

THE SAGES OF GALILEE

It was 135 CE in the Land of Israel. The Temple had been destroyed, the revolt against Rome had failed, and now fear of Roman vengeance drove most Jews out of Judea. They made their way northward, their Sages among them, and settled in Galilee and nearby, a region that Jews shared with Samaritans, Pagans, and a small but increasing number of Christians.¹

All Galilean communities of the time experienced the pressure of scarce resources. Rabbi Levi, a sage of the 200s, is said to have commented that the people “do not have enough for their necessities, and . . . they are worn out with the oppression. They want to hear only words of blessing and of comfort” (*Songs Rabbah* 2:5:1). “Not enough” refers to poor economic conditions. “Oppression” refers primarily to heavy taxation that the Romans levied on the region and imperial edicts, unevenly applied in the Empire, that attempted to restrict the activities of all but the official polytheistic religion of Rome. Some members of the community sought out the Sages for “words of blessing and comfort” that would assure them of God’s ongoing loyalty to Israel in these times when all the signs seemed to call it into question.

During the 300s, the economic decline worsened. In addition, Emperor Constantine’s patronage of Christianity empowered and emboldened the Church, which undertook an aggressive program of settling Christians and building churches and monasteries throughout the Land of Israel. The Church also adopted an increasingly aggressive stance toward non-Christians. In 381 CE,

¹ Jews had lived in the area for over 1,500 years. The Samaritans were an ethno-religious group who had lived in the North since at least the 500’s BCE. Pagans had lived in Galilee since well before Israel’s entrance into the Land circa 1,500 BCE.

Emperor Theodosius 1 officially adopted Christianity as the imperial religion and ended official support for all other creeds and cults. Meanwhile, the Jewish community was further destabilized by the weakening of the office of the Patriarch, the Jewish community's official leader and its liaison with Rome. The Patriarchate was terminated by the Empire in the early 400s, leaving the community without an official representative in the face of legislation that sought to undermine all non-Christian communities in the Empire.

During the 400s, the Empire continued to decline, breaking up permanently into East and West. The capital of the eastern part of the Empire was Byzantium (later renamed Constantinople) and became known as the Byzantine Empire. Its state religion was Christianity and Greek replaced the Latin of Rome as the official language. In the Byzantine Empire, the legal status of the Jews and Jewish practices fluctuated over time, depending on the desire and ability of the state to exercise control and the Church's desire to maintain Jews as a living testimony of their failure and the triumph of Christianity. Even so, Jews were not treated as harshly as Samaritans and Pagans.

At the beginning of the 400s, Jews were the largest of the Galilean communities, though probably not a majority. As the century wore on, conversions and Christian immigration to Galilee made Christians the largest community in the region. In the eyes of the Sages, Christianity was not simply the official religion, but an expression of Imperial Roman, then Byzantine, power. While the Jewish community was willing to endure Imperial oppression, the Samaritans revolted in 529 CE and were crushed by Byzantine forces, leading to the long decline of the Samaritan community.

The period ended with the beginning of the Muslim invasion in 634. Even then, the ongoing Jewish literary and liturgical output

and creativity attests to the continued vitality of the Jewish community.²

Complex, Common Judaism

During these centuries, the Jewish community in Galilee practiced what Stuart S. Miller termed “complex, common Judaism.”³ This was a body of practices and beliefs that were derived largely from the Torah, but mingled with ethnic and local customs and rabbinic traditions. This Judaism was “common” because it included a set of virtually universal practices such as male circumcision, avoiding forbidden foods, keeping Shabbat and the major festivals, and much of the synagogue liturgy. It was “complex” because it included many elements that were not practiced uniformly by Jews everywhere, but varied from one group or local community to another. An example of this is found in “differences in the language, art forms, and building plans that existed among the synagogues in late antiquity.”⁴

When the Mishnah, the foundational legal work of all subsequent Judaism, was completed circa 225 CE, there existed a significant gap between the Sages’ and the community’s practice of complex, common Judaism. The Mishnah’s perspective is expressed in a statement attributed to first century sage Dosa ben Harkinos, who warned that attending synagogues of the common

² David Goodblatt, “The Political and Social History of the Jewish Community in the Land of Israel, C. 235-636,” Steven T. Katz, *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume IV: The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 404-430.

³ Stuart S. Miller, *Sages and Commoners in Late Antique Erez Israel*. (Tübingen: Mohr, 2006), 21-28.

⁴ Lee I. Levine, “The Sages and the Synagogue in Late Antiquity,” Lee I. Levine, ed., *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 222.

people would “drive a man from the world” (*Mishnah Pirkei Avot* 3.10); that is, it would cause him to lose his proper orientation to the Torah. Clearly, the Sages were not in charge of the synagogues of the common people. As we will see, the sense of distance between the Sages’ circles and the community slowly decreased. By the time of the Muslim invasion, the Jewish community was essentially rabbinic in its practices.

The Synagogue and the Beit Midrash

Many Galilean Jewish communities had two institutions: the synagogue and the Beit Midrash. The synagogue was a place where the community of each city, village, or neighborhood prayed, heard the Scriptures read and explained, and met for other community purposes. The Beit Midrash was, as its name indicates, “a House of Study” for the Sages and their circles. The two institutions appear in a midrash attributed to Rabbi Isaac, a Galilean sage of the late 200s.

My beloved is like a gazelle (Song 2:9). Just as a gazelle leaps from mountain to mountain, from valley to valley, from tree to tree, from thicket to thicket, and from fence to fence, so the Holy One, blessed be He, leaps from one synagogue to another, from one Beit Midrash to another. And why all this? So as to bless Israel. (*Song Rabbah* 2.9.2)

The Holy One visits the Sages and their disciples in one Beit Midrash after another and the gathered community in one synagogue after another in order to bless both groups, despite their divergent practice of “complex, common Judaism. This midrash implicitly recognizes the unique function and legitimacy of each institution.

The Synagogue

The synagogue served as the primary place of the community's religious and cultural formation. Galilean synagogues functioned under lay leadership and without any central authority, just as synagogues in the Land of Israel had done even in Second Temple times. As Lee I. Levine wrote,

the synagogue was first and foremost an institution of the local community. . . . The synagogue always retained its indigenous roots, thereby reflecting its own particular needs, desires, and proclivities. The rabbis were but one of a number of elements of Jewish society of late antiquity which had a hand in shaping the course and destiny of this central Jewish communal institution.”⁵

After childhood, during which boys received instruction in the Torah (and, to a lesser extent, the Prophets and the Writings), most members of the community received further knowledge of the Tanakh in the synagogue. The Torah (the first five books of the Tanakh) was divided into nearly 150 portions that were read over approximately a three year period. Each weekly reading was accompanied by a selection taken from the Prophets. In addition, certain books were read in connection with calendar events; for example, the book of Ruth was read in connection with the festival of Shavuot (Pentecost) and the Song of Songs with Pesach. The most frequent exposure to biblical passages came in the context of the liturgy, when portions of the Tanakh, taken especially from the Torah and the Psalms, were read daily or weekly. However, parts of some biblical books and the whole of others were not included in any of these public readings.

During the era of the Sages of Galilee, the Tanakh was still transmitted in the form of scrolls that were very expensive to

⁵ Ibid.

produce. Therefore, they were owned almost exclusively by the wealthy, the community of scholars in the Beit Midrash, and the synagogues. Few Jews who were not in the Sages' social network were able to engage in in-depth study of the Tanakh.

The synagogue *drashah* (sermon) was normally delivered by laymen (often wealthy Jews who had greater access to the Tanakh), invited rabbis, or visiting guests.⁶ Although there must have been some inconsistency between the viewpoints expressed by these individuals, they were all apparently acceptable if they fell within the boundaries of complex, common Judaism.

In the 600s, there arose a line of liturgical poets who produced *piyutim*, poems for use in synagogue liturgy. The poets' copious references to Midrash show that they had almost certainly spent time in the Sages' circles. Even at this late date, many of their poems express ongoing feelings of desolation over the destruction of the Temple and longing for God's intervention to restore it.⁷

The Beit Midrash and the Sages

The second common institution in the Galilean Jewish community was the Beit Midrash, a small structure or a space in a Sages' home that was dedicated to study.⁸ There the Sages and

⁶ The custom of inviting visitors to speak in the synagogue is witnessed in the first century, when Paul and his party *came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on"* (Acts 13:14-15). Although this event did not take place in the Land of Israel, it represents the general synagogue custom of the time.

⁷ Oded Irshai, "Confronting a Christian Empire: Jewish Culture in the World of Byzantium" in David Biale, ed. *Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 198.

⁸ See Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, "Social and Institutional Settings of Rabbinic Literature" in Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, Martin S. Jaffee, eds. *The*

their disciples studied and prayed. The Beit Midrash was the primary place of religious and cultural formation for the Sages and their circles, which included their disciples, extended families, and others who followed the Sages less closely.

In the wake of the destruction of the Temple and the failed revolt against Rome, the Sages displayed great resolve and confidence that God had not abandoned his people. Like other Jews, the Sages worked long hours to put bread on the table. They were mostly farmers, shopkeepers, and merchants. The Sages' circles consisted of the Sages, their disciples, extended families, and others who followed the Sages less closely.

The Sages of the region related to one another in various ways; therefore their circles became a loose social network.⁹ This was the Galilean rabbinic movement, a sub-culture of the broader Jewish community. The sub-culture was characterized by a high priority placed on Torah study, the development and practice of halakhic standards, and a body of biblical interpretation, theology, ethics, and comfort expressed in Midrash.

The scribes in the Sages' network taught young boys the Tanakh, while Mishnah teachers instructed older boys. Some boys from outside the rabbinic sub-culture also studied at these small schools. Students who were particularly adept would be taken under the wings of a sage who mentored them in his discipleship circle. Some of these disciples eventually became Sages in their own right.

Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58-74.

⁹ The network was concentrated in Galilee and nearby. For an in-depth treatment of the network's social structure, see Catherine Hezser, *Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine.* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1997).

The Sages studied the Tanakh closely to learn precisely how God had related to Israel in past cycles of sin, repentance, and restoration. They sifted every passage, sentence, phrase, and word to extract their meanings and determine their significance for themselves and for Israel as a whole. Convinced that the Tanakh is a coherent whole in which every part is connected to every other part, they engaged in a massive project of identifying these connections and explaining their theological significance. Many of these explanations come down to us in the thousands of midrashim (the plural of “midrash”) in the great Midrash collections edited between the fifth and seventh century C.E. At the same time, the Sages were sensitive to the spiritual and social realities of the community, so they designed Midrash to be relevant to all members of the community, Sages and common Jews alike.

The Beit Midrash curriculum included the Tanakh, written and oral halakhic traditions, and Midrash.¹⁰ All of this came under the rubric of “Torah study,” which consisted of research, discussion, and debate among the Sages. On certain occasions, the Sages’ extended families and other interested members of the community gathered outdoors to be taught.

According to Levine, the Sages reached their numerical high point of about 135 during the late 200s. In most generations of the 200s and 300s, they numbered four or five dozen.¹¹ Yet, even though their numbers were small, their influence in the wider community grew over time, arising from their role as informal judges, occasional teaching in the synagogue, their well-attended open-air teaching, and the influence of their social network on the community.

¹⁰ *Leviticus Rabbah* 3:7; *Song Rabbah* 1:5:1

¹¹ Lee I. Levine, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1989), 66-69.

For most of this period, the larger community continued to practice versions of complex, common Judaism. Rabbinic writing record that although some or most Jews kept the basic tithing and purity laws that were known to them, they could not be relied on to keep them according to the Sages' standards. This made certain kinds of commercial transactions difficult or impossible for the Sages to engage in with the wider community. Although the Sages' attitude toward the synagogue was generally positive, they clearly disapproved of some synagogue practices,¹² showing us again that the community, not the Sages, had the final say about synagogue practice.

By the later 200s, a change of the Sages' attitude toward the wider community was beginning to take place. According to Rachel Anisfeld, there took place "a fundamental shift in the nature of the rabbinic movement . . . toward a greater interest and involvement in the larger Jewish community."¹³ The Sages and the community both felt the loss of the Temple deeply and both suffered from the economic and other difficulties of the times. The Sages searched the Tanakh in order to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of God's relationship with Israel, and so they were prepared to provide members of the community with the "words of blessing and comfort" that they requested. This shift is reflected in many midrashim ascribed to Sages who lived in the late 200s and the 300s, which portray God as One who is near to the common people and empathizes with their concerns. The insular rabbinic movement also became more involved in wider community affairs, informally settling civil disputes,

¹² Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 472-476.

¹³ Rachel A. Anisfeld, *Sustain Me With Raisin Cakes: Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Judaism*. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 148. Also see Anisfeld 147-162 and Levine, "The Sages and the Synagogue in Late Antiquity," 201-222.

teaching the young, and preaching more frequently in the synagogue. Nevertheless, the Sages did not become synagogue leaders, but kept to their role as Torah scholars centered in the Beit Midrash.

An anonymous midrash, dated no later than the 400s, expresses the Sages' view of the Jewish community as a whole in terms of the four species that are waved before God on the festival of Sukkot.

And you shall take on the first day the fruit the fruit of a beautiful tree, palm fronds, and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Eternal One, your God, for seven days (Lev 23:40).

Another comment: *The fruit of a beautiful tree* – these are Israel. Just as this etrog has nourishment and fragrance, likewise Israel—there are people among them who are masters of Torah learning and good deeds.

Palm fronds—these are Israel. Just as this palm-tree has nourishment but not fragrance, so Israel—there are people among them who are masters of Torah learning but not good deeds.

And boughs of leafy trees —these are Israel. Just as the myrtle has fragrance but no nourishment, so Israel—there are people among them who possess good deeds but do not have Torah learning among them.

And willows of the brook—these are Israel. Just as the willow has no taste and no fragrance, so Israel—there are people among them who are not masters of Torah learning or good deeds.

What does the Holy One, blessed be He, do to them? To destroy them is impossible. “But,” says the Holy One, blessed be He, “Let them all be made one bundle [so that] they atone for one another.” Therefore Moses exhorts Israel and says to them, *And you shall take [on the first day the fruit . . .]* (Pesikta DeRav Kahana 27:9).

This midrash recognizes the existence of four types of Jews in the community, two of which had not mastered Torah and, by implication, did not closely follow the halakhah of the Sages. Yet, despite the midrash's implicit emphasis on Torah learning and good deeds, it expresses a radical inclusion of Jews who possess neither.

For the Sages of Galilee, the community consisted of different kinds of Jews who are all bound together by God.¹⁴ When the four groups are bundled together, they atone for one another. Even Jews who do not possess either Torah learning or good deeds contribute to the community in matters of farming, commerce, prayer, and other participation in Jewish community life. The midrash suggests that the Sages did view themselves as self-sufficient; they were an integral part of the community. The community does not have to consist only of rabbinic Jews.

It is not known whether the community actually functioned with this level of unity, but the midrash shows that the Sages envisioned a diverse and interdependent community. The Sages' changing views of the community must have filtered out through their network and been evident in their social interactions with other Jews and on the occasions when they were invited to preach in the synagogue or taught in the open air.

At the same time, the entire body of halakhic and midrashic writings universally depict the Sages as essential to the ongoing life of Israel. Only the Sages could establish a halakhic way of life in the framework of a living relationship with God. Therefore, the Sages received, developed, and transmitted halakhic and midrashic traditions and worked with their families, disciples, social network, and (when possible) the wider community “to shape character and

¹⁴ For a comparison of Galilean and Babylonian rabbinic attitudes toward common Jews, see Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *The Culture of the Babylonian Talmud* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 123-142

inculcate values”¹⁵ that have characterized Judaism to this day. The Sages of Galilee emphasized Midrash as an essential way to bring others into the inner world of biblical texts with the goal of community transformation.

Because most of the midrashim that have come down to us are very brief—most of them take a few minutes or less to read aloud—it is virtually certain that the written versions were accompanied by oral traditions that explained them more fully. For example, the Sages’ biblical quotations are usually not proof texts but point to the larger biblical context of the quoted material.¹⁶

Although common, complex Judaism could have carried on for some time without the Sages, it is far from certain that it would have sustained itself permanently in the face of the many spiritual, economic, and political challenges that lay ahead. As it happened, the heritage that the Sages of Galilee bequeathed to us is essential to Judaism as we know it.

¹⁵ Michael Fishbane, “Anthological Midrash and Cultural Paidea: The Case of *Songs Rabba* 1.2,” Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, Eds. *Textual Reasonings: Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 33.

¹⁶ In the Sages’ day (as in the days of Yeshua and the apostles), the Tanakh had not yet been divided into commonly accepted chapter and verse divisions. These were normalized until the sixteenth century in the Christian world and apparently later among Jews. Therefore, in order to refer to passages, the Sages (like their predecessors) would quote the first or most important words of the passage. Thus, *the Sages used quotations as citations*. In other words, *the Sages frequently used quotations as citations*. The Sages thought in terms of the passages they cite, not merely in terms of the words they quote from these passages.

Yet the Sages, like Yeshua and the apostles, also used Tanakh quotations to support or illustrate a line of thought. Determining if a quotation refers to a passage, and identifying the boundaries of cited passage, is a learned art.