U

Statement by Referee of Senior Thesis

The Senior dissertation entitled:

"R. Johanan B. Nappaha, The Aggadist"

written by Harold D. Hahn
(name of student)

1) may (with revisions) be considered for publication: ( )

cannot be considered for publication: ( )

2) may, on request, be loaned by the Library: (X)

may not be loaned by the Library: ( )

(signature of referee)

Israel Bettan
(referee)

Mar. 17, 1955
(date)

R. JOHANAN B. NAPPAHA, THE AGGADIST

by

HAROLD D. HAHN

Submitted in partial fulfillment
for the Master of Hebrew Letters
Degree and Ordination.

Hebrew Union College-
Jewish Institute of Religion
1955

Referee: Dr. Israel Bettan

ABSTRACT

R. Johanan b. Nappaha was one of the outstanding figures of the early Amoraic period. He was known as a master of homiletical literature and a creative teacher of the rabbinic tradition. It was from his academy in Tiberias that work was first begun on the Palestinian Talmud and on the Midrash to Psalms. His own legal decisions and his homiletic interpretations of Scripture quickened the religious conscience and heightened the spiritual capabilities of his own generation; his thinking fertilized the mind of succeeding ages.

His life and thought is explored in this thesis. It comprises an introduction to the task the writer has undertaken; a chapter on Johanan's life against the period in which he lived; another chapter explores his exegetical method - which was varied and adroit; the third chapter highlights his theological conceptions; and the final chapter discusses his ethical admonitions. The thesis concludes with some suggestions as to Johanan's relevance for our own age.

The author has attempted to utilize all sources in a critical fashion; the basic ideas were culled from the Talmudim and Midrashim.

R. JOHANAN B. NAPPAHA, THE AGGADIST

ר' יוחנן מסיים בה (אחר ברכת
התורה הראשונה של שחרית) הכי: הערב־נא
ה' אלהינו את דברי תורתך בפינו ובפיות
עמך בית ישראל ונהיה אנחנו וצאצאינו
וצאצאי עמך ישראל כלנו יודעי שמך ועוסקי
תורתך. ברוך אתה ה' המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

It is true that the Bible is one of the most influential of books, stimulating the mind of many a creative artist to the literary possibilities of its legends and tales. But to the Jew the Bible is more. It is the incomparable revelation of God's will, of His plan for the world. To the children of Israel the Bible is the record of their peoplehood, the history of their spiritual wanderings, their vicissitudes of profound despair and glorious achievement. The Jew has been nourished on the Bible. He is the people of the Book.

Yet, if we consider the history of Judaism through the ages it becomes clear that the Bible is not the only document of faith nor the sole instrumentality of religious fulfillment. The Bible is the root but the tree has been nourished by many streams. Students and scholars, poets and sages have contributed to the unfolding of Israel; nor could it be any other way. For religion - as with life itself - is change and growth.

The Jews, once upon their own land were now exiled to Babylonia where they could no longer observe their religion as they were wont to do, and their new situation challenged the ingenuity of the leaders of the people.[1]

---

1. There is reason to think the synagogue had its origin in the Babylonian Exile, although the matter is far from clear. See Kohler, Origins of Synagogue and Church, pp. 25-35.

The Bible had to be reinterpreted if it was to continue as a source of strength, Biblical laws and institutions had to be revitalized to bring them into harmony with the contemporary world. Yet change could not be random, for the Jews had a sense of their history and their mission, and they were aware that the new had to be based upon the old and that the Biblical insights were not so much to be changed as to be understood anew. Then too, with the passage of time the Biblical idiom had been forgotten and this made more difficult the urgent task of refashioning their way of life.

The literature of exposition which was the result of this demand as well as its method of achievement is of compelling significance. For it was upon this dual foundation of the Biblical and Rabbinic literature that the house of Judaism was built and many of the distinctive nuances of the religion of Israel may be traced to this complex of ideas.

But because Judaism has eschewed rigid, creedal formulations of its hopes and dreams, the student must seek his understanding in the lives and teachings of its great personalities, those who have contributed to its lore and have transmitted its substance to posterity. Such a figure is R. Johanan b. Nappaha, a sage of the third century of our era, renowned as one of the greatest of the Palestinian Amoraim and as a master of homiletical literature.

Important to Jewish tradition, he is not without relevance to our own age.

It is with gratitude and affection that I acknowledge my debt to Dr. Israel Bettan, Professor of Midrash and Homiletics in the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, who has guided me through this material and instructed me in its excellence and worth.

H. D. H.

Cincinnati
February, 1955

CHAPTER I

R. Johanan b. Nappaha, the Aggadist
His Background and Life

It is a natural disposition of ancient peoples to revere the past and to relate their today and tomorrow to it. With no people is this more true than with the Jew who finds in antiquity the source of his being. In consequence of this, all changes in the structure of faith, changes which were necessitated by the passage of time, were read back into history and located in a prior era. But let us disabuse ourselves of the notion of falsehood or deceit for none is involved. The past is sacred, God revealed himself in that age, and the attempt at harmonization of present with past is to infuse the present with holiness and with the sense of doing the will of God.

Because the Bible is the supremely important document of that venerable time, the provenance of later conceptions is ascribed to it. Thus we read that תקנות were instituted by Moses, Joshua,[2] David, Solomon,[3] and Ezra.[4] Such statutes, if it was thought that they had been in immemorial usage were termed הלכות למשה מסיני.[5] Yet, we know from internal evidence that many of these

---

2. B.K. 80b, Pal. B.B. 15a, Erub. 17a.
3. Erub. 21b
4. B.K. 82a, Meg. 31b
5. Avos 1.1, Peah 2.6, Eduy 8.7, Yad 4.3, et al.

customs and rituals could not have originated in the Biblical period, but, on the contrary, their genesis may be directly traced to the Rabbinic period. In addition to this there is the body of evidence furnished by the Rabbinic literature itself of the existence of schools and academies which met for the specific purpose of searching out Scripture to apprehend God's will in an ever-growing world. We know, for example, that when Ezra returned to Jerusalem he took with him teachers[6] to aid him "to teach in Israel statutes and ordinances for he had set his heart to seek the law of the Lord, to do it."[7] Further, there is evidence of the existence of a body of 120 men called the 'Great Synagogue' whose function it must have been to assist Ezra to make the Biblical legislation effective in the life of the community, to preserve it, and to widen its scope.[8]

This custom of more or less systematic and organized interpretation of Scripture continued through the centuries succeeding Ezra. The oldest bearers of tradition appear in pairs beginning about 300 B.C.E. and are considered by some to have served as president and vice-president respectively of the Sanhedrin.[9]

---

6. Ezra 8.16, Neh. 8.4ff.
7. Ibid. 7.10
8. The tradition of the 'Great Synagogue' rests upon Neh.8-10, but it is thought by many to be pure invention. For literature see Strack, Introduction, p. 9, note 10.
9. The זוגות . Avos 1.4-15. The tradition that they served as נשיא and as אב בית דין is found in Hag. 2.2 but may not be true. It is not unlikely that the High Priest presided over this Sanhedrin.

There followed upon this group a series of teachers, representatives of different schools of interpretation, who are called Tannaim.[10] This company of masters takes on form only in retrospect; within their own age they were individual teachers each with a different approach to their responsibilities, each with a different scheme of the logical inference and deduction of the law. Among the different schools of thought we may mention the Seven Interpretive Norms of Hillel, The Thirteen Norms of R. Ishmael, The Two and Thirty Norms of the Great School.[11]

Now, while a multiplicity of free investigation is a commendable manifestation of the creative spirit, it tends to become self-defeating. Too many schools of thought, too many conclusions, left the average man, yearning for the right path, confused as to the requirements of practice. So it was only to be expected that an effort would be made to codify the conflicting statements, and to fashion the divers views of the Rabbis into a single authoritative mold. And this was the crowning achievement of the age of the Tannaim: the Mishnah.

The Mishnah is a work in which are logically arranged exposition of Scripture, statements of traditional law, proverbs, parables, and narratives. It brought order out of the chaos of interpretive material and provided

10. For the Tannaim see Moore's classic study, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era - the Age of the Tannaim.
11. On the hermeneutics see Strack, Introduction and Mielziener, Introduction.

a body of approved teaching which later generations could expand and transmit. It was edited by Judah, the Prince, about 130 C.E. and derives its decisive character from the masterful attempt to its compiler to consult with the Body of Sages then in existence. It was to this body that Judah presented the earlier collections of Hiyya, Hoshaiah and Bar Kappara[12] and together with them pondered the statements and arranged them in topical order. With the publication of this work - the Mishnah - the age of the Tannaim is brought to a close.

Yet, even the issuance of such a work as the Mishnah could hardly assuage the Jew's thirst for knowledge, for was he not commanded, "this book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein...."?[13] Certainly this command in itself was a goad to further study and thought. And we cannot forget that the Jewish community had expanded during these years, and that there were flourishing groups in both Palestine and Babylonia; the different conditions of each culture made imperative the exploration of the Mishnah collection for its local application. These Expounders of the Mishnah are known as the Amoraim; with them the Mishnah enjoyed almost canonical authority, and it is within

12. See Strack, Introduction, p. 3
13. Josh. 1.8

this framework that we find our Sage, Johanan b. Nappaha.[14]

2

The world Johanan inherited was one which had known sublimity as well as unutterable wretchedness. The Exile in Babylonia, later to become a fertile source of the Jewish spirit, had torn asunder the very fabric of their life; the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah, under the aegis of Persian hegemony, could but partially bind up. And even here the Jews were not an independent people but rather had to rely upon the kindnesses of their rulers. Independence was gained - and only for a brief moment - when the Maccabees revolted against those Greeks who had succeeded the Persians in authority. Then they were able to institute the High Priesthood with Simon as their leader. The chaotic state of Jewish life in this period, with its feuds and internecine war gave rise to a sectarianism and divisiveness within the body politic which helps explain not only the later rise to power of Rome in that part of the world, but the appeal of Christianity as well. The triumph of Rome over Jewish life had a tremendous impact: the fall of the Temple meant the collapse of the structure

---

14. In Hebrew his name is בן הנפח Pal. R.H. 58b. The Aramaic form בר נפחא was used by Shimon b. Lakish, see Ket. 25a, but he is most often called ר' יוחנן. A similar Aramaic usage is found in בן הקפר becoming בר קפרא. See also Bacher, אגדת אמוראי ארץ-ישראל, Volume I, Section 2, p.1, note 1. (This is the Hebrew translation of Agada der Palästinischen Amoräer, 1892, 1896, 1899.)

of Jewish authority as well, and this is what caused those magnificently creative adjustments which emanated from the academy at Javneh in the age of the Tannaim. Yet Roman rule - synonymous with brutality and oppression - continued unabated; the malevolence of Herod and other Roman representatives cried out for revenge and a revolt was led by Bar Cochba. The virtues of stealth and surprise permitted the Jews to maintain the advantage for several years, but the superior might of the enemy triumphed. The erstwhile leader of the Jews was put to death and no longer did the people entertain notions of freedom and independence.

A free people can tolerate and encourage the spirit of inquiry, a subjugated people cannot, and so it is not surprising to find this the period when the investigations of the Tannaim sought the more rigid form of the Mishnah. People sought the stability and order of the fixed standard. But that the Mishnah itself could be published and openly disseminated when earlier Roman leaders had hindered scholars in the performance of their work is worthy of amazement. The explanation is found in the friendship of the emperor Antoninus for Judah, the Prince, under whose auspices this code was made.[15] While the friendship

15. The references are most likely to Marcus Aurelios Antoninus (161-180) and Septinius Severus (193-211) who resided for a time in Palestine. While the narratives are of unequal validity a large element of friendship and regard is evident. Most likely, Judah received gifts of land from the emperor.

between Judah and the Emperor was real enough it did not penetrate to the masses of people, for they were suffering from harsh taxation while the ravages of war were still heavily upon them. This is the world in which Johanan grew up.

3

Of Johanan's life and learning the Talmud speaks at length.[16] He was born between 175 and 180 C.E.[17] and although the tradition that he lived for one hundred and six years[18] finds little support among those who eulogized him it is clear that he lived to a high old age; he must have died about 290 of our era. In his early life he was called בעל המקרא while later ages thought him a master of the law as well.

Of his parents we know nothing other than that his father died only shortly before the child was born, and his mother shortly after.[19] To be thus orphaned must have affected his whole being, and shortly before his death, so we are told, his disciples found him weeping. Asked the reason, he told of his fear that he might have to give judgment upon the childless.[20]

---

16. The only biographies are a short one in Monatsschrift, IV. 285-321 by Lewinmeyer and an incomplete one by Horowitz in לימרמור-בלאם דער יורשען מרעסטע, 1871, 1872,1873.
17. Strack, p. 319, note 2.
18. Bacher, p. 19 bottom
19. Kid 31a
20. Eliahu Zuta, 23

It was his grandfather who undertook the task of educating the youngster. He secured for him admission to the school of R. Shimon b. Elezar[21] who was one of the most distinguished of the contemporaries of Judah, the Prince, This R. Shimon b. Elezar had himself been a disciple of the famous R. Meier and also gained fame for his published disagreements with Judah. It was through this instruction that Johanan was later able to quote the opinions of Meir.[22]

Johanan was a diligent student, always carrying a book of the Aggada with him,[23] yet it must have been difficult for him to carry on his studies, for we know that he sold his inheritance - a plot of land lying between Sefforis and Tiberias - for this purpose. As a matter of fact, when he heard this his own student, Hiyya b. Aba, had done the same thing, he called him, "Hiyya the strong, Hiyya the wise!" And his explanation was, "the things created in six days (Land) might be exchanged for the things created in forty days (Law)."[24]

Our sage, Johanan, later became a disciple of Judah himself[25] who so highly regarded his student, so we are told, that he applied to him the verse, "Before I formed

---

21. Pal. Maasros 1.2.
22. So Bacher, p. 2.
23. Ber. 23b.
24. Bacher 16,17; Pesikta 178, Shir R. 8.7.
25. Scholars are uncertain as to the date of Judah's death. One school holds to 193, while another suggests 210. At any rate, since Johanan was born in 175, he must have been a young man when he studied with Judah.

thee in the womb I knew thee."[26] Judah rewarded Johanan with a gift of land, motivated no doubt by the report that Johanan had once been forced to sell his property in order to continue his studies.[27] Later, for some reason, Johanan wished to borrow money with the property as security, and when the prospective lender hesitated Johanan offered the ironic comment that "the heart is dependent upon the pocket-book."[28]

There can be little doubt that later generations thought highly of Johanan because of his association, however slight, with the revered compiler of the Mishnah.[29] In addition to his early training with R. Shimon b. Elezar and his study with Judah we know that he was associated with Ilfa (or Halafta) who preserved many of Johanan's utterances.[30] There was the further influence upon Johanan's mind which was exerted by Rav, the notable head of the Babylonian academy at Sura. Rav was already well-known in the time of Judah and both of these imposing personalities - Rav and Johanan - attended his classes. As a matter of fact Johanan reports that when Rav "sat" in the academy (because he was an advanced student) Johanan had to "stand", and on

---

26. Jer. 1.5. The legend is in Hul. 54a.
27. Taan. 24a, also Sota 21b.
28. Pal. Terumos 46.b.
29. With reference to Pal. Betza 63a, Bacher says בארץ ישראל נשאר רק המאמר המליצי של ר' יוחנן, שזכה לתורה מפני שזכה לראות אצבעות ר' יהודה יוצאות מביח יד שלו although others believe Johanan's intention is to imply but slight dependence on Judah.
30. See Bacher, p. 5 and Taan. 21a.

a later occasion, acknowledging the superiority of Rav, he tells us that "sparks passed between Rabbi (Judah) and Rav, while I did not understand."[31]

But since the life of scholarship is one of constant association with people similarly inclined we know that Johanan must have been in contact with other teachers of the period. And indeed, the sources are replete with references to contemporary sages. Johanan was a good friend of Jonathan,[32] in whose name he transmitted several legends; by virtue of his study with R. Shimon b. Elezar he had a chain of tradition which included such luminaries as Hanina, Hiyya, Hoshaya, Hamnuach, and Shimon b. Yohai.[33] His own knowledge and skill placed him on a level with his teachers; he became their colleague.

Johanan was a man of skill and beauty as well as learning. He was celebrated as a physician and may have utilized his art with certain Romans.[34] His beauty[35] was embodied in many legends,[36] some of which convey a magical thought. We are told, for example, that he would sit by the bath house so that women might look upon his beauty as they departed. In that way they would be sure to give

---

31. Hul. 54a, 137b.
32. Pal. Ber. 9.1
33. So Bacher, pp. 2,3,4.
34. Pal. Shab. 14.4 and 40.4
35. It is interesting to note the evolution of taste. That early age considered fat people beautiful.
36. Cited by Bacher, pp. 17-18.

birth to handsome sons.[37] And although he was aware of his beauty[38] he would explain his success by saying, "my garments are handsome."[39] Johanan was also meticulous in his personal habits and frequently spoke of the need for personal cleanliness.[40]

The details of his own family life are sparse indeed. We know that he had ten sons, all of whom he outlived[41] and a daughter whom Johanan's disciples thought would be a fit bride for their associate, R. Zeiri.[42] R. Johanan also had a sister who was married to R. Shimon b. Lakish (Resh Lakish) and these two brothers-in-law virtually dominated the early Amoraic period. Their relationship was so close that upon the death of Resh Lakish Johanan was forced to give up his daily work for some years out of grief and mourning.[43] Their arguments, especially over the Types of Work Forbidden on the Sabbath, were carried out in a spirit of friendly rivalry; they were zealous for the Law. R. Berachya called them the שני גדולי עולם.[44]

Because the function of scholarship in this period was to transmit the approved body of law, the Mishnah, R. Johanan decided to open an academy. This he did in Sefforis,

---

37. Ber. 20a.
38. He would say אנא איתתיה משפירי ירושלים, B.M. 84b.
39. Shab. 113b, B.K. 91a.
40. Shab. 25a, Ket. 62b.
41. Ber. 5a.
42. Bacher, p. 18, note 5.
43. B.M. 84a.
44. Ber. R.3.

but because of a disagreement with his former teacher, Hanina, Johanan moved his school to Tiberias. The brilliance of his elucidation, and his method of resolving the contradictions found in the Mishnah, spread his fame far and wide. And there can be little doubt that his endeavors were supported by the Nasi who made his home in the community of Tiberias. The Nasi so highly regarded Johanan that he requested his intercession in a personal squabble with another sage, surely a confidential matter. And the honor was returned when Johanan accepted a fast ordained by the Nasi. Once, we are told, R. Johanan was able to suggest that the Nasi was not attired in the garb his office required.[45]

Johanan's fame became so great that on one occasion, his former teacher with whom he had disagreed, Hanina, saw crowds hurrying in the street. In reply to his inquiry as to their destination, he was told the crowd was rushing to hear R. Johanan. On receiving this information he exclaimed, "Blessed am I for being able to see my life's work bear such fruit!"[46] And there is preserved the report of R. Nahman b. Yakov, famed as the Vice-President of the Court of the Nasi, who said he had heard R. Johanan with pleasure.[47] Many students came to study with Johanan, men from all parts of the known world, that they might drink from a well of

45. Pesikta 136.2, Pal. Sanhedrin 19.4, Taan. 24b.
46. Pal. Horayoth 48.2
47. Bacher, p. 13, note 9.

living waters, and return to irrigate their own parched lands. Among these scholars, whose names are found as transmitters of Johanan's teachings, we may mention the famous Abahu, R. Levi, R. Yizhak, and Judah b. Nahmani (who would hold the crowds until the master would arrive),[48] Jacob b. Idai (a close friend as well as student), and Abba b. Cahana.[49] According to a report of Sherira, he led this school for eight years.[50]

We must not forget that at the time of Johanan's popularity in Palestine there were also important and ever-growing schools of interpretation in Babylonia. They were staffed by men of acknowledged ability, and because of the greater viability of their communities, were destined to exist longer than the Palestinian schools. And because Babylonian Jewry had the problem of adjusting to a new society in a far greater degree than did the religionists of Palestine it is natural that their magnum opus, the Babylonian Talmud, should have greater authority than the Talmud of Palestine which did not have the characteristics a later age would find valuable.

Yet, the two areas were not cut off from each other but rather, there was a constant cross-fertilization of ideas and concepts. There were many Babylonian students

48. Pal. Succah 5.1
49. Bacher, p. 14, note 5.
50. Cited in Strack, p. 122.

who went to study with Johanan in Palestine, and even though Johanan did not have the power of ordination, these young men found great benefit in studying with the noted scholar.[51] But, the precise nature of our sage's relationship with these rival schools is not clear. On the one hand there is egregious derogation of the Babylonian leaders. Johanan, for example, refused to address the great Babylonian leader, Samuel as רבנו although he did use this word with regard to Rav. Johanan preferred to call Samuel חבר and did so until he was reproved.[52] Then too, Johanan would often refer to the foreign students as "mere Babylonians," in a sarcastic and biting fashion.[53]

But, on the other hand, we find strong bonds of affection and regard between the leaders and students of the two communities. We know that Johanan would visit the sick among his students, not neglecting the Babylonians. Nor did Johanan carry his baiting of Babylonian students to the same extent as did his brother-in-law, Resh Lakish.[54] As a matter of fact, the visiting students had very high regard for Johanan's qualities of heart as well as mind.

---

51. There are many legends which glorify the student who came up from Babylonia to study with Johanan. Many of these men, Shimon of Babylonia, Bar Abba, R. Hiyya b. Abba, R. Assi and R. Jose, were responsible for perpetuating Johanan's name in the Babylonian Talmud. See Bacher, pp. 7ff.
52. Bacher, pp. 6,7.
53. Shir R. 8.1, Pal. Ber. 2.1, Shek, 47a, Moed Katan 83c. For similar stories see Bacher, p. 8, note 3 where they are cited.
54. Yoma 9b.

Then too, Johanan considers the literary production of the Babylonian academies penetrating in their analysis of material,[55] and in a poignant passage writes, "Why was Israel exiled to Babylonia? It is like a man who became angry at his wife and sent her away, to her mother."[56] Unquestionably, there was some bitterness and conflict between the two schools, and there is no doubt but that Johanan had only slight regard for some of the leaders of Babylonian Jewry. Yet, neither school could stand alone; they needed mutual support and encouragement. They recognized this and it is this recognition which really undergirded their joint strength.[57]

4

Founding a school and teaching the tradition would be enough to assure Johanan a place in the history of our people, but there is more. There is a literary tradition associated with his name, a series of documents ascribed to his authorship, which add not only to his luster but to his importance.

Johanan is traditionally considered to be the author of the Midrash to Psalms,[58] and while this commentary

55. Hag. 10a.
56. Pes. 87b.
57. Even Resh Lakish sent his sons to study with R. Hiyya, a Babylonian. See Bacher, p.9.
58. Cited often as שוחר טוב from Prov. 11.27, the first words of this book.

may have originated in his school, the final recension must have been done by someone other than Johanan for many sages of a later period are cited, and then too, this Midrash adverts to many events of another historical period.

But the great document which is attributed to Johanan's authorship is the Palestinian Talmud. This work is important because it reflects the continuance of the tradition in the land of Israel, for many of the laws of our people are based upon the land itself and were observed for centuries after the destruction of the Temple. No lesser figures than Abraham ibn Daud and Maimonides consider Johanan its author[59] but this conclusion, is untenable because of the presence of later sages in its discussions. As with the Midrash to Psalms, the Palestinian Talmud was begun under the aegis of Johanan's school in Tiberias and it is for this reason he is considered the author. The actual redaction of the work is by other hands.

5

The mood of any age is to think itself more complex and difficult than preceding ages. Yet, each age has its own problems, its own confusions and difficulties which are troublesome to it. It is the unusual man in each generation who can rise above the perplexities of the time,

59. Daud in Sefer ha Kabbalah, and Maimonides in the Introduction to his Commentary on the Mishnah. See also Strack, pp. 65ff.

bring order out of chaos and make a contribution to his era.

Johanan was such a man. The breadth of his learning and the lucidity of his teaching caught up his time in such fashion as to enlarge the religious capabilities of the people. In an age of political subjugation he helped free the spirit. He was known as a great preacher and a fine halakist, and was ranked with Rav and Samuel as one of the outstanding leaders of his period.[60] His very life was the exemplar of his teaching: he was considered tolerant and fair, had an agreeable presence and pleasing disposition, was kind and considerate to the stranger as well as to his brethren, he understood the non-observant as well as the pious.[61] Like all great men, though, he was aware of his greatness. He objected when disciples would cite his interpretations or decisions without giving credit.[62] And while this may be vanity, it is also regard for tradition, guiding people and not deceiving them.

His death was compared to the setting of the sun[63] and to the destruction of the pillars of the world.[64]

But if the pillars of the world collapsed at his death they were rebuilt upon the sturdy foundation of his teaching.

---

60. A.Z. 40a.
61. See B.M. 84a, Pal. A.Z. 42c, Meg. 10b,16a,A Z. 26b.
62. Pal. Ber. 2.1, Tanhuma, version B, Num. 22. He also said, "He who mentioned a saying by name is as if he continued his influence in the world after his death," citing Ps. 61.5
63. Moed Katan 25b.
64. Pal. A.Z. 43c near end,

CHAPTER II

Exegesis

It is true that the schools of rabbinic interpretation of Scripture which arose in the post-Biblical period met a very real need on the part of the people. Life had thrust the Jew into new situations, and their leaders had to search out a pathway, give direction and purpose to those who depended upon them. But this was no mere mechanical and routine task - leadership never is - it was rather a profoundly creative work calling forth the deepest resources of heart and mind. The rabbis not only promulgated new laws and founded institutions; they took the old and infused it with their spirit and their outlook. They tried to make the traditional concepts vital and dynamic once again, to express the reality of God, the nature of Torah and the uniqueness of Israel in words strong and sustaining. The rabbis considered their words to be a further revelation of God's will and a manifestation of His spirit.

They gave expression to this thought in quaint questioning: "Wouldst thou," they asked, "get to know Him who called the world into being? Then, study Agada (homiletical literature): for thus wilt thou come to know the Holy One and cling to His ways."[1] Their literature revealed

---

1. Sifre Deut. 49 end, on 11.22.

their conception of life, its motivation and its destiny.

This literature has come down to us, not in one single and comprehensive volume, but rather in a number of disparate works, of unequal age and divers structure.[2] It is this Aggadic literature, literature of spiritual exposition and homiletic interpretation, which contains the religiously creative utterances of R. Johanan b. Nappaha.

The student of early Jewish preaching, the scholar who would reconstruct the life of an ancient homiletician, will find his work attended with almost insurmountable difficulties. To begin with, many of our texts appear in various editions, with different wordings often ascribed to several different rabbis; the problem of attribution is frequently beyond solution. And again, many of these divergent editions of the various midrashic texts do not preserve the full form of the early homily, as we

---

2. This literature is called Midrash, from the verb meaning, "to seek," "search," or "interpret." The best known of these works of Midrash are the Mekilta to Exodus, the Sifra to Leviticus and the Sifre to Numbers and Deuteronomy, all hailing from the Tannaitic period; the Rabbot to the entire Pentateuch and the Five Scrolls: Canticles, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, all of unequal age and character; the Tanhuma homilies to the whole Pentateuch, of which we possess two different compilations; and the Pesikta homilies, comprising two separate volumes, and revolving around the Holy Days and other special occasions.

know it existed.[3] In consequence of this, we have in our classic sources but a hint of the breadth of power our preachers possessed. We can only guess at the complete development of their ideas.

This difficulty, interestingly enough, has roots within Jewish tradition itself. As we have pointed out, Scripture had to be expanded if it was to serve as a way of life in a changing world. This would imply, of course, some departure from the old viewpoints. To counteract the fear that the tried-and-true would be overthrown to make way for novelty, there arose a centrifugal force among the rabbis. This culminated in an Interdiction Against Writing Down the Oral Tradition. This was not a rigid law, but rather it represented an attitude, an attitude which did operate to prevent the preservation of many oral traditions. We may admit, though, the Interdiction rested upon real grounds, and served a necessary function. If every teacher

---

3. The original homiletic form, no doubt, was a simple explanation of the Scriptural verse, in the order in which it appears in the Bible. This was but a few words of explanation and interpretation, usually rather simple. Acceding to popular demand, the preachers made their homiletics more complex, prefacing the text upon which they were to expound, with an exordium or introduction. The exordium would often be another verse of the Bible, perhaps from the Prophets or Writings. Often there would be several of these "proemial" texts strung together, illuminating each other and leading directly to the text of the message. But unfortunately, many of these proems appear in abbreviated fashion making difficult the comprehension of the message itself. See Bettan, Studies in Jewish Preaching, and article, "Midrash Haggada" in Jewish Encyclopedia.

had been free to compose his own code of laws and to transmit it to his disciples, the unity of Judaism would have been endangered. Then writing as a means of giving permanence to the traditional law would have precluded the process of modifying this law in accordance with the peculiar time conditions in each period. For this reason the Interdiction applied more strongly to Halachoth than to Aggadoth, and was not against writing per se, but rather against writing for public use; the private use of written collections were permitted as an aide memoire.

This view gains strength when we examine the original material, in which Johanan plays an important role.[4] There Johanan writes, כותבי הלכות כשורף התורה. a statement which is certainly antithetical to formalizing the oral law. On the other hand, this same passage states that Johanan was wont to read a book of Aggada on the Sabbath, and even further it states, הלומד אגדה מתוך הספר לא כמהרה משכח. We know, too, that the amoraim would frequently avail themselves of the services of a tanna or semi-tanna whose business it was to carry mentally the tannaitic teachings. The fact that these men provided the basis for the halakic discussions held in the amoraic academics, and further, that it was necessary for them to cite the origin of the traditions which they carried affirms the conclusion

4. Temura 14b, also Gittin 60b.

that the Interdiction applied more to legal material collected for public use, than to Aggadic material though it hindered the writing of this as well. The rabbis worried lest the cohesiveness of the total Jewish community be compromised.[5]

2

It is axiomatic that the creative artist, if he is to communicate his ideas to people, must discipline his spirit. The sculptor cannot create a form which is without meaning - some meaning to some people. The poet must arrange his words so his readers will perceive the image as he does. There are rules and standards which flow from the particular artistic medium and which aid the artist to use these media as a means of expression. And so it is with the exegete. There are standards of interpretation, standards which are inherent in the verses used and which help to order the ideas in a meaningful fashion. The brilliant interpreter, the man who understands the inner spirit of the text, can perceive in it the rules governing its composition.

Johanan was such a man, a workman who knew his tools. He sensed, from his study of the Bible, Mishnah and Aggada, its raison d'etre, and its significance.

---

5. See Strack, pp. 12ff.

He was able to voice these ideas as principles of textual interpretation.

For example, he perceived the Torah and the Prophets to be different in essence and said, לשון תורה לעצמה לשון חכמים לעצמן.[6] and that every single word, phrase or idiom was a Divine Revelation, אין הכתה אלא מלמעלה למטה.[7] Johanan also knew that Biblical laws and institutions were not dependent upon only one verse; that it was legitimate to use several verses to support a Biblical statement.[8] To aid in ordering the understanding of the Scriptures, Johanan taught, גורעין ומוסיפין ודורשין, that it is permissible to take an improper letter from the beginning of a verse and add it to the end of the verse.[9] He also tried to show that arguments between the different tannaim on the meaning of a given verse were not serious and could be harmonized.[10]

3

Rules of interpretation are general statements, but methods of interpretation show specific application. Johanan, for the most part, limits himself to several methods of interpretation. Occasionally he will use word analogy.

---

6. A.Z. 58a, Hullin 137a.
7. Ber. R. 44, Shir R.3.
8. Pal. Ber. 2.3.
9. For example Pal. Sotah 5.1 at the beginning. Another example is cited by Jastrow, Dictionary, p. 271.
10. Pes. 68b, Yoma 60b.

For example, in commenting on Psalm 104.16, "The trees of the Lord have their fill, the cedars of Lebanon, which He hath planted," Johanan wishes to derive the thought that the cedars of Lebanon refer only to the Temple, indeed, can be used for no other purpose. In support of this he cites Deuteronomy 3.25, "Let me go over, I pray Thee, and see the good land that is beyond the Jordan, that goodly hill-country, and Lebanon." The use of the word "Lebanon" in the two verses, one with reference to the cedars and the other suggesting the temple mount, provide Johanan with grounds for identification.[11]

Another method is that of notarikon, Hebrew shorthand or mnemonosis, which Johanan frequently used. For example, the first word of the Ten Commandments, אנכי , is considered a mnemonic device for אנא נפשי כתבית יהבית, that God gave the Torah in a form proper for writing.[12] Then again, Johanan understands the word מכתם which is often found in the Psalms, as מך תם referring to no one except David, the author of the book.[13]

Occasionally Johanan will allegorize, as with Genesis 29.2, "And he looked, and behold a well in the field, and lo three flocks of sheep lying there by it, for out of that well they watered the flocks. And the stone upon the

---

11. Ber. R. 15, Near the beginning.
12. Shab. 105b.
13. Sotah 10a. For other examples, See Bacher, p. 54, Note 7.

well's mouth was great." The well is Sinai, the source of God's Revelation; the three flocks are the Priests, Levites and Israelites; the phrase, "out of that well they watered the flocks," refers to the Ten Commandments; and the great stone is the Shekinah, the Heavenly Presence.[14]

At times, in his use of allegory, Johanan will permit angels or demons to present his thought. In commenting upon Exodus 12.2, "This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you," Johanan has Gabriel and Michael as God's messengers who examine the sun for size and color. Upon their report the decision is made to intercalate the year.[15] These same figures are used to explain the "firebrands" in Isaiah 7.4, " .... neither let thy heart be faint because of these two tails of smoking firebrands...."[16] And sometimes we find an extended simile as when Johanan comments upon Job 25.2, " ... He maketh peace in His high places." Here he uses the elaborate conceit of a fierce battle raging between the sun, moon and stars; only Divine intervention puts a halt to the fighting.[17] Often, Johanan will explain a difficult Biblical word with a Greek synonym; Greek of course was familiar to many people.[18]

---

14. Ber. R. 70. The following verse, Gen. 29.3, is there similarly interpreted by R. Shimon b. Judah.
15. Pesikta 55.
16. Ber. 4a.
17. Pal. R.H. 2.4.
18. See Bacher, page 55, Note 2; page 64, Note 3 for examples and citation.

One of the most ingenious and fascinating of Johanan's interpretive methods is his play on words. For example, he wishes to use Deut. 32.39, "...I kill and I make alive..." to emphasize that death is but a step leading to eternal life with God. So he interpolates מחצה to mean that God has made a מחיצה between the higher beings and lower beings; it is a gateway, as it were, through which man passes to life among the higher beings.[19] This is preaching both clever and powerful.

In another homily Johanan explains that the Sea opened to permit the Jews passage and then closed over the Egyptians pursuing them not because God directly controlled the action of the Sea, but because He had an agreement with it to do His bidding. Johanan takes the word, לאיתנו in the phrase from Exodus 14.27, "...and the Sea returned to its strength....," to mean the agreement, תנאין which God had made.[20] How deeply this must have impressed itself upon the people!

4

For the most part, Johanan's preaching was simple and uncomplicated, taking a verse and exemplifying it in a manner quickly comprehended by his listeners, illustrating it with apt experiences from every day life. In discussing

19. Koh. R. 1.4.
20. Ber. R. 5.

the story of the Garden of Eden, and how irrevocable was the expulsion, he used the verse, Genesis 3.24, "So He drove out the man... " and said it was like the wife of a Priest who once divorced could not remarry.[21] Or, if the people should ask why the Book of Psalms uses the phrase, "Bless the Lord, O my soul," only five times, Johanan would answer that it corresponds to the Five Books of the Pentateuch.[22] Or again, if one would want to know the meaning of Isaiah 59.21, "And as for Me, this is My covenant with them, saith the Lord; My spirit that is upon thee, and My words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever," Johanan would say, every sage whose son is a sage and whose grandson is a sage will remember the Torah for ever.[23] It is almost literal in its explanation.

In like fashion Johanan explains Hosea 14.10, " ... For the ways of the Lord are right, and the just do walk in them; but transgressors do stumble therein." This is like two men, Johanan explains, who are at the Passover Seder. One eats according to the Divine intent while the other eats more than his share. The first is the just person who walks in the way of the Lord; the second person

---

21. Ber. R. 21.
22. Lev. R. 4.
23. B.M. 85b.

is a transgressor and will stumble.[24]

At times history will be woven into the fabric of the address. To explain Proverbs 10.27, "The fear of the Lord prolongeth days, but the years of the wicked shall be shortened," Johanan points out that the First Temple stood for over four hundred years with but eighteen High Priests; righteousness accounts for the small number required for that extended period. But the Second Temple needed more than three hundred Priests for its equally long existence; these men were so wicked their years were shortened.[25]

In compelling fashion, Johanan explains the relationship between Jacob and Esau. He uses Genesis 25.21f, "···· and Rebekah his wife conceived, and the children struggled within her," that is, ויתרוצצו and presents the idea that זה רץ להרג את זה וזה רץ להרג את זה.[26] But, if Johanan could be clear and succinct he could also be complex and confusing. He takes the striking verse from Psalm 19, "day unto day uttereth speech," and uses it for a long and involved defense of the method of proclaiming the new moon and the intercalation of the year.[27] Yet, in spite of its complexity it was an exegesis dictated by the need of age, to know the dates of the holidays, and equally, we may imagine, to maintain the authority of the Nasi.

---

24. Nazir 23b.
25. Yoma 9a.
26. Ber. R. 63 at the beginning.
27. Midrash to Psalms, 19.3

At times Johanan explains a verse by referring to an institution of the age. So, when Exodus 19.3 says, "... Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob," this 'house of Jacob' can only mean the Sanhedrin, which interprets God's laws, as it says in Isaiah 2.5, "O house of Jacob, come and let us walk in the light of the Lord."[28]

Utilizing his proclivity for semantics, Johanan highlights the importance of halacha. In Joshua 8.13 we find, "... and Joshua went that night into the midst of the valley," that is, העמק , which Johanan explains, שהלך בעומקה של הלכה.[29] At the same time he voices his dislike of Talmudic arguments by applying the hope expressed in Job 34.30, "That there be none to ensnare the people," to mean those who indulge in pilpul.[30]

5

Though we have many examples of the vividness of Johanan's preaching, of his ability to compel the attention of his listeners with a word or phrase, we have but few of his more developed exordia. And of these, fewer still show his proficiency in creating a chain of proemial texts. Yet, one example will show us the direction of his thought.

In preaching on Exodus 2.4, "And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him," Johanan wishes

---

28. Ex. R. 28.
29. Eruvin 63b.
30. Esther R. at beginning.

to voice the thought that prophecy is a gift of God to his servants. The prophets, by virtue of this gift, are able to transcend their world and so perceive God's will. To formulate this idea he comments on his verse word-by-word: "And she stood," is explained by Amos 9.1, "I saw the Lord standing by the altar...." "His sister," is explained by Proverbs 7.4, "Say unto wisdom, 'thou art my sister,'" The words, "from afar off," are explained by Jeremiah 31.3, "From afar off the Lord appeared to me." "To know," is explained by Isaiah 11.9, "... for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord... " And the final phrase, "to know what would be done to him," is rendered by Amos 3.7, "For the Lord God will do nothing; but He revealeth His counsel unto His servants the prophets."[31] The preacher then has the opportunity to amplify his thought.

In a certain sense, it is unnecessary for us to judge the preaching ability of R. Johanan b. Nappaha; history has already done that for us. We need only affirm that judgment, pointing out that these sermon notes, as it were, are as significant as when first uttered.

6

It is true, of course, that one of the functions of preaching in this early period was to expound Scripture. We, therefore, find it built upon a strong exegetical

---

31. Pal Sotah 1.9.

framework. Yet, the prevalent notion that in early synagogal preaching homiletic exegesis constituted the entire purpose and essence of the Jewish sermon, needs radical revision. To be sure, this type of exegesis formed the indispensable substructure which supported all the rest. But what satisfied the great popular demand for preaching was not intricate and ingenious interpretation; it was rather the profundity of the spiritual message. The powerful preacher stirred the imagination of the people, lifted up their hearts, and guided them along the path of life. He would recount the power and glory of God, the reward of the good life, and the happiness of the future world. This nourished the soul of the people and sustained them.

And because the preacher built upon the Bible - his thought was but a continuation of it - these midrashic writings are a valued source of authentic Jewish theology and ethics. The writings of these men reveal the spirit and character of Judaism.

CHAPTER III

Theology

In a certain sense, this chapter heading is a misnomer. For theology, conceived as it is as a systematic body of doctrines and teachings about God and His nature, is a concept largely foreign to the Jew. God is, and God does, and man apprehends His power and majesty. Johanan, for instance, has written no work of theology, has offered no creedal formulations. Rather he spoke about God in experiential terms: His relationship with His people, the manifestations of His power in various events. So it is with other concepts. It would be more correct, then, to discuss the theological ideas which Judaism has taught; the integration is necessarily our own.

In consequence of this, there are certain facets of the problem which will occur to the modern mind, and yet are never discussed by the ancients. Perhaps these things - which fill many a mediaeval theological treatise - never troubled the sages, or perhaps they were manifestations beyond human comprehension. Whatever the explanation, we cannot expect our attempt at ordering the various ideas to carry us beyond the material offered. If our forefathers did not speak, then prudence dictates our silence as well.

And because Judaism did not proclaim a theology we have a further difficulty as well, and that is, perceiving

the true nature of what we might call quasi-theological ideas.

Look, for example, at the concept of Torah. It is, on the one hand, a theological doctrine: it is the medium of God's revelations and a statement of His nature and attributes as well. But, on the other hand, Torah is an ethical concept because it contains the prescriptions and proscriptions of daily living. Or consider the idea of Prayer. Prayer is the vehicle of communication with God; Prayer often expresses the human conception of God. Yet the command to pray, the formal institution of public Prayer is an ethical command, a way of attaining the happy life. How shall we order this material? Does not a strict categorization, in itself alien to the rabbis, deprive us of the rich flavor and subtle nuance of the thoughts which motivated our people? Yet, some system is required and we can only hope it will do justice to the material.

2

One of the great problems which occupy many modern minds, if we judge by the literature published on the subject, is that of the existence of God. "Do you believe in God?" is one of the most frequently asked questions. But to Johanan such a question was ridiculous. God exists, God has existed and will exist. And there is nothing more to the problem. Of course, there is a legitimate area of

discussion: we might be concerned with some of God's attributes: can He do such and such? Is this outweighed by some other attribute? How far can man go on his independent way? Questions such as these did come to Johanan's mind.

First, there is the recognition that God's creative power is greater than man's. If a man create something, he does it in parts, one part at a time: God creates all at once.[1] This God is both sun and shield to the entire world[2] and is the only reality for Israel.[3] God possesses unlimited power,[4] and this power is used for good. As a matter of fact, Johanan would not permit us to ascribe evil to any agency of God's dominion.[5] Indeed, there is no end to God's blessing to His creatures.[6]

Man is unable to deceive or to influence God in any manner,[7] but God is always zealous to maintain his people. If, for example, God should see a generation of humankind in trouble or distress He will save it from destruction.[8] But He will not have to do this forever. At some future time the Messiah will come and will take over the

---

1. Midrash Samuel 5, Ber. R. 12.
2. Shoher Tov. 1.
3. Sotah 42a.
4. Ber. R. 41.
5. Tanhuma on Tazria.
6. Pal. Ber. at the end.
7. B.B. 16a, Commentaries on Job 2.3.
8. Sanhedrin 98b.

task of guarding the world from evil.[9]

God, in His great goodness, has given many things to man. Material things, life and health; but, he has not given everything to man. For example, God has taught the healing arts, but not all of them; man still has to search out many more.[10]

Now, although God has extensive power, He has voluntarily set limits to this power. His heavenly family must concur in His decisions.[11] And God has set a further limitation by permitting only the angels of mercy to stand before Him and to aid in reaching these decisions; angels of anger and retribution stand in the distance.[12] Even when God Himself is angry, He will attempt to act only in merciful fashion.[13]

But there are times when God can be provoked to anger and indignation, and that is when His children complain too much. The legend is recounted for us that God became annoyed at the people for their excessive wailing and crying while in the Desert. He said, as it were, "I'll give you something to cry about," and so instituted the fast of Tisha b'av, a day of lamentation and sorrow.[14]

Although God, for the most part, uses His power

---

9. Shoher Tov. 9.12.
10. Ber. R. at the beginning of 39.
11. Sanhedrin 38b.
12. Tanhuma on Tazria.
13. Pesahim 87a.
14. Sotah 35b.

in merciful fashion, Johanan was concerned with those great national calamities such as war and famine and earthquake, which uproot hundreds upon thousands of people. How can this be explained? Is God merciful, are these a judgment upon people for their sinning? How can we understand theodicy, or the presence of evil in a world which is good? Johanan offers one answer, which, the modern mind might say, begs the question. And yet, it is a notable exposition. Johanan utilizes Exodus 3.14, "I am that I am," for his interpretation. He says, "I am that I am," is the attribute of mercy which God shows to individuals; the attribute of judgment, anger and retribution obtains when dealing with whole groups.[15]

To the ancients, God has so much power, used in such beneficial fashion, that men wondered why they should be singled out for God's blessings. But, the fact that they were so blessed placed a powerful obligation upon man: the obligation to have faith in spite of adversity and sorrow. These may be present in the world, but the manifold gifts of God's goodness made faith imperative. This lesson of the necessity of faith is pictured for us by Johanan when he discusses the story of Noah and the Flood. Noah, so Johanan points out, was not a man of faith, for he refused to go into the Ark until the waters of the Flood came up to his ankles; only then was he convinced that God would

---

15. Exodus R. to that verse.

truly work His Will upon the world.[16]

In fine, then, Johanan believed in God as the creative power in the universe, who uses this power to aid and support His creatures; in spite of setbacks man must have faith in the ultimate goodness of God.

3

To live may be to strive, but to strive is not always to succeed. Often, in spite of our best efforts our life is one of sorrow and travail. And out of the sorrow which so often inheres in our life, there is born the hope for a better world, a more pleasant existence, where all wrongs will be requited, the wicked punished, and the righteous live a life of eternal bliss.

This thought has motivated many peoples throughout the ages, and it forms a large part of the literature of the Jew. And although it is a complex area of thought, our sage, Johanan b. Nappaha deals with it in but cursory fashion.

Johanan believes there will be resurrection for the dead; this is based upon Isaiah 52.8, "Hark, thy watchmen! they lift up the voice, together will they sing; for they shall see, eye to eye, the Lord returning to Zion." It does not say, "they did sing," but rather, "they will

16. Ber. R. 32.

sing." Hence, there is resurrection.[17] The purpose of this resurrection is to punish those who have been wicked and to reward the righteous.[18] The fate of the wicked is not mentioned, but the righteous are promised entry into a world far different from the world they left.[19] It will be a good world[20] in which all the righteous will be called by the name of God.[21] The center of this newer and better world will be Jerusalem[22] which will see the Temple restored in all its glory.[23] The thought that Jerusalem will be the home of all the righteous in the next world is given telling form by the statement that "in this world all may go up to Jerusalem, but in the next world an invitation will be required."[24]

This type of thinking, as seems evident, has the individual in mind. But the concept of the group, the entire household of Israel, has always loomed large in the thought of the rabbis. Prayer is effective in groups, and retribution is made upon groups. It is this which has given impetus to the formulation of the idea of the Messiah, a descendant of the family of David, who will come and redeem the entire assembly of Israelites, bringing peace and

17. Sanhedrin 91b.
18. Shoher Tov 1, at the end.
19. Pesahim 50a.
20. B.B. 75a.
21. Ibid. 75b.
22. Shir. R. 1.5
23. Ber. 58b.
24. B.B. 75b.

harmony with him to the entire world. This hope of redemption is basic to most rabbinic teaching; Johanan states it by pointing out that the years spent by our people in Egypt were far more worthwhile than the years spent in the Desert, for the years in Egypt were climaxed by redemption.[25]

Johanan devoted a good deal of his thought to the problem of when the Messiah will come. He believes that a period of sore distress will precede the coming of the Messiah,[26] yet he can come only in a righteous generation.[27] But, it is possible to aid the coming of the Messiah: "even though the time for the coming of the Messiah has been set, whether the people repent or no, still repentance makes it easier."[28] Johanan offers us the following schedule for the coming of the Messiah: the first year will be one of rain; the second, famine; the third year will see many people perish and those of good deeds will be few in number; the fourth year will be one of scarcity; but, in the fifth year people will eat and drink and the Torah will be renewed; the sixth year will hear thunder; war will obtain in the seventh; and in the eighth year David will come.[29]

4

The final theological concept which occupies the

25. Lamentations R. 4.22.
26. Pesikta 51b.
27. Ibid, also in Sanhedrin 98b.
28. Exodus R. 25 near the end.
29. Shir. R. 2, also Sanhedrin 97a.

thinking of R. Johanan b. Nappaha and which enters into his preaching, concerns Israel and its relations with the rest of the world. Is Israel unique among the myriad peoples of the world; does it have a special merit in God's eyes?

There can be little doubt that the thinking we perceived in Israel's hope for a future world of bliss and contentment, is also at the root of Israel's conception of its neighbors. A people which has suffered is bound to conceive of a later age when its oppressors will bow before it, and will find in it a hitherto unrecognized virtue. Such thoughts are not only comforting, they are ennobling as well for they set a task and a goal, a responsibility to live up to. So it is with Israel; it thinks of the other nations of the world as without hope;[30] itself as blessed.

There is, of course, sound historical reason for Johanan expressing these ideas. The age in which he lived did suffer from the harsh treatment meted out by its Roman overlords. This he expressed in a number of striking passages, as for example when he compares Rome to a pen which can only write deeds of tyranny.[31] Rome is also the monster in the eschatalogical passages in the book of Daniel.[32]

30. R.H. 23b.
31. Pesahim 118a, See also Jastrow, Dictionary, p. 1328.
32. Deut.7.8, See Ber. R. 77, Lev. R. 12.

But, interestingly enough, Johanan did not consider Greece to be in the same category, though other rabbis did. Johanan, as a matter of fact, expressed affection for Greek culture, and suggests it may even have helped to preserve Judaism.[33] He also permitted the teaching of the Greek language, to boys in order that they might be able to detect any slanders made against them in that language, and to girls for he thought it an ornament.[34]

But in spite of this friendship for Greece the basic notion of the superiority of Israel prevails. Israel is the fence for all the world.[35] Israel possesses more worthwhile characteristics: "he who eats Israelite bread has tasted really good bread."[36] Even the land itself is singled out for praise as, for example, this statement: "He who walks four cubits in the land of Israel may be confident of attaining the World to Come."[37]

The other nations of the world should not be dismayed at the special status God has given Israel for they had the very same opportunity. The other lands were

---

33. Ber. R. 37 where discussing Gen. 9.23 he awards Greece the philosopher's mantle, for performing praiseworthy acts. See also Tanhuma on Noah.
34. Pal. Peah 1.1. Bacher is in error when he implies that Johanan forbade the teaching of Greek to boys. The prohibition which he detects in the passage is actually an interpolation; the next succeeding statement refers back to the prior question of permitting it to be taught. See Bacher, p. 47.
35. Exodus R.2, near the end.
36. Sanhedrin 104a.
37. Ket. 111b.

offered Yahweh, but only Israel accepted.[38] This is the idea behind the following legend which Johanan recounts: There was once a king who entered a province, taking with him generals, captains and government officials. One of the leaders of the province said, "I will take a general to my house." Yet another said, "I will take one of the government officials to my house." But a shrewd man who was there said, "I will take the king to my house, for while the others may pass away, the king will not." In like fashion there are the countries of the world which worship the sun and the moon or idols of wood and stone. But Israel worships the Eternal One, the Holy One, Blessed Be He."[39]

The other nations of the world will eventually realize what they have lost by refusing to accept Yahweh and will try to entice Israel away from its God. These other nations will point out how small Israel is, and how it suffers. Israel will answer that the Torah is all they need; suffering and size do not matter.[40] As a matter of fact, Israel is so zealous for the Torah that its study is forbidden to non-Jews.[41] The land itself is forbidden to the non-Jew; it cannot be sold to anyone except a Jew.[42]

---

38. A.Z. 2b, Exodus R. 5.
39. Lamentations R. on 3.24.
40. Pesikta 139b.
41. Sanhedrin 59b.
42. This is the basis of an argument with R. Joshua b. Levi. See Bek. 55a, Sanhedrin 108b. There are those who say that Johanan's prohibition against using wine mixed by a heathen is based on this same reason; it seems more likely, when the context of the passage is considered, that the reason for that prohibition is to prevent such a mixture from being offered to a Nazir by mistake. See A.Z. 58b.

Johanan is so confident of the faithfulness of the household of Israel, of its refusal to be led from the path of its election, that he advises Israel to search out and to investigate other gods so they may see for themselves the superiority of the God of Israel.[43]

But Johanan offers a healthy counterbalance to all of these affirmations of Israel's superiority. He tells us that non-Jews are not idolators merely because they have not accepted Judaism; they must actually perform an idolatrous act to be so considered.[44] As a matter of fact, Israel has no premium on wisdom; wisdom is wisdom no matter what the source.[45] At the same time, though, proselytes are welcomed.[46] But even proselytes are not needed in order to make sure that the God of Israel will rule the entire world. God gave a portion of His power to the idolators so that in the future they would be able to accept Him.[47]

But this is for the future, for Israel is a dispersed people. Though dispersed, however, Israel will return to its own land,[48] and all of the nations which Israel

---

43. Ber. 9a.
44. Hullin 13b.
45. Meg. 16b.
46. Pal. Sanhedrin 29b, "Reject the proselyte with one hand and welcome him with the other, not as did Elisha who rejected with both hands."
47. Midrash to Psalms, section 31.2.
48. Ibid, section 70.1.

served will do homage to it.[49] That day will be like the very one on which the heavens and the earth were made.[50]

5

The amoraic period was an uncreative one, theologically speaking. Most of the ideas had been formulated and expressed in mishnaic times. Hence, it is not surprising to observe that Johanan was neither complete nor profound in expressing his own notions of God, man, Israel and the nations of the world. Johanan, we need recall, was primarily the preacher, the aggadist. Theology entered his utterances only when it would serve the function of giving hope and strength to the people. To formulate an abstract metaphysic was an unnecessary task.

But the ideas which he did express are the basic ones. God is the ruler of the world, and that rule is expressed through mercy. There is a future life, not because we are so vain as to wish to preserve our life forever, but because we want to see the things for which we have worked and striven find some fulfillment. We know we shall find reward for our efforts; even the nations of the world, against whom we may have had to labor, will eventually recognize the message we bring. Are not these magnificent ideas for our age?

---

49. Lamentations R., Pesiha 21.
50. Pesahim 88b.

CHAPTER 4

Ethics

Detractors of Judaism are fond of noting the nomistic base upon which the religion is built, and then emphasizing the greater humanity and love found in later faiths. Even if we should agree that nomism is an inferior philosophy - something which many people will challenge - it would still be necessary to point out that Judaism is far from being exclusively nomistic. To affirm such a thought would be to show ignorance of the vast ethical literature which Judaism has produced.

Ethical literature is, of course, anti-nomian. For the function of ethics is not to compel people to do things, but rather to exhort and persuade them that a given path is a high and lofty way. Law, on the other hand, need only legislate and compel for it to induce proper action. If all were law, if all were compulsion and conformity, then there would be no need to use moral suasion.

The answer is that all religion is both nomian and anti-nomian. Any formulation of doctrine backed up with the sanction of religion has the force of law; any moral statement which urges action rests on a different base. And this is true even though both - law and ethics - would require the same performance.

Jewish ethics, like Jewish theology, is a nebulous field. Many significant ideas taught by the rabbis fall under both categories. Our sage, Johanan b. Nappaha, was less interested in creating a formal system than in preaching to his people; hence he will often speak of the same concept in both theological and ethical terms. Yet, it is possible to discern a certain pattern and approach to the material. In this chapter, we shall present the moral imperatives which are behind Johanan's teaching.

2

Torah occupies a dual role in Jewish life. On the one hand, the Torah is a literary document containing the revelation of God to His people in legal and legendary form, and this it is which makes it of profound value. On the other hand, the Torah is a source of God's revelation to future ages, and this makes the perpetual study of Torah a way of life in itself.

The first of these conceptions of Torah is expressed in Johanan's statement that, "if the Torah had not been given we might have learned decency from the cat and regard for property from the ant."[1] God considered His revelation so necessary that He rushed to give it,[2] hoping

1. Eruvin 100a.
2. Pesikta 101b, The text is corrupt; see Jastrow, Dictionary, p. 1150.

all men would accept it.[3] The Torah is likened to a "city of refuge,"[4] and to a "tree of life."[5] The Torah is so important that in the future, when even the Prophets and Writings will disappear, the Torah will remain in its pristine glory.[6]

The second idea, that the Torah should be the subject of constant study, finds expression in the thought that one should "eat of this good fruit" while still a young man.[7] As a matter of fact, one should not get married until a substantial amount of studying has been accomplished, for a wife is a millstone around the neck.[8] Torah should be studied even at night,[9] and even up to the hour of death.[10] However, Johanan considers the Torah to be a form of work from which one abstains on holidays.[11]

The Torah will preserve life;[12] why, all you have to do is to examine the many years allotted to the sages![13] The study of Torah will lead to life in the World to Come,[14] but forsaking Torah will lead to Gehinnom.[15] And, of course, the sages are considered quite meritorious for devoting

---

3. Sanhedrin 99a.
4. Mak. 10b.
5. Taan. 7b.
6. Pal. Meg. 1 (70d.)
7. Bacher, p. 19, additional note.
8. Kid. 29a.
9. Men. 110a, Lev. R. at beginning of 49.
10. Shab. 8[illegible]b.
11. Pal. Demai 7[illegible]3 (26b)
12. Ber. 14b.
13. Pesahim 87b.
14. Shir. R. 6.2.
15. B.B. 79b.

themselves to Torah: all men must be certain to praise scholars,[16] and even the prophets spoke only on behalf of "one who gives his daughter in marriage to a scholar, or who conducts business for the benefit of a scholar, or who allows the scholar the use of his possessions."[17]

The scholar has a corresponding responsibility. "He who studies but does not teach is like a myrtle in the wilderness,"[18] or he is considered as one who withheld help from a friend in need.[19] Such a laggard may even be afflicted with ugliness and despair.[20] However, he should not teach for money, even though he is permitted to accept a gift for instructing in the cantillation of the Torah.[21]

Learning is higher than sacerdotal status: "the learned bastard is better than an ignorant priest."[22] But, anyone who profanes the Torah will be "uprooted from the world."[23] Nor is study any guarantee that punishment will not be meted out by God for wrongdoing.[24] Study should always be done in a spirit of humility.[25]

---

16. Shab. 105a.
17. Ber. 34b.
18. R. H. 23a.
19. Ket. 96b.
20. Ber. 5b.
21. Ned. 37b.
22. Pal. Shab. 2.3 (13.c)
23. Ned. 62b.
24. Ber. 5a.
25. Sota 21a, Eruvin 55b, Pal. M.K. 3.7 (83.d)

3

The institution of both public and private prayer is so much a part of traditional Judaism that it is hardly commented upon in any theoretical sense. Johanan speaks of prayer only occasionally. He tells us that a person should always walk in front of a synagogue - never around the back - so that if he should feel an urge to pray he may do so more easily.[26] The words of prayer are equal in importance to the words by which God created the world.[27] Prayer should be in Hebrew and not in Aramaic, because the angels do not understand Aramaic.[28] Nor should prayers be overly long.[29] A person should not begin the morning prayer until he has performed his ablutions,[30] and prayer should be said only in the place appointed for it.[31] Prayer should be said with a congregation,[32] and never on a high elevation because it would contradict Psalm 130.1, "Out of the depths have I called Thee."[33] The place of prayer should be quiet in order to induce a reverent state of mind.[34] And prayer should be practical. An example of this, says Johanan, is for a אשה to pray that she may not stumble and sin.[35]

---

26. Ber. 61a.
27. R.H. 32a, Meg. 21b.
28. Shab. 12b, Sotah 36b.
29. Ber. 32a.
30. Pal. Meg. 1.9.
31. Ber. 6b.
32. Pal. Ber. 5.1.
33. Pal. Meg. 1.9.
34. Ber. 29b, Shab. 118a.
35. Sotah 22a, Eliahu Zuta, 17, at the end.

Prayer is efficacious: "he who says גאל ישראל in the Amidah will surely help to bring on the Messianic age.[36]

4

While the study of Torah and the practice of Prayer are virtues in themselves, they serve a higher purpose if they lead to the performance of noble acts with one's fellowmen. Even reverence for God is not as good as leading the proper life.[37] And sin, the antithesis of the good life, can only cause more and greater sin.[38]

Anyone can sin, even a king. For this reason, Johanan teaches that kingly rule should be exercised only for fixed periods.[39] And every man should be on the lookout to do good deeds just as the helmsman on a ship is on the lookout to steer the proper course.[40] The only time a man may desist from doing good is at the hour of his death.[41]

The good deeds that a man should do are the simple ones; a man should not try to reform the entire world. For example, "a bachelor who lives in a large city should not sin; a man should always return lost goods to their owner; a rich man should give charity in private."[42] These

36. Ber. 4a.
37. B.B. 15a.
38. Hag. 5a, also Sota 4b where pride leads to sin.
39. Ruth R. 1 et. al.
40. Pesikta 169a, See also Jastrow, p. 1313.
41. Shab. 30a.
42. Pesakim 113b.

are simple, yet vitally important tasks. Each one must be done because every blessing which God gives to man must be earned by him.[43]

Johanan considers the man who steals as one who murders,[44] or as one who worships idols or performs incest.[45] Gossipers and slanderers cannot give testimony in legal proceedings.[46] Concerning intoxication, Johanan offers the balanced view that drinking in itself is not evil, but only drinking to excess.[47]

A man should always do acts of kindness and generosity wherever he can; such acts are of greater value than giving charity, for charity is an obligation while kindness and generosity are voluntary.[48] A man should always visit the sick,[49] and should always welcome the stranger who enters the House of Study.[50]

The orphan is the subject of many an utterance: "she who raises an orphan is considered as if she bore him";[51] and family life is an important area of the preacher's consideration, as for example the statement that a man has greater obligation to his father than to any other.[52] The same idea of family loyalty and love is behind the statement

---

43. Midrash Samuel 27.
44. B.K. 119b.
45. Lev. R. 33.
46. Eruvin 15b.
47. Ber. 56b.
48. Pal. Peah 1.1 where it says, גמילות חסדים חביבה יותר מן הצדקה.
49. Midrash to Psalms 41.2.
50. Bacher, p. 20, note 3.
51. Sanhedrin 19b.
52. Ber. R. 94

which Johanan makes when commenting on Genesis 30.8, "And Rachel said, 'with mighty wrestling have I wrestled.'" Johanan says, "perhaps the girl might say I should have been a bride before my sister and will go and try to interfere. But she should accept the fact that she had not been found worthy and thank God that the world will be built up through another."[53]

A man should not squander his inheritance;[54] he should be friendly to all;[55] men should be neat in their dress;[56] and good manners are important.[57]

R. Johanan offers many comments on the virtue of marriage. He tells us the verse from Koheleth (4.9), "Two are better than one," obviously refers to the institution of marriage.[58] Marriage is ordained by God,[59] and are made in heaven.[60] This is true even though it often seems as hard to pair men and women as to split the Sea![61] The wife takes on the attributes of the husband: the wife of a robber is like a robber and the wife of a good man is like that person. A man should be faithful to his wife,[62] and the man who loses his wife through death is like the Temple destroyed.[63]

---

53. Ber. R. 71 near the end.
54. Hul. 84b.
55. Ket. 111b.
56. Shab. 114a.
57. Sanhedrin 101a.
58. Koheleth R. to that verse.
59. Sotah 12b.
60. Sotah 2a.
61. Pesikta 80a.
62. Sotah 10b.
63. Sanhedrin 22b.

Johanan counsels moderation in political action as well as in social action. He tells us, for example, that one should not judge the judges,[64] and that even if a slave is deceived or mistreated he should not rebel, for such is the lot of slaves.[65]

A man is judged by his actions; if he was bad in the past there is reason to think he will be bad in the future.[66] And a man should always complete what he sets out to do, otherwise he will be considered irresponsible and negligent. He should complete whatever he undertakes even if it will turn out badly.[67] But if a man should err and not perform a certain ritual he will not endanger the household of Israel.[68] As a matter of fact, even a little bit of idol worship - such as saying "amen, amen" vehemently - is permitted;[69] but, of course, visible manifestations of idol worship, such as icons may not be erected even though one may look at those which have already been set up.[70]

Johanan's liberal attitude toward the non-performance of rituals, and his tolerance of images which had already been graven, found a limit when the survival of Judaism demanded it. We find this in his reaction to a

---

64. On Ruth 1.1, See Bacher, p. 100, note 6.
65. Hag. 5a.
66. Yoma 38b.
67. Ber. R. 85.
68. M.K. 9a.
69. Shab. 119b.
70. Pal. A.Z. 3.1 (43.d)

well-known teaching of R. Shimon b. Yehozedek. R. Shimon b. Yehozedek had taught that any commandment of the Bible may be transgressed, when compelled on pain of death, except idolatry, incest and murder. R. Johanan taught, in contradiction to this statement, that one should be killed rather than transgress even the lightest of the commandments.[71]

5

As law has its sanctions which compel conformity, so ethics has its motives upon which the appeal is based. In Judaism, the appeal of ethical behavior is often a mere prudentialism. Johanan exemplifies this attitude with his teaching that one should tithe in order that he may be tithed for, should he ever require it.[72] But while this element is indubitably present, it certainly does not form the burden of his thought. The prime reason for ethical action is righteousness; proper living is itself a virtue needing no defense. "The world exists even for one righteous person."[73]

Yet, people do transgress. There are beasts lurking within all men; at times they do wreak violence on

---

71. Sanhedrin 74a,
על מאמרו של ר' שמעון בן יהוצדק: כל עבירות שבתורה אם אומרין לו לאדם עבור ולא תהרג, יעבור ואל יהרג חוץ מע'ז ג'ע וש'ד - מוסיף ר' יוחנן לא שנו אלא שלא בשעת גזרת המלכות אבל בשעת גזרת המלכות אפילו על מצוה קלה יהרג ואל יעבור.

72. Taan 8a.
73. Yoma 38b.

the world. It is taught that the Temple itself was destroyed by the sins of Israel.[74]

Ever since the time of the prophet Ezekiel, Judaism has taught that responsibility for such wickedness is an individual one; each man is accountable for his own sins. Johanan affirms this belief with the statement that זכות אבות, the Merit of the Patriarchs which is conferred upon all Israel, ceased with the death of Hezekiah.[75]

But if each man is accountable to God for his own actions, there is also repentance. Every one possesses the power to forsake sin and to return to God. Repentance is always available;[76] it is good because it prevents God from having to exercise His attribute of judgment.[77] The only hindrance to repentance is with a man who leads others to sin; such a one, says Johanan, cannot repent.[78]

These then, are the theological ideas underlying Johanan's preaching and teaching.

---

74. Shir. R. 1.4.
75. Shab. 55b.
76. Midrash to **Psalms**, section 23.1; B.B. 16a, Ex. R. 13.
77. R.H. 17a, citing Is. 7.10,
78. Sanhedrin 107.b.

CONCLUSION

A Lesson from the Past

History is a fickle thing: those who are enthroned as the outstanding figures of one age are often deposed by another. The great happenings and world events are differently explained by the various ages. Revisionism becomes almost the sine qua non of the historian's craft. At times this is dangerous, because history can be rewritten so as to deceive and falsify. But more often this rewriting of history represents an advance in understanding and a greater interpretive ability.

Be that as it may, the ages have remained firm in at least this one judgment. Johanan b. Nappaha was considered in his own lifetime to be one of the foremost of the Palestinian Amoraim; our own age cannot quarrel with the verdict. We have seen his mastery of traditional material, some of his useful legal decisions, and his sharp homiletic insight. We have become aware of the influence of his academy, the documents which emanated therefrom. Johanan was a preacher and teacher par excellence.

The commanding position he held in his own period would be enough to enshrine him in the age-old consciousness of our people; yet, it is not unfair to ask whether he has any relevance for our own time.

2

The poets are fond of describing our age as the "age of anxiety"; certainly the sobriquet is not undeserved. War, and the threat of war, economic and social dislocation seem an almost inevitable part of our daily existence. We pick up our newspapers or turn on our radios almost expecting to be informed of some new tragedy or greater horror. And we <u>are</u> afraid! And if the fear which grips us is not as great as some professional pessimists would have it, it is also true that other times were happier and more secure.

Johanan, I believe, offers us some help. He reminds us of the requirement of faith, and more than that, of a faith which leads to action. It must be action which is informed by the spirit of tolerance and understanding; it must be action which is broad in outlook, yet cautious in its manifestations. But it is action, it is that irreversible commitment to a religion which has learned from its history the need to work and fight for what is right and true. Judaism can play a role in the modern world; we have something to offer. Johanan b. Nappaha, the Aggadist reminds us of that.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS CONSULTED OR QUOTED

Primary Sources:

Talmudim and Midrashim as cited in the Notes.

Secondary Sources:

Bacher, W. אגדת אמוראי ארץ-ישראל
Tel Aviv, D'vir, 1926.

Bettan, Israel. Studies in Jewish Preaching.
Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Press, 1939.

Graetz, H. History of the Jews.
Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1893.

Jastrow, Marcus. Dictionary.
New York, Pardes, 1950.

Mielziner, M. Introduction to the Talmud.
New York, Bloch Publishing Co., 1925.

Moore, George Foote. Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1927.

Schechter, S. Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology.
New York, Macmillan, 1909.

Strack, Hermann L. Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1931.