

The Rabbi and His Talmidim

The people of Galilee were the most religious Jews in the world in the time of Jesus. This is quite contrary to the common view that the Galileans were simple, uneducated peasants from an isolated area. This perspective is probably due to the comments made in the Bible, which appear to belittle people from this area. At the Shavuoth feast in the book of Acts for example, the people seem amazed that the Galileans were capable of speaking in other languages. But this is certainly a bias against Galileans by the people of Judea and other countries due to the very strong and passionate religious commitments of the people of Galilee. Besides, the Galileans had more interaction with the world living on the "way of the sea" (the trade route, see [Matt. 4:15](#)) than the Jews of Jerusalem who were more isolated in the mountains. The Galilean people were actually more educated in the Bible and its application than most Jews. More famous Jewish teachers come from Galilee than anywhere else in the world. They were known for their great reverence for Scripture and the passionate desire to be faithful to it. This translated into vibrant religious communities, devoted to strong families, their country, whose synagogues echoed the debate and discussions about keeping the Torah. They resisted the pagan influences of Hellenism far more than did their Judean counterparts. When the great revolt against the pagan Romans and their collaborators (66-74 AD) finally occurred, it began among the Galileans.

Jesus was born, grew up, and spent his ministry among people who knew Scripture by memory, who debated its application with enthusiasm, and who loved God with all their hearts, all their souls and all their might ([Deut. 6:5](#)). God prepared this environment carefully so that Jesus would have exactly the context he needed to present his message of *Malchut Shemayim* "the kingdom of heaven" and his followers would understand and join his new movement. He fit his world perfectly. Understanding this helps to understand the great faith and courage of his followers who left Galilee and went to the whole world to bring the good news. Their courage, their message, the methods they used, and their complete devotion to God and his Word were born in the religious communities in the Galilee.

Education in Galilee

The Mishnah(1) describes the educational process for a young Jewish boy in Jesus' time.

At five years old [one is fit] for the Scripture, at ten years the Mishnah (oral Torah, interpretations) at thirteen for the fulfilling of the commandments, at fifteen the Talmud (making Rabbinic interpretations), at eighteen the bride-chamber, at twenty pursuing a vocation, at thirty for authority (able to teach others)

This clearly describes the exceptional student, for very few would become teachers but indicates the centrality of Scripture in the education in Galilee. It is interesting to compare Jesus' life to this description. Though little is stated about his childhood we know that he "grew in wisdom" as a boy ([Luke 2:52](#)) and that he reached the "fulfilling of

the commandments" indicated by one's first Passover at age twelve ([Luke 2:41](#)). He then learned a trade ([Matt. 13:55](#), [Mark 6:3](#)) and spent time with John the Baptist ([Luke 3:21](#); [John 3:22-26](#)) and began his ministry at "about thirty" ([Luke 3:23](#)). This parallels the Mishnah description quite closely. It certainly demands a closer look at the education process in Galilee.

Schools were associated with the local synagogue in first century Galilee. Apparently each community would hire a teacher (respectfully called "rabbi") for the school. While this teacher was responsible for the education of the village he had no special authority in the synagogue itself. Children began their study at age 4-5 in *Beth Sefer* (elementary school). Most scholars believe both boys and girls attended the class in the synagogue. The teaching focused primarily on the Torah, emphasizing both reading and writing Scripture. Large portions were memorized and it is likely that many students knew the entire Torah by memory by the time this level of education was finished. At this point most students (and certainly the girls) stayed at home to help with the family and in the case of boys to learn the family trade. It is at this point that a boy would participate in his first Passover in Jerusalem (a ceremony that probably forms the background of today's *bar mitzvah* in orthodox Jewish families today.) Jesus' excellent questions for the teachers in the temple at his first Passover indicate the study he had done.

The best students continued their study (while learning a trade) in *Beth Midrash* (secondary school) also taught by a rabbi of the community. Here they (along with the adults in the town) studied the prophets and the writings (3) in addition to Torah and began to learn the interpretations of the Oral Torah (4) to learn how to make their own applications and interpretations much like a catechism class might in some Churches today. Memorization continued to be important because most people did not have their own copy of the Scripture so they either had to know it by heart or go to the synagogue to consult the village scroll. Memory was enhanced by reciting aloud, a practice still widely used in Middle Eastern education both Jewish and Muslim. Constant repetition was considered to be an essential element of learning (5).

A few (very few) of the most outstanding *Beth Midrash* students sought permission to study with a famous rabbi often leaving home to travel with him for a lengthy period of time. These students were called *talmidim* (*talmid*, *s.*) in Hebrew, which is translated *disciple*. There is much more to a *talmid* than what we call student. A student wants to know what the teacher knows for the grade, to complete the class or the degree or even out of respect for the teacher. A *talmid* wants to like the teacher, that is to become what the teacher is. That meant that students were passionately devoted to their rabbi and noted everything he did or said. This meant the *rabbi/talmid* relationship was a very intense and personal system of education. As the rabbi lived and taught his understanding of the Scripture his students (*talmidim*) listened and watched and imitated so as to become like him. Eventually they would become teachers passing on a lifestyle to their *talmidim*.

As a result, Galilee was a place of intense study of Scripture. People were knowledgeable about its content and the various applications made by their tradition. They were

determined to live by it and to pass their faith and knowledge and lifestyle on to their children. It was into this world that Jesus came as a child and eventually a rabbi.

Jesus the Rabbi

The term rabbi in the time of Jesus did not necessarily refer to a specific office or occupation. That would be true only after the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed (70 AD). Rather, it was a word meaning "great one" or "my master" which was applied to many kinds of people in everyday speech. It clearly was used as a term of respect for one's teacher as well even though the formal position of rabbi would come later. In one sense then, calling Jesus "Rabbi" is an anachronism. In another sense the use of this term for him by the people his day is a measure of their great respect for him as a person and as a teacher and not just a reference to the activity of teaching he was engaged in.

Many people referred to Jesus as Rabbi. His disciples ([Luke 7:40](#)), lawyers ([Matt. 22:35-36](#)), ordinary people ([Luke 12:13](#)), the rich ([Matt. 19:16](#)), Pharisees ([Luke 19:39](#)), and Sadducees ([Luke 20:27-28](#)). Jesus fit the description of a first century rabbi especially one at the most advanced level---the one sought by *talmidim*.

He traveled from place to place with his disciples depending on the hospitality of others ([Luke 8:1-3](#)) and often meeting in private homes ([Luke 10:38-42](#))

In travel, rabbis would visit local synagogues because of the discussion of Scripture that occurred regularly in these community centers ([Matt. 4:23](#))

Rabbis used similar methods of interpreting Scripture. For example the great teachers used a technique today called *remez* or hint, in which they used part of a Scripture passage in discussion assuming their audience's knowledge of the Bible would allow them to deduce for themselves fuller meaning. Apparently Jesus used this method often. When the children sang Hosanna to him in the Temple and the Sadducees demanded Jesus quiet them he responded with a quote from [Psalm 8:2](#) "From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise." Their anger at Jesus is better understood when you realize that the next phrase in the Psalm adds the reason why children and infants would praise because of the enemies of God who would be silenced ([Ps. 8:2](#)). In other words the chief priests realized Jesus was implying they were God's enemies.

Another example is Jesus' comments to Zacchaeus ([Luke 19:1-10](#)). Jesus said "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." ([Luke 19:10](#)) The background to this statement is probably Ezekiel 34. God, angry with the leaders of Israel for scattering and harming his flock (the people of Israel) states the he himself will become the shepherd and will seek the lost ones and deliver (save) them. Based on this the people of Jesus' day understood that the Messiah to come would "seek and save" the lost. By using this phrase, knowing the people knew the Scripture, Jesus said several things. To the people he said "I am the Messiah and God no less." To the leaders (whose influence kept Zacchaeus out of the crowd) he said "you have scattered and harmed God's flock." To Zacchaeus he said "you are one of God's lost sheep. He still loves you."

This technique indicated a brilliant understanding of Scripture and incredible teaching skills on Jesus' part. It also demonstrates the background knowledge of Scripture the common people had.

Rabbis used similar teaching techniques like the use of parables. More than 3,500 parables from first century rabbis still exist and Jesus' are among the very best. He uses similar themes (landowner, king, and farmer) as well. ([Matt. 13:3,34](#))

Jesus seems to be a type of rabbi believed to have *s'mikhah* or authority to make new interpretations. Most of the teachers were Torah teachers (teachers of the law) who could only teach accepted interpretations. Those with authority (today "ordination") could make new interpretations and pass legal judgments. Crowds were amazed because Jesus taught with authority (Hebrew *s'mikhah*, Greek *exousia*) not as their Torah teachers ([Matt. 7:28-29](#)). Jesus was questioned about his authority ([Matt. 21:23-27](#)). While this makes Jesus one of a small group of teachers he was not the only one with authority.

Rabbis invited people to learn to keep the Torah. This was called taking "the yoke of Torah" or "the yoke of the kingdom of heaven." Rabbi's with *s'mikhah* would have a new interpretation or yoke. Torah teachers would teach the accepted interpretations or yoke of their community. Jesus' invitation to those who listened to many teachers and interpretations helps establish him as a Rabbi would present an interpretation that was easy and light (to understand not necessarily to do) ([Matt. 13:11-30](#)). As such, he was probably not speaking to unsaved people burdened with sin but people unsure of the many interpretations they heard in the dynamic religious debate in Galilee.

Fulfilling the Torah was the task of a first century rabbi. The technical term for interpreting the Scripture so it would be obeyed correctly was "*fulfill*." To interpret Scripture incorrectly so it would not be obeyed as God intended was to "destroy" the Torah. Jesus uses these terms to describe his task as well ([Matt. 5:17-19](#)). Contrary to what some think Jesus did not come to do away with God's Torah or Old Testament. He came to complete it and *to show how to correctly keep it*. One of the ways Jesus interpreted the Torah was to stress the importance of the right attitude of heart as well as the right action ([Matt. 5:27-28](#)).

The Disciples as Talmidim

The decision to follow a rabbi as a *talmid* meant total commitment in the first century as it does today. Since a *talmid* was totally devoted to becoming like the rabbi he would have spent his entire time listening and observing the teacher to know how to understand the Scripture and how to put it into practice. Jesus describes his relationship to his disciples in exactly this way ([Matt. 10:24-25](#); [Luke 6:40](#)) He chose them to be with him ([Mark 3:13-19](#)) so they could be like him ([John 13:15](#)).

Most students sought out the rabbis they wished to follow. This happened to Jesus on occasion ([Mark 5:19](#); [Luke 9:57](#)). There were a few exceptional rabbis who were famous for seeking out their own students. If a student wanted to study with a rabbi he would ask

if he might "follow" the rabbi. The rabbi would consider the students potential to become like him and whether he would make the commitment necessary. It is likely most students were turned away. Some of course were invited to "follow me." This indicated the rabbi believed the potential *talmid* had the ability and commitment to become like him. It would be a remarkable affirmation of the confidence the teacher had in the student. In that light, consider whether the disciples of Jesus were talmidim as understood by the people of his time. They were to be "with" him [Mark 3:13-19](#); to follow him [Mark 1:16-20](#); to live by his teaching [John 8:31](#); were to imitate his actions [John 13:13-15](#); were to make everything else secondary to their learning from the rabbi [Luke 14:26](#).

This may explain Peter's walking on water ([Matt. 14:22-33](#)). When Jesus (the rabbi) walked on water, Peter (the *talmid*) wanted to be like him. Certainly Peter had not walked on water before nor could he have imagined being able to do it. However, if the teacher, who chose me because he believed I could be like him, can do it so must I. And he did! It was a miracle but he was just like the rabbi! And then...he doubted. Doubted what? Traditionally we have seen he doubted Jesus' power. Maybe, but Jesus was still standing on the water. I believe Peter doubted himself, or maybe better his capacity to be empowered by Jesus. Jesus response---why did you doubt? (14:31) then means--why did you doubt I could empower you to be like me?

That is a crucial message for the *talmid* of today. We must believe that Jesus calls us to be disciples because he knows he can so instruct, empower, and fill us with his Spirit that we can be like him (at least in our actions). We must believe in ourselves! Otherwise we will doubt that he can use us and as a result we will not be like him.

Being like the rabbi is the major focus of the life of talmidim. They listen and question, they respond when questioned, they follow without knowing where the rabbi is taking them knowing that the rabbi has good reason for bringing them to the right place for his teaching to make the most sense. In the story recorded in [Matthew 16](#), Jesus walked nearly thirty miles one way to be in Caesarea Philippi for a lesson that fit the location perfectly. Surely he talked with them along the way but the whole trip seems to have been geared for one lesson that takes less than ten minutes to give ([Matt. 16:13-28](#)).

This means that the present day *talmid* (disciple) must be no less focused on the rabbi. We must be with him in his Word, we must follow him even if we are not sure of the final destination, we must live by his teaching (which means we must know those teachings well), and we must imitate him whenever we can. In other words everything becomes secondary in life to being like him. When they had observed and learned for a time they were sent out to begin to practice being like the teacher ([Luke 9:1-6](#); [10:1-24](#)). The amazement of the *talmidim* in discovering they could be like their teacher is delightful ([10:17](#)). It is very understandable to anyone who has seen the deep attachment of *talmidim* to his or her rabbi even today. It is most affirming when a student discovers that being like the teacher is possible. The teachers joy is no less as he discovers his students have learned well and are gifted and empowered by God to act as the rabbi does ([Luke 10:21](#); see also [John 17:16, 18](#)).

When the teacher believed that his *talmidim* were prepared to be like him he would commission them to become disciple makers. He was saying "As far as is possible you are like me. Now go and seek others who will imitate you. Because you are like me, when they imitate you they will be like me." This practice certainly lies behind Jesus' great commission ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)). While in one sense no one can be like Jesus in his divine nature, or in his perfect human nature, when taught by the Rabbi, empowered and blessed by the Spirit of God, imitating Jesus becomes a possibility. The mission of the disciples was to seek others who would imitate them and therefore become like Jesus. That strategy, blessed by God's Spirit would bear amazing fruit especially in the Gentile world.

It also helps to understand the teaching of Paul who sought to make disciples. He invited Herod Agrippa and the Roman governor to become like him ([Acts 26:28-29](#)). He taught the young churches to imitate him and others who were like Jesus ([1 Cor. 4:15-16, 11:1](#); [1 Thess. 1:6-7, 2:14](#); [2 Thess. 3:7-9](#); [1 Tim. 4:12](#)). The writer to the Hebrews had the same mission ([Heb. 6:12, 13:7](#)).

This is one of the most significant concepts of the New Testament. Jesus, the divine Messiah, chose the rabbi/*talmid* system. He taught like a rabbi in real life situations, using the most brilliant methods ever devised. He interpreted God's word and completed it. He demonstrated obedience to it. He chose disciples whom he would empower to become like him and led them around until they began to imitate him. Then (after the gift of the Holy Spirit) he sent them out to make disciples...to lead people to imitate them by obeying Jesus. And that strategy, by God's blessing would change the most pagan of cultures.

That is our call too! Jesus calls us to be his *talmidim*. We must know God's Word and Jesus' interpretation of it. We must be passionate in our devotion to that word and Jesus' example. As we are filled with his Spirit, we must be obsessed with being like him as far as is humanly possible. We must strive for relationships with others so they will observe us and seek to imitate our love and devotion to God and our Jesus-like lifestyle ([1 Cor. 2:16, 11:1](#); [Gal. 3:27](#)). By God's grace, that strategy CAN change the most pagan of cultures.... our own!

1. The Mishnah contains rabbinic interpretations of Scripture written down during the second century AD. Jewish scholars believe it contains the oral traditions present during the 1st century BC to 1st century AD and therefore would reflect what was true during Jesus' lifetime.
2. Aboth 5:21, The Mishnah, Herbert Danby, ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985.
3. The Jewish people call the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) *Tanakh* an acronym taken from *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Navi'im* (Prophets including the history books since history is prophetic), *Ketubim* (writings). Boys began the study of Torah since it was the foundation of the Jewish faith and the others (writings and prophets) were believed to comment on and apply the Torah.
4. The Oral Torah was interpretation and application of the Torah believed to originate with Moses and to have been handed down orally for centuries. Many of Jesus' debates with the scribes were over issues of the Oral Torah ([Matt. 23:5](#). God had commanded the wearing of Tassels [[Lev. 19:18](#)] but the Oral Torah specified the length).
5. An excellent treatment of this education can be found in *The Jewish People in the First Century*. II, by Shmuel Safrai, Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1974