where Jesus appears to go against the law in the synoptic tradition, closer examination reveals repeatedly that this is the result of Christian misunderstanding or, as in the case of Mark 7:19 [Thus he declared all foods clean.], a later tendentious interpolation. The overwhelming evidence of the gospels is that Jesus upheld the authority of the Torah and the prophets. Jesus indeed fought against the deifying of law-observance into the essence of Judaism. But on this point Jesus is in the good company of Hillel, Akiba, the Hasidim, and the neo-orthodox Jews. (Hagner 96)

Jesus was a law-abiding Jewish rabbi in first century Jerusalem. His ministry and teachings spoke directly to Jewish interpretation and theology. Disagreements with the Pharisaic sect of his time were minimal. “The sum total of Jesus's teachings can be found in a Pharisaic literature,” writes Walter Homolka in his book *Jesus Reclaimed* (48). Any conflicts that appear to have arisen between Jesus and Jewish theology are often texts that have been misinterpreted, altered, and that have suffered from poor translation. Jesus, like Hillel and many other revered rabbis, called Jews to live a more loving, compassionate, and ethical life, “Jesus' insistence on a universalistic, spiritually oriented Judaism echoed the great Hebrew Prophets. Focusing on our

need to love and forgive others.” (Solomon 151). In the light of the Torah and with love of God, Jesus taught an understanding of the Law that put the need for inner morality and human compassion ahead of ritualistic interpretations. His beliefs and understandings of the Torah, and his drive to transform the Judaism of his time, places him among the other remembered rabbis of first century Israel.

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