

The Woodcutter and the Carpenter

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This evening, as Christians around the world are gathering to celebrate one of the most sacred days on their religious calendar, I find myself thinking about a particular historical figure. I wonder if you can guess who it is.

The person I'm thinking of was Jewish, and he lived about 2000 years ago in the land of Israel. He was a teacher, a preacher, and a sage -- a rabbi who inspired many students and raised up many disciples. He taught about the centrality of ethical behavior, and the importance of showing loving kindness to everyone you meet. He was famous for his open-mindedness, his patience, and his tolerance. And on account of all these qualities, he grew to become the most influential teacher of his generation.

If you thought that I was describing Jesus of Nazareth, whose birth Christians around the world are celebrating tonight, then you were not too far off. Indeed, this description does fit Jesus quite well. But in fact, the person I'm thinking about this Christmas Eve is not Jesus, but rather, is a different ancient teacher who also fits this description -- Jesus's slightly older contemporary: the great Jewish sage, Rabbi Hillel.¹

Although we might not immediately associate one with the other, there is much that Hillel and Jesus share in common. They lived in the same time and place, they practiced the same religion, and they preached a similar message.

Hillel was older than Jesus by two generations. At the time that Hillel died, Jesus would have been ten years old, and already fully initiated into the study of Torah. Hillel was the most influential rabbi of his generation, with an impressive network of disciples who all subscribed to his particular school of thought. It is hard to imagine that Jesus, as a young student of Torah, would not at the very least have heard of the revered older sage, Rabbi Hillel. It is entirely possible that Jesus might have been directly influenced by him.

Jesus, the Christian scriptures report, was a carpenter by trade. And Hillel, Jewish tradition teaches, earned his living as a woodcutter. There is something poetic about this unusual coincidence. Just as the carpenter builds upon the work of the woodcutter, so too, it seems entirely possible that Jesus may have built upon the work of his predecessor, Hillel.

And yet, despite the possible influence that Hillel may have had on Jesus, there is also a certain irony to how their story will eventually unfold. This evening, I'd like to explore that story -- the unusual tale of the woodcutter and the carpenter -- to see how they were alike, how they have been remembered so differently, and what that might mean for us.

¹ This sermon is inspired by and draws upon Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's incredible intellectual portrait of the sage, entitled *Hillel: If Not Now When?*

Let us begin with what they share in common. Hillel is known for his pithy ethical maxims -- which, in substance and in style, are strikingly similar to what would become some of Jesus's most well known teachings. Where Hillel said, "Do not judge your neighbor until you have stood in his place" (Avot 2:4), Jesus would later say, "Judge not, lest ye be judged" (Matthew 7:1). Where Hillel said "My humiliation is my exaltation" (Exodus Rabbah 45:5), Jesus would later say, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

There is a story in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 12:28-31) in which someone asks Jesus to give his opinion on what is the single most important commandment in the entire Torah. In classic rabbinic form, Jesus is unable to pick just one -- so he narrows it down to two: the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4), and the famous commandment from the Book of Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

If you've studied a little Talmud, this story might sound vaguely familiar. In fact there are many² stories in the Talmud where different rabbis are asked to distill the essence of the Torah down to a single commandment. But Jesus's answer is particularly reminiscent of a famous story³ that is told about Hillel.

The story goes like this: Once, a young man who was not Jewish showed up unannounced at the house of study and demanded to speak with a rabbi. A certain rabbi came to the door. "What is it you want?" the rabbi asked. The young man replied: "Rabbi, I challenge you to a test! To prove whether you are indeed a wise and learned person, I challenge you to teach me the entirety of your Torah while I balance on one foot. And if you can accomplish such a feat, then I will convert to Judaism here on the spot."

The rabbi immediately grew incensed at this outrageous request. How dare this young man suggest that the entirety of the Torah, the wisdom of which this rabbi had devoted his countless years of his life to studying, could be summarized in mere minutes to a complete novice -- and meanwhile debasing the sanctity of Torah study while the would-be-convert simultaneously performed some frivolous acrobatic balancing act! And the rabbi angrily slammed the door in the young man's face.

Again, the young man knocked on the door -- and this time, it was Hillel who greeted him. Once again, the young man proposed his challenge: "To prove that you are learned, teach me the entirety of your Torah while I balance on one foot -- and if you can, I will convert to Judaism on the spot."

And Hillel, with his characteristic patience and wisdom, quietly considered the young man's challenge. After a few moments, he asked the young man to please balance himself on one

² See, for example, Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 9:4 -- "Rabbi Akiva says: the greatest principle in the Torah is 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18). Ben Azzai says: a more important principle is 'This is the story of all humankind' (Genesis 5:1)."

³ Babylonian Talmud, 31a

foot, and then Hillel said: “That which is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. The rest of the Torah is commentary. Now go and study it.”

This story bears a striking resemblance to Jesus in at least two ways. First of all, when asked to distill the entirety of the Torah down to its essence, Hillel and Jesus offer remarkably similar responses. They could have said nearly anything -- that the essence of the Torah is to observe Shabbat, or to keep kosher, or to remember that God redeemed Israelites from Egypt. But instead, each of them offers a similar ethical teaching, that the essence of the Torah is to show concern for one’s neighbor -- with Jesus framing it in the positive, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and Hillel framing it in the negative: “That which is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor. The rest of the Torah is commentary. Now go and study it.”

But there is also a second way in which this story about Hillel and the convert bears a striking resemblance to Jesus. Jesus was well known for having welcomed so-called sinners into his ministry (Luke 15:2). Similarly, this story about Hillel (which, I should mention, is just one among many such stories about him in the Talmud)⁴ depicts Hillel as someone who was willing to open his door wide to even the unlikeliest of students. Where the first rabbi slammed the door in the young man’s face, Hillel welcomed him in. Where the first rabbi saw only a scoundrel, Hillel recognized a seeker.

We see here a portrait of two renowned Jewish sages, Hillel and Jesus: one slightly older, the other slightly younger, both of whom were famous for their pithy ethical maxims, both of whom distilled the essence of Judaism down to concern for one’s neighbor, both of whom opened their doors wide to even the unlikeliest of students -- the woodcutter, and the carpenter.

But here is where their stories begin to diverge. Although in their lifetime, Hillel and Jesus shared much in common, after their death, history would remember them in wildly different ways.

It is important to note that Jesus never intended to establish a new religion. He lived his entire life as a fully committed Jew. The Christian scriptures report that Jesus and his closest disciples practiced every aspect of Jewish life: they kept kosher (Acts 10:14), they believed in circumcision (Acts 15:1), they regularly prayed at the Temple in Jerusalem (Acts 2:46 and 3:1). In his famous Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds his followers about the importance of practicing Judaism. He says: “I have not come to abolish the laws [of the Torah], but rather, to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17), and goes on to say that anyone who forsakes even the smallest detail of the Jewish tradition should not be counted as among his disciples.

It was not until after Jesus’s death that his followers began to take things in a different direction. Despite the protestation of many of Jesus’s most trusted disciples (Acts 15:1), the apostle Paul overturned Jesus’s insistence on following Jewish law (Galatians 2:21). And with that, Jesus’s loosely organized band of followers ceased to be merely a group of committed Jews, all of

⁴ See also: the prospective Jew who challenged the validity of the Oral Torah (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a); and the prospective Jew who wanted to be High Priest (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a).

whom happened to feel devoted to one particularly charismatic rabbi -- and were instead newly transformed into a distinct religion unto themselves. Christianity was born.

There are many possible reasons why Paul might have decreed that Christians no longer needed to practice Judaism. On a purely practical level, it made Christianity more attractive. A would-be convert could join the new religion without having to take on the extra burden of keeping kosher or circumcision. And indeed, after Paul lowered the bar to entry, the ranks of Christianity swelled.

Paul's religious revolution had a profound impact not only on Christianity, but also on Judaism. Over the centuries, our ancestors leaned into the religious practices that distinguished us from our Christian neighbors. They built a sense of group identity around the things that made us unique, the things that Paul had abandoned: things like keeping kosher, observing Shabbat, building a sukkah, or wearing a kippah.

Even today, we can still see the effects of Paul's religious revolution. When you hear someone say, "I'm a bad Jew" (which, by the way, is a phrase that I do not endorse), what they usually mean is: I don't keep kosher or I don't observe Shabbat. Similarly, when you hear someone described as "very Jewish" (another phrase that I do not endorse), it usually means that that person *does* keep kosher, *does* observe Shabbat, *does* build a sukkah, or *does* wear a kippah.

But of course, the great irony is that none of these things that we label as "very Jewish" fit with Hillel's definition of the essence of Judaism: "That which is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor." By that measure, a person should be described as "very Jewish" not based on whether they keep kosher or wear a kippah, but rather, based on how they treat others. This is the great irony in the story of the woodcutter and the carpenter: Hillel likely influenced Jesus, but Jesus's success likely marginalized Hillel.

This Shabbat, as Christians around the world are gathering to celebrate the legacy of the carpenter, I would encourage us Jews to try and reclaim the legacy of the woodcutter. We might ask ourselves, as Hillel famously did while his student balanced on one foot: what do we believe is the essence of Judaism? Should we lean into the religious rituals that make us uniquely Jewish? Or, should we focus our attention on the ethical values that we share with all humankind?

We remember Hillel for having prioritized ethics, saying: "That which is hateful unto you, do not do to your neighbor." But let us not forget that he also added a second part to his answer, in which he affirmed the importance of Jewish rituals. He added: "The rest of the Torah is commentary. Now go and study it."

Perhaps this is the true legacy of Hillel: that, unlike Jesus and his followers, Hillel held on to both -- ethics *and* Jewish rituals. Perhaps this is the most important lesson that Hillel ever taught: while his student stood upon one foot, Hillel taught us that the most important thing in life is learning how to balance.