
The author seeks to define the status of the Sages within the Jewish society of the 3rd and 4th centuries in the Land of Israel. The contradictory statements about the influence of the Sages within the Jewish community of that time are one of the main motives for that aim. As expected, the author responds to the somewhat harsh thesis according to which our view of the Sages is incorrect, since we depend on the sources left behind precisely by the group under discussion or, in other words, that the actual role of the Sages in the Jewish community has been of much less importance than it seems today. As the opposite the author posits, surprisingly enough, the "romantic" view which ascribes to the Sages the whole and only really relevant leadership of the Jews in the country. Between these two extremes the author tries to find—as far as possible—the historical truth.

Whilst the formulation of the false alternative at the beginning is already very well balanced, this remains the prevailing attitude throughout the book. The author is not only aware of the methodological problems involved in such a kind of historical study, but makes them also clear to his reader (Introduction). After all, he will have to draw not a few conclusions about the sociological conditions in Israel from rabbinic sources which have been formulated in their last (and sometimes only) form in Babylonia. Even more difficult is the problem posed by the nature of rabbinic literature, its sometimes inexact transmission of the names of certain rabbis who said this or that. But precisely those names are of immense importance, since they may give the key to define whether or not one deals with authorities of the centuries under discussion.

The optimistic answers of the author to these challenges are not a mere introductory advice, but a working technique applied throughout the study. This general remark, though, does not apply to every part of the book. We will return to this point later.

The study is divided into five parts. The author starts with some remarks about the historical situation at the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century. He argues that the changes within the Jewish society influenced the position of the Sages. The urbanization, the erec-
tion of institutions (like the רמב"ם) and the new attitude of the Sages to the people are called to our attention, as are the special role of Rabbi Yehuda and the relations of the Sages towards the Galilean population.

The second chapter describes the inner structure of the Sages as a group. Concerning their ideology Levine lists the known features of the inner-rabbinic ideals as the study and fulfilment of the Law. More in the sociological sense, he defines the group according to some special rights the Sages wanted to get, as well as their mutual help. The general picture arrived at is that of a closed society (here Levine uses the evidence from Bet Shean) with consciousness of its responsibility for the general population, though a certain feeling of an elite is ascribed to the Sages throughout. The inner rivalry between the Sages is alluded to by giving some examples. One of the outstanding questions dealt with in this chapter is that of the historical existence of a central "Sanhedrin" in the 3rd and 4th centuries, which the author denies.

Chapter three inquires especially about the relation of the Sages to society in general. Levine gives certain aspects of the ambivalent relations which include not only the acceptance of the Sages by the people, expressed by some of the rabbinic tales, but also accounts for the struggles and sometimes even hostile feelings between the groups. Interesting are his observations that not only the negative sayings about the רחמים אין are reduced by the Sages within the country of Israel during the third century compared to those during the second century, but that most of the material which reached us is contained in Babylonian traditions.

Chapter four contains the discussions about the patriarch and his relations to the Sages as well as the public life of the Sages. For the first subject the author follows a chronological scheme and deals mainly with Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehudah III. The second allows for a discussion of the Sages' involvement in financial matters as well as their relations to the upper classes in Galilee (After all, the family of the patriarch was one of the richest within the Jewish community). Here a special section is assigned to the patriarch and the upper classes. The section deals inter alia with the pagan motifs in the art of synagogues and graves. The concluding remarks emphasize again the contradictory traditions of some of the Sages against an involvement in the community as well as a certain amount of critique against the patriarch.

The last chapter is in general a summary of the main points of the book. The volume is richly illustrated and contains several maps, a bibliography (pp. 134-142), and indices of sources and names (pp. 143-154).

Although not a "sociology" of the Sages in the narrow sense of the term, this study is full of important information. As the question in the beginning makes clear, the approach of the author is balanced and avoids not only the "romantic" view of the Sages as the only representatives of