

Hum 110  
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The Rabbis on Halakha and History:  
Pirke Avot in Context

- I. Historical Background
  - a. chain of transmission, *PA* 1:1
  - b. Hebrew Bible = Torah [Pentateuch], Writings, Prophets
  - c. Written *Torah* vs. Oral *Torah*
  - d. Greek Rule: 332-140 b.c.e.
  - e. *Sanhedrin*: *nasi* + *av bet din* = *zugot* (pairs)
  - f. Pompey conquers, 63 b.c.e.; Temple destroyed in 70 c.e.
- II. The *Mishna* and its authors, the *Tannaim*
  - a. *Shana* = “to repeat by memory”; *Mishna* = “that which is memorized”
  - b. *Torah li-Moshe me-Sinai* = additional laws given to Moses on Mt. Sinai
  - c. Hillel’s *Prozbul* (cf. Deut. 15:1-3)
- III. *Pirke Avot*
  - a. Political life: 1:10; 1:11; 2:3; 3:2; 3:16
  - b. Economic life: 2:2; 3:21; 4:12
  - c. “Cosmic” life: 1:12; 1:18; 3:1; 3:19; 5:1
- IV. Hillel the Elder (5:20)
- V. The Hillelization of Judaism and its implications  
“The words of both schools are the words of the living God but the law follows the rulings of the School of Hillel because the Hillelites were gentle and modest, and studied both their own opinions and the opinions of the other schools, and humbly mentioned the words of the other schools before their own.” *Babylonian Talmud* (Erubin 13b)
- VI. Conclusions
  - a. Contrasts with Greco-Roman Wisdom Literature
  - b. The purpose of *Pirke Avot*?
  - c. The Rabbis on *Halakha* and History: *Halakha* replaces history?
  - d. Rabbinic “*Halakhocentricity*” and the rise of Christianity
  - e. The *baal bayit* (householder: cf. 2:6) as ideal

Note: Resources for the study of classical Jewish religious literature are available at the Hum 110 Tech page, under Gateways, and on the Religion Department page: click on “Judaica”.