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A Note on Rabbinic Titles and the Communities that Create Them¹

Soon after the conclusion of the Six-Day War in 1967, the staff officer in charge of archaeological affairs in the Golan Heights of the Israel Defense Forces, Dan Urman, inaugurated a survey of antiquities in the that area. The team surveyed the remains of an abandoned village in the central Golan, where a large number of basalt relief fragments had been documented during the nineteenth century. Approaching the mosque of the village, the archaeologists noticed a large carved lintel above the door, covered with plaster but showing signs of ancient carving. Investigating further, they found the remains of a large wreath secured by an herculean knot, flanking birds grasping the ends of the

1. This essay is for Richard Joel, the “exalted” past president [*nasi*] of Yeshiva University. Many thanks to my colleagues and friends, David Berger and Stuart Miller, for their insightful comments on earlier drafts.

wreath. Most strikingly, they saw an inscription in square Hebrew script. It reads, “*Zeh beit midrasho shela’ Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar*,” “this is the study house of Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar.” This discovery was quite a sensation, being the first archaeological evidence for a *beit midrash* from the talmudic era, associated, apparently, with a *Tanna* of the fifth generation, a contemporary of Rabbi Judah the Prince. He flourished near the turn of the third century CE.² This sage is often called Eleazar HaKappar or simply Bar Kappara.



The lintel of “Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar” was discovered in secondary use above the main portal of the now-destroyed village mosque.

This discovery has become a touchstone for studies of the history of the sages in late antiquity. Whether it actually represents the study house of the known sage has been questioned, especially since we now date synagogue remains in the Golan to the fifth or sixth centuries, and not the third. Is this an actual talmudic “rabbi” at all, or the leader of some

2. Dan Urman, *Public Structures and Jewish Communities in the Golan Heights*, in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, eds. Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 433–77.

other group? Scholars are split. Some, mostly former doctoral students of Columbia historian Morton Smith, choose the former position. Others are not so sure – allowing for the possibility that this and other inscriptions from the Land of Israel reflect actual members of the rabbinic community. I fall into the latter group.³



Photo credit: Steven Fine

Basalt Lintel from Dabbura, inscribed “This is the Study House of Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar.”

I begin with the inscription of “Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar” as an entrée into the ways that sages identify themselves as such in public settings – both in antiquity and in the modern world. Recent controversies make this historical point all the more relevant. These revolve around the ways that we speak of women learned in Torah. Our communities have not yet reached a consensus as to what to call women Torah scholars. Some have chosen, and others rejected, a form of “rabbi”: rabbi, *rabbanit* (a term used historically for the rabbi’s wife), or *rabba*. Others have opted for *rosh kehilla*, “head of the community,” or the acronym *Maharat*, which stands in for “*Manhiga Hilkhaitit Ruhanit Toranit*,” denoting a woman who is a “leader in Jewish law, spirituality, and Torah,” and the more narrow and definitionally non-clerical position of *yoetzet halakha*, “advisor on Jewish law.” Some have opted for no title, or to use secular academic

3. Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Epigraphical Rabbis,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 72 (1981): 117; Hayim Lapin, “Epigraphical Rabbis: A Reconsideration,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 101 (Summer 2011): 311–46; Stuart S. Miller, “Real Sages or Nothing More than Donors and Honored Deceased? – Epigraphical Rabbis Yet Again,” in *Talmuda DeEretz Yisrael: Archaeology and the Rabbis in Late Antique Palestine*, eds. Steven Fine and Aaron Koller (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 239–74; Benzion Rosenfeld, “The Title ‘Rabbi’ in Third- to Seventh-Century Inscriptions in Palestine Revisited,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 61 (September 2010), 234–56. See also Steven Fine, *Art, History, and the Historiography of Judaism in Roman Antiquity* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 123–37.

titles (beginning with Professor Nechama Leibowitz, who called herself simply “Nechama”). The choice of terms is intense and intensely significant, personal and very local – as our communities wrestle with what to call increasingly learned women in leadership roles.

The earliest leaders mentioned by the sages had no titles at all. Hillel and Shammai had no titles. The Gospels remember differently, polemically scorning Pharisees for using titles. Thus Jesus ridicules the Pharisees in Matthew 7:5–10, which transliterated the Hebrew “rabbi” into Greek:

They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ.

In fact, Jesus is called “rabbi,” “my master” throughout the Gospels;⁴ he is the only person known by name to have borne this title during the Second Temple period. This early Christian tradition, however, may fill a hole in our knowledge of titles in latter Second Temple Judaism.

Beginning at Yavne (ca. 90 CE) the term “rabbi” or *ribbi* begins to appear, attached to the names of sages who flourished after the destruction of the Temple. Thus, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurqanos, Rabbi Akiva, and the like. Occasionally the term *rabbenu* appears, an early attestation found in a letter by Bar Kokhba that refers to one “Rabbenu Batanya bar Misa.”⁵ The more general term for a student of these teachers is *talmid ḥahamim*, “student of the sages.” The short form, *talmid ḥaham* is a modern locution, referring to a high-level sage, an *ilui*. It was not used in antiquity. The highest compliment one could offer a member

4. See, e.g., Matthew 26:25, 49; Mark 9:5, 14:45.

5. This is discussed by Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher, *Hebrew and Aramaic Studies*, ed. Z. Ben-Hayyim, et. al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1977), 456–58.

of this community was that he was a student of the sages. Side by side with *rabbi*, of course, was *rabban*, “our master,” used for some of the Patriarchs, the *nesiim* (literally, the “exalted ones”). *Nasi* was also used for Bar Kokhba, *Nesi Yisrael*. *Tosefta Eduyot* 3:4 tried to give resonance to the range of terms used during the later tannaitic period: “He who has students, his students call him *rabbi*.” When his students are forgotten, they call him *rabban*, “our master,” and when both are forgotten, they call him by his name” (*Eduyot* 3:4) Babylonian rabbinic culture developed other terms, from *rav* and *mar*, “sir,” for sages (as in Mar Ukva to *Resh Galuta*, “Head of the Exile”). Still other terms developed in later Diaspora communities, including *gaon* in early Islamic Babylonia, *haham* in Sephardic lands and *mori*, “my teacher,” in Yemen. During the medieval period, *harav* came to refer to a *rabbi* of high standing.

Medieval and early modern Christians often referred to sages as “*rabbi*,” drawing their terminology directly from New Testament usage. Nicholas of Lyra, a biblical scholar, called Rashi “*Rabbi Shlomo*,” and Maimonides was called “*Raby Moyses*.”⁶ In the modern period Hasidim limited *rebbe* to their titular leaders at about the same time that Western European Ashkenazi Jews adopted *rabbi* in vernacular languages from Christian usage to refer to their leaders. This is the situation today.

The next phase was the amalgamation of this title with more secular titles. This began in nineteenth century Germany and spread widely as Jews acquired university educations. In Germany in particular, the accretion of degree titles became a standard of excellence. One with more than one doctorate, who attained the higher rank of professor had the right to call himself “*Dr. Dr. Dr. Professor*” – a situation that continues in Germany to this day. Protestant ministers are often referred to as “*The Reverend...*” and thus as “*The Reverend Doctor...*”⁷ Rabbis have followed suit. Liberalizing communities often referred to their leaders as “*Dr. Rabbi so and so*,” and more traditional to “*Rabbi Doctor so and so*.” This parlance was particularly important, as it showed that a leader

6. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “*rabbi*.”

7. Robert Hickey, “How to Address a ‘Reverend’ in the United States,” *Honor & Respect: The Official Guide to Names, Titles, & Forms of Address*, <http://www.formsofaddress.info/Reverend.html> (accessed February 27, 2018).

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had attained both a religious and a secular pedigree, respected by both. It was important even when unused. Thus, rabbis sometimes referred to themselves as “Doctor” in one environment and as “Rabbi” in another and priests who were “Father” in church but “Doctor” in other areas of their lives. Personal and communal decisions regarding titles continue to fascinate.



Photo credit: Steven Fine

Dabbura, a Talmudic period village in the Golan Heights.

All of this to bring us back to Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar at Dabbura. Was he an actual talmudic “sage” or did his authority derive elsewhere? He was certainly not a spiritual descendant of the “rabbi” from Nazareth, but was he a “student of the sages?” Through titles, communities express who they are, and what they expect of their leaders. They are important, even in their absence, the use or non-use of titles sending powerful signals to both other clerics and the larger community. Jewish usages, especially in the modern period, have generally followed titles used for clergy of other Western religious communities. Titles mattered in antiquity, and they continue to matter as we think and rethink our communal lives today.