

BOOK DESCRIPTION

THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF RABBI AKIVA BEN YOSEF*

by

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Rabbi Akiva is outstanding among the Tanna'im for his many-sided activities in public life and for his system in halakhah and midrash, without his holding a well-defined office in the national leadership. Frequent references to his activities are found in Talmudic literature in halakhah and aggadah, in traditions and testimonies, and in the words of praise and admiration accorded him. Safrai presents in this book a selection of testimonies dealing with the person and work of Rabbi Akiva, weaving them together into a tapestry, thus enabling us to obtain a clear picture of his teachings, his views and works, and the admiration accorded him by the sages of his time and those of subsequent generations.

The greatest part of the book is devoted to those sources relating to Rabbi Akiva found in Talmudic literature including late midrashim, the *Hekhalot* and *Ma'asei Merkaba* writings, and the early liturgical poetry. The author has garnered from these sources those passages which deal with Rabbi Akiva, selecting and compressing them in three chapters under the headings: The sources for the life and work of Rabbi Akiva; Halakhah; and Aggadah. Within the framework of these chapters the author has arranged the sources in sub-sections containing material for the outlines of the person of Rabbi Akiva, his teachings and works, and the manner in which these have been regarded by the sages during the course of the centuries. The sources are quoted in their original form, with the exception of Aramaic texts, which have been translated into Hebrew. Comments have been added in footnotes, partly based on the words of exegetes, both early and modern, partly representing the author's own interpretations. The book opens with an exhaustive introduction dealing with the sources while at the same time analysing Rabbi Akiva's life, his beliefs and opinions, and his system of dealing with halakhah and midrash of the Written Law. The introduction's merit lies in its analysis of the sources with the aid of modern research, and it succeeds in clarifying their historical context.

As is customary in Talmudic literature, there are many stories about Rabbi Akiva which combine elements of truth and legend. In his introduction

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the author succeeds in separating the historical kernel from the legend, thus opening up before the reader a complete and historical picture of Rabbi Akiva's life. Safrai proves that the story of Rabbi Akiva's marriage to the daughter of Kalba Savu'a is legendary, whereas the traditions about Rabbi Akiva's being illiterate in his youth, and the emphasis on his humble descent, contain elements of historical truth.

Rabbi Akiva occupied a special place in the institutions of internal government. On the one hand, his right to succeed the *Nasi* (Patriarch), Raban Gamliel, upon the latter's dismissal, was forfeited because he did not possess the "ancestral merits" (*zekhut avot*); on the other hand, he supported the institution of *Nesiuth* out of a realisation of its merits for preserving the unity and uniqueness of the nation. It is to be assumed that precisely because of the special place which he occupied, Rabbi Akiva appears as a mediator and reconciler between the *Nesiuth* and the sages of the Sanhedrin who were in controversy with it, like Rabbi Joshua ben Hannania and Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, his point of departure being the preservation of the power of the *Nesiuth* even if right was on the side of its opponents in one or the other specific case.

Rabbi Akiva's part in the Bar-Kokhba revolt carries special importance. Safrai does not agree with those scholars who see a connection between Rabbi Akiva's frequent journeys abroad and the preparation for the Bar-Kokhba revolt. He proves that part of the journeys were made in the latter part of the last decade of the first century, thus excluding the possibility of their being associated with the revolt which broke out in 132. On the other hand, Safrai does see a connection between the activities of Rabbi Akiva's pupils and the revolt, particularly regarding the traditions dealing with the death of his pupils, who were most probably killed during the revolt while serving in Bar-Kokhba's army. Rabbi Akiva was the spiritual leader of the Bar-Kokhba revolt, regarding the latter as the Anointed King (Messiah). Rabbi Akiva's anticipation of redemption thus received its practical expression at the time of the Bar-Kokhba revolt, this probably being part of his total mystical-religious approach to the Torah and Judaism.

Part of the introduction is devoted to the beliefs and concepts of Rabbi Akiva. The author describes the most important directions taken by those beliefs and concepts, particularly emphasising devotion to God and love of man. These two elements are intertwined in Rabbi Akiva's saying: "Whatever the people approve – God approves; whatever the people don't approve – God doesn't approve." (Tosefta *Berakhot* iii, 4). Rabbi Akiva sees something of an identity of fate between Israel and its God, expressed in the view that wherever Israel is in exile, the Shekhina (the Divine Presence) is in exile with it. The deep attachment between Israel and its God receives, as it were, its literary expression in the manner in which Rabbi

Akiva interprets the Song of Songs as being an allegory of the relationship between the Shekhina and *Knesset Israel*.

Rabbi Akiva does not rest at the relationships of love among men, but extols the principle of equality among Jews. At the basis of this equality is the positive attitude of the sages of Javneh in general and Rabbi Akiva in particular to physical labour and the practising of a trade. At the time of Javneh the merits and the *mitzvah* of practising a trade is widely emphasised, opposing the contemporary Roman view of physical labour. Equality among men is not only expressed in Rabbi Akiva's philosophy, he also rules accordingly in setting a fixed price as compensation for shame caused, irrespective of the socio-economic status of the one incurring shame.

The other chapters of the introduction are devoted to Rabbi Akiva's system in halakhah and aggadah. Rabbi Akiva's part in halakhah is very great and he found new directions in all its aspects. Many of his innovations are fundamental, and a large proportion of them pertain to rules regulating the daily life of every Jew. Rabbi Akiva belongs to the Beit Hillel school and he consequently usually tends to leniency; however, he is strict in laws pertaining to financial dealings between man and man in general and to plunder in particular. This approach is of course on a par with his socio-moral view of a man's dignity and his view of equality among men.

Rabbi Akiva's part is not only great in the creation and development of halakhah; his contribution to the compilation of the Mishnah is decisive, and a large part of it is "mishnah according to Rabbi Akiva". His influence on its compilation is greater than that of any of his contemporaries; complete compendia of *mishnaot* which are included there were compiled in Rabbi Akiva's House of Study (*Beit Midrash*). Rabbi Akiva was accorded words of praise for his part in the compilation of the Mishnah by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi who finished the compilation and closed it: "He called Rabbi Akiva a walking encyclopedia. Rabbi Akiva is like the labourer who picked up his basket and went outside. If he found wheat, he put it in his basket; if he found barley, he did likewise; if he found buck-wheat, he did likewise; lentils, likewise. Upon entering his house, he separated them, the wheat from the barley, from the beans, from the lentils. So did Rabbi Akiva, and he sorted out the whole Torah like coins." (*Avot de-R. Nathan*, Version A, xviii, ed. Schechter, p. 67.)

Rabbi Akiva's time was an age of blooming of the midrash, and here too he played a decisive role. He developed a system and a school of his own in the exegesis of the Torah, and some of the compendia of the Tannaite midrashim in our possession are his work.

Safrai especially focuses on the differences between Rabbi Akiva's school and the school of Rabbi Ishmael, thus bringing out the uniqueness of the former. Rabbi Akiva paid great attention to any redundancies in the Torah and on them he based his exegeses, while his opponent argued that

the Torah followed normal human usage; Rabbi Akiva sees in every sentence of the Torah a duty and commandment, while Rabbi Ishmael interprets many things as being optional.

Rabbi Akiva's accuracies and niceties in Torah exegesis, and his emphasis on every letter and symbol are part of his view that the Torah is divine not only in its contents but in its writing as well. It may be said that Rabbi Akiva was generally given to a religious-mystical view of the perfection of the Bible and gave expression to this view in his system of exegesis. In questions pertaining to the canonisation of the sacred books this view also played its role with Rabbi Akiva emphasising that the Scroll of Esther was written with divine inspiration and the Song of Songs was of supreme sanctity.

Rabbi Akiva was also renowned, in his use of legends, as a speaker whose sermons were full of vitality and drama, studded with symbols, allusions, and allegories. Rabbi Akiva sometimes incurred criticism from the sages of his time for his far-fetched exegeses, and the personification of the Deity in them.

Rabbi Akiva, who on the one hand, in the expounding of the laws, went far beyond the mere text of the Written Law, on the other hand firmly established the position and authority of the Oral Law by his claim that it is an integral part of the Written Law and of equal value to it.

Rabbi Akiva's personality, his activities in public life, his work in halakhah and midrash, his sermons and his tragic end, all created for him a central place among the sages of his day and a deep and vast influence for all time. When the sages tried to evaluate the person of Rabbi Akiva, their minds did not rest until they proclaimed that he would have been worthy of receiving the Torah himself (b *Menachot* 29, b).

Described by Dr. Aharon Oppenheimer

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