

NEW TESTAMENT AND JUDAISM OF THE NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION:

HILLEL'S SELF-AWARENESS AND JESUS

by

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*In memory of my dear friend and scholar,
Aryeh Toeg, who fell in the Yom Kippur War*

Even today there exists in New Testament scholarship a trend which considers all references to a high self-awareness of Jesus as secondary elements in the Gospels, contradicting Jesus's own understanding of who he was: "He was", in the words of Paul Winter, "a normal person – he was the norm of normality".¹ Not only does a careful analysis of the texts forbid this assumption, but in addition it is no longer possible nowadays, after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, to affirm that a high self-esteem, both with regard to one's personal and one's religious standing, did not exist in Judaism of the Second Temple period. We have not only learned about the Essene Teacher of Righteousness, but we can now also study the author of the Thanksgiving Scroll, a man who considered himself the mediator of divine mysteries. Thus the liberal conception of the absence of an elevated self-awareness in Jesus is today anyhow obsolete.

Additional evidence for the occurrence of an exalted self-awareness in the Second Temple period is to be found in some sayings of Hillel the Pharisee,² who died before Jesus was born. This is a surprising fact, as the Pharisees, the founders of rabbinic Judaism, were sometimes conceited as scholars, but we very seldom find that a Rabbi would imagine that he as a person had a special role to play in the meta-historical economy of the universe. Moreover, Hillel is known as an unequalled humble and meek teacher and man. But as we will see, Hillel's self-esteem was very high, so exceptionally high that in later rabbinical tradition it was often denied that he really spoke about himself in those exalted sayings, but it was assumed that

¹ Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, Berlin, 1961, p. 148.

² See: W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten* I, Strassburg, 1903 (reprint 1965), pp. 1-11; N. N. Glatzer, *Hillel the Elder*, Schocken Books, 1956; *Beit Shammai, Beit Hillel* – collected sayings, by I. Konovitz, Mosad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, 5725 (1965) (in Hebrew).

he was referring to God. This interpretation of some of Hillel's sayings in rabbinic literature was the reason why his special message of the almost cosmic role of the human personality had not been recognised in modern scholarship. We will try to rediscover Hillel's peculiar views about himself. This will have some consequences for the understanding of Jesus. It is well known that Jesus accepted various aspects of Hillel's moral theology. Thus it is more than probable that Jesus's exalted self-awareness was influenced by Hillel's views about himself.

It can be shown that Jesus knew at least one of such sayings of Hillel about his own person. Jesus said (Luke 11:20-23; cf. Matt. 12:28-30): "But if it is by the finger of God that I drive out the devils, then be sure the Kingdom of God has already come upon you. . . . He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters". The meaning of this saying is clear enough: a moment of "revival" had begun in Israel, and this revival is the realisation of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. But now this movement must be centred around Jesus's person: separate initiatives, independent of Jesus, would be not to gather but to scatter.

Others³ have already observed that the end of Jesus's saying is similar to Hillel's famous words which are preserved in numerous places in the Talmudic literature. In *Sifre Zutta*⁴ Hillel's parallel words from the first part of a longer passage read:

"'It is time to act for the Lord; they have broken thy law' (Ps. 119:126). You have to read: they have broken thy law – it is time to act for the Lord. And so says Hillel: 'In the time when men scatter, gather!⁵ when there is no demand, buy then! in the place where there are no men, there be⁶ a man!

The first of these three short phrases of Hillel (which possibly were all said on one occasion) occurs in other places in the rabbinical literature in an expanded form:⁷ "In the time when men gather, scatter; in the time when men scatter, gather". It is difficult to decide whether this larger form is also original, or whether it is secondary and came into existence because

³ Strack-Billabek I. 635-6.

⁴ *Sifre Zutta*, Pinchas, ed. H. S. Horovitz, Lipsiæ, 1917 (reprint: Jerusalem 1966). pp. 316-317.

⁵ *Sifre Zutta* reads here: "gather the foot". S. Liebermann (*Tosefta ki-fshutah, Order Zera'im*, Part I, New York, 5715 (1955). p. 124, note 93) has shown the word "the foot" is a scribal error. He proposes to read, "gather your words", but this is an unnecessary enlargement.

⁶ See the apparatus criticus to *Sifre Zutta*. The words "strive to be" are influenced by the parallel in *Pirke Avot* 2:6, where the saying is in Hebrew. In *Sifre Zutta* the saying (except the words "strive to be") is in Aramaic, a language often used by Hillel, who came from Babylonia.

⁷ E. g. *Tosefta Berakhot* 6:24.

of love for contrast and symmetry. The focus of Hillel's saying is the study of the (oral) law. Its background is the time of King Herod, when there was evidently a crisis in the study of the law ("they have broken thy law"). In this crisis, "it is time to act for the Lord". The law has become cheap, and this is the best occasion to "buy" it. "In the place where there are no men, there be a man!" And in the time when the law is being broken, "scattered", then "gather" it, i. e. collect the oral tradition of the law and develop it! Hillel said⁸, "He that increases not, decreases, and he that learns not is worthy of death". Thus the simple saying in *Sifre Zutta* is clear enough and according to its form it is parallel to Jesus's words, "Who does not gather with me, scatters". The expanded version of Hillel's saying is difficult to understand for it is not clear what the addition, "In the time when men gather, scatter" can possibly mean, as we can infer from Jesus's parallel saying that scattering most probably has a negative connotation. It therefore seems dubious that the larger form of the saying could be original.

Jesus apparently knew Hillel's saying and adapted it to his own situation. While Hillel had spoken about the gathering of the increasing bulk of oral tradition, Jesus evidently thought of the gathering of people. A second difference between the sayings of Jesus and Hillel is that while Hillel addresses himself to others, Jesus stresses the importance of his own task. But this difference is smaller than it seems at first glance, for in addition to sayings in which Hillel speaks in the imperative to a general "you", there are also sayings in which he speaks in the first person: e. g. "If I am not for myself, who is for me? and when I am for myself, what am I? and if not now, when? (*Avot* 1:14). This saying resembles Jesus's words (*Luke* 11:23; *Matt.* 12:30): "He who is not with me is against me".

The two most daring sayings were pronounced by Hillel during the Feast of Tabernacles:⁹

"To the place that my heart loves, there my feet lead me; if you will not come in my house, I will not come in your house, as it is said (*Ex.* 20:24): 'In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless'".

The saying is related to daily life: it begins with a proverb which says: I go to the place where I like to go. Then follows a rule of common social behaviour: I will visit your home only after you have visited me; and then he adds as scriptural support a word that is said by God!¹⁰ The

⁸ *Pirqa Avot* 1:13.

⁹ *Tosefta Sukkah* 4, 3; *b Sukkah* 53a; *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, ed. S. Schechter, p. 55; *Mekhilta*, ed. H. S. Horowitz.

¹⁰ S. Liebermann, *ad locum*, thinks that in this saying of Hillel the "I" does not refer to the sage himself but to God, but this is very unlikely in the light of Hillel's other sayings. In such an interpretation the saying would have no good sense. Moreover I have not found any saying in which a Jewish sage would speak in the name of God. My interpretation is hinted at by W. Bacher, o. c. p. 6 (note).

deeper meaning of Hillel's word is plain: I can freely act according to my inclination; if you are prepared to enter into my sphere, I will be prone to enter your sphere, but if you do not want to adapt yourself to me, I am not prepared to help you.

The other saying is even more paradoxical:

"If I am here, all is here; if I am not here, what is here?"¹¹ It resembles in its form and tendency the already quoted saying of Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who is for me" etc., but it expresses a more far-reaching idea: the individual, represented by Hillel himself, is, so to say, the whole universe. No wonder that in some versions of this saying biblical verses about God are quoted. It is even probable that Hillel, as in the other saying, has himself quoted biblical words of God. This does not mean, however, that in both of these sayings not Hillel but God is speaking. On the contrary, Hillel's self-awareness is so exalted that he could quote as biblical proof God's utterances!

This becomes clear from the following saying:

"My humiliation is my exaltation, my exaltation is my humiliation – it means 'Who sits exalted humbles himself to see' (Ps. 113: 5f.)."¹²

Though God's words about himself are quoted, it is impossible to assume that here Hillel does not speak about himself, but about God. There is a similar saying in the Epistle of James (4:10): "Humble yourselves before God and he will exalt you" (see also Matt. 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14). There is also an interesting parallel in the Essene Thanksgiving Scroll; "Thy rebuke of me hath turned into gladness and joy . . . and the scorn of mine adversaries was turned into a crown of glory, and my failure into everlasting might" (1QH IX, 23-5). Hillel's saying had a broader and deeper meaning: by humbling himself he is exalted and by his exaltation he becomes humble. In this saying, as well as in the previous ones, we see the very nature of Hillel's proverbial meekness. It is not a consequence of his weakness but of his strength. It is rooted in his free decision to be meek and in his exalted view of himself.

As we have seen, Hillel's paradigmatic sayings are either put in the second person so as to demand from others to act, or in the first person. In the latter sayings his own person is exemplary for all other people. In this way he shares the characteristic mistake of great men who are at the same time humble, in thinking that any human being is able to perform what he as a gifted genius can. The strong "existential" meaning of all these sayings is rooted not only in Hillel's strong and goodly personality but also in the special contemporaneous situation of religious crisis. History had

¹¹ b *Sukkah* 53a; *Avot de Rabbi Natan*, ed. S. Schechter, p. 55; y *Sukkah* 55b.

¹² Lev. Rabbah Cap. 1, ed. M. Margolis, Jerusalem, 1958, pp. 16-17. See W. Bacher, o. c., pp. 5-6 (notes).

put the right man in the right time. And thus he could successfully fulfil his own demand: "In a place where there are no men, there be no man!"

The fact that Hillel's proud sayings about himself are sometimes followed by quotations from the Bible in which God himself speaks has a special weight. It has to be understood as a theological justification of Hillel's high self-esteem. Since he speaks sometimes about himself in a way similar to that in which he addresses himself to others, there is no doubt that from the theological angle also he considered every person to have the same value, the same universal task and function. Hillel said: "If I am here, all is here; if I am not here, what is here?"¹³ Evidently, in his own opinion, this can be said by any person. And from connecting such sayings with biblical quotations in which God himself speaks, it follows that the sublime function of all human beings as individuals is founded upon the biblical assumption that every single individual is created in the image of God. Hillel once exemplified by a parable that to care for one's own body is a divine commandment: if Caesar is honoured when his statues are being washed in the parks and public places, how much more is the Creator honoured when man, who was created in the image of God, washes himself.¹⁴ The concept that man is godlike is a very important one in the doctrines of Hillel's followers, especially Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkay and Rabbi Akiva. This is also one of the roots of the "anthropocentric theocentrism" and the humanistic approach of the School of Hillel. This school became later on dominant in Judaism and its humanistic heritage is living until today. The idea that every single human being weighs up against the whole of mankind is the special Jewish contribution to humanism, though this deep respect for the individual is at times forgotten. The theological foundation of Hillel's sayings is the idea that every single individual fills the whole universe. Hillel could cherish his exalted self-awareness because it was in accordance with his humanistic theology.

It may be assumed that Hillel's high consciousness about himself had some influence on Jesus's personal experience. But there is a great difference between the two. Hillel's high self-awareness is limited to his person, but is paradigmatic for everyone. Jesus's consciousness of his exalted value – though, as in Hillel's case, connected with personal meekness, and though he was opposed to any "cult of personality" – was connected with the knowledge that his person was not interchangeable with any other man. As the Son, he considered himself to have a central task in the divine economy: "He who is not with me is against me, and who does not gather with me, scatters".

¹³ See note 11.

¹⁴ Lev. Rabbah, Cap. 34. See W. Bacher, o. c. , pp. 775 - 7.

The fact that some of Hillel's sayings in which he expresses sublime views about himself were followed by biblical quotations in which God himself speaks caused the erroneous understanding, as early as in ancient rabbinic sources, that the "I" of Hillel in these sayings was the divine "I". In this connection it is interesting to note that already in the New Testament some biblical verses about God were quoted as referring to Jesus of Nazareth (e. g. Phil. 2:10; cf. Is. 45:23). An exalted self-awareness thus caused in both cases a somewhat similar development, though Hillel, who wanted to express the sublime dignity of man, was never deified.

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