

## TRADITION

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Understanding tradition releases a fortuitous stream of knowledge about Jesus. First, Jewish people tell stories. From Adam to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses and so on, stories inform each new generation.

In one of my visits to Israel, I made a usual stop at a religious kibbutzim, one of the communal farms in Israel. Yitzak [Isaac], one of the resident rabbi's, addressed our group. Someone asked about cheeseburgers. Yitzak responded: We don't eat meat and cheese together. Not so much because it is wrong to eat cheese and meat together; but, because we are Jewish. Jews don't eat cheese and meat together. It defines who we are.

In the first century, Jewish religious life, for all but Sadducees, centered around table and synagogue. Modern religious interpretations would say, home and synagogue (or church). Endless discussions focused on ritual cleansing. Hence the questions of Jesus: Rabbi, why don't your disciples follow the tradition of the elders? (This in reference to washing hands [ritually] before eating) Reading the scriptures in the synagogue resounded on the Sabbath; however, for devout people, most days found someone reading or teaching in the synagogues. The Pharisees establish the synagogues so that each community had a place dedicated to prayer, worship and study. Only the Sadducees disdained the synagogues in favor of the Temple. For the Sadducees, religious and political life could be practiced only in relation to the Temple. Though wealthy and powerful, Sadducees were not the majority. Political expedience and the need for cooperation with the Pharisees toned down their insistence upon the Temple.

Tradition held the Jewish world in check amidst the powerful cultural changes encouraged by the Roman empire. For most Jews, Greek culture remained the far country metaphorically, although it may have, in actual fact, been next door.

Early one morning, I walked by the Sea of Galilee for my devotion. A man from the kibbutz approached me. Not wanting to be rude but enjoying the quiet, I tried to ignore him. He wanted to talk. A few days earlier, the 1994 massacre in the Hebron mosque startled all of us. What do you think? he asked. It makes me sad; my reply reflected the numbness of my thoughts at the tragedy. Suddenly, he spoke rather forcefully: Everything we need to know is in the Mishna. Having just purchased an eight volume set of the Mishna, I was fascinated by his enthusiasm. In the oral tradition? I said.

He looked at me in surprise. You know about the Mishna? Our conversation quickly bounded into discussions of Mishna and Talmud. Pausing, he reflected: I once knew a man who knew the Mishna here. He pointed to his head. All of it. Another pause. I knew a man who knew Talmud here. Again he pointed to his head. He wasn't married. He was married to Talmud. Neither of us spoke for a while. I broke the silence. People forget. That's why the Mishna was written down, so people wouldn't forget. It's sad, he replied. Once many of our people knew Mishna, all of it. All we need to know for peace is there.

The conversation drifted off. For a while I remained by the lake trying to understand the lesson I had learned. Once many of our people knew Mishna. Suddenly, I realized. Jesus knew Mishna. Jesus knew Torah. Jesus knew the Psalms. Jesus knew the prophets.

All his life, Jesus heard the stories and the law. In synagogue and home, he heard the stories until he knew. Add to that traditional knowledge, the stories of his own family. Stories of angels, shepherds, eastern kings, Egypt, Herod, and stars. Jesus knew the essence of what he would need to understand about himself and his mission. Jesus learned. He knew. Possessing Mishna and Torah does not mean putting it into practical, positive use. It does not mean understanding. The head and the heart must meet. More than once. They must meet each day and each day must become the teacher for those who journey with God. When orthodox Jews tie the tefilin on their forehead and on their forearm, they are symbolically tying head and heart together (knowledge and understanding). Each phylactery contains portions of the Torah, the Word of God. Each day, understanding must meet knowledge. Both are necessary. Where does knowledge meet understanding for Jesus? Let this question guide your reading of the gospels for a fresh insight into the mind and heart of our Lord Jesus. Begin with the following example from Luke 2. As a boy of twelve or thirteen, Jesus is presented in the Temple in Jerusalem (a kind of first century bar mitzvah). He amazes everyone at the depth of his questions. To be presented in the Temple, Jesus must have demonstrated his knowledge of Torah. Already, he is knowledge seeking understanding.