A SECOND CENTURY JEWISH-GNOSTIC DEBATE: RABBI JOSE BEN HALAFTA AND THE MATRONA *

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Of the many encounters between Jews and non-Jews recorded in rabbinic literature, surely the most elusive and provocative are the epigrammatic discussions between sages and upper class Roman women during the Imperial Period. In eighteen passages found in various midrashim, R. Jose Ben Halafta, head of the academy in Sepphoris in the second half of the second century C.E., confronts an anonymous "matrona." In the following study, we have identified all of the pertinent passages, and propose to examine the entire corpus afresh, with due attention to its historical and religious background).

Previous investigators experienced considerable difficulty in assigning a convincing religious allegiance to the matrona, whether pagan, Christian or Gnostic2). Two elements contributing to this difficulty are the cryptic nature of the questions asked and the answers given in the midrashim and, in most instances, the absence of parallel passages that can help in elucidating their meaning. When considered individually, some of the midrashim are extremely puzzling; however when they are studied as a corpus, many of these puzzles yield meaning. The midrashim emerge as mutually supporting elements in a coherent structure, and that structure is consistent with what is known of second century Gnosticism. The

1) For the most complete listing of the Rabbi Jose-matrona debates see Arthur MARMORSTEIN, "Midrash Abachir," Devir 1 (1923), 133 n. 7. This list also includes a question by the matrona which is found only in Daat Zekenim to Gen. 32:7. See n. 92 below. See also BACHER, 165-170. The Rabbi Jose-matrona confrontations are variously treated by Zechariah FRANKEL in "Zur Geschichte der judischen Religionsgespräche," MGWJ 4 (1855), 205-210; BUCHLER, Minim, 245-275; HERR, 123-150; and BERGMANN, where the midrashim are arranged topically. See his index. See also URBACH, The Sages, 210-212, 471-472.

2) See preceding note. The conclusions of the older studies were, of course, limited by the paucity of the non-rabbinic data.
constellation of themes enunciated by the matrona form a complete Gnostic theology, and when they are compared with ideas emerging from the study of newly available Gnostic texts\(^3\), the correspondence is impressive. From the responses of R. Jose, we can derive an equally coherent statement of rabbinic theology. The two religious systems, Gnostic and rabbinic, face each other across the revealed text of Scripture, which is invoked by both controversialists to frame and support their opposing contentions.

Two anticipatory questions arise: can the midrashim in question, embedded in contextual layers which cannot themselves be reliably dated, be ascribed with any certainty to R. Jose? Can the entire polemic be regarded as a historical encounter between two actual antagonists, rather than as a conventional literary vehicle in which the ostensible literary opponent is merely a fiction mouthing widely known arguments?

After all, many of the questions raised by the matrona were regarded as legitimate exegetical problems within the rabbinic schools. Our proposal that these midrashim be treated as a unit does not depend on a demonstration—obviously impossible—that they reflect actual encounters between specific individuals. Whatever the historical and literary impetus for enclosing their contents in this unusual polemical framework, we believe that they record the major arguments in the second century Gnostic-Jewish debate, as preserved by Jewish spokesmen. Later redactors may no longer have recognized Rabbi Jose’s opponent as a Gnostic, but they recognized and preserved the language of religious polemic and the second century Galilean provenance.

There are several a priori reasons for treating this group of midrashim as a unit. First, although a wide variety of encounters between sages and matronas is reported in the literature, both in Palestine and in Rome itself, the passages involving R. Jose are

\(^3\) The literature on Gnosticism is by now so extensive that it is impossible to suggest its scope in a footnote. A selected listing of primary sources and secondary works such as that assembled by Robert Haardt, *Gnosis: Character and Testimony* (Leiden: 1971), 398-416, quite helpful at the time of its publication, is by now inadequate. An impressive attempt to keep pace with the proliferation of literature is the on-going bibliography of David M. Schôlar, first published as *Nag Hammadi Bibliography: 1948-1969* (Leiden: 1971), and now followed by regular supplements in *Novum Testamentum*. Seven have appeared to date, in issues XIII (1971), XIV (1972), XV (1973), XVI (1974), XVII (1975), XIX (1977), and XX (1978).