

Hillel

Hillel (hil el [Heb *hillēl*—‘he greatly praised’; LXX Gk *Ellēl*])

Hillel “the Elder” (Heb *hazzākēn*; ca 60 b.c.-a.d. 20?). An eminent Jewish scholar and rabbinic leader in Jerusalem in the early Herodian period. Biographical details are scant, but it seems certain that Hillel was a native of Babylonia (TB *Pesahim* 66a; *Sukkah* 20a). He came to Jerusalem to study biblical exegesis, and Shemaiah and Abtalion, two of the early great “expositors” (Heb *daršānîm*, TB *Pesahim* 70b), became his teachers. Hillel excelled in the elucidation of legal rules (Halakoth) from Scripture, and his zeal for Torah study, despite his poverty, became a model for later students (TB *Yoma* 35b). Other traditions state that Hillel, like Moses, lived one hundred twenty years (*Sifre* Dt. xxxiv.7 [357]) and that he was descended from David (TB *Ketuboth* 62b; “Rabbi” [ca a.d. 135–220] was descended from Hillel), but these claims may be pious veneration rather than fact. It is still debated whether Hillel was the father or grandfather of Gamaliel I, the teacher of Paul (Acts 5:34; 22:3). The issue turns upon the questioned existence of a certain Simeon, mentioned only in TB *Shabbath* 15a in the rabbinic literature, who some scholars claimed was Hillel’s son (R. T. Herford, “Pirke Aboth,” in APOT, II, 694; recently re-asserted by Guttmann, *Rabbinic Judaism*, p. 177; denied by E. Schürer, HJP2, II, 367).

Hillel became leader (Heb *nāsî*, “prince”) of the rabbinic council after giving three arguments for the priority of the paschal sacrifice over the sabbath. The council had forgotten the Halakah on this issue and consulted Hillel, who finally silenced their arguments by appealing to previous tradition: “Thus have I heard from Shemaiah and Abtalion” (TB *Pesahim* 66a).

Hillel’s exegesis was frequently opposed by Shammai (ca 50 b.c.-a.d. 30), a Judean who, like Hillel, gathered a school of disciples about himself that continued after his death. Hillel generally favored a freer interpretation of the biblical text than Shammai, who usually adhered to the letter of the

law. The difference between the two schools is illustrated by the issue of Divorce, which centered on the phrase “some indecency” (Heb *erwat dābār*, lit “nakedness of a thing”) in Dt. 24:1. The school of Shammai restricted the meaning of illicit sexual conduct by focusing on *erwat* (“shamefulness,” “nakedness”), but the Hillelites emphasized *dābār* (“thing,” “matter”) and construed the phrase to mean “any indecent thing,” even as trivial as spoiling the husband’s food (TB *Gittin* 90a). This controversy lies behind the question of the Pharisees in Mt. 19:3 (cf. Mk. 10:2), “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife *for any cause*?” The restriction of divorce to the one cause of Unchastity in Mt. 5:32; 19:3 reflects the stricter interpretation of the school of Shammai (SB, I, 312–320).

On one occasion a non-Jew came to Shammai and asked to become a proselyte on the condition that Shammai teach him the whole law while the gentile stood on one foot. Shammai, apparently doubting his sincerity, chased him away with a measuring stick. Thereupon the man came before Hillel, who said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary” (TB *Shabbath* 31a). See Golden Rule.

Another important decision rendered by Hillel was his issuance of the so-called *prozbul* (Heb *perôzbôl* or *perôsbôl* from either Gk *prôs Boulē Bouleutôn*, “before the assembly of the counselors,” or *prosbolē*, “delivery”; cf. JewEnc, X, 219; HJP2, II, 366f, etc.), a judicial edict that in effect canceled the OT ordinance that all debts should be remitted during the Sabbatical Year (Dt. 15:1–11). Hillel’s intent was to prevent transgression on the part of those who refused to give loans prior to the seventh year (cf. Dt. 15:9).

According to later tradition Hillel demonstrated seven hermeneutical rules (Heb *middôt*) when he was called before the council (Tosefta *Sanhedrin* vii; *Aboth de Rabbi Nathan* xxxvii). The presence of several of these interpretative principles in the NT has led scholars to compare Hillel’s use of Scripture with that of Jesus and Paul. Hillel’s first rule,

qal wāḥômer (lit “light and heavy,” i.e., what applies in a lesser case will certainly apply in a greater case), is exemplified in Mt. 7:11 (par Lk. 11:13); Jn. 10:34–36; Rom. 5:15–21, which all have an “if ... then how much more” argument (cf. R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* [1975], pp. 32–38, 68, 117, etc.). Paul’s use of other rules of Hillel led J. Jeremias to conclude that Paul was a Hillelite (“Paulus als Hillelit,” in E. Ellis and M. Wilcox, eds, *Neotestamentica et Semitica* [1969], p. 89).

Glatzer argued (“Hillel the Elder in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in K. Stendahl, ed, *The Scrolls and the NT* [1957], p. 244) that Hillel’s teaching may show an awareness of the Qumrân sect’s break from Jerusalem Judaism. Hillel’s purpose was thus one of reform within Judaism (contra H. L. Strack,

Intro. to the Talmud and Midrash [Engtr 1931; repr 1969], p. 108) to counter the influence of that group.

Bibliography.—W. Bacher, *Tradition und Tradenten in den Schulen Palästinas und Babylonens* (1914; repr 1966), pp. 54–71; F. Delitzsch, *Jesus und Hillel* (3rd ed 1879); *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, VIII, sv; N. Glatzer, *Hillel the Elder: The Emergence of Classical Judaism* (1956); J. Goldin, JR, 26 (1946), 263–277; A. Guttmann, *Rabbinic Judaism in the Making* (1970), pp. 59–104; HUCA, 23 (1950/51), 453–473; 28 (1957), 115–126; A. Kaminka, JQR, 30 (1939/40), 107–122; G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, I (1927; repr 1971), 72–81.

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