

# The Terminologies of Jewish Culture in the World of Jesus & beyond

(with credit and acknowledgment from Dr. Brad Young's excellent book,  
*Meet the Rabbis: Rabbinic Thought & the Teaching of Jesus, 2007*)

- Agadah**      A Hebrew term meaning "*storytelling*." Agadic teaching, especially the teachings of the rabbis, contained stories, legends, parables, and folklore. (also spelled Haggadah)
- Amidah**      A Hebrew term mean "*standing*." This refers to (even today) to a set of 18 prayers or benedictions. The Amidah is also called the *Shemoneh Esreh* (literally, "18") prayer. It is prayed 3 times daily.
- Essenses**      This represents a Jewish sect that separated from mainstream Judaism. They are best known as inhabiting the community of Qumran in the Wilderness of Judah.
- Ethics of the Fathers**      A moral code of conduct. It served as a valuable source of Jewish teachings that linked the spiritual world of the Hebrew Scriptures (OT) with the New Testament era. This resources serves as valuable for us to understand the thought and practice of the "silent years" between Malachi and Matthew. A total of 65 rabbis are quoted, spanning a time between 539 B.C. and 220 A.D. The book was incorporated into the Mishnah. It is sometimes called the *Avot*.
- Gemara**      A Hebrew and Aramaic term meaning "*to learn from memorization*." It also means "completion." It serves as the *commentary* on the collection of Oral Tradition or the *Mishnah* contained in the *Talmud*. It supplements as well as uses the Mishnah in launching various discussions on the practice and application of the Torah.
- Halakhah**      A Hebrew term that refers to one's *conduct or manner of walk*. It also can refer to rabbinic law. Jesus, like other rabbis, would have expected their disciples to walk in a way that was consistent with the teaching. To follow a rabbi was to walk within the scope of his teaching or Jewish law.
- Midrash**      A Hebrew term meaning "*Bible commentary*." It was a collection of rabbinic interpretations of a verse by verse exegetical commentary of Scripture aimed to bring practical insights into the legal laws of Torah.

At first, the sharing of Midrash was done on a very informal level. Later, it became so interwoven with the Biblical text. In the words of Brad Young, "*In this line of tradition, Jesus did not cancel the law and the prophets. Rather, he intensified Torah by his midrashic interpretation.*" (p. 103) Midrash may be compared to "*taking a lemon and squeezing every drop out of it.*" (David Flusser). Midrash took the form of storytelling and parables, something Jesus would use himself.

- Mezuzah** This is a Hebrew term that refers to the doorpost box container. According to Deuteronomy 6:9, the hanging of a mezuzah fulfills the commandment, "*You must write them on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.*" They typically contain the words of Deut. 6:4 (the "Shema").
- Mishnah** A Hebrew terms which means "*that which is repeated.*" This was a collection of Oral Laws compiled around 200 A.D. by Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi at Sepporis (near Nazareth). It is arranged into 6 divisions or orders (e.g. Seeds, Appointed Times, Women, Damages, Holy Things, and Purities) and 63 tractates. It developed into what was to be known as the Talmud. The Mishnaic Period spans approximately 240 years (20 B.C to 220 A.D.)
- Oral Law** Refers to the "2<sup>nd</sup>" Law or Torah revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai in addition to the Written Law. It was viewed by the 1<sup>st</sup> century rabbis as equal to
- Pharisees** A Hebrew term which means "*to be set apart.*" They were a pious group of sages from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Period. The rabbis were the successors to the Pharisees. They believed in Oral Law as well in the resurrection. Contrary to our negative view of this group, the Pharisees constituted a significant reform movement within late 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple period Judaism. In the words of Young, "*The Pharisees played an indispensable role in preparing the people for Jesus' message of radical obedience to God's redemptive agenda - the gospel of the kingdom of heaven.*" (p. 60).
- Rabbi** A Hebrew term that means "*teacher.*" They were viewed sages, as ones who had great learning. In Jesus' day, it was a title of honor not yet achieving a formal title for those ordained to service or ministry. After 70 A.D., a sage ("*chakham*") often carried the title of "*Rabbi*," a more official term indicating an ordination status.

**Rabbinical Schools** In the time period of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, Rabbinical schools attracted their own followers. The Schools of *Shammai* and *Hillel* (50 B.C. - 30 A.D.) served as the primary schools of religious thought. Shammai took a more conservative position to the Jewish law and its interpretation, while Hillel was more liberal in the practical applications of the law. Another famous rabbi, *Avika* (100 A.D.) took a more liberal view of the law. Jesus' view of the law was more similar to that of conservative Shammai.

**Sadducees** They were an influential group that rejected the Oral Law and the authority of the sages. Almost all of the priests were Sadducees. They did not believe in the resurrection. In the Gospels, they were the primary opponents of Jesus and the early Christians because of their political ties to the Roman government. They were also the group in charge of the Jerusalem Temple.

**Sage** These were viewed as wise teachers in all areas of Jewish law (both Written and Oral). Sages preached and taught during the Talmudic and Mishnaic periods.

**Sanhedrin** Also known in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple period as "*The Great Sanhedrin*," this was a religious body of 71 Jewish men who were devoted to the interpretation of both the biblical and traditional law. They served as the tribunal of religious law and justice. Contrary to common thought, the Sanhedrin was not the religious group who decided Jesus' fate. The 3 top leaders of the Sanhedrin were the *Nasi* (presiding leader), the *Av Bet Din* (chief magistrate), and the *Chakham* (the sage). When the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., the seat of the Sanhedrin moved from Jerusalem to Yavneh, to Bet Shearim, to Sepporis, and finally to Tiberias.

**Second Temple Period** This refers to a period beginning with the dedication of the reconstructed Temple in 515 B.C. It was Herod the Great who expanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, with work beginning in 18 B.C. and continuing almost up to when the Temple would be destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D.

**Shema** A term meaning "*to hear or obey.*" The word "shema" serves as the first word of the common phrase taken from Deuteronomy 6:4, "*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one.*"

**Siddur** A term meaning "*order.*" The Siddur is the Daily Prayer Book used today.

- Synagogue A term meaning "*gathering together.*" The term is actually a Greek word but reflects the Hebrew, "*Bet Keneset*" or "House of Gathering." During Jesus' day, it was a place to study Torah, not a place of worship.
- Talmud A Hebrew term that means "*study.*" The term comes from a root word that means "*disciple.*" The Mishnah, together with its written commentary, *Gemara*, form the Talmud. A version of the Talmud was written in Israel (about 350 A.D., known as the Jerusalem Talmud. It provides commentary on 39 of the Mishnah's tractates) as well as in Babylon (about 500A.D. known as the Babylonian Talmud. It provides commentary on 37 of the Mishnah's tractates).
- Torah A Hebrew term that means "*instruction.*" It is derived from a Hebrew word meaning "*to reveal.*" Torah may refer to the 1<sup>st</sup> five books of Moses or to Oral Tradition.
- Tefillin A Hebrew word referred to in Deut. 6:8, "*And you will bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as a reminder on your foreheads.*" Tefillin include small boxes that contain Scriptures connected with God's redemptive power. Jesus warned his disciples against making an ostentatious display of their faith by enlarging these tefillin or by lengthening the *tzitzit*.
- Tzitzit A Hebrew word that refers to the fringe on the "*Tallit*" or Prayer Shawl. They are mentioned in Numbers 15:38-39 - "*Speak to the children of Israel that they will make for themselves tassels on the corner of their garments...*" They serve as a reminder of the many Jewish commands (613). This fringe is mentioned as the "*hem of Jesus' garment*" *Matthew 9:20*).
- Yeshiva A Hebrew word meaning "*sitting together.*" It is the place where the learners of Torah gather to study. Today, the term refers to religious school.
- Zedekah A Hebrew term which means "*righteousness.*" It was also interpreted as "*justice.*" The term played a foundational part in Jesus' kingdom teaching (see Matt. 6:33). Additionally, the term was synonymous with God's salvation.

