

Three Notes on Relations Between Early Rabbinic and Early Christian Sources

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In his *Midrash Reader* Jacob Neusner has provided a convenient collection and arrangement of some of the more significant Rabbinic materials written between 200 and 600 A.D.¹ He has also stratified these sources chronologically by dating the Mishnah to ca. 200, the Tosefta to ca. 300, the Talmud from Israel to 400, and the Babylonian Talmud to ca. 600 (10). Of the three sources utilized below, two come from the earliest of these four strata and the third comes from the third stratum. Neusner discusses briefly the relation between Jewish and Christian sources of revelation and teaching (2-3), and it is only natural that these two sources occasionally touch upon the same or related topics. Three of these overlapping areas have been selected for a brief discussion here.

I. Mekhilta attributed to R. Ishmael 53, Bahodesh 7, and I Cor 16:2

I Corinthians 16:2 gives the instruction of Paul to the Corinthian church in regard to the offering to be saved up for him to take to Jerusalem, “On the first day of every week each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come” (RSV). This text has been used in some circles to indicate that the first day of the week or Sunday was observed by Corinthian Christians as a holy day. On the contrary, the text actually says the opposite. The offering was to be saved up at home and not brought to a common church meeting.

A similar idea, that of saving something up for Sabbath, is expressed in the Mekhilta attributed to R. Ishmael 53. It is quoted here according to Neusner’s translation and arrangement (63):

7. A. Eleazar b. Hananiah b. Hezekiah b. Garon says, ‘Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.’

¹ Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990

SHEA: EARLY RABBINIC AND EARLY CHRISTIAN SOURCES

B. 'You should remember it from Sunday, so that if something nice comes to hand, you should set it aside for the sake of the Sabbath.'

The idea of saving something up or laying it aside for the Sabbath here in this Rabbinic source begins on Sunday, the first day of the week, the first day after the Sabbath. Paul urges a similar type of activity on or from the first day of the week. His purpose for this practice was extended, however, not only to the next Sabbath, but starting over again then after that Sabbath to make up the collection for the saints in Jerusalem that he was to collect in Corinth. In spite of this more extended goal, there still appears to be a similarity of practice involved here.

Rabbis early in this era attempted to collect and systematically arrange materials developed from Scripture. The earliest sources setting forth these presentations is the work cited above. Neusner calls it "the first scriptural encyclopedia of Judaism" (49). The rabbis mentioned by name in this document belong to the period of the Mishnah, thus this source is dated to the earliest period of the four mentioned above, ca. 200. That makes the statement of this idea here less than a century and a half later than Paul's expression of a similar idea.

II. Mekhilta attributed to R. Ishmael 53, Bahodesh 7, and numbering the days of the week according to the Sabbath

The resurrection narratives of the gospels refer to the Sunday upon which Christ rose from the dead as the first day of the week or *sabbaton*. In this case the word Sabbath in the genitive plural stands for the word "week." This practice of numbering the days of the week according to the Sabbath continued among the early church fathers, as is illustrated by the Didache and other early Christian sources (TDNT 7:32).

A prominent Christian radio broadcaster has advocated on the basis of this use that the Resurrection Sunday should be identified as the "first of the (new) Sabbaths" in Matt 28:1. Thus, in his view, Sunday was the first of the new Sabbaths, and Sunday thereby took the place of the seventh day Sabbath.

That this is an incorrect interpretation of the grammar involved is already evident from the early Christian sources referred to above. In addition, it is interesting to see that the rabbis of the period ca. 200 continued to advocate the numbering of the days according to the Sabbath. The source for this is the same Mekhilta cited above, in the passage which follows immediately after the passage in the preceding quotation (Ibid.):

7. C. R. Isaac says, 'You should not count the days of the week the way others do, but rather, you should count for the sake of the Sabbath [the first day, the second day, upward to the seventh day which is the Sabbath].'

This is parallel to the practice cited above from the New Testament, and it is of interest to see that it was still advocated in Rabbinic sources a century and a

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

half after its use in the New Testament. Contemporary Christian sources from the second and third centuries indicate that the practice continued there also.

III. The Genesis Rabbah and Daniel 7

The writers of the period of the Mishnah do not appear to have had much interest in prophecy *per se*. On the other hand, they did have an interest in history in Scripture as a type or prophecy of the history of Israel. Thus they found the later history of Israel embedded in the stories of Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the book of Genesis. The stories about these patriarchs provided pre-figurations of what was to happen to later Israel. This type of interpretation does not appear in the earlier interpretations of the Mishnah. It arose especially in the fourth century to meet the crisis posed by the legalization of Christianity by Constantine. This is the period from which the Genesis Rabbah comes, and it adopted the methodology of seeing past history as future events to meet the crisis of the day. In this way the sages developed the four kingdoms of Daniel 7 from Gen 15 in Genesis Rabbah 44 (Ibid., 88-89)

4. A. [‘And it came to pass, as the sun was going down] lo, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him’ (Gen 15:12):

B. ‘. . . lo, a dread’ refers to Babylonia, as it is written, ‘Then was Nebuchadnezzar filled with fury’ (Gen 3:19).

C. ‘and darkness’ refers to Media, which darkened the eyes of Israel by make it necessary for the Israelites to fast and conduct public mourning.

D. great. . .’ refers to Greece.

E. R. Simon said, ‘the kingdom of Greece set up one hundred and twenty commanders, one hundred and twenty hyparchs, and one hundred and twenty generals.’

F. Rabbis said, ‘it was sixty of each, as it is written, “Serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions” (Gen 8:15). Just as the scorpion produces sixty eggs at a time, so the kingdom of Greece set up sixty at a time.’

G. ‘. . . fell upon him. . .’ refers to Edom, as it is written, ‘The earth quakes at the noise of their fall’ (Jer 49:21).

H. Some reverse matters:

I. ‘. . . fell upon him. . .’ refers to Babylonia, since it is written, “Fallen, fallen is Babylonia” (Isa 21:9).

J. ‘. . . great. . .’ refers to Media, in line with this verse, ‘King Ahasuerus did make great’ (Esther 3:1).

K. ‘and darkness’ refers to Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel by its harsh decrees.

L. ‘. . . lo, a dread. . .’ refers to Edom, as it is written, “After this I saw . . . a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible” (Dan 7:7).

It has long been known that the Rabbis used Edom as a code name by which to refer to Rome, the fourth beast and the fourth kingdom referred to above. What Neusner has supplied here is an interesting rationale for this use. He locates this development in the fourth century, when the legalization of

SHEA: EARLY RABBINIC AND EARLY CHRISTIAN SOURCES

Christianity posed an additional problem for the rabbis. Previously Christianity had only been a theological problem, but now it became a political problem:

True, their reading makes no explicit reference to what, if anything had changed in the age of Constantine, but we do find repeated references to the four kingdoms, Babylonia, Media, Greece, Rome—and beyond the fourth will come Israel, the fifth and last. So the sages' message, in their theology of history, was that the present anguish prefigured the coming vindication of God's people. (75)

Putting the crisis of this time in more specific terms, Neusner observes,

To define the terms of the crisis that defined the task of Midrash as prophecy is simple. Christians saw Israel as God's people rejected by God for rejecting the Christ. Israel saw Christians, now embodied in Rome, as Ishmael, Esau, Edom: the brother and the enemy. The political revolution marked by Constantine's conversion not only forced the two parties to discuss a single agendum and defined the terms in which each would take up that agendum. It also made each party investigate the entire past in making sense of the unprecedented and uncertain present. When emperors convert and governments shift allegiance, the world shakes underfoot. (72)

In terms of the specific passage in Genesis Rabbah quoted above, Neusner notes the interpretation that,

The fourth kingdom is part of that plan, which we can discover by carefully studying Abraham's life and God's word to him. What of Rome in particular? Edom, Ishmael, and Esau all stand for Rome, perceived as a special problem, an enemy who is also a brother. In calling now Christian Rome brother, sages conceded the Christian claim to share in the patrimony of Israel. For example, Ishmael, standing for Christian Rome, claims God's blessing, but Isaac gets it, as Jacob will take it from Esau. (89)

Neusner dates the closure of Genesis Rabbath to "some time after 400" (74). From the same period and place the main witness we have to the four kingdom sequence of Daniel as Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome in Christian sources is Jerome. He wrote his commentary on Daniel in the fifth century while living in Bethlehem, making his Vulgate translation. While he utilized the same historical sequence the rabbis used, his personal concern carried that interpretation one step further. As he looked out upon the Barbarian invasions that were leading to the breakup of Rome, he observed that the prophecy of Dan 2 was marching forward from the legs of iron to the feet of iron mixed with clay.²

While both Jerome and the rabbis used the same historical sequence, their concerns lay in different areas. The concern of the rabbis was the Christianiza-

² Jerome's *Commentary on Daniel*, tr. G. L. Archer [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958], 32

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

tion of the empire, while that of Jerome was the de-Christianization of the empire.

Conclusion

From time to time early Rabbinic and early Christian sources touch upon the same or similar subjects. Selections from Jacob Neusner's *Midrash Reader* have provided three examples of this:

1. The idea of laying by in store for Sabbath or for a coming event as measured from Sunday onwards is common to Paul and a Rabbinic source from ca. 200.

2. The same Rabbinic source identifies the practice of numbering the days of the week according to the Sabbath in a way that parallels the practice of the New Testament.

3. A later source, from ca. 400, identifies the four kingdom sequence of Daniel as Babylon, Media, Greece, and Edom. In this sequence the name of Edom stands for Rome. Edom was chosen for this identification in part because of the problem for Judaism created by the conversion of Constantine and the legalization of Christianity. Like Jacob and Esau, who founded Edom, one who had once been a brother was now an enemy. The Christian father Jerome used the same four kingdom sequence, but went on to note the breakup of the fourth kingdom with the Barbarian invasions.

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