STORIES OF JEWISH CHRIST
Jesus Among the Rabbis
IN THIS LECTURE:

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From Sages to Rabbis
Many of our modern terms and ideas about ancient religion are fairly new. The title “Rabbi”, for example, can be applied to Torah teachers of 1st century and to Jesus only in a general sense. The occupation and office of a Rabbi which most people today understand as a trained and ordained teacher of Judaism did not officially exist in the first century.
Many of our modern terms and ideas about ancient religion are fairly new. The title “Rabbi”, for example, can be applied to Torah teachers of 1st century and to Jesus only in a general sense. The occupation and office of a Rabbi which most people today understand as a trained and ordained teacher of Judaism did not officially exist in the first century. The term “Rabbi” was only a general informal description of a teacher who taught the wisdom of Torah. The official rabbinic ordination, rabbinic office, succession and the formal title of “Rabbi” were developed much later in history. The modern sense of what is understood by the title “rabbi” was established after the destruction of the temple and completion of Mishnah.
In the early stages of Judaism’s development a class of non-priestly leadership emerged in Israel. Besides the priests and the prophets Israel always had elders who carried out mostly localized civic duties. Most scholars believe that in the Babylonian exile these elders became teachers of Jewish values and sustainers of the communal identity. This was a shift and a necessary step in order to prevent assimilation in Babylon.
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Much of the Jewish tradition of the 1st century has roots in this era. The Babylonian exile profoundly affected Israel. The greatest of elders who taught God’s ways in Babylon were called Zugot (pairs) as one would refer to shoes. Each generation had two most notable sages which explains the name Zugot (pairs). Only later, after the Zugot the title of the “rabbi”, an itinerate teacher, became an office.
**Era of Zugot** (500 BCE - 70 CE) - Jewish tradition, theology and interpretations were developed and passed down orally.

**Era of Tanaim** (70 - 220 CE) - Jewish oral traditions and legal opinions were assembled and written down as Mishnah.

**Era of Amoraim** (220 - 500 CE) - Mishnah is supplemented by an authoritative commentary called the Gemara (Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud)
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**Writing of the New Testament**

**Emergence of the church dominated by non-Jews and the beginning of Rabbinic Judaism**

**Development of Rabbinic Judaism into Mainstream Judaism**
The Zugot (pairs) were notable Torah Sages who provided a balance of Torah interpretation, government and legislation in ancient Israel. The most famous pair is Hillel and Shammai. The Zugot were the leading scholars of their generation and according to tradition jointly led the Sanhedrin.
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According to traditional sources, the “Great Assembly” formed in the Babylonian exile was also called the Sanhedrin (council). In Greek συνέδριον (sunedrion) means “sitting together”. The Nasi (President) and Av Bet Din (Head of the Court) presided over the council of 71 elders who governed the affairs of Israel.
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Typically the role of Nasi was fulfilled by a descendant of King David. The Nasi was seen at times as “a prince” and as a preeminent political leader in Israel. The Av Bet Din (Head of the Court) acted as a vice president, but also had his own unique responsibilities.
Tradition explains that the role of Av Bet Din (Head of the Court) was to make sure that all decisions considered by the council were legal and proper in light of Torah. The job of the Nasi was to make sure that disagreements were settled peacefully, and that compassion and love towards brothers, as described in Torah, was not ignored in the process of making laws. Such were the duties of Hillel and Shammai.
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The members of the Sanhedrin were Torah scholars, wise and educated men, priests, scribes, nobles, and businessmen. Many functioned as local community leaders and often as local judges throughout Israel.
Jesus Among the Rabbis
Jesus was a rabbi, an itinerate teacher of God’s law and wisdom among other rabbis just like him. He behaved similarly to his peers. He taught in various synagogues and as was the custom, depended on the hospitality of his hosts for his livelihood. The method of the ancient rabbis was to teach not standing, but sitting down. The most earnest disciples gathered at the feet of their teacher.
...let thy house be a house of meeting for the Wise, and bedust thyself with the dust of their feet, and drink with thirst their words... (Mishna, Pirke Avot 1:4)
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...a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her home. She had a sister called Mary, who was seated at the Lord’s feet, listening to His word. (Luke 10: 38-39)
The Apostle Paul was also a rabbi in the same sense. This is how he described himself, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under (lit: at the feet of) Gamaliel” (Acts 22:3) Paul’s rabbi was Gamaliel I, a Pharisee from the 1st century CE. He was a gifted teacher of Torah and the son of the famous Hillel the Elder, one of the early Zugot sages (1st century BCE).
"When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. He opened His mouth and began to teach them..."

(Matt 5:1-2 NASB)

Studying at the feet of a rabbi, or right next to him, was a privilege of the best and brightest pupils.
The disciples memorized their rabbi’s teachings word for word, later repeating them to each other to verify the accuracy. Then these memorized teachings were passed down to others orally through the same process.
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In Judaism this kind of instruction and knowledge transmission is traditional. When people speak of “oral torah” this is what they typically have in mind.
Jesus taught as other rabbis did. His disciples behaved in the way the disciples of other rabbis behaved. Jesus also used the religious language of his day. Understanding him in the context of other rabbis helps us to interpret his words properly, in a natural context. Without the knowledge of early Judaism, modern Bible teachers interpret his words in the most foreign and obscure ways.
“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:19)

“Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 18:18)
What are the common explanations and teachings about “binding and loosing” one hears today?

Usually it has to do something with spiritual warfare and biding the devil. But these terms were technical legal expressions in ancient Judaism. And many people simply do not know this fact.
“Binding and loosing” is legal terminology most often used by the Pharisees. It means “forbidding something” – binding, tying (as with a rope) and “permitting something” – loosing, untying, relaxing the rules in a legal sense.

“[Under Queen Alexandra of Jerusalem (141–67 BCE) the Pharisees] became the administrators of all public affairs so as to be empowered to banish and readmit whom they pleased, as well as to loose and to bind.” (Josephus, War 1:5:2)
When Jesus used this proper terminology he did not speak about demons or prayer or spiritual warfare.

He told his disciples that they (just like the Pharisees in the Josephus quote) have the legislative right of making rules and norms, allowing and forbidding things in their community. To bind is to forbid, to loose is to permit. Jesus used the language that other rabbis used.
Hillel, Shammai and Their Debates
Hillel is the most famous member of the last Zug (pair) of Jewish sages.

He was born in Babylon around 110 BCE and died in the very beginning of 1st century CE in Jerusalem during the time of King Herod and Emperor Augustus. Hillel was buried on Mt. Meron in Galilee.
Hillel was from the tribe of Benjamin on his father’s side and of Davidic descent on his mother’s side. Hillel was a woodcutter by profession. His name translated from Hebrew means “praise”.

Hillel the Elder belonged to the sect of the Pharisees and he served as the Nasi of the Sanhedrin for many years.
Hillel was known to be a kind, patient and humble man during his life. He typically made more lenient applications of Torah to life, but that was not always the case.

Hillel is one of the most revered early teachers in Judaism whose ideas and thinking lay at the foundation of Jewish spiritual tradition.
"In ancient days, where the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came from Babylon and re-established it. Then it was again forgotten until Hillel came from Babylonia and re-established it."

(Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 20a)
Hillel taught, “He who seeks fame loses his name; knowledge that does not grow will decrease; one who does not study deserves to die; one who uses the crown of the Torah for material gain will perish.” (Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 1:13)
“Hillel would say: Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not believe in yourself until the day you die. **Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place**... And do not say "When I free myself of my concerns, I will study," for perhaps you will never free yourself.” (Mishnah, Perkei Avot 2:4)
Shammai taught, "Make the study of the Torah your chief occupation; speak little, but accomplish much; and receive every man with a friendly countenance."
(Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 1:15)
“Every argument that is in the name of heaven is destined to endure. But if it is not for heaven's name - it is not destined to endure. **What is an example in the name of heaven? The argument of Hillel and Shammai. What is not in the name of heaven? The argument of Korach and all of his followers.” (Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 5:17)
Shammai is almost always mentioned together with Hillel (mostly in a polemical comparison).

Unlike Hillel, Shammai came from a wealthy family in Judea. His name translated from Hebrew means “measurer” or “appraiser”. Shammai's name points to his profession as a builder or an engineer.
Shammai was also a Pharisee. He became Av Bet Din (vice president) and served along with Hillel in the Sanhedrin.

After Hillel died Shammai became the Sanhedrin Nasi (president).

Shammai was buried on Mt. Meron in Galilee not far from Hillel but in a much more elaborate tomb.
If Hillel was more lenient, Shammasi the Elder consistently held the most conservative, rigid and strict interpretations of Torah. Shammasi was known to be an impatient and short-tempered man, especially when compared to Hillel.

Both men were revered for their brilliance and skill in teaching Torah, but Hillel became preeminent.
The Babylonian Talmud, in Shabbat 31a, tells a story that once a pagan came before Shammasi, and said to him: "Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammasi became upset and chased him away with the measuring stick. This same Gentile came to Hillel with the same request, and Hillel converted him by saying: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, now go and learn it."
Shammai stood on a strict and rigid interpretation of the commandments. For example, he believed that young children should not be exempted from the 24 hour fast on the Day of Atonement. Hillel believed in exemptions. Current rules allow children, mothers with infants and anyone in weak health not to fast. Shammai argued that even infants should not be exempted from living in a temporary booth during the Feast of Tabernacles. Hillel allowed for sensible exclusions.
“For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting, ‘The halachah is in agreement with our views’ and the latter contending, ‘The halachah is in agreement with our views’. Then a Bat Kol (heavenly voice) announced, ‘[the utterances of] both are the words of the living God, but the halachah is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel.” (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b and Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 1:4)
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Shammai and Hillel were very different in character and in their interpretations of Torah. They founded separate schools of thought and each profoundly influenced Jewish understanding of Torah in the 1st century.
1st Century Arguments About Divorce
Hillel and Shammasi were dead by the time the NT was written, but their disciples carried on. Jesus' interaction with the sages in the Jerusalem Temple (Luke 2) could have put him in touch with teachers from both of the houses. One can suppose that the type of Pharisees who opposed Jesus (Matt. 23) were from the house of Shammasi, while the Pharisees that supported him, like the group whom Nicodemus represented (John 3), were the followers of Hillel.
Not all Pharisees were opposed to Jesus. Many invited him to eat at their house, which points to the fact that they considered him worthy and maybe even one of them. Pharisees were known for refusing to eat with non-Pharisees. A Pharisee named Gamaliel II (a grandson of Hillel) defended the cause of the apostles in the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:33-39). The Apostle Paul claimed to have been trained by Gamaliel I himself (Acts 22:30).
“Some Pharisees came up to Jesus, testing Him, and began to question Him whether it was lawful for a man to divorce a wife...In the house the disciples began questioning Him about this again. And He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery.” (Mark 10:2-12)
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Matters of divorce and remarriage were passionately debated by pious Jews in the 1st century. The New Testament writers do not stay out of this debate and they present Jesus’ involvement in this argument. Here is Mark’s version.
Mark says that “some Pharisees” came to him, so we can assume a particular group. Mark also says this was a test. The Pharisees were not asking Jesus the question because they did not know what to do. Rather, they were testing Jesus and were curious where he stood.

Will he side with the house of Shammai or with the house of Hillel? Or will he oppose them both?
Some Pharisees came to Jesus, testing Him and asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”. They (Pharisees) said to Him, “Why then did Moses command to give her a certificate of divorce and send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted... I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” (Matt. 19:3-9)
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Matthew’s version of the same story appears to be more complete and detailed. The argument is more nuanced. The real question was not whether divorce is allowed in general. That was settled by Moses. The argument was about proper and improper grounds for divorce.

Can a divorce be initiated for any reason whatsoever? Or is there a limited list of the most serious grounds for divorce? Hillel and Shammai argued over that!
Beit Shammai says: A man should not divorce his wife unless he has found her guilty of some unseemly conduct as it says, because he has found some unseemly thing in her. Beit Hillel, however, says even if she has merely spoilt his food since it says, because he has found some unseemly thing in her. R. Akiva says [he may divorce her] even if he finds another woman more beautiful than she is, as it says, it comes to pass, if she finds no favor in his eyes. (Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 90a)
The verse in question is - “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she תִּמְצָא־חֵן бְּעֵינָיו finds no favor in his eyes because he has found עֶרְוַת דָּבָר some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce…” (Deut. 24:1)
The verse in question is - “When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce…” (Deut. 24:1)

Shammai appealed to the phrase עֶרְוַת דָבָר (ervat davar) “matter of indecency”. He stressed עֶרְוַת (ervat) - the indecency itself, pointing out that for divorce the matter is connected to marital impropriety. Hillel appealed to the same phrase pointing out that דָבָר (davar) is “some matter” - which can be anything and therefore, the reason for divorce can be anything, even superficial.
In the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva went even further to advance Hillel's opinion. He said that the reason for a divorce can be a more beautiful woman because the words “finds no favor” imply the husband's preference.
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Now let’s remember that in Mark, Jesus is asked “if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” In Matthew the question is more nuanced and detailed, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?” The question is about proper reasons, exactly what the other rabbis argued over.
4 And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” (Matt 19: 4-6)
In Jesus’ view, Hillel’s lenient interpretation compromised the real intent of the Torah; which was not to have divorces period. The divorce law itself was already an exception to the norm. Jesus sided with Shammai and rejected Hillel’s “any cause divorce”.

In Matthew he cited the “marital indecency” as proper grounds. There is a clear disagreement here, but there is more...
The Essenes and those Jews who lived in Qumran held to the most conservative interpretations of the Torah. They called Pharisees “builders of the wall” because they invented new Torah interpretations. Qumran Jews expressed their disagreement with these interpretations in words almost identical to Jesus’ criticism, citing creation, Adam and Eve and God’s original intent.
The builders of the wall who walk after law... are caught [by two] by fornication in taking two wives during their lifetime. But the fundamental principle of the creation is ‘Male and Female created He them.’ And they who went into the Ark, ‘Two and two went into the Ark.’ (Zadokite Fragments or CD 7:1-3)
But what about the other grounds Moses mentions? Sexual impropriety is not the only reason Moses mentions.

“If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights. If he will not do these three things for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money. (Ex. 21:10-11)
Divorce based on “abandonment and abuse” was another well-known reason taught by Moses. The denial of basic needs like food, clothing and sexual relations to a spouse was considered a reason as valid as marital unfaithfulness outlined in Deut. 24:1.
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Why didn't Jesus list this other reason Moses mentions? Because the focus of this debate is that improper grounds for divorce made divorces illegitimate and not valid.
Based on Jesus’ judgement a remarriage in this particular situation (of improper divorce) would then be legally an adultery. Jesus was asked if a divorce can be initiated for any reason whatsoever and his answer was - “no, only for proper reasons”. 
Based on Jesus’ judgement a remarriage in this particular situation (of improper divorce) would then be legally an adultery. Jesus was asked if a divorce can be initiated for any reason whatsoever and his answer was - “no, only for proper reasons”.

He sided with Beit Shamai in this instance and his answer should be understood in light of the historical argument between the two houses. Jesus was clearly informed about this debate.
Jesus knew Torah well. Yet he failed to mention the legitimate abandonment issue in his answer to the Pharisees. Yeshua was answering a particular question and not presenting a comprehensive teaching on divorce.
Jesus knew Torah well. Yet he failed to mention the legitimate abandonment issue in his answer to the Pharisees. Yeshua was answering a particular question and not presenting a comprehensive teaching on divorce.

Without the understanding of the background and nature of this debate over divorce, this question that was asked of Jesus, and his answer, will most likely be misinterpreted and misunderstood.
Hillel and Shammasi, as well as the schools of interpretation established by them, left a significant mark on Jewish society of the 1st century.

By the Second Temple era, the diversity of Jewish movements can be seen even within a single group such as the Pharisees. One cannot assume a cohesive uniform Judaism in the New Testament era.
Both Jewish and Christian communities, in their Scripture interpretation and in practice, owe much to the early generations of Jewish sages; the Zugot. Their teachings should not be ignored because they often provide points of reference for understanding the New Testament writings. It is necessary to interpret Jesus in his context, and that means seeing him among other Rabbis of his day.
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