

Jesus and His Disciples: The Beginnings of Their Organization

by Chana Safrai

Among the traditions about Jesus, a special place is reserved for those concerning the role of his disciples. The high point is doubtless Jesus' revelation to them following his death, and the command to spread his teaching, win souls and preach the way of life of the revered teacher. "Go forth, therefore, and make all nations my disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:19–20). "Go forth to every part of the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk. 16:16). "Anyone who loves me will observe my word, and my Father will love him..." (Jn. 14:23).

In the spiritual world of the authors of the various Gospels and of the Acts of the Apostles, every aspect of the disciples' activity is portrayed in terms of this overall tendency — namely the unique and important mission of these disciples who are known as "apostles" (Mt. 10:2; Lk. 6:13). The joining of the various disciples to the circle of those surrounding the teacher Jesus, their election as disciples-companions, their deeds while in the presence of the master, the criticism directed against Jesus as the result of his disciples' behavior, and the mission that they took upon themselves following the death of their illustrious master and teacher — all imbued with an aura of the unique and the miraculous. These details were also repeatedly interpreted in this spirit in Church exegesis during subsequent generations.

Whatever was unique about these events, however, they were not without parallels. This area of the life and mission of Jesus, like many others, seems to be anchored in the world of the Jewish sages of the end of the Second Temple period. Careful examination of the relevant rabbinic sources will elucidate the manner in which a group of disciples came into being around this young

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Galilean teacher, how Christianity started on its long path, and what its first steps were in the generation of its original adherents. It will also allow us better to understand the nature of the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and his leading disciple — Simon Peter.

At the very root of the tradition of the Oral Torah, and specifically in the rabbinic understanding of the tradition of the Torah and its study, lies the principle of the instruction and cultivation of disciples. According to the opening of Tractate Avot, “They [i.e., the men of the Great Assembly] said three things — be deliberate in judgment, and raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah” (Avot 1:1). Note also the saying of R. Ishmael: “He who learns in order to teach, is given the ability to learn and to teach...” (Avot 4:5).

The tradition says much about the students of the various sages. It more than once records the large number of disciples who were attached to such figures as Hillel the Elder (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Schechter ed., p. 29) or Rabbi Akiva (bKetuvot 62b). The numerous descriptions of the masses of people who came to hear Jesus’ preaching and words at the beginning of his mission can be understood in this same spirit. The Sermon on the Mount even opens in this manner (see Mt. 5:1), while Matthew describes Jesus’ activity in Galilee as follows: “And great crowds followed him, from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea, and beyond the Jordan” (Mt. 4:25). Parallels occur in the other Gospels (Mk. 3:7–8; Lk. 6:17).

The descriptions of the life of Jesus of Nazareth found in the Gospels relate the attraction of the teacher to his unique powers as a healer or to his being a person of unusual authority and power (e.g., Lk. 7:16–17). There can be no doubt, however, that the general manner of his activity, as a teacher who instructed and attracted many listeners and disciples to follow his teaching, fits into the framework of the patterns of Torah study known to us from other sources and traditions in Jewish society of the end of the Second Temple period.

Calling of the Disciples in the Synoptic Gospels

Within the overall context of the masses of people flowing to hear and to understand, to see and to meet the teacher, the Gospel tradition recounts how certain outstanding disciples came to follow Jesus. Matthew and Mark relate that Jesus spoke to some fishermen, Simon and Andrew, whom he asked to become his disciples, and shortly afterwards to the two sons of Zebedee, James and John: “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt. 4:19; Mk. 1:17). Those who joined the circle of his disciples were simple folk who were captivated by his words and attracted to his person and his teaching.

To some extent this picture resembles the beginnings of such noted sages as Rabbi Akiva, who was originally an ignorant simple shepherd,¹ or R. Eliezer

1. On the purely literary-ideational plane, a distinction may be drawn between the image of the fisherman, who catches fish in his net, and that of the shepherd, who cares for and worries about his flock. Two comments, however, should be made. 1) The difference can be seen, at least in part, as geographical. Fishing and fishermen were part of the scenery of actual life in the specific region in which the historical Jesus

ben Hyrcanus, the youngest and unsuccessful son of a farmer, who ran away to take asylum in the study house of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 15a-b and parallels). Not all the Jewish sages who attained positions of leadership attracted simple folk, but the Judaic tradition takes pride in the accounts of scholars who rose from the poor and unlearned classes to take their place in the ranks of the leading scholars.

The Gospel of Luke, too, relates how Simon, Andrew, James and John joined Jesus, but its account has a different context from Matthew and Mark, and there are slightly different emphases regarding the nature of the circle of the disciples and their connection to their teacher. Their joining is prefaced with an account of a miracle and an act of salvation. The two pairs of future disciples together constituted a team of fishermen who, to their misfortune, were unable to catch any fish. Jesus entered Simon's boat and told him to go into the deep water and cast his nets, which immediately became completely filled with fish to the point of splitting. When Simon saw what had happened, "he fell at Jesus' knees and said: 'Leave me, Lord, sinner that I am!'" For astonishment seized him and all who were with him at the catch of fish they had taken.... "Do not be afraid," said Jesus to Simon, "from now on you will be catching men alive" (Lk. 5:1-11). Luke's account concludes with all four of them joining the circle surrounding Jesus: "As soon as they had brought the boats to land, they left everything and followed him" (v. 11).

A similar dedication is expressed in the accounts of Mark and Matthew, although there it is only emphasized in connection with James and John. Jesus "called them, and at once, leaving the boat and their father, they followed him" (Mt. 4:21-22); he "immediately called them and, leaving their father Zeb-edee in the boat with the hired men, they went away after him" (Mk. 1:20). Thus these accounts, too, emphasize the immediate devotion to Jesus displayed by these new disciples, manifested in their sacrifice of their livelihood and their separation from their families.

Luke's story of the miraculous assistance offered by Jesus to the unfortunate fishermen is missing in Matthew and Mark, though interestingly developed at the end of the Gospel of John. It makes the teacher's charisma dependent not so much upon his teaching per se, as on the fact that he helped the fishermen — not his words but his deeds convinced them to join him. By the miraculous act of Jesus, the fishermen acquired wealth, yet simultaneously realized that wealth was of little importance. This made them ready to "leave everything," relying upon the mercies of their master and teacher. In Simon's reaction to the miracle — "Leave me, Lord, sinner that I am!" (Lk. 5:8) — he assumes that a saint and miracle-worker like Jesus would not be permitted to associate with one who is considered a sinner. Apparently he interprets his preceding ill-luck in his work as a punishment and as a proof of his sinfulness. Here, as else-

was active, while shepherding was more typical of the life of the Jewish people in the hill country of Judea and Galilee. 2) Even on the literary plane, the early Christian tradition saw the two images as equivalent. In the Gospel of John, therefore, when Jesus appears to Peter following his death, he calls upon him to tend his sheep (Jn. 21:15 ff.).

where, Luke stresses Jesus' willingness to approach sinners and assist them to turn from their wicked ways.

Three prominent features of the account in Luke have thus far been noted: the emphasis upon miraculous acts, the abandonment of a settled and orderly way of life in favor of a life of poverty shared with the master, and the willingness to associate with sinners. Shmuel Safrai has already noted that rabbinic society included a group of saintly sages (*bakhamim-basidim*) who, by their way of life and their deeds, embodied all of the above-mentioned characteristics.² Note that the reluctance to have dealings with sinners stems in principle from punctiliousness concerning the laws of purity and pollution (*toharah wetum'ab*). Sinners are presumed to be either ritually polluted or uneducated people (*amei ba-aretz*) who cannot be relied upon to observe these laws properly, such that contact with them should be minimized. In some cases, *basidim* were themselves accused of not observing the laws of ritual pollution and impurity properly. Jesus answers such charges by arguing that the reward of one who is strict is counterbalanced by the loss of the sinner, who is compared to a sick person who has not received the necessary medical treatment: "It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick" (Lk. 5:31; cf. Mt. 9:12 and Mk. 2:17).

Matthew and Mark stress that James and John abandoned not merely the boat, the source of their organized livelihood, but their own father as well. Splits within the family are among the signs of the "End of Days," or of the tumultuous period immediately preceding it: "For son spurns father, daughter rises up against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law: a man's own household are his enemies" (Mic. 7:6). This verse is worked into Jesus' instructions to his disciples (at Mt. 10:35) in a fiery speech which has a clearly eschatological flavor. The speech does not occur in Mark and Luke except in fragmentary form. Yet one fragment in Luke (Lk. 12:51-53, paralleling Mt. 10:34-36) does characterize separation from the home as a sign of upheaval characteristic of times of trouble. It is thus notable that the eschatological allusions in the Matthean and Markan accounts of the calling of the disciples are absent in the account of Luke. In the decision of the disciples to join their teacher Jesus and no longer to engage in fishing, Luke simply portrays a social reality clearly taken from the world of the sages, which he in no way sees as a premessianic sign. In this respect, Luke's description is similar to that of the beginnings of Eliezer ben Hyrcanus' sojourn in the school of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Schechter ed., 15b).

All the Synoptic Gospels subsequently recount the incident of Levi (or Matthew), whom Jesus noticed sitting in the tax house and invited to join him. The latter got up and followed him (Mt 9:9; Mk. 2:13-14; Lk. 5:27-28), becoming one of the disciples. This incident of a sinful tax-gatherer, which again is related to

2. S. Safrai, "The Teachings of *Hasidim* in Tannaitic Literature" (Hebrew), *We-Hinneb Ain Yosef: Qovez le-Zikbro shel Yosef Amorai* (Jerusalem, 1973), pp. 136-152, and "Hasidim and Miracle-Workers" (Hebrew), *Zion* 50 (Zion Jubilee Volume, 1935-1985), 133-154.

Jesus' attitude to questions of purity and pollution, constitutes an addition to the original tight group of followers.³

At a somewhat later stage, this group of disciples became organized into a band of twelve men (Mt. 10:1-4; Mk. 3:13-19; Lk 6:12-16), who were to become the twelve apostles appointed by Jesus to spread his teaching (Mt. 10:1-16; Mk. 6:8-11; Lk. 6:12-16). David Flusser has already discussed at length how this stage in the organization of the group of disciples was both ideologically and organizationally influenced by the positions taken by the Essene sect. At the same time, this stage also belongs to the lifetime of the master himself, and already existed in the earliest stages of the new Christian organization.⁴

Calling of the Disciples in John

Whereas the miraculous catch of fish is described close to the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, it appears in the last chapter of John's Gospel. It is no longer a tale concerned with the joining of the disciples, but "the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection from the dead" (Jn. 21:14). A small circle of disciples is sitting together on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, apparently having returned to their profession of fishermen. They are Simon, Thomas ("the Twin"), Nathanael of Cana-in-Galilee, the two sons of Zebedee and two others from Galilee. Simon, who initiates the decision to go out and fish, is again the active figure. At daybreak, the resurrected Jesus asks them if they have anything to eat. When they admit to being empty-handed, he instructs them to cast the net on the right side of the boat, and after doing so "they could not haul the net aboard for the quantity of fish" (v. 6). Again, "Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net to land, full of big fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and yet, many as they were, the net was not torn" (v. 11). The miraculous aspect is further emphasized by the fact that, when the fishermen came ashore, they found that a meal had already been prepared for them: "they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish laid on it, and some bread" (v. 9), and Jesus "came up, took the bread, and gave it to them, and likewise the fish" (v. 13).

Of the three prominent features of Luke's description noted earlier, clearly the miracle is the one most strongly emphasized in John. On the other hand, the fact that the Lord's disciples sacrificed their livelihood when they joined him is somewhat obscured. Nevertheless, their retroactive dependence upon his miraculous ability to take care of them is stressed emphatically and repeatedly. The account in John also contains a veiled reference to the third aspect, namely Simon's sinfulness. When Simon heard from the beloved disciple that the man on the shore was Jesus, "he wrapped his coat about him, for he was stripped, and plunged into the sea" (Jn. 21:7). This impulsive and unexplained action of Simon may be a somewhat peculiar reworking of Luke's description

3. See previous note.

4. See D. Flusser, "The Peshet of Isaiah and the Notion of the Twelve Apostles in Early Christianity" (Hebrew), *Eretz-Israel* 8 (1967), 52-62, reprinted in his *Jewish Sources in Early Christianity* (Tel-Aviv, 1979), pp. 283-304, and the bibliography there.

of Simon's falling at the feet or knees of the master, wondering how such an outstanding person was willing to associate with sinners like himself.

The beginning of John's Gospel has its own account of how the disciples joined the living Jesus. John's list includes two of the followers of John the Baptist (Jn. 1:37–40). One of these was Andrew, the brother of Simon (1:41), who presented his teacher to Simon (vv. 42–43); they were then joined by Philip from the same town (v. 44), who in turn convinced Nathanael to join them (vv. 48–49). Two of these five disciples — Simon and Nathanael — are explicitly named in the list of disciples who sat by the shore of the Sea of Galilee following the master's death and participated in the miraculous catch of fish.

John's description provides an entire series of explanations for how the various disciples, each in his own way, successively came and joined the circle. These explanations seem close in spirit specifically to the meetings described in Matthew and Mark. The first pair of disciples acknowledges the importance of Jesus after spending time in the company of John the Baptist, at whose inspiration they join Jesus and go over to live with him. Simon meets his teacher in the company of his brother, and is received with blessings by the master. Philip, the fourth one, is invited by the teacher himself to join the group, just as in Matthew and Mark the two sons of Zebedee are asked to join the group already consisting of Simon and Andrew (Mt. 4:18–22; Mk. 1:16–20). When Philip calls Nathanael to recognize Jesus and his place in the divine plan (Jn. 1:46), Nathanael is not easily convinced, asking with characteristic contempt: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Despite his skepticism, eventually he joins with the master's blessing.

This last addition to the list of disciples has some eschatological features woven into its description. These are clearly expressed in the promise given by the master: "Is this the ground of your faith, that I told you I saw you under the fig-tree? You shall see greater things than that" (v. 50). The mention of the fig-tree presumably alludes to a certain repeated motif in the words of Jesus of Nazareth,⁵ and may have some relation to the possible eschatological hints, mentioned above, in Matthew's description of the joining of the sons of Zebedee.

Groups of Disciples of Jewish Sages

There are thus a number of different traditions about the calling of the disciples of Jesus in Gospel literature: a tradition concerning four disciples in the Synoptic Gospels, and traditions of five and even seven in John. Similar traditions about small groups of disciples attached to Jewish sages occur in other literature from the end of the Second Temple period and thereafter.⁶ Ezra has five disciples who accompany him in his activities (4 Ezra 12:42). Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai likewise has five disciples (Avot 2:8–9).

5. The fig-tree cursed during the entrance to Jerusalem (Mt. 21:19–20; Mk. 11:13–14); the blossoming of the fig-tree and the other trees at the end of summer as symbol of the end (Lk. 21:29). Cf. the midrash on the verse, "the fig-tree has put forth its green figs..." (Song of Songs 2:13).

6. Flusser, "The Peshet of Isaiah," p. 298, and notes there.

With Rabbi Akiva, however, several different groups of close disciples are mentioned. One group is seen as the founders of the tannaitic literature: "An ordinary [i.e., unidentified] *mishnah* follows R. Meir; an ordinary *tosefta* follows R. Nehemiah; an ordinary *sifra* follows R. Judah; an ordinary *sifrei* follows R. Simeon; and all of them follow the tradition of R. Akiva" (bSanhedrin 86a). Another group of four close disciples is mentioned in "an incident involving four elders, who sit by the gate of R. Joshua: Eleazar ben Mattya, Hananiah ben Hakhinai, Simeon ben Azzai, and Simeon ha-Timni were engaged in what Rabbi Akiva had taught them..." (tBerakhot 4:18).

A third tradition enumerates five special disciples of R. Akiva: "...until R. Akiva came to our teachers in the south and taught them: R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Jose, R. Simeon and R. Eleazar ben Shammua, and they preserved the Torah at that time..." (bYevamot 62b). A fourth tradition explicitly states that there were seven: "...had he not raised up seven disciples in his old age..." (Tanhuma, *hayyei Sarah* 6). A parallel gives their names: "In the end he raised up seven disciples, who were: R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, R. Meir, R. Jose, R. Simeon ben Yohai, R. Eliezer son of R. Jose ha-Galili, and R. Johanan ha-Sandler" (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 10). The same number, with a similar list, appears in the account of the intercalation of the leap year at Beit Rimmon: "It came about that seven elders went in to intercalate the (leap) year in Bik'at Beit Rimmon, and who were they? R. Meir, R. Judah, R. Jose, R. Simeon, R. Nehemiah, R. Eleazar ben Jacob, and R. Johanan ha-Sandler..." (jHagigah 3:5).

All in all, each of the outstanding sages mentioned would seem to have been surrounded by one or more small groups which were considered to form his intimate circle. These might include some individuals who were closer, generally mentioned in each group, as well as others who were attached more loosely.

Tensions Between Disciples

We have thus far been concerned with the question of the banding of isolated individuals into a distinct circle of disciples, and their organization into one circle identified as Jesus' disciples. We shall now turn to two incidents in the realm of their internal relations.

The Gospel tradition notes a certain tension between the disciples. Even though they seem externally to be a united and well-defined group, they can compete for superiority or prominence within it.

In the Gospel of Mark, the two sons of Zebedee approach Jesus and ask of their teacher a special favor: "Grant us the right to sit one at your right and the other at your left in your glory" (Mk. 10:36). This request to share in Jesus' glory offended the entire circle of the disciples: "When the other ten heard this, they began to be indignant at James and John" (v. 41). In this version, it was Jesus' task to admonish the two, while simultaneously calming the spirits of the others and trying to guide them toward a sense of equality among themselves and a different perception of societal and group arrangements. In the Gospel of Matthew, it was not these two disciples themselves, but their mother

who approached with such a request of the master (Mt. 20:20–21), arousing a storm among the disciples.⁷

This story may be no more than a literary elaboration by Mark and Matthew of the dispute about “who shall rank highest” that Luke recounts in connection with the Last Supper (Lk. 22:24). In any event, a tradition evidently exists regarding certain tensions within the group.

Such debates about preeminence among disciples are also familiar from traditions in the world of the sages. Speaking of his disciples, Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai is said to have remarked: “If all the sages of Israel were in one pan of the scales, and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus in the other, he would outweigh them all” (Avot 2:8). According to another tradition, however, Abba Saul said in his name: “If all the sages of Israel were in one pan of the scales, including even Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus among them, and Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh in the other, he would outweigh them all” (ibid.). Evidently, the second claim is explicitly formulated in such a way as to reject the first. It is true that in this case the opposing claims are not put forward by the disciples themselves, but about them. Nevertheless, the question here is still essentially the same: who is most important among them? The authority of the master himself is claimed for both of the competing viewpoints.

A dispute about preeminence seems also to lie behind a story from the life of a disciple of Rabbi Akiva. “...R. Meir sat down first, and R. Simeon’s face turned yellow. R. Akiva said to him: ‘Enough, for both I and your Creator recognize your power’” (jSanhedrin 19a). R. Meir was ordained before R. Simeon, but the latter seems to have thought himself sufficiently outstanding to deserve priority; R. Akiva’s task was to calm the spirits of both. The death by plague of the original students of R. Akiva is explained by some later sources as a punishment “because they did not respect one another” (bYevamot 62b). According to a variant on this theme:

He [Rabbi Akiva] said to them [his later group of either five or seven disciples]: “The former ones died only because they were jealous regarding one another’s Torah. You should not be this way.” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah, ch. 10)⁸

It is immaterial that these may not be wholly historical accounts but later literary reworkings of the actual incidents themselves. They clearly show that it was accepted within the rabbinic tradition to talk about tensions, jealousy and the desire for honor among close disciples who spent much time in one an-

7. The formula in Matthew would appear to be more reliable, as it is difficult to understand how the evangelist changed the account in Mark into the peculiar story in which the mother is the one who seeks honor for her son. It is more likely that it was Mark who felt the need to alter this “too human” story to one more respectable and probable within the circle of the disciples. In the near future, I hope to investigate the historical information and literary traditions concerning “great mothers” in the Temple period.

8. Compare also Genesis Rabbah 61:3; Yalqut Shimoni, part 1, 11:6. A precise comparison of all versions of the story in the full range of amoraic sources makes it clear beyond a doubt that this developed as an aggadic story; it is highly doubtful whether it has any historical basis at all.

other's company, while the master and teacher saw it as his responsibility to calm and to make peace among his disciples, exactly as Jesus is reported to have done in the dispute mentioned above.

The rabbinic tradition is interested in retelling these events, not primarily out of historical interest, but as an expression of the social messages that it wished to pass on to its readers. The attempts to rank the disciples of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai reflect different views about what kind of scholar most advances the study of Torah. Is it the traditional type of sage who goes over what he has learnt many times and is strict about preserving the tradition — e.g., R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, who was called “a whitewashed pit which does not lose a drop”? Or is it the creative sage who expands his knowledge — the “flowing spring” — e.g., R. Eleazar ben Arakh? Similarly, the account of the deaths of R. Akiva's disciples in the plague was intended to teach a clear ethical-religious message, namely the obligation of those who study Torah, as of all Jews in general, to respect one another. Likewise, the incident of the sons of Zebedee is an instructive one within the overall social-pietistic teaching implied by both the stories and the sayings of Jesus.

Conferring Uniqueness on Disciples

All the Gospels acknowledge and emphasize the special role of Simon Peter among the disciples, and the close relation between the teacher and his prime disciple. The Christian tradition undoubtedly saw him as the leading disciple of Jesus and the initial leader of the community of the apostles (Acts 1:15; 2:14, 37; 3:12).

The Gospels ascribe to Jesus a special recognition of Peter from the beginning. In the section describing the appointment of the twelve apostles, the Gospel of Mark mentions three of the disciples to whom Jesus gave special names: “So he appointed the twelve: to Simon he gave the name Peter; then came the sons of Zebedee, James and his brother John, to whom he gave the name Boanerges, Sons of Thunder...” (Mk. 3:16–17). Luke mentions only Peter in this respect, who thereby receives a special emphasis enjoyed by none of the other disciples: “...from among them he chose twelve and named them apostles: Simon, to whom he gave the name Peter, and Andrew his brother...” (Lk. 6:13–14).

This can be compared with the practice of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai and other sages, who called their close students by names based upon allegory or personal traits.⁹ These names were meant to refer to a characteristic quality of that disciple's path in Torah.

Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai had five disciples, to whom he gave names. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus he called “a whitewashed pit which does not lose a drop, a tarred wineskin which preserves its wine.” Joshua ben Hananiah he called “the three-fold cord which is not easily broken.” R. Jose ha-Kohen he called “the pious one of the generation.” And Simeon ben

9. See Flusser, “The Peshet of Isaiah,” and the bibliography there.

Nathanael he called “an oasis in the desert which preserves its waters....”
(Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version A, ch. 14)¹⁰

The Gospel of Matthew gives the fullest account of the special name given to Simon.

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Mt. 16:17–19)¹¹

The highly elevated tone of this passage reflects the evangelist's sense of the unique task conferred upon Peter for the entire future Church. So indeed was Peter's role understood in subsequent generations. Nevertheless, in this very passage there are a number of elements also found in the circles of the sages and their disciples. The giving of the name Peter is followed by an explanation by Jesus of the meaning of that name — i.e., rock — which sounds like a paraphrase of a biblical verse, even if an exact correspondence cannot be found. It is reminiscent, for instance, of the situation of Moses when he sought to see God's glory. “Behold, there is a place by Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock...” (Ex. 33:21–22). The fact that “rock” (*tzur*) can also serve as a metaphor for God enabled Jewish homilists to sketch all sorts of sublime connections and to make daring exegeses concerning the task of Moses and his identification with God.¹² Likewise, it is after calling Simon Bar-Jona a “rock” that Jesus accords him sublime powers of sharing in, or even of directing, heavenly acts and world rulership. “Whatever you bind [forbid] on earth shall be bound in heaven....”

In the rabbinic world, too, starting from the earliest period, sages are reported to have applied verses from Scripture to their disciples. Following the

10. See also M. Higger ed., *Masekhet Derekh Eretz* (New York, 1935), p. 71, and *Masekhtot Ze'ivot* (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 75; Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version A, ch. 18; bGittin 67a. This tradition of “nicknames” goes beyond the framework of teacher and disciples alone, and can also be encountered in the relations of the sages to one another. Our concern here is somewhat different from this general tradition.

11. The very uniqueness of this passage among the Gospels arouses the suspicion that it is a literary reworking by the author. In Mt. 18:18, moreover, the author again repeats the second half of the saying, “whatever you bind on earth...,” in which the remarks are addressed to all the disciples. It may be that Matthew conflates the sayings in order to convey a special status to Peter. Compare Peter's query in Mt. 18:21–22, which does not exist at all in the other Gospels, and, on the other hand, the same subject without Peter in Lk. 17:4.

12. If we are correct in assuming that this verse underlies these midrashim, then Peter receives one of the titles of God — namely, Rock — while the community which learns from him and lives with him is compared to Moses, who stands upon the rock. One may conjecture the power of the special connection of the community, which sees itself as identified with Moses, the greatest of the prophets and the closest to God, “who is trusted throughout my household” (Num. 12:7). In “The Peshet of Isaiah,” p. 292, Flusser mentions a series of homilies that interpret “the rock” as the Patriarch Abraham.

story of the unique prayer uttered by Honi ha-Me'aggel, in which he seemingly coerced God to send rain to end a severe drought, the talmudic account concludes with the reaction of certain homilists:

What did the sages in the Chamber of Hewn Stone send to Honi ha-Ma'aggel? [The verse] "You will decree and it will be fulfilled, and light will shine upon your path" [Job 22:28]. "You will decree" — you decreed below and the Holy One, blessed be He, followed your word above.¹³ "And light will shine upon your path" — the generation which was in darkness, you enlightened with your prayer. "When others sank low, you said it is pride" [v. 29] — you uplifted a generation which was downcast with your prayer. "For He saves the humble" [ibid.] — you saved a generation which was bent over by sin with your prayer. "He will deliver the unclean" [v. 30] — a generation which was not clean, you delivered with your prayer. "We will be delivered through the cleanness of your hands" [ibid.] — you saved through the work of your clean hands. (bTa'anit 23a)

The original meaning of the passage in Job clearly refers to God Himself; it was an audacious homilist who applied it to a mere man, however great a sage Honi might have been. Moreover, in the first section of this homily the author explicitly states that his intention is to stress the identity between Honi ha-Me'aggel, his act and his prayer, and God, who answers and fulfills his request — or rather demand.¹⁴ This homily expresses a certain recognition of Honi's unique position within the circle of the sages, a recognition which comes from the leaders of Jerusalem, who shaped the interpretation of the Torah. All this although Honi's impudent prayer for rain had aroused the anger of Simeon ben Shattah (or Shetah), the main leader of the Sanhedrin.

Rabbi Akiva, too, was regarded with a mixture of unease and unique appreciation. There is no doubt that Akiva's uniqueness lay in his midrashic method. On more than one occasion, he aroused the ire of his fellow scholars for his unorthodox method of Torah exegesis.¹⁵ On the other hand, the sages also commented upon the beauty and daring of his exegetical method,¹⁶ as in the following parable ascribed to R. Simeon b. Menasia:

[R. Akiva's learning is comparable] to a stonemason who was sitting by the side of a mountain. They said to him: "What are you doing here?" He answered: "I wish to uproot it." They said to him: "Are you able to do such a thing?" He said: "Yes." He began to carve away small stones and throw them into the Jordan. He saw another one greater than that, he placed upon it a nail of iron and thrust it into the Jordan. He saw another one yet greater, he placed a nail underneath it and thrust it into the Jordan. He said: "Jordan, take this," [and to the stone he said:] "This is not

13. This section of the homily is very similar to the words of Peter to Jesus according to Matthew.

14. The type of sermon supposed to have been used by the men of the Chamber of Hewn Stone is similar to that used by the members of the Dead Sea Sect — the *pesher*. I wish to thank my teacher, Prof. David Flusser, for calling my attention to this source.

15. bHagigah 14a; cf. jYoma 39d and elsewhere.

16. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Schechter ed., p. 15; jYoma 39d; etc.

your place!" As is written: "He sets his hand against the flinty rock and overturns mountains by the roots" [Job 28:9]. R. Akiva thought within himself and said: "Why were this Alef and this Bet written? As is written: 'He carves out channels through rock; His eyes behold every precious thing' [v. 10]." R. Eliezer said to Akiva: "About you it is said: 'He pours light on secrets' [v. 11]." Things which were concealed and hidden from the eyes of human beings, R. Akiva brought to light. (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version B, ch. 12)¹⁷

R. Simeon b. Menasia's parable concerns Akiva's unique method, whereby he expounded fragments of letters, extracting the maximal exegesis from every jot and tittle of the text, so that in the end, so to speak, he uprooted the entire Torah from its place. Thus a famous aggadic story describes how even Moses himself no longer recognized the Torah as it was taught and expounded in the school of Akiva (bMenahot 99a). At the conclusion of the parable comes a kind of midrash on three verses in Job (28:9–11), of which the part on the last verse is said to stem from R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus — who was the teacher and master of Akiva. Here too, accordingly, the teacher of an outstanding disciple applied a particular scriptural verse to him, preaching a sermon of great power and no little exegetical daring. A verse which deals entirely with the activity of God was transformed into a graphic definition of the daring activity of a beloved student.

Yet another similar tradition, from approximately the same period and again in the name of the sages of the Chamber of Hewn Stone, concerns R. Hanina ben Dosa:

An incident concerning R. Hanina b. Dosa, who saw the people of his town carrying votive and freewill offerings up to Jerusalem. He said: "Everyone is carrying votive and freewill offerings up to Jerusalem, and I am not taking up a thing?" What did he do? He went to the wilderness [around] his town, where he saw a stone, and he lay down and dressed it and polished it. He said: "I take it upon myself to bring this up to Jerusalem." He sought to hire workers, and five people came to him. He asked them: "Will you take this stone up to Jerusalem for me?" They said to him: "Pay us five *selaim* and we will take it up to Jerusalem." He wished to pay them, but he could not find any money at the time, so they left it and went away. The Holy One, blessed be He, sent him five angels in the form of human beings. He asked them: "Will you take this stone up for me?" They said to him: "Give us five *selaim* and we will take your stone to Jerusalem, provided that you put your hands and fingers along together with ours." He placed his hand and fingers with theirs, and they

17. In Version A, ch. 6, this sermon is cited in the name of R. Tarfon, a colleague of R. Akiva, and includes mention of only one part of the midrash: "...Thus did R. Akiva do to R. Eliezer and R. Joshua. R. Tarfon said to R. Akiva: 'Of you the verse says, "He dams up the sources of the streams so that hidden things may be brought to light" [Job 28:11] — things hidden from human beings R. Akiva has brought to light.'"

Only the text in Version B is similar in literary structure to the homily of the men of the Chamber of Hewn Stone in the story of Honi. In both versions, the original text appears to be garbled. It may be that there is here a full exegesis of Job 28:9–11, which the preacher — perhaps R. Eliezer, who was R. Akiva's teacher — applied to R. Akiva and his work in studying Torah.

found themselves standing in Jerusalem. He wanted to pay them, and could not find them. He went into the Chamber of Hewn Stone and asked after them. They said to him: "It seems that ministering angels carried your stone up to Jerusalem." To him they applied the verse: "Have you seen a man who is quick in his work? — he shall stand before kings [*melakbim*]" [Prov. 22:29]; read there "before angels [*mal'akbim*]." (Ecclesiastes Rabbah, ch. 1)

Like Honi ha-Me'aggel, R. Hanina b. Dosa belonged to the circle of the *basidim*, a characteristic part of whose activity involved the miraculous events associated with them.¹⁸ Thus it was that angels helped him to carry his stone up to Jerusalem. When the men of the Chamber of Hewn Stone applied the verse from Proverbs to this unusual and miraculous event, they conferred a unique status upon this sage and his activity.

It seems that the passages from the Gospels cited earlier in this section may be understood in the same way. The teacher Jesus notes the talents of his disciples, and in a propitious time applies to them allusions from Bible and Midrash, typical of his activity as a sage and a leader in his community.

The statement in Matthew's Gospel, "whatever you bind [forbid] on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose [allow] on earth shall be loosed in heaven," must be seen within the same framework. From now on, Peter is given permission, and perhaps even the obligation, to lead the community and to make decisions — at times even important and unconventional decisions — in the spirit of what he has learned. Jesus' words imply a kind of authorization to act at difficult times, and with daring. These remarks seem to reflect a sublime consciousness of the obligation imposed upon a leader to reach decisions and to hope that his actions are also favorable and acceptable.

A similar consciousness of the implications of their halakhic activity is found among the sages. In the last days of the Second Temple, R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim explains:

A commandment [i.e., Lev. 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself — I am the Lord"] upon which the entire world depends, was uttered with an oath at Mount Sinai. If you hate your neighbor whose deeds are evil, like your deeds, "I am the Lord" — faithful to punish that same person. But if you love your neighbor whose deeds are proper, like your deeds, "I am the Lord" — faithful to have mercy on you¹⁹ and loving human beings. (Avot de-Rabbi Nathan, Version B, ch. 26)

18. See note 2.

19. In Version A, ch. 16: "Does it not say, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself — I am the Lord' [Lev. 19:18]? What is the reason? For I have created him, and if he does the deeds of your people, you love him. And if not, you do not love him. R. Simeon b. Eleazar said: 'This thing was said with a great oath, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself — I am the Lord," who created him. If you love him, I am faithful to reward you a goodly reward, and if not, I am [as] a judge to punish.'"

In this version, the central message found in the words of R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim is missing. A person is dependent upon what is decided in heaven, receiving a corresponding reward, while in the words of Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim the initiative is entirely in the hands of the human individual whose decision is awaited

In this rabbi's opinion, God's attitude toward the deeds of human beings — or in other words the reward or punishment that He metes out — is dictated, so to speak, by the considerations of Israel. Therefore, the very existence of the world depends upon human ways of thinking and the ability of society to determine whether to love or hate those who surround it. In the verse, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself — I am the Lord," R. Hanina Segan ha-Kohanim sees fundamental guidelines for how society is to weigh its response, and tells us how significant and fateful this reaction is for the life of the entire world — in heaven itself they await the human reaction. This is also the meaning of the above-mentioned sermon concerning Honi ha-Me'aggel (bTa'anit 23a).²⁰

It seems to me that this is likewise how we are to understand God's response to the incident of "the oven of Akhnai" (bBava Metzia 59a–b), which took place during the generation of Yavneh. R. Eliezer tried to legitimize the oven by performing miracles and even by getting confirmation through a heavenly voice. But the sages retorted that even such a confirmation is to be disqualified in halakhic arguments, since God Himself told Moses that the Torah "is not in heaven" (Deut 30:12). The admission of God at the end of the discussion — "My children have defeated me" — reflects this idea: the valid ruling of the Halakhah can find its definition only within the rabbinic house of study. The ruling that emerges from the discussion and decision of the majority of authoritative rabbis on earth is what also obligates the heavenly court, such that God Himself accepts whatever is "bound" and "loosed" by the authorized human court.

In a similar spirit, Rabbi Judah stated:

From whence do you know that God said to Moses: "I say to you a thing, and you answer me and I agree with you, so that Israel may say, 'Great is Moses that God agreed with him?'" As is said, "that they may also believe in you forever" [Ex. 19:9].²¹ (Mekhilta, sec. 45, Horowitz-Rabin ed., p. 210)

For R. Judah, Moses' responsibility as a leader of Israel obliged him on occasion even to contradict or oppose the words of God himself, such as when God proposed to destroy Israel after the incident of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:9–14). The greatness of Moses, and with him that of every other sage, lies in their ability to take this initiative and to decide on earth and in heaven. This is also precisely the obligation that Jesus, the teacher, placed upon his first and closest disciple, in the spirit of "Fear not, for God will be with you."

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in heaven. The reward is then the divine confirmation of and support for that decision.

20. See note 14.

21. Further on, Rabbi Judah the Prince disagrees with this sermon of R. Judah. At the same time, it would seem that there are not a few partners among the sages who share the feeling of high self-regard regarding their activity in the framework of halakhic and social action.