

Using the Title Rabbi

By

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Levi bar Ido

B'nai Avraham



- ⁸ “But you are not to let yourselves be called ‘Rabbi’ [my one who has much]; because you have one Rabbi [guide], and you are all each other’s brothers. ⁹ And do not call anyone on earth ‘Father’ [progenitor], because you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ Nor are you to let yourselves be called ‘leaders[guides]’, because you have one Leader, and he is the Messiah![the Anointed One] ¹¹ The greatest among you must be your servant, ¹² for whoever promotes himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be promoted. **JNT-Matt.23:8-12 Dr .David Stern**
- ⁸ But you are not to have pretentious titles like ‘Rebbe,’ for One is your Rebbe [Moshiach], and all of you are achim. ⁹ And do not refer to anyone in Olam Hazeh as your ‘Abba,’ for One is your Av sh’baShomayim. ¹⁰ Neither be called ‘Moreh Torah,’ for One is your Moreh—the Rebbe, Melech HaMoshiach. ¹¹ And the greatest among you will be your mesharet (servant/ minister). ¹² But whoever will lift up himself will be humbled, and whoever will humble himself will be lifted up. **OJBC-Matt.23:8-12**

Recently, the “Call no man rabbi” controversy has raised its anti-Semitic head in the Messianic/Nazarene Yisraelite Movement. Many returning Ephraimites look with distain upon the usage of the title “rabbi” by the leadership of congregations and synagogues. Let us examine the words of our Master Yahshua in the Hebraic context of the Second Temple Period.

Defining Terms

One of the first things a student must do in a Scriptural study is to define the terms used in the passage of Scripture. This is called the “right to define”. This authority belongs to Yisrael NOT the Roman European Church system. Everything must be filtered through the Hebraic dictionary of usage and true origins of the word in order for the proper conclusion to be reached by the student of the Torah.

- G4461 *rhabbi*-**Rabbi -Thayer Definition:** 1) my great one, my honorable sir 2) Rabbi, a title used by the Jews to address their teachers (and also honor them when not addressing them) **A Related Word by Thayer’s/Strong’s Number:** of Hebrew origin H7227 with pronominal suffix.
- **Rabbi** renders Greek *rabbi*, which transliterates the Hebrew (compare 8:19N). The word means, literally, “my great one,” and, less literally, “my master,” “my teacher.” It became a title of respect used for *Torah* scholars by everyone, even those of the same or higher rank. Thus the Talmud says, “Whenever King Y’hoshafat, King of Y’hudah, saw a *talmid chakham* [“wise student,” “scholar”] he would rise from his throne, embrace him and kiss him, and call him, ‘*aviAvi*, ’ [‘My father, my father’], ‘*rabbiRabbi*, ’ [‘My teacher, my teacher’], ‘*Mari, mari*’ [‘My lord, my lord’].” (Makkot 24a; parallel Ketubot 103b) **JNT Commentary**
- G2519 *kathēgētēs*-**Master Thayer Definition:** 1) a guide 2) a master, teacher **Related Word by Thayer’s/Strong’s Number:** from a compound of G2596 and G2233
- G3962 *pater*-**father-Thayer Definition:** 1) generator or male ancestor 1a) either the nearest ancestor: father of the corporeal nature, natural fathers, both parents 1b) a more remote ancestor, the founder of a family or tribe, progenitor of a people, forefather: so Abraham is called, Jacob and David 1b1) fathers, i.e. ancestors, forefathers, founders of a nation 1c) one advanced in years, a senior 2) metaphorically 2a) the originator and transmitter of anything 2a1) the authors of a family or society of persons animated by the same spirit as himself 2a2) one who has infused his own spirit into others, who actuates and governs their minds 2b) one who stands in a father’s place and looks after another in a paternal way 2c) a title of honour 2c1) teachers, as those to whom pupils trace back the knowledge and training they have received 2c2) the members of the Sanhedrin, whose prerogative it was by virtue of the wisdom and experience in which they excelled, to take charge of the interests of others ...

- **G1249 diakonos-servant Thayer Definition:** 1) one who executes the commands of another, especially of a master, a servant, attendant, minister 1a) the servant of a king 1b) a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the church, cares for the poor and has charge of and distributes the money collected for their use 1c) a waiter, one who serves food and drink. **A Related Word by Thayer's/Strong's Number:** probably from an obsolete *diako* (to run on errands,).

The word rabbi has many permutations in the Hebraic understanding; like-*rav, rov, reb, rebbe, rebenyu*. But what is the real root of the word?

The root meaning of the Hebrew word “*rav*”, “*rabbi*”, is “large, great, or much”. In the *TaNak* it is used to signify a great number, magnitude, age, and other things. *Rav* for instance can mean “many”. The plural is *rabim*, as used in *yamim rabim* or “many days”. When used as magnitude, we can look in Tehillim “*ma rav tuvcha*” or “How GREAT is your goodness.” Describing age, *rav* means older or senior as the blessing over Ya’akov, “*va-rav ya’avod tsa’ir*” or “And the older will serve the younger”.

Rav may be used as an adjective and sometimes a noun. In Biblical Hebrew, it has other usages. It can mean the same as the English prefix “arch” meaning “chief”. We may have words like *rav chovel*, the “chief rigger” of the captain’s ship; *rav mag*, “chief magician”; *rav sarism*, “chief eunuch.” In one place the word *RAV* in the genitive plural is used standing alone in **Yirmeyahu 39:13**, “All the chiefs of-*kol rabbei*- the king of Babylon.”

The Post-Biblical time period, beginning in *Mishnaic* times, the usage of *rav* became very common. AT FIRST, it was the general term for “master”, whether of a slave or a trade as a “master craftsman”. LATER, it took on the sense of a spiritual or religious master or a TEACHER of disciples. It is at this point it began to be translated “*rabbi*” as used in the *Mishnah* in the ***Pirkei Avot***: “*Aseh lecha rav*” –“Find yourself a master or teacher, a rabbi”.

The inflected form of *rabi*, “my teacher”, is the root of the current usage of the term “*rabbi*”. *Rabi* was used by a student to address his teacher. In the early centuries C.E. in Yisrael, it became a general title for a TEACHER of the Torah.

The Oxford Dictionary states that “the source of the “n” in rabbin or rabbinate is obscure” but *Rabbin* actually derives from *rabban*, an inflected Aramaic form of *rav*, meaning “our master”. This title was used in Yisrael for a rabbinical leader, such as Raban Gamliel, who was recognized as a TEACHER of a whole generation. It is he same Aramaic ending that gives us the Hebrew plural form of *rabanim*, “*rabbis*”, and the adjective *rabani*,”rabbinical”.

In Yiddish, *rebbenyu* is a term of endearment meaning “dear rabbi”. The “NYU” coming from the Slavic suffice-NYU, which appears in words like *tatenyu* or “dear father”. The Yiddish *rov* and *rebbe* descends from the Hebrew *rav* and *rabi*. In European Jewry the term *rebbe* refers to a Chasidic rabbi and *rov* to a *mitnagdic* or a non-Chasidic rabbi. The usage of the word *reb* is a title of respect or affection that could be given to any Jewish man that observes the Torah.

- **RABBI, RABBINATE.** The title rabbi is derived from the noun *rav*, which in biblical Hebrew means "great" and does not occur in the Bible; in its later sense in Mishnaic Hebrew, however, the word *rav* means a master as opposed to a slave (e.g., "does a slave rebel against his *rav*"—Ber. 10a; "It is like a slave who filled a cup for his *rav* and he poured the water over his face"—Suk. 2:9). It was only during the tannaitic period, in the generation after Hillel, that it was employed as a title for the sages. The passage in the New Testament (Matt. 23:7) in which the Scribes and Pharisees are criticized because they "love... to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi" **probably reflects the fact of its recent introduction**. The word "rabbi" therefore means literally "my master," although the Sephardim point it and pronounce it *ribbi*, the suffix therefore not being a pronominal one. In any case it lost its significance, and rabbi became simply the title accorded to a sage. Since the title was accorded only to those who had been properly ordained, and such ordination was not granted in talmudic times outside Erez Israel, it was not borne by the Babylonian sages (the *amoraim*) who adopted, or were granted, the alternative title of *rav*. In the Talmud, therefore, the title rabbi refers either to a *tanna* or to a Palestinian *amora*, while *rav* refers to a Babylonian *amora*. The rabbi of the Talmud was therefore completely different from the present-day holder of the title. The talmudic rabbi was an interpreter and expounder of the Bible and the Oral Law, and almost invariably had an occupation whence he derived his livelihood. **Encyclopedia Judaica CD Rom**

- It was only in the Middle Ages that the rabbi became—in addition to, or instead of, the interpreter and decisor of the law—the teacher, preacher, and spiritual head of the Jewish congregation or community, and it is with this meaning of the word that this article deals. For the Talmudic rabbi see Sages. In modern usage the word "rabbi" in Hebrew has sometimes become the equivalent of "mister." Thus every Jew called up to the reading of the Torah is invited to do so as "Rabbi So-and-So the son of Rabbi So-and-So," and for the rabbi as spiritual head the title *ha-rav* is employed. **Encyclopedia Judaica CD Rom**
- FUNCTIONS OF THE RABBI-The function of the modern rabbi varied somewhat in the various countries according to local conditions. Thus in England he approximated until recently more to the cantor than in any other country. His official title in the United Synagogue was "minister-preacher," while his colleague was the "minister-reader," both sharing the conduct of the weekly and Sabbath services and the reading of the Torah. In England, France, and Germany the wearing of canonicals was obligatory, while in France the organizational aspects of the rabbinate was largely determined by the Consistory. Nevertheless there are general lines of similarity which applied equally to all. Preaching, of course in the vernacular, occupied a place of prime importance, out of all proportion to the old-fashioned rabbi who generally limited his public discourses to two halakhic-aggadic addresses per year. The modern rabbi was expected to devote much of his time to pastoral work, establishing a personal bond between himself and his congregants, visiting the sick, officiating at bar mitzvahs, marriages, funerals, and houses of mourning as a matter of course. He was expected to take part in all social, educational, and philanthropic activities of the congregation. Above all he was looked to as the spokesman of the Jewish community to the larger community, though the extent of this participation varied in different countries, being most extensive in the United States. **Encyclopedia Judaica CD Rom**

In modern usage the term rabbi simply means “teacher” and is a title given to those who are called to teach the Body. It no longer means “master” or “my great one” as it did during the Second Temple Period. A rabbi is not the “one source” for all truth. We have One Teacher, the *Ruach HaKodesh.*, but that does not eliminate the role and calling of a teacher in the synagogue.

- ¹¹And he gave some to be sh'luchim, and some nevi'im, and some gifted to be used in Kiruv efforts for Rebbe, Melech HaMoshiach, and some supervising mashgichim ruchaniyim (spiritual overseers) who are ro'im and morim in the kehillah, ¹²for the equipping of the kedoshim for the work of avodas kodesh ministry, to the building up of HaGuf HaMoshiach [Bereshis 47:18; Tehillim 16:9-10; Iyov 19: 25-27; Yeshayah 53:11] **OJBC**
- ¹¹And, he, gave—some, indeed, to be apostles, and some, prophets, and some, evangelists, and some, shepherds and teachers [*didaskalos*],— ¹²With a view to the fitting of the saints for the work of ministering, for an up building of the body of Messiah. **Rotherham Trans.NT**

The Greek words for teacher used in the *Brit Chadasha* (Matt.23, Eph.4), *kathegetes* and *didaskalos* are actually synonyms for the English word, MASTER or TEACHER. They could be interchangeable in usage.

Why would Elohim give us teachers-masters, when His Son, Yahshua, instructed us not to be called teachers or masters? An Ephraimite mind-set contradiction to be sure.

Context of Yahshua's Remarks

Now that we have defined our terms and their usage, we can understand the context of Yahshua's usage of the terms. The context of **MattithYah 23** is a critical view of the hypocrisy of those who were sitting in the seat of Moshe. Moshe, who was called the “meekest man”, was the leader of the nation of Yisrael. Moshe was called the servant of Elohim. Because of his humbleness, YHWH chose him to bring Yisrael out of *Mitzrayim* and to bring the Torah to Yisrael at Mt.Sinai. In contrast, the Pharisees were “puffed up” by the authority they held in sitting in the seat of Moshe. They loved the title “my great one” yet did not live the “heart” or spirit of the Torah. Their outward appearance was pious, but inside they needed a heart that can only be cleansed by humbling oneself before YHWH. Their viewpoint of the title “rabbi” was one of great esteem, authority, self- righteousness, and importance. This self-righteous heart attitude is what Yahshua is addressing in this chapter. A rabbi, father, or leader is to be the servant of all Yisrael, walking humbly before Elohim.

My point is that a literalistic approach (*pashat* level interpretation) here is inappropriate, since Yahshua also warns against being called “father” or “leader,” These are terms everyone uses. The context teaches me to believe that Yahshua here is prohibiting His *talmidim* from accepting unearned honors, rather than outlawing all titles. Having a title does not guarantee the anointing or calling into that specific office by YHWH. Many today are appropriating a title that they have not earned nor are they anointed to step into without the proper training and discipleship.

A leader is to be humble, a servant; if he is given any title; he is not to become puffed up like the *P'rushim*. Others in the community are to guard against making invidious distinctions between “clergy” and “laity” by bestowing titles. What should a “rabbi” be? An Xtian pastor under another name? Definitely not! I think the term “rabbi” sets up Hebraic expectations which ought to be fulfilled in the minds of the Yehudim and Ephraim. A Nazarene congregational leader who accepts the title “rabbi” without having training adequate to qualify him as a rabbi is accepting an honor which he has not earned nor to which he is not entitled; and this *does* violate Yahshua’s injunction.

Our Master is warning His *talmidim* not to LOVE to be called by titles, which would SEEM to make them more pious than the other brethren. The servants of Yisrael (the *P'rushim*) sought the honor and praise of one another rather than Elohim. We, as servants of the Master Yahshua, are not to attempt to make yourself a master or the sole source of truth for anyone. There is only one Master or Source of all truth. We are not to DESIRE in our heart to be lifted up in pride by taking to ourselves a title to which we have not been called.

Titles simply reflect the line of authority in the Kingdom of Elohim. Titles do not define how important we are, but rather our responsibility before YHWH. Being a teacher is a very serious responsibility and accountability.

The usage of the term “rabbi” is simply indicative of a person’s responsibility under the Master Yahshua. A rabbi is a teacher, pastor, administrator, psychologist, counselor, and a servant. A rabbi, as a servant, always feels humbled, inadequate, and sometimes unworthy to sit in the office to which he has been called to by YHWH. A true rabbi knows he is the least of all in the Kingdom.

¹**Not, many teachers, become ye, my brethren, knowing that, a severer sentence, shall ye receive; Ya’akov 3:1**