



# The Value of Rabbinism for New Testament Study

BY CORY MARSH

## Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been much discussion regarding the value of rabbinic study in connection to New Testament exegesis. It was during this period that Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner (who is credited with publishing well over 900 books) released his seminal series on rabbinic studies.<sup>1</sup> Neusner's groundbreaking study soon circulated throughout academia, causing exegetes of all stripes to have to wrestle with the question of ancient rabbinism's validity concerning New Testament study.<sup>2</sup>

While in no way presuming to be the final word on the matter, this article will briefly discuss and evaluate the value of rabbinism as it relates specifically to the Jewish background of the New Testament. The argument advanced is that *any* noncanonical literature used in assisting New Testament exegesis is to be handled with extreme caution, including rabbinical texts. More narrowly, rabbinic insights, while helpful when constructing a historiography relating to post-temple and post-Biblical periods, has limited value when it comes to New Testament study. The main reason for this is that too many changes occurred in Judaism after the first century, changes that would preclude today's Bible student

from gleaning decisive answers that may shed further light on the New Testament.

## What Is Rabbinism?

Perhaps the best way to address the question of rabbinism's value to the New Testament (NT) is to simply define the term. Yet it is exactly here where a problem first emerges: there is no definitive definition. This is conceivably the reason that *The Dictionary of Jewish Words, Judaism 101*, and even the authoritative *The Jewish Encyclopedia* have no entry for the word.<sup>3</sup> Its meaning is either assumed or thought of being fraught with too many

1 See Jacob Neusner *A History of the Mishnaic Law of Damages: Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity*, 5 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1983–1985). This is one publication among many that Neusner put out in regards to early rabbinism and its impact on first-century Judeo-Christianity.

2 A helpful essay on the matter is David Instone Brewer, "The Use of Rabbinic Sources in Gospel Studies," *Tyndale Bulletin* 50, no. 2 (1999): 281–98.

3 Joyce Eisenberg and Ellen Scolnic, *Dictionary of Jewish Words* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2006); *Judaism 101*, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.jewfaq.org/>;

difficulties. Due to the ambiguity surrounding *rabbinitism*, the definition offered by Oxford will have to suffice: “the teachings or doctrines of the Talmud and the latter rabbinical writings.”<sup>4</sup> The definition problem of *rabbinitism* is then confounded by its late dating problem. Rabbinic Judaism has been the standard form of Judaism since the sixth century codification of the Babylonian Talmud. However, its origin—a germinal form entirely dependent on oral (not recorded) tradition—can be traced to the decades and leading centuries following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. This means the New Testament, itself a thoroughly Jewish document, far predates any contemporary notion of rabbinitism. As such, the major problem that surfaces is one of anachronism. What is read and quoted from Rabbinic Judaism, while affording interesting historical-cultural insights, is still at best a portrayal of a form of Judaism several centuries removed from the days of Jesus and the NT. Brewer agrees: “The world of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE is very different from that of Rabbinic Judaism before this momentous event.”<sup>5</sup>

### What Rabbinitism Is Not

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus is addressed as “Rabbi” eight times (1—11). The Greek term *rhabbi* is an indeclinable form of the Hebrew *rab* meaning “lord, master,”<sup>6</sup> or literally, “my great one.”<sup>7</sup> This is not to be confused with its later derivatives “rabbinic” or “rabbinitism” which denotes a religious system based on latter Jewish sages and texts. To be a rabbi during the days of the NT was simply to be a teacher of the Law, one who had a mastery of the Old Testament corpus. It did not carry its modern notion of an ordained clergy member within the Jewish community. There is no doubt that Jesus was a Jewish teacher of God’s revelation, a position, not an uncommon vocation in the days of the second temple. In this sense, He was certainly a “rabbi,” but unlike any other. His being the incarnate Son of God made Jesus more than a mere rabbi, but still nothing less. Köstenberger adds, “Part of Jesus’ ‘enfleshment’ involved his assumption of the role of a Jewish religious teacher, a rabbi. So while he was certainly more than a rabbi, even a rabbi ‘with a difference,’ he was not less than a rabbi.”<sup>8</sup> To this even the respected Nicodemus addressed

Yeshua as “Rabbi” and recognized that He “came from God” (John 3:2). Thus, as the NT suggests, being a “rabbi” does not necessitate being a teacher of rabbinitism.

### Rabbinitism and the New Testament

New Testament Johannine scholar Craig Keener has treated the issue of the NT’s overall Jewish context more than most. In his massive 1,600-page commentary on John, Keener devotes a 20-page analysis of ancient Judaism during the days of Jesus in John’s Gospel. Keener astutely observes, “A Gospel that structures its chronology around Jerusalem festivals, engages in polemic with a Jewish elite as its main competitor, and exploits a variety of Jewish symbols cannot be understood apart from early Judaism.”<sup>9</sup> While Keener’s observation is certainly noteworthy, the problem with it is that *there is no “early Judaism” on record as early as the NT.* The earliest rabbinical texts in which comparisons can be attempted do not emerge until several centuries *after* John’s Gospel. However, Keener’s treatment on the matter is wise and should be taken seriously by the NT exegete. Of course Keener acknowledges the time gap between the end of the NT (John’s writings) and early rabbinitism, and because of that fact, the best he can do is compare different localities of rabbinic expression.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as he states repeatedly throughout his treatment, “some evidence is better than no evidence.” While this may not inspire much confidence for the NT exegete to expend his energies in the subjective realm of diverse and late rabbinical texts, Keener does make strong points for the usefulness of rabbinitism. For example, Keener sums up his comprehensive survey with the following gem:

Given the peculiar problems in rabbinic literature (most significantly its dating and diversity), this challenge may be appropriate; nevertheless, on many points rabbinic sources are all we have. When our evidence is limited, our conclusions are tenuous; but some evidence remains better than no evidence, and even a relatively late and isolated source that moves somewhere in the general cultural continuum of Mediterranean antiquity is more likely to provide the basis for a useful educated guess than a modern argument from silence would.<sup>11</sup>

While not forgetting the problems with rabbinitism outlined earlier, an agreement with Keener’s assessment on the limited yet still-valid usefulness of rabbinic study is reached. To dismiss

The Jewish Encyclopedia, accessed March 31, 2017, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com).

4 Oxford Dictionary, accessed March 31, 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/rabbinitism>.

5 Brewer, 282. Brewer is not clear as to what “Rabbinic Judaism” pertains to before the destruction of the temple. Compare Michael E. Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984), xx-xxi for interesting insights regarding the radical changes in genre between early Jewish Apocryphal works and later rabbinic literature. One gets the impression that it is a futile enterprise when attempting to compare pre-temple to post-temple Judaism, let alone trying to interpret the NT in light of the latter.

6 Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Edited by Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6460, Bible Works Software. From here on, abbreviated as BDAG.

7 Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 23900, BibleWorks Software.

8 Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 242.

9 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:171. The Judaism in mind here is Rabbinical Judaism, not OT Jewish devotion and practices.

10 *Ibid.*, 180–81.

11 Keener, 185.

Rabbinic Judaism out of hand due to its time gap is too minimalistic in one's exegetical methodology. Yet to endorse every insight Rabbinic Judaism possibly throws onto the NT is to endorse a dangerous anachronism wholesale. A balance must be struck between the two, and Keener does just that. "For our purposes," suggests Keener, "fourth-century evidence of a particular view may be better than no evidence at all, but if this material appears in isolation, it is only a *little* better than no evidence at all, *and it must be used with caution*."<sup>12</sup>

### A Caution to Christian Preachers and Authors

Many well intended yet seemingly unaware preachers often appeal to a form of Judaism found in rabbinic texts when delivering a homiletical point. Statements such as "to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew this would have meant . . ." or "in ancient Judaism the custom was . . ." are often hurled from the pulpit in an unguarded fashion devoid of any factual validation. The same can be true in research and writing. Michael Kibbe warns of the mistake often made when theological writers treat secondary sources as if they were primary and contemporaneous with the Biblical topic at hand. Kibbe provides a relevant illustration:

For example, there are some fun and even profound points to be made by comparing Jesus' calling and training of his disciples with the way Jewish rabbis called and trained their disciples. But nearly all of what we know about the rabbinic customs on this point comes from the second, third, or fourth century AD, and there are concrete historical reasons (e.g., the destruction of the temple in AD 70 and its impact on Jewish religious practices) to question whether the rabbinic customs in the third century were in force during the life of Jesus. At the very least, we must admit that we do not know if those practices were in place, and so we must exercise caution in treating them as if they were.<sup>13</sup>

Kibbe's final point echoes Keener's caution in the way to approach rabbinism and the NT. Rabbinic Judaism is a religion heavily marinated in ancient tradition, and as such, can shed light on certain aspects of the ancient Judaism embedded in the Gospel accounts. Yet while there is certainly a plumb line of tradition within Judaism (as wobbly as that line may be), the student of the NT would do well to research, validate, and discern whether it is appropriate to appeal to rabbinic texts as an authoritative guide

for ancient Jewish customs. This means that while rabbinism can be helpful at times with a view to Jewish historical-cultural milieu, it is still to be used with caution.

### Concluding Proposal

It must be remembered that the NT is thoroughly Jewish and predates any rabbinic texts. So, for example, Jesus being labeled "rabbi" throughout John and the other Gospels provides us with the earliest documented record of the term's usage.<sup>14</sup> This example yields some fascinating historical perspective, which one Jewish commentator aptly picked up:

What if the New Testament provides us a better window into the history of Judaism than other sources [i.e., Rabbinic]? . . . If so, the New Testament collection can be considered the earliest collection of ancient literature that testifies to the existence of the office of a Jewish Rabbi; even if we still need to concede that the office of Rabbi was in its infancy.<sup>15</sup>

The NT as the earliest source of a particular Jewish institution does not end with the office of rabbi. In Luke, the oldest synagogue service on record is reported (Luke 4:16–29), and in John, we find the earliest mention of Hanukkah taking place ("the Feast of Dedication," John 10:22). Examples such as these exalt the NT as the premier source to consult for first century Jewish history. In turning the tables, one might therefore legitimately pose this option: *Rather than studying the earlier Jewish New Testament in light of later Jewish rabbinism, perhaps we should be studying later rabbinism in light of the earlier Jewish New Testament*. It would seem more historical weight lies with the portrayal of Yeshua—the rabbi *par excellence*—recorded in first-century inspired documents than with rabbis centuries removed from the second temple period. This is especially so as those rabbis, then and now, were/are entirely hostile to Jesus of Nazareth and the revelation He brought—a point constantly portrayed in John's Gospel (e.g., John 7–10).

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12 Ibid., 190. Italics added.

13 Michael Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 34, n7.

14 In contrast, the word *rabbinism* has no written appearance before the Hebraist scholar Joseph Mede (1586–1638) used the term in the mid-seventeenth century. Compare Oxford Dictionary, s.v. "rabbinism."

15 Eli Lizorkin-Eyzenberg, *The Jewish Gospel of John: Discovering Jesus, the King of Israel* (Tel Mond, Israel: Israel Study Center, 2015), 17.