Rabbi Jesus in the Gospel of John

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In November of 2009, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the Chief Rabbi of the city of Efrat in Israel, was severely criticized for referring to "Rabbi Jesus" in a filmed interview that was subsequently posted on YouTube.{1} In an attempt to calm the storm, Rabbi Riskin subsequently retracted the statement and explained himself as follows:

My comments referred to Jesus the historical figure, the man who was not a 'Christian,' who did not hate Jews but rather was himself a committed Jew. In order to emphasize this point to a Christian audience, I referred to him as "Rabbi" Jesus, the Jewish historical Jesus as many historians such as Professors Joseph Klausner and David Flusser have proven him to be. However, let me be clear: While I refer to Jesus poetically as "Rabbi" Jesus, he was not a rabbi in the classical sense of the term. It was used only to explain to a Christian audience the Jewish Jesus, and in hindsight, the term was an inappropriate one to use.[2]

Rabbi Riskin's comments raise an interesting question. Was Jesus a Rabbi in the "classical" sense? The answer depends on what the term meant in the time of Jesus, or, for that matter, in the time of the evangelists, who do refer to him that way.[3] And whether the term is appropriate or not, there are without a doubt many Christian scholars who use it. Indeed, the scholarly and not-so-scholarly literature offers an intimate biography of Rabbi Jesus,[4] an opportunity to sit at the feet of Rabbi Jesus,[5] to walk in his dust;[6] benefit from his wisdom, and to laugh at his wit.[7]

The readiness of scholars and others to ordain Jesus as rabbi reflects a current tendency towards Christian-Jewish rapprochement which is related in part to the strong and relatively recent emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus in New Testament scholarship.[8] But whatever one's reaction to the designation of Jesus as rabbi, its antiquity cannot be denied, for the Gospels themselves refer to Jesus as such. In Matthew, Mark and John, Jesus' disciples use the term "rabbi" for Jesus, and all the Gospels at times use the term "teacher" (*didaskalos*), which may well reflect the same designation. And, as Bruce Chilton documented in his recent SBL paper on "Rabbi Jesus in the Gospel According to St. John," all of the activities associated with Jesus as rabbi in the Gospel of John correspond to activities associated in rabbinic literature from the third century onwards with figures known as rabbis.[9]

From a historical perspective, the Gospels' use of "rabbi" in association with Jesus may provide valuable evidence for the usage of "rabbi" as a title in the first century prior to the destruction of the Temple, which in turn may tell us something about the organized life of second temple Judaism in the land of Israel.[10] The term clearly expresses respect and implies an acknowledgement of that person's authority. Whether it was a full-fledged title or merely a form of address, the term may serve as a lens through which to think or rethink the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, or perhaps even the structure and value system of the Jesus movement that extended beyond Jesus' death.

If so, we might wonder, for example, whether the model allowed for the same sort of continuity that may have characterized rabbinic Judaism, in which disciples — or students — become teachers in their own right. When it comes to the depiction of Jesus as rabbi in the Gospel of John, one might ask whether and how the title was reflected in the organization and history of the Johannine community, or whether, alternatively, the use of the title might be an argument either for John's

value for the study of the historical Jesus, or for his knowledge of the Gospels of Matthew and/or Mark.

These are all interesting questions. But my focus in this paper is on another point altogether: the seeming contradiction between the Gospel's readiness to refer to Jesus as a rabbi alongside its refusal to refer to Jesus as a Jew, a *ioudaios*. This disjuncture is puzzling because — unlike, say, teacher, Lord, master, or many other terms used for Jesus in the Fourth Gospel — "Rabbi" is a quintessentially Jewish term, designating someone who holds a respected position and perhaps exercises a leadership role within a Jewish group. Why deny Jesus the designation of *ioudaios* and still identify him so prominently as a rabbi?

To consider this matter, I will first look closely at the designation of Jesus as a rabbi: who calls him this? In what contexts? Second, I will look briefly at the non-designation of Jesus as a *ioudaios*, and offer some suggestions as to the reasons why. Finally, I will speculate on why a non-*ioudaios* like Jesus can nevertheless be called rabbi. I will argue that this disjunction may point to the need of the Johannine community — the implied audience for this Gospel — to distance itself from Jewish community as such, and, at the same time, maintain some central aspects of a Jewish value system, liturgical calendar, and communal practice.

Jesus as Rabbi

The term "Rabbi" appears 8 times in the Gospel of John, all within the first eleven chapters. Neither the narrator nor Jesus himself uses the term of Jesus, or of anyone else. In 7 of these verses, the term appears in the words of a single disciple (Nathanael; 1:49), a potential disciple (Nicodemus; 3:2) or the disciples as a group (1:38; 3:26; 4:31; 9:2; 11:8). In 6:25 it is the Jewish crowd that calls Jesus Rabbi, after they have eaten their fill of loaves and fishes.

The content and context of the "rabbi" statements vary considerably. In 1:38, two of John the Baptist's disciples ask Jesus where he is staying. In 1:49, Nathanael proclaims this rabbi to be the Son of God and the King of Israel. In 3:2, Nicodemus makes a more modest claim, calling Jesus a teacher who has come from God. In 3:26, the disciples express their concern about the Baptist's surge in popularity, while in 4:31 they express concern about Rabbi Jesus himself; eat something, they urge him. Similar concern for his well-being emerges in 11:8, in which the disciples are worried that if he returns to Judea, Jesus will be harmed by the "Jews" who were just now trying to stone him. And in 9:2, the disciples ask their rabbi to teach them, "who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Although the narrator himself does not use the term Rabbi, he knows what it means, as he translates it as teacher, presumably for the sake of readers who are unfamiliar with the term (1:38).

The term "teacher" also appears in the Gospel, and may be interchangeable with Rabbi, although it is not a literal translation of the term (which would be "master"). It is used by Martha of Bethany in 11:28 and by Jesus himself after the footwashing at the Last Supper: "You call me Teacher and Lord-- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Finally, a variant on the term appears in 20:16. Mary Magdalene has gone to the tomb to mourn and weep, but is astonished to find that the stone has been rolled away and the body of her beloved Jesus is not there. A short while later, she sees a man in the garden, who, to her shock, calls her by name. She recognizes him as Jesus and cries out "*Rabbouni*," which, as the narrator explains, also means teacher. Parenthetically, we might suggest that Mary's use of this term may well mark her as a disciple. Indeed, the emphatic nature of rabbouni, compared to rabbi, may even signify a special status, in keeping with her role as the first witness to Jesus' resurrected self and as the "apostle to the apostles" when Jesus tasks her with revealing to the disciples that he has

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risen from the dead.

If we look at the Gospel of John as a potential source for the life of the historical Jesus, the varying contexts in which Jesus is called Rabbi might suggest that this was indeed a term that Jesus' followers used when addressing him. If we look at the Gospel, however, as a rhetorical document, one that is trying to persuade readers to believe that Jesus is the messiah, Son of God, and thereby have life in his name — we might ask what impact this pattern of usage might have on the intended, imagined, original audience.

At its most basic level, the use of the term "rabbi" for Jesus emphasizes what we all know to be the case: that Jesus, his family, his disciples, his followers and his opponents are Jewish. Because their Jewishness is taken for granted, it is not emphasized directly in any way. Nevertheless, it is evident in numerous details. The story is explicitly set in Galilee (e.g., 2:1), Judea (e.g., 2:13) and Samaria (4:1) during the period that Pontius Pilate was the representative of Rome and Caiaphas was the high priest (between 18-26 CE). The Gospel refers to Jewish practices, such as ritual handwashing (2:6), blessing of the bread before a meal (6:11), the Sabbath (e.g., 5:9) and festivals, such as the Passover (2:13; 6:4; 12:1), the Feast of Tabernacles (7:2) and the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah; 10:22).

Jesus' regular participation in these activities confirms his Jewish identity, even when his practices do not conform to the norms and expectations of other Jews, as when he heals a lame man (5:6–9) and a blind man (9:6–7) on the Sabbath (5:18; 9:14,16). John's Jesus draws freely and frequently on the Hebrew Scriptures to argue his points (e.g., 7:38). His disciples too are Jewish; Nathanael is even called a "true Israelite" (1:47). The narrator describes the cosmological significance of Jesus, his relationship with God, his pre-existence and his role in the creation of the World using language drawn from the Jewish wisdom tradition (1:1–18), and expresses the belief that in Jesus the Hebrew scriptures are fulfilled (e.g., 18:9).

Finally, the Gospel presumes that salvation for all of humankind will arise through the intervention of the one God of Israel, who has sovereignty over the entire cosmos. As Jesus tells the Samaritan woman whom he encounters in John 4: "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). These and many other examples from the Gospel confirm and reinforce the Jewishness of Jesus, his environment and everyone with whom he interacts.

While their Jewishness is assumed, however, neither Jesus nor the disciples are directly referred to as Jews. Only once is Jesus called a Jew: by the Samaritan woman, who expresses her astonishment that contrary to common practice, a Jew is asking a Samaritan woman for a drink of water (4:9). Her words draw attention to the friction between Jews and Samaritans, and the view that for Jews, Samaritans have outsider status. But as the conversation between Jesus and the woman develops, it is clear that Jesus disregards, or even casts aside that differentiation.

The Gospel's avoidance of the term *ioudaios* for Jesus is in my view easily explained. For this Gospel, the ioudaioi, the Jews, are those who refuse to believe Jesus is the messiah and Son of God, who seek to kill him and who persecute and even kill those who believe in him. Those who believe in Jesus — or, to be more precise, in John's interpretation and representation of Jesus — whatever their ethnic, national, geographic, or cultural origins, have removed themselves from the category of ioudaioi, even if they are not yet truly identified by the category of Christians, a move that will take place some decades after the Gospel was written. If those who believe in Jesus do not fall into the category of ioudaioi, then obviously Jesus himself also does not own this label, regardless of his own ethnicity, geographical location, and cultic practices.

But if the Gospel is so careful not to label Jesus and his disciples as ioudaioi, why does it also have those disciples call Jesus their rabbi, and what does that mean for the Gospel's

understanding of Jesus' role and identity? How can Jesus be a rabbi if he is not also a *ioudaios*?

To address this question, we look first and briefly at the role of the rabbi within a Jewish context, then at the representation of Jesus as rabbi in the Gospel of John. Finally, we will consider the implications of this representation for the community's self-identification and religious practice.

Rabbi Jesus as the Interpreter of Revelation

Those who have attended a synagogue service in Europe or America may be forgiven for thinking that the Rabbi's role is principally to call out the pages in the prayer book or preside over the prayers. Those who have attended a Jewish life cycle event such as a wedding or bar mitzvah may see the Rabbi as someone who officiates at a rite of passage. These functions of the modern rabbi are at least to some degree influenced by the roles of Protestant clergy whose presence is required to administer various sacraments or render prayer efficacious. But in a Jewish context, an ordained rabbi is not needed in order for a prayer service to take place, nor do life cycle events require the presence of a rabbi in order to mark the transitions from one state to another. These are functions that became attached to the rabbinic role over time, perhaps as a consequence of Christian influence. Rather, the fundamental role of the rabbi is to interpret the divine will to those who acknowledge his or her authority to do so. Underlying this role is the assumption, or rather the belief, that God's will is expressed in revelation, that is, in Torah.

It is this same role that underlies the representation of Jesus as Rabbi in the Fourth Gospel. In referring to him as Rabbi, the Gospel asserts that Jesus is the conduit for divine revelation – the knowledge of God – to those who acknowledge his authority (in the view of the Gospel, this should mean everyone in the world). Underlying this understanding is the assumption that humankind desires eternal life (or whatever salvation might mean concretely), that eternal life is attainable only through the will of God, which is available to humankind through revelation. Knowing and doing the will of God are therefore essential if one is to overcome death and enjoy eternal life.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus, like other Jewish rabbis, is an interpreter of Torah. In the so-called Bread of Life discourse in chapter 6, Jesus interprets the manna of Exodus. In 6:31, the crowd that has enjoyed the loaves and fishes declares that "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness," referring to Exodus chapter 16:4: "As it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus explains that "it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven (6:32). In the broader context of the discourse this exegetical discussion is a prelude to the shocking declaration that Jesus is the bread from heaven, whose flesh must be eaten in order to have eternal life. But in its immediate context, Jesus is here engaging in an act of biblical interpretation. Whereas the crowd seems to attribute the manna to Moses, Jesus draws them back to the plain meaning of the text (the "pshat") in which it is God who provided the manna: "Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day" (Exodus 16:4).

In chapter 7, Jesus provides an interpretation for a puzzling claim: "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." Though there is no biblical verse that makes this claim directly, Jesus describes this as a scriptural verse, and in that sense the Gospel presents him as an authoritative interpreter, at least to readers or listeners who do not have their biblical concordances to hand. Indeed, immediately prior to Jesus' comments, the narrator tells us that the "The Jews were astonished at it, saying, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" (7:15). These examples suggest that the Torah remains authoritative, and that whatever else he might be, Jesus is an authoritative interpreter of scripture. As John 10:35 declares, "The scripture cannot be annulled" (10:35).

For the Gospel of John, however, the most important thing about scripture is that it bears witness

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to Jesus, not only in general times but also specific activities as well as the events leading to his death, and his resurrection. The Jews' lack of belief "was to fulfill the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'" (12:38); Judas' betrayal was "to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me'" (13:18). The persecution of Jesus "was to fulfill the word that is written in their law, 'They hated me without a cause'" (15:25). The soldiers who cast lots for his clothes were simply fulfilling "what the scripture says, 'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots'" (19:24) and the same was true of Jesus when he declared "I am thirsty" before his death (19:28).

For the Gospel, proper understanding of scripture is a matter of life and death, and it is this that drives a wedge between the Johannine Jesus and the Johannine Jews. As Jesus tells his Jewish opponents in John 5: 45-47: "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" For the Fourth Evangelist, then, the scriptures bear witness to Jesus, and are fulfilled in Jesus words and his deeds, his life, his death, his resurrection, in other words, his very identity as the Christ and Son of God, and his significance for humankind.

For this reason, Rabbi Jesus' exegesis of scripture always ends up in the same place: referring the true, divinely intended meaning of scripture to himself. He is the true bread of life whom God gives to the world; and he is the source of living water — the Holy Spirit — that provides refreshment to those who drink of him (7:39).

In contrast to the expectations of the Jewish crowds (and of the rabbis of later periods) Jesus' authority to interpret scripture comes not from years of study but directly from God. As Jesus declares in 7:16, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me." As God's son Jesus is God's primary representative in the world. This role qualifies him not only to interpret scripture but also to mediate God's will directly through both his words and his deeds (4:34). Just as the words of Torah do not originate with Moses but with God, so do Jesus' words and deeds not originate in him but in God, and it is for that reason that they, and he, not only interpret divine revelation but also constitute divine revelation. As he explains in 6:38-40: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me…This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

This is the fundamental message of Jesus' prayer in chapter 17, which concludes his lengthy teachings to the disciples. In that prayer, Jesus summarizes his mission as follows: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (17:6-8).

Jesus also makes some request of God. He asks God's blessing on "his own" and asks that God protect them "from the evil one" (17:15) and sanctify them in the truth (17:17). He asks that they "also, whom you have given me, maybe with me where I am, to see my glory" (17:24). These blessings extend not only to the now-eleven disciples who heard his farewell discourses, but "those who will believe in me through their word" (17:20) that is, future believers, those who "have not seen and yet believe" (20:29).

Why Jesus as Rabbi?

As their rabbi, Jesus therefore interprets the divine will — as expressed through Torah and through the person, words and deeds of Jesus himself — to his congregation, that is, those who recognize

him as having spiritual authority and accept his privileged status with regard to the relationship between God and humankind. We can now return to the question of why Jesus would be addressed by a term that is so specifically and exclusively associated with Judaism when the Gospel is so careful to dissociate Jesus, his disciples, and indeed all who believe, from Judaism and its institutions such as the Temple and the synagogue.

One answer may be found in the so-called replacement theme that many scholars have remarked upon. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as replacing familiar institutions within Judaism. In John's version of the Temple cleansing theme, for example, Jesus reinterprets the Temple as his body, evoking the destruction of the Temple that has not yet occurred at the time of Jesus but has occurred in the recent past for the Gospel's first audiences. After creating a disturbance in the temple, the Jews challenge him: ""What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body" (2:18-21). The centrality of the Temple is also challenged in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman in which he insists that worship will no longer be focused on the Temple mount in Jerusalem. Rather, "But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (4:21). Jesus himself is spirit and truth; in the future, then, worship will focus on him and not on a particular geographical location.

Most important, Jesus' coming has altered the terms of God's covenantal relationship with humankind. Until Jesus' coming it was the Jews who had a privileged status as God's chosen people by virtue of their rejection of idolatry and acceptance of the Torah as God's revealed will. Now that Jesus has come, it is those who believe in Jesus as the messiah and Son of God who enjoy that special covenantal relationship. This is the main point of the complex and difficult discourse in John 8, in which Jesus shoots down the Jews' claim to covenantal primacy as children of Abraham who have rejected the worship of other Gods and declares that their rejection of Jesus demonstrates that, far from being children of God (8:41), they have the devil as their father (8:44).

In this context, it is not difficult to conjecture that Rabbi Jesus, who receives his interpretations directly from God, replaces more traditional rabbis or teachers who must engage in years of study before their interpretations of God's will are considered authoritative. But the Gospel does not suggest that Jesus is merely a superior rabbi with a better source of information about the appropriate interpretation of scripture. Jesus not only interprets divine revelation but is himself both the content of and the conduit for divine revelation. As Jesus tells the unbelieving Jews in 8:28, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me." (8:28).

This idea and its consequences for humankind come through even more clearly in 12:48-50: "The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge, for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me." If Jesus' words are the words of God, he is both the content and the vehicle for divine revelation, the rabbi who interprets the divine will to the people, and also the one who himself constitutes that revelation. To hear, listen, obey, and believe: these are what guarantee eternal life.

Conclusion

The Gospel of John's designation of Jesus as Rabbi may or may not be a genuine historical reminiscence that dates back to the life of Jesus himself. But it also has an important rhetorical function in light of the Gospel's purpose as a whole. As we have seen, the Gospel aims to play a

crucial role in the lives of its readers, as the foundation for their faith in Jesus as the messiah and Son of God, and therefore the basis of their hope for eternal life. For the Johannine community, and, indeed, for all subsequent readers, the Gospel testified or, one might even say, embodied the words and deeds of Jesus, preserving them for posterity and thereby allowing later generations, who did not know him directly, to encounter Jesus for themselves. If all of this is a plausible construction of the role of the book in the life of the community, then one may go one step further to suggest that the book itself had scriptural status, not because it had already been accepted as authoritative by the Fathers of the Church, but because it recorded the Logos, the divine word of God. By designating Jesus as Rabbi, the Gospel could draw attention to its own special status, first, by marking its content as the Rabbi's authoritative interpretation of the divine will to its readers, and, second, by signalling that, like the sermons or teachings of other authoritative Jewish teachers or masters, it should be encountered by the community in the context of a regular liturgical gathering.

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