

# SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS



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A MESSIANIC PERSPECTIVE  
ON PIRKEI AVOT

A DEVOTIONAL FOR COUNTING THE OMER BETWEEN PASSOVER AND SHAVUOT

WILLIAM MARK HUEY

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APOLOGETICS**  
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# SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS

## A MESSIANIC PERSPECTIVE ON PIRKEI AVOT

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Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Pirkei Avot are from *Pirkei Avot: Ethics of the Fathers* (ATS), © 1984 Mesorah Publications/ArtScroll.

Accept a teacher upon yourself;  
acquire a friend for yourself,  
and judge everyone favorably

*Avot 1:6*



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# ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

- ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*  
 AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*  
 ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)  
 Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament  
 Ara: Aramaic  
 ASV: American Standard Version (1901)  
 ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)  
 b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)  
 B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.  
 BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)  
 BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*  
 BECNT: *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*  
 BKCNT: *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*  
 C.E.: Common Era or A.D.  
 CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)  
 CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)  
 CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*  
 CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)  
 DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition  
 DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls  
 ECB: *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*  
 EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*  
 eisegesis: “reading meaning into,” or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text  
 EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*  
 ESV: English Standard Version (2001)  
 exegesis: “drawing meaning out of,” or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own  
 EXP: *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*  
 Ger: German  
 GNT: Greek New Testament  
 Grk: Greek  
*halachah*: lit. “the way to walk,” how the Torah is lived out in an individual’s life or faith community  
 HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)  
 HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)  
 Heb: Hebrew  
 HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible  
 ICC: *International Critical Commentary*  
 IDB: *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*  
 IDBSup: *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*  
 ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*  
 IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*  
 Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)  
 JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)  
 JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*  
 KJV: King James Version  
 Lattimore: The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore (1996)  
 LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)  
 LS: *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott)  
 LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)

LXX: Septuagint  
 m. Mishnah  
 MT: Masoretic Text  
 NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)  
 NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)  
 NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*  
 NEB: New English Bible (1970)  
 Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*  
 NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)  
 NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*  
 NIGTC: *New International Greek Testament Commentary*  
 NICNT: *New International Commentary on the New Testament*  
 NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*  
 NIV: New International Version (1984)  
 NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)  
 NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)  
 NKJV: New King James Version (1982)  
 NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)  
 NLT: New Living Translation (1996)  
 NT: New Testament  
 orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world  
 OT: Old Testament  
 PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*  
 REB: Revised English Bible (1989)  
 RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)  
 t. Tosefta  
 Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament  
 Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*  
 TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*  
 TEV: Today's English Version (1976)  
 TLV: Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant (2011)  
 TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)  
 TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*  
 TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*  
 UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition  
 v(s). verse(s)  
 Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*  
 Vul: Latin Vulgate  
 WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*  
 Yid: Yiddish  
 YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

# PIRKEI AVOT

YEAR ONE



# INTRODUCTION TO YEAR ONE

For the last few years, the joy of participating in the Counting of the Omer, between the Passover season and *Shavuot*, has been a major highlight, in which I have encouraged many to participate. However, the main verses which refer to this annual command are not full of any great detail about how to specifically “Count the Omer”:

“From the day after the day of rest—that is, from the day you bring the sheaf for waving—you are to count seven full weeks, until the day after the seventh week; you are to count fifty days; and then you are to present a new grain offering to *ADONAI*” (Leviticus 23:15-16).

This minimal description forced me to find a means for encouraging people to count the seven weeks between the Festival of Unleavened Bread to the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot*. Several years ago (2004), while investigating the subject, a series of meditations from the Book of Psalms came to my attention that were used as a basis for daily reflection. The principal passage, that was considered each day, was recited by the priests at the altar in Jerusalem, when they were offering up the morning and evening sacrifices that burned continually before the Lord:

“For the leader. With stringed instruments. A psalm. A song: God, be gracious to us, and bless us. May he make his face shine toward us, (*Selah*) so that your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. Let the peoples give thanks to you, God; let the peoples give thanks to you, all of them. Let the nations be glad and shout for joy, for you will judge the peoples fairly and guide the nations on earth. (*Selah*) Let the peoples give thanks to you, God; let the peoples give thanks to you, all of them. The earth has yielded its harvest; may God, our God, bless us. May God continue to bless us, so that all the ends of the earth will fear him” (Psalm 67:1-7).

Psalm 67 became a backdrop for going before the Lord on a daily basis. Coupled with it were a series of Psalm passages, which at times providentially seemed to line up with some of the Torah portions that were being studied and discussed on a weekly basis. Witnessing the Father’s handiwork, in answering many of my own personal questions throughout this fifty-day period, was extremely encouraging. Eventually, these reflections were compiled into a book entitled *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot*, which is available for those who like to have a tool for daily reflections centered on the Word of God.

# SAYINGS OF THE FATHERS פְּרָקֵי אָבוֹת

During the course of the Omer Count in 2006, I was contacted by a friend who pointed out that one of the traditional Jewish topics for study during this time period for a certain number of communities (especially Sephardic) was the Mishnah tractate *Pirkei Avot* (פרקי אבות), or Sayings of the Fathers. After consulting several English translations of the *Pirkei Avot*, including some commentaries by Jewish Rabbis, I discovered that it is the most widely known and studied of all of the tractates of the Mishnah. This past year (2006), I have read the *Pirkei Avot* numerous times, to discern what it communicates, particularly to Torah students. **There are areas where it does deviate from Scripture and Apostolic teaching.**<sup>1</sup> However, though, the majority of what I read I found to be rather enlightening and useful to consider—as the *Pirkei Avot* undoubtedly makes up a major collection of wisdom sayings present throughout not only post-Second Temple Judaism, but likely also Second Temple Judaism itself. Yeshua and His Disciples were likely aware and influenced by some of these teachings passed down through the ages, or at least similar sentiments.<sup>2</sup> I thought it would be instructional for us to have a tour of the *Pirkei Avot*. For, if we have an open mind, we are likely to learn important things, from some of the edifying virtues contained in the Jewish philosophical tradition.

The *Pirkei Avot* essentially contains the teachings of the Sages of Judaism, on the conduct of human life and thought from the time of Moses down to the era of Rabbi Judah, who is credited with the compilation of the Mishnah or Oral Torah sometime in the late First Century to Second Century C.E. The following is a summation of the *Pirkei Avot* and its importance in much of Jewish theology, from the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*:

“By tracing (in its first two chapters) the uninterrupted transmission of tradition from the Sinaitic revelation through the leading *tannaim* of the generation after the destruction of the Second Temple, the treatise provides the credentials, as it were, of these teachers and their subsequent students. In effect, it declares that in these teachers and their loyal disciples will be found the unbroken and authoritative instruction which began at Sinai. Thus *Avot* serves as the underpinning of the authority of the Mishnah as a whole.

“The sages in this continuous tradition from the Men of the Great Assembly are not merely listed in ‘genealogical’ or roll-call fashion but their ‘platforms’ are also quoted. Along with the editorial report (in the first two chapters) that Master B took over from Master A, an important statement is also attributed to each master. This statement, originally, was not an expression, however, of just one more personal view, *bon mot*, or some general moral maxim, but apparently a formulation of a fundamental principle or policy or program the Pharisaic leader and (later) the leading *tanna* directed to his own generation. Taken together, these sayings reveal the convictions which shaped the Pharisaic and the early dominant tannaitic schools: that the principal task was to raise

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Hertz, ed., *Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Behrman House, 1945), 12 where the statement of m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1 (“All Israel have a portion in the world to come”), is discussed. This affirms a universal salvation for all physical Israelites and Jews, and disputes the idea that salvation is only available via a Redeemer, i.e., Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ).

<sup>2</sup> This is something noted in a wide array of contemporary, academic commentaries on the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament. Reviewing all of the potential places where the *Pirkei Avot* communicate something that is possibly seen or echoed in the teachings or activities of Yeshua or the Apostles, obviously goes beyond the purposes of this publication.

The Sayings of the Fathers or *Pirkei Avot* are notably referred to, among an array of ancient Jewish sources, by David H. Stern in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995).



# INTRODUCTION TO YEAR ONE

many disciples; that the pillars on which society rests are the Scriptures, worship, and acts of piety; that the duty of man, regardless of consequences, is to serve God; that the company of the sages is to be preferred above all; that a household is to be governed by certain proprieties; that proper associations are to be cultivated, proper procedures are to be followed in the administration of justice; that one must engage in work rather than seek power and political influence; that it is no light responsibility teachers assume; that priests have social obligations over and above their ritual ones; that consistency and practice and decency toward all men are what count; that study of Torah is of prime significance; that there are right ways of human conduct to adopt and wrong ways to avoid. To these statements, which constituted the original core of the treatise (1:1–15; 2:8–14), later were added reflections and teachings of the sages who were the students of Johanan b. Zakkai's most outstanding students, and those of other sages too (some famous from the period before the destruction of the Temple, many from the middle of the second and the following century). In this way, the first four chapters of *Avot* preserved those teachings and emphases of the *tannaim* which reflected what most concerned classical Judaism: the claim of high antiquity for the Oral law; the nature and destiny of man; the permanent centrality of Torah; the doctrine of reward and punishment; the approved course for man in his life in this world in expectation of the world to come” (*EJ*).<sup>3</sup>

After much consideration and some prayer, I decided that taking a contemplative review of the *Pirkei Avot* would be beneficial. This series of reflections might be some of the first serious examination—especially if you are a non-Jewish Messianic Believer like myself—that some of you may have, in reading and appreciating some extra-Biblical Jewish literature. I, myself, have found that the Sayings of the Fathers has stimulated, a bit, my own personal walk with the Messiah of Israel, and how I look at some of Yeshua's teachings and perspective. Every single one of us in our walk of faith can, and has benefited, from the collective wisdom of those who have come before us. Today's Messianic movement does have a heritage rooted within the Jewish theological tradition, and being familiar with the *Pirkei Avot* can be something quite useful.

When we examine the *Pirkei Avot*, there will be things that each of us, as not only Messianic Believers—but as modern people living in the Twenty-First Century—will both agree and disagree with. The Sayings of the Fathers that we will be reflecting upon are ***not* Holy Scripture**; ultimately they originate entirely from human beings. At the very most, the Sayings of the Fathers might be said to have a “consultative authority” for us, along with a collection of other religious resources, both Jewish and Christian, for formulating our theology and *halachah* or orthopraxy.

The different Jewish Rabbis and teachers, whose sayings largely compose the *Pirkei Avot*, were people who were engaged with the Torah and Tanakh (Pentateuch and Old Testament), and they were trying to interpret and apply such Holy Scripture to their lives and their ancient communities. Examining and reflecting upon a human work, like the *Pirkei Avot*, is quantitatively similar to how many of today's Believers study the works of various Christian leaders and voices throughout history. (Speaking for myself, I know that I have been particularly blessed and enriched by the classic works, *My Utmost for His Highest* by Oswald Chambers, and *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.) Believers in Yeshua (Jesus) today might not only consider different devotional treatises written by Christian

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<sup>3</sup> Judah Goldin, “Pirkei Avot,” in [Encyclopaedia Judaica](#). MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

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leaders over the centuries, reading through them over a set period of time—but they might even reflect on such devotions, offering and interjecting their own thoughts. This resource on the *Pirkei Avot*, in a similar manner, might be considered **my own personal “journal” of reflections**, and how I have been enriched from studying it. The Sayings of the Fathers, as religious literature, ultimately represents an attempt for people made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27), to try to probe His good intention for us all.

This series of teachings offers two years of reflections, plus an additional six days, which are compiled from my 2006 and 2007 Counting the Omer posts to our ministry e-mail list. The base English translation employed is provided from *Pirkei Avos: Ethics of the Fathers* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1984). On occasion, I may also be using Jacob Neusner’s translation of the Mishnah (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), or renderings from Rabbi Avrohom Davis, *Pirkei Avos: The Wisdom of the Fathers* (New York: Metsudah Publications, 1986); J.H. Hertz, *Sayings of the Fathers* (New York: Behrman House, 1945); Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York: UAHC Press, 1993).

I hope and pray that these short reflections will be used by our Heavenly Father, to enrich each one of us in our approach to Him. In our efforts, perhaps we will also be able to fine tune our understanding of Yeshua’s and the Apostles’ teachings, as we consider some ancient Jewish perspectives about life.

*Until the restoration of all things...*

*Mark Huey*

# DAY ONE

מ. אבות 1:1

**Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders; the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be deliberate in judgment; develop many disciples; and make a fence for the Torah (m.Avot 1:1).**

As we begin our review of the *Pirkei Avot*, we are reminded that the long history of the Torah, from its reception at Mount Sinai to the members of the Great Assembly during the generation of Ezra, was maintained throughout the history of Israel.

First, it is noted that Moses was the initial, formal recipient of the laws of our Creator:

“ADONAI said to Moshe, ‘Come up to me on the mountain, and stay there. I will give you the stone tablets with the *Torah* and the *mitzvot* [commandments] I have written on them, so that you can teach them” (Exodus 24:12).

Next, we are reminded that Moses transmitted the Torah to Joshua, his faithful servant who never departed from the Tent of Meeting, when the Lord was speaking to Moses:

“ADONAI would speak to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. Then he would return to the camp; but the young man who was his assistant, Y’hoshua the son of Nun, never left the inside of the tent” (Exodus 33:11).

Apparently, God always intended that the Torah, as received by Moses, would be passed down from generation to generation. Joshua, being the obedient disciple of Moses, was chosen to receive the precious contents of the Torah for his generation.

Accordingly, the generations which followed Joshua, specifically during the time of the Judges when elder-rule predominated, received the instructions and preserved them for future generations. The checkered history of Israel during the period of Judges finally culminated with the beginning of the prophetic era during the time of the priest Eli and the Prophet Samuel.

The Prophets, from Samuel to the exiles of the Southern Kingdom, were responsible for preserving God’s Instruction for future generations. The *Pirkei Avot* indicates that the Torah was finally passed on to the “Great Assembly” (*kneset ha’gedolah*, כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה) or the 120 Sages, which likely included notables such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, and Mordecai.<sup>1</sup> These figures were partially responsible for the return of the Southern Kingdom exiles to the Land of Israel from exile in Babylon. It was these leaders who placed a great

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Avrohom Davis, trans., *Pirkei Avos: The Wisdom of the Fathers* (New York: Metsudah Publications, 1986), 7.

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emphasis on returning to the Torah as a basis for reestablishing God's rule and prominence in the hearts of the people.

By the time of Ezra and the return to Jerusalem, the bodies of literature not only credited to Moses, but also to many of Israel's Prophets, began being compiled into what would later be considered the canon of the Tanakh.<sup>2</sup> These writings were the Holy Scriptures that were used during the times of Yeshua and the Apostles. The Apostle Paul wrote Timothy that the Tanakh or Old Testament, "all Scripture," was essential instruction to follow, for living a life that is continually in God's service:

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, convicting of sin, correcting faults and training in right living; thus anyone who belongs to God may be fully equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Next, the *Pirkei Avot* indicates that three maxims are considered to be instrumental in preserving the Torah's instruction from Moses to this very day: "**(1) Be prudent in judgment. (2) Raise up many disciples. (3) Make a fence for the Torah**" (m.*Avot* 1:1, Neusner).<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, as you read these declarations, you discover that the First Century Apostles were very much influenced by these conclusions.

First, one is to be deliberate in judgment or not make rash decisions. Paul reiterates this concept in his letter to the Romans where he exhorts his readers to exercise "sound judgment," recognizing that Believers are all different, but nevertheless, part of one Body of Messiah:

"For I am telling every single one of you, through the grace that has been given to me, not to have exaggerated ideas about your own importance. Instead, develop a sober estimate of yourself based on the standard which God has given to each of you, namely, trust. For just as there are many parts that compose one body, but the parts don't all have the same function; so there are many of us, and in union with the Messiah we comprise one body, with each of us belonging to the others" (Romans 12:3-5).

Likewise, the Apostle Peter uses the statement "sound judgment" (NASU) to encourage his readers to let love cover a multitude of sins:

"The accomplishing of the goal of all things is close at hand. Therefore, keep alert and self-controlled [clear minded, NIV], so that you can pray. More than anything, keep loving each other actively; because love covers many sins" (1 Peter 4:7-8).

Obviously, these and a number of similar statements about making informed decisions, using discernment, and being wise, occur throughout the Apostolic Scriptures. They all indicate the necessity to maintain deliberate judgment in order to build up the Body of the Messiah while covering a multitude of transgressions.

The second axiom is the admonition to educate many disciples, which is one of the key foundational building blocks of our faith. We should all remember that Yeshua's departing instructions included the strong admonition for His Disciples to continue the process of making more disciples throughout the world:

"Therefore, go and make people from all nations into *talmidim*, immersing them into the reality of the Father, the Son and the *Ruach HaKodesh*, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember! I will be with you always, yes, even until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

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<sup>2</sup> Tanakh/Tanach (תנ"ך) is a Hebrew acronym for *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings).

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 672.