“Where Two or Three . . .”:
Shekhinah and Matthew 18:20:
and Beyond?

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Abstract: The term shekhinta, in Hebrew Shekhinah (“dwelling,” “[Divine] presence”), is quite common in the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible (Targumim) and in other parts of rabbinic literature. It originates from the idea of God’s dwelling in a sanctuary, especially the Jerusalem Temple, and is based on longstanding biblical traditions, but the term itself is perhaps first attested in the Greek text of 2 Maccabees 14:35. God’s dwelling, however, was not imagined as limited to the Temple, particularly at times when there was no functioning temple. The Divine presence was attributed also to other contexts, such as a gathering of judges or of small groups of people, not necessarily in a liturgical setting. One of the best-known expressions of this idea is found in Mishnah tractate Avot (3:2), which reads, “But two who are sitting together and there are words of Torah [spoken] between them, the Divine Presence [Shekhinah] rests with them.” This and similar sayings find an interesting analogy in the New Testament: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). Despite the differences, there seem to be profound connections between the different sayings, beyond a common basis in the Hebrew Bible. The Jewish and Christian idea that God may be present among those who gather for his sake may have important implications for the renewed encounter of Jews and Christians, and indeed for interreligious relations in general, without any attempt to downplay differences. As a matter of fact, the concept of Sakīna in the Qur’an and other Islamic writings is most probably related to Shekhinah, an observation that can only be touched upon in this article but can be the basis for further dialogue and scholarship.
The Origins of the Term Shekhinah

Rabbinic literature commonly expresses the idea of the presence of God by the term Shekhinah. This is an abstract feminine noun derived from the verb shakhan, which means to dwell, rest, repose, abide. This verb and its cognates are frequently used in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament with reference to God’s sanctuary and God’s dwelling among the Israelites. The term Shekhinah itself, however, never occurs in the Hebrew Bible or in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Thus, when scholars have searched for the origin of the concept, they have relied almost exclusively on the rabbinic texts themselves. While this method is legitimate, it leads to meager results, for the term is not well attested before the generation of Rabbi Aqiva in the early second century CE.

Some rabbinic references to Shekhinah may be earlier than that, but they are found in texts that have undergone changes considerably later. Therefore, they cannot be used as reliable guides. One example is the “reference to the ‘abode’ (Shekhinah) of his might in the loftiest heights” in the Aleinu prayer, which in its earliest form may go back to Temple times and is now part of the daily Jewish liturgy. Another prayer, an addition to the Eighteen Benedictions attributed to the hasidim ha-rishonim (“pious men of old”), is preserved in the Midrash on Psalms: “Merciful (Lord), in your great compassion return your Shekhinah to Zion and restore the Temple service to Jerusalem.” If we knew that the hasidim ha-rishonim were connected with the Asidaoi/Hasidim of the early second

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2. The term is also spelled Shekinah, Shekina, and in other ways, based on different modes of transcribing Hebrew. I use the transcription of the Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2nd ed., edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), vol. 18, 440–44, with contributions by various scholars regarding different contexts in which the term is used. A recent discussion in a multiauthor work is found in Das Geheimnis der Gegenwart Gottes: Zur Schechina-Vorstellung in Judentum und Christentum, ed. Bernd Janowski and Enno E. Pöppkes (WUNT 318; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).


5. The Temple Scroll, as do many Hebrew Bible texts, has God say “for I dwell in their midst” (11Q1T 46.12), using a participle of the verb shakhan.

6. Titles of rabbinic literature will be given in full, except that tractates of the Mishnah (m.), the Tosefta (t.), the Babylonian (b.), and the Jerusalem (y.) Talmud will be distinguished only by their initial letter. Much of rabbinic literature is available online through http://www.sefaria.org/ or http://www.halakhah.com/ or http://www.mechon-mamre.org/.


8. Joseph Heinemann, in Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1977), 273, considers the reference to the Divine Presence to be part of the oldest stratum of the prayer. This is possible, but his arguments are highly hypothetical.

century BCE, then this prayer could be considered a reference to the desecration of the Temple by Antiochus IV (c. 167–164 BCE). But unfortunately, we know too little about this group of “pious men of old” to ascertain the historical setting reflected here. Much less can we be sure about the original wording of the prayer.

The references to the Shekhinah (Aramaic: shekhinta) in Targum Onqelos as well as in the various recensions of the Palestinian Targum (here mostly in the expression “glory of the Shekhinah”) are numerous. Although McNamara suggests that “there is a tendency to date the Targum Onqelos and the Prophets before 135 CE,” Fraade insists that we have no reliable evidence (except among the Dead Sea Scrolls) for Aramaic Bible translations (Targumim) prior to the third century, even though they certainly contain much earlier material. Therefore, they are of limited assistance in establishing the origin of the term Shekhinah.

A more fruitful search for the origin of this concept may be conducted outside rabbinic literature. Second Maccabees, written in Greek and completed before 63 BCE and perhaps as early as 143/142 BCE, may give us a clue. While reporting events of 161 BCE, it includes a prayer of Jerusalem priests for the purity of the “Temple of your indwelling” (naon tēs sēs skēnōseōs). Skēnōsis, an abstract feminine noun, finds its closest Hebrew parallel in meaning as well as in form and sound in Shekhinah. McNamara accepts my suggestion that this instance may serve as an indication of the early use of the term. The same observation of 2 Maccabees 14:35 as the first attestation of the term had earlier been made by my late colleague Jesús Luzarraga. As a matter of fact, the Peshitta, the Syriac version of the Bible, translates skēnōsis in 2 Maccabees 14:35


16. 2 Maccabees 14:35. The parallel passage in 1 Maccabees 7:37–38 contains a different prayer. It is impossible to determine whether either is authentic. Both texts reflect the interests of the authors of the larger works: First Maccabees emphasizes the defeat of Israel’s enemies at the hands of the Hasmoneans, whereas Second Maccabees stresses the sanctity of the Temple. The term skēnōsis occurs only here in the Septuagint. Its closeness to the Hebrew verb šḥkan has been noted also by Daniel R. Schwartz (2 Maccabees Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 486. The cognate kataskēnōsis occurs in Ezekiel 37:27 (LXX, translating Hebrew mishkan), Ws 9:8, Tb 1:4. The similar noun skēnōma is often used for regular tents, but in many Psalms, as well as in Jdt 9:8 and 1 Ezra 1:48, it refers to God’s dwelling place. Unfortunately, no fragments from Qumran include these passages, except the Psalms.
17. Martin McNamara, Targum and Testament Revisited, 148–49; McNamara, Targum and New Testament (WUNT 279; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 529–530. This idea is accepted also by Marek Vaňuš, La presenza di Dio tra gli uomini: La tradizione della «shekinah» in Neofiti e in Matteo (Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologia 214; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2015), p. 48; Janowski admits that the idea is controversial but not improbable (Das Geheimnis der Gegenwart Gottes, p. 4n5).
as *shekhinta*. The same term is used eleven times in the Syriac version of the Books of Chronicles (and only here in translations from the Hebrew Bible), where it commonly but not exclusively translates the Hebrew for the “name” (shem) or the “glory” (kavod) of God. Syrian Christian authors, at least from the fourth to the thirteenth century, commonly used the term *shekhinta* in speaking of different forms of God’s presence. Apparently, they derived this usage from the Jewish Aramaic Bible translations, the *Targumim*, especially *Targum Onqelos*.

Returning to the initial use of the term *Shekhinah*, Goldberg suggested that the designation of the Temple as “House of God’s dwelling” may have been at its origin, although he was not referring to the specific passage in 2 Maccabees. Second Maccabees appears to corroborate such a conjecture by showing us an early stage of the development that led to the meaning “God’s presence,” or “God” (who is present in the Temple), instead of simply a “dwelling.” It is no longer possible to determine when this development was completed, but a date sometime before the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) is most plausible. The meaning of *Shekhinah*, however, did not remain confined to the divine presence in the sanctuary, as we shall see below.

**Shekhinah and Torah**

In rabbinic literature, *Shekhinah* came to signify all modes of God’s presence in past, present, and eschatological future. In other words, it became a synonym for God whenever and wherever God’s nearness was implied. This fact, however, did not eliminate the distinction and even tension between different forms of divine presence. As Urbach put it: “The concept of the *Shekhina* does not aim to solve the question of God’s quiddity, but to give expression to His presence in the world and His nearness to man, without at the same time, destroying the sense of distance.” Abraham Joshua Heschel, too, saw the concept of *Shekhinah* as a key idea in rabbinic Judaism.

Here I wish to concentrate on those situations for which the rabbis thought the presence of the *Shekhinah* possible among three or even two people. A passage in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, a relatively early midrash on Exodus, shows us the connection between God’s presence in the Temple and among people outside the Temple. It interprets Exodus 20:24, “In every place where I cause my name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you,” as follows:

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22. Ibid. See, however, the use of the term *Shekhinta* in the translation of 2 Maccabees 14:35, perhaps translating directly from its Greek equivalent, discussed above.
23. See Goldberg, Untersuchungen, 441.
24. Ibid., 440–43.
25. Ibid., 471–530, 457. See also 1 Kgs 8:12–13.27.
28. Günter Stemberger, while discussing proposals for earlier and later dates, suggests that the final redaction is to be dated in the second half of the third century (Einleitung in Talmud und Midrash [9th ed. Munich: Beck, 2011], 282).
Where I reveal Myself to you, that is, in the Temple. Hence, they said: The tetragrammaton\textsuperscript{29} is not to be pronounced outside of the Temple.\textsuperscript{30}—Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob says: If you come to my house I will come to your house, but if you do not come to my house I will not come to your house. The place my heart loveth, thither my feet lead me.—In connection with this passage the sages said: Wherever ten persons assemble in a synagogue the Shekinah is with them, as it is said: “God standeth in the congregation of God” (Ps 82:1).\textsuperscript{31} And how do we know that He is also with three people holding court? It says: “In the midst of the judges he judgeth” (ibid.). And how do we know that he is also with two? It is said: “Then they that feared the Lord spoke one with another,” etc. (Mal 3:16). And how do we know that He is even with one? It is said: “In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come unto thee and bless thee.”\textsuperscript{32}

This Midrash presents anonymously two opposing opinions: One restricts God’s presence to the Temple, the other affirms it also for other places. The saying of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob stands apart from them and tells us nothing about the setting of the two traditions.\textsuperscript{33} It is, however, an indication that the redactor understood the problem to be God’s presence or absence, not where the Tetragrammaton may be pronounced. We should note that the proof text for the Shekhinah presence among ten in the synagogue or “three people holding court,” that is, those who judge, is taken from a psalm that was part of every Tuesday liturgy in the Temple (\textit{m. Tamid} 7:4). This observation does not allow us to date the origin of this idea or to consider identical God’s presence inside and outside the Temple, but it weakens Goldberg’s thesis that there was no connection between the ideas of the Shekhinah in the Temple and in the community.\textsuperscript{34} The presence of the Shekhinah among three or more judges is a recurrent theme in rabbinic literature. It is assumed in criminal and civil cases as well as during their deliberations concerning the fixing of the calendar.\textsuperscript{35}

The \textit{Mekhilta} attaches no conditions other than fear of the Lord and remembrance of God’s name to the presence of the Shekhinah with one or two persons. In this it differs from most other traditions that consider occupation with Torah as the main requisite. Several sayings in the Mishnah tractate \textit{Avot} illustrate this. They include the only two occurrences of the term Shekhinah in the entire Mishnah.\textsuperscript{36} The first and best-known saying is:

\begin{quote}
33. There are two Tannaim by this name. One flourished in the late first century, the other in the mid-second century. See Stemberger, \textit{Talmud und Midrasch}, 84, 93. On the present \textit{Mekhilta} passage, see Goldberg, \textit{Untersuchungen}, 385–88, 501.


35. Ibid., 376–85.

\end{quote}
Rabbi Chananya ben Teradyon says: Two who are sitting together and there are no words of Torah [spoken] between them, this is a session of scorners, as it is said (Ps 1:1): “[Happy is the man who has] not . . . sat in the session of the scorners.” 37 But two who are sitting together and there are words of Torah [spoken] between them, the Divine Presence [Shekhinah] rests with them, as it is said (Mal 3:16): “Then those who feared the Lord spoke one with another, and the Lord hearkened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for those who feared the Lord and for those who thought upon His Name.” 38

Rabbi Chananya ben Teradyon was a contemporary of Rabbi Aqiva. According to the Talmud he died a martyr’s death in the persecution of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (c. 135 CE). His exceptional emphasis on study and observance of Torah is highlighted by the story that he was burned alive wrapped in a Torah scroll. 39 The above saying is fitting for such a man in a time of persecution, and it may be original with Chananya, including the reference to Torah. The idea of the Shekhinah with two people, however, may have existed already in the first century CE. The relation of this tradition to the above-quoted Mekhilta passage is not clear. But it is reasonable to suppose that the belief in the Shekhinah presence among at least ten people developed earlier.

A parallel to Rabbi Chananya’s saying is attributed to his contemporary Rabbi Chalafta of Sepphoris in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*. 40 He speaks of the presence of the Shekhinah with any “two or three who sit together in the marketplace and the words between them are of Torah.” 41 Similarly, in *m. Avot*, Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai (c. 100–170 CE) is quoted as saying: “When three eat at one table and do speak words of Torah there, it is as though they have eaten from the table of God.” 42 Avot continues with a variety of sayings concerning the importance of Torah in one’s life. Included is a dictum of Rabbi Chalafta of Kefar Chananiah (late second century) maintaining that the Shekhinah is with those who occupy themselves with Torah, be they ten, five, three, two, or only one. 43

In this context “Torah” should not be understood too narrowly as only the Pentateuch or as the Written and Oral Law in any strictly defined sense. In rabbinic literature, the term is used in a variety of meanings, often including all the living halakhic traditions

37. The entire passage is meant here: “Blessed is the man who . . . meditates on (or reads) his Torah day and night” (Ps 1:1–2).
40. *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* is an extracanonical tractate of rabbinic literature, with a strong dependence on parts of Tractate *Avot* of the Mishnah. Although it contains in part early traditions, its date is debated, with some scholars maintaining that it goes back to the third century, while others argue that its final redaction may be as late as the fifth to the ninth century. Version B, which is cited here and is already quoted in an eighth century text, is certainly the older version. See Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrash*, 248–51.
42. *M. Avot* 3:3. See the requirement of common prayer when three men eat together (*m. Berakhot* 7:1). Both passages underscore the sacred character of every meal.
43. *M. Avot* 3:6 (9). The prooftexts are the same as for the above quoted *Mekhilta* passage. The reference to Torah here fits the prooftexts less well than the reference to synagogue (for 10) and the law court (for 3) in the *Mekhilta*, which contains a more cohesive and probably more original tradition. See Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 387.
and their applications in life. A text dealing with the question of the Shekhinah among judges states that “also court proceedings are Torah,” and one rabbi maintained that even the everyday talk of people in the Holy Land is Torah. At least one modern homiletic commentary explains that the saying of Rabbi Chananya ben Teradyon implies an “obligation to apply and reflect the ‘words of Torah,’ its values, its norms and laws, in our everyday social and business world.” In rabbinic thought, occupation with Torah is not merely an intellectual enterprise but a sharing in God’s own activity. It is because of this that Torah is considered a way to experience his nearness, the Shekhinah.

An area in which the presence of the Shekhinah with two people is particularly stressed is married life. God is considered the third partner of the spouses. A saying attributed to Rabbi Aqiva reads as follows: “When husband and wife are worthy, the Shekhinah abides with them; when they are not worthy fire consumes them.” This saying includes a play on words and letters: Husband (‘ish: Hebrew consonants alef, yod, shin) and wife (‘ishah: alef, shin, he) minus God (YH[WH]: yod, he) equals fire (‘esh, consisting of the consonants alef, shin). Yet it is not just a word play but aims to express the idea of God’s nearness to the married partners. This and numerous other instances show the ethical implications of the presence of the Shekhinah. People must be worthy of it. Sinful behavior, such as murder, adultery, idolatry, and slander, causes its departure. On the other hand, “whoever is meek will ultimately cause the Shekhinah to dwell with man [ha-adam] on earth.”

In later developments, Shekhinah became an important concept in medieval and modern Jewish philosophy and in Kabbalistic and Hassidic Jewish mysticism. It often became an expression for feminine aspects of the Divine.

Shekhinah-Like Terminology in the Qur’an
The Arabic term Sakīna recurs six times in the Qur’an. Scholars consider it possible or certain that it is a borrowing from the Hebrew Shekhinah. Its original meaning is most probably related to the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac terminology discussed above and suggests the presence or protective intervention of Allah, although most current translations render it as “tranquility,” “(re)assurance,”

between Sakīna and divine presence may present interesting and fruitful results (e.g., see Qur’an 9:40).


Whereas it is not entirely clear how widespread the concept of Shekhinah was in the first century CE, its existence seems to be suggested by Second Maccabees, and the term may be in the background of several New Testament passages. Time and again scholars have pointed out that a most striking parallel to the saying of Chananya ben Teradyon that we quoted above (m. Avot 3:2) is found in Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (NAB). This verse certainly must be seen in the context of the entire Gospel of Matthew, which emphasizes the divine presence in Jesus also at its beginning in the reference to him as the Emmanuel or “God with us” (Mt 1:23) and in its final verse “I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20 NAB), and elsewhere (e.g., 10:40; 25:40–45).


55. All these and other translations are found at http://corpus.quran.com/, a project based at the University of Leeds.

or similar, based on the meaning of the Arabic root s-k-n (to be quiet, to be still, to be tranquil, to inhabit, to dwell). 

In at least one instance, such an interpretation seems to be forced, where there is a reference to the Sakina of/from the Lord in the Ark of the Covenant (Qur’an 2:248). Yet, even here most translations use terminology such as “the chest will come to you in which is assurance from your Lord” (Sahih International), or “the ark wherein is peace of reassurance from your Lord” (Pickthall), or “the chest in which there is tranquillity from your Lord” (Shakir). The respected but somewhat dated translation by Cambridge scholar Arthur J. Arberry leaves the term untranslated here as well as in all the other five occurrences but evidences its relation to the Hebrew: “The Ark will come to you, in it a Shechina from your Lord.” Similarly, the French translation by Régis Blachère reads “l’Arche de l’Alliance reviendra à vous, portée par les Anges, contenant une Présence Divine (sakina) [venue] de votre Seigneur.” Another important French translation, by Denise Masson, leaves the term Sakina untranslated but in a note stresses its relation to biblical and rabbinic references to Divine Presence. She also points out connections to several New Testament passages, including John 1:14. Perhaps there is a connection between this Qur’anic verse and the rabbinic idea that the Shekhinah was present in or near the Ark of the Covenant. Further studies of the relation...
Our verse forms part of a complex chapter of instructions for an early Christian community. Reference to “in my name,” although in a slightly different Greek formulation, is already found in the earlier admonition “And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me” (Mt 18:5). The phrase “two or three” is present in the advice to use “the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Mt 18:16). Thus, verse 20 is firmly linked to its surroundings.

In its immediate context, verse 20 stands between the teachings concerning reconciliation (vv. 15–17) and those concerning forgiveness (vv. 21–35). It is preceded by the promise that the prayer of two people offered in unison will be answered (v. 19) and by the bestowal of the power to bind and to loose (v. 18). Verses 19–20 are clearly set off from their context by the introductory formulas in verses 19 and 21, and by their form and contents. Yet they are also linked to what precedes by the use of related numbers (“one or two,” “two,” “two or three” vv. 16, 19, 20) and by other means.61 They may constitute two originally independent sayings, although verse 20 is redactionally linked to verse 19 by the conjunction “for” (gar).62 In an influential study, Frankemölle has argued that Matthew 18:20 is a central statement of Matthew’s ecclesiology. On this point, Luz in his important commentary on Matthew, is in full agreement with him, stating that “in 28:20, the final verse of the gospel, Matthew takes up once again the statement of v. [18:] 20. There one can finally see how important this verse is for his understanding of the church.”63 Luz goes even further, noting, “Far from being a superfluous addition . . . , it [v. 20] is the Christological center of the entire chapter.”64

Frankemölle argues in addition that the verse is due to Matthew’s redactional activity and based directly on the covenant theology of Old Testament texts about God’s presence with his people.65 He denies, however, and argues against any direct relation to or dependency from the rabbinic dicta discussed above and adduces the following arguments: (1) Chronology; (2) “two or three” is not the same as “two” in Mishnah Avot; and (3) other material differences between Matthew 18:20 and Avot 3:2.

Firstly, regarding the question of chronology, it is indeed extremely difficult to date rabbinic pronouncements. Yet an almost total renunciation of the use of rabbinic literature, as practiced by many New Testament scholars, is not the proper answer.66 In fact, it is clear from the Dead Sea Scrolls and other early sources that at least some discussions, otherwise attested only in rabbinic sources that were redacted much later, were current already in the first century BCE, if not earlier.67 Thus the attribution of a saying to a

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63. Luz, Matthew 8–20, 459.
64. Luz, Matthew 8–20, 458.
particular rabbi, though often of indicative value, cannot be taken as a reliable basis for the date of origin of the idea expressed in that saying (see also 2 Macc 14:35).

Secondly, Frankemölle is correct in maintaining that “two or three” is not the same as the “two” in m. *Avot*. Yet, he disregards the evidence of *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, which speaks precisely of “two or three.” Although the identical formulation may be coincidental (see below) or attested late, one should not simply ignore it. Thirdly, we may grant that the wording of Matthew 18:20 has important differences from the rabbinic sayings, which however do not cancel the striking similarities (see below).

Frankemölle rightly insists on the centrality of the theme of God’s being “with” his people in the entire Hebrew Bible. Yet, these unquestionable antecedents do not seem to be as close to Matthew 18:20 as the rabbinic parallels. Luz observes:

> The statement about the presence of the risen Lord Jesus in his church that is so basic for Matthew’s Christology is rooted in Jewish thought, and we should not claim with some sort of theological finesse that these declarations about Christ are superior to the rabbinic statements about the presence of the Shekinah.

70. There have been several in-depth studies of Matthew 18:20 and its context. Therefore, instead of attempting a complete exegesis, I shall address primarily the question of what light rabbinic texts may throw on verse 20 and vice versa. So far, little has been done to try to explain the nature of this relationship. One of the reasons for this certainly lies in the difficulty of relating a gospel passage dating from the first century to rabbinic sayings retracted at least over a century later. Samuel Sandmel rightly warned of “parallelomania.” And yet, a careful attempt at comparison of parallel features can be made. 


71. Despite a great amount of recent literature on Matthew 18:20 and on Shekinah, unfortunately, this statement from my original 1981 publication (175) basically still seems to hold true. An exception is an article by Pierre Lenhardt, “La Tradition d’Israël sur la Présence Divine (Shekinah) dans le Temple et dans le monde éclaire a la foi chrétienne en l’Incarnation,” *Cahiers Ratisbonne* 2 (1997), 137–62. Lenhardt studies many more New Testament passages in which he finds echoes of the Shekinah traditions. He rightly criticizes my earlier article for having focused exclusively on Matthew 18:20 (ibid. 146n16), but unfortunately I am not able, in the space of a short article, to deal with the broader subject.

Since the parallels are so close, there is a reasonable probability that some literary relationship exists. It is not to be excluded a priori that some rabbis knew Matthew’s Gospel or similar Christian traditions and adopted some of them for their own use. It is unlikely, however, that the theological development of a concept as important as Shekhinah was a direct response to Christianity. Thus, most scholars readily admit that Matthew 18:20 is based on a Jewish tradition and not vice versa. 

Davies and Allison sum up their discussion by suggesting the likelihood “that Mt 18:20 is a Christian reformulation of a rabbinic sentiment” or “a Christified bit of rabbinism.”

### Analysis of Matthew 18:20

**Two or three:** The quorum for a special form of presence may simply be left vague or it may be an echo of the “two or three witnesses” mentioned in verse 16b. There are, however, other possibilities. The concept of the Shekhinah between three judges may have been at work in this formulation. This cannot be proven, but because of the previous verses concerning church proceedings in the case of a person’s misconduct, it should not be dismissed.

1903, numerous reprints and online versions), 599, lists several instances wherein the verb yashab (“sit”) is used for meetings or assemblies.

75. E.g., Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 142; C. H. Dodd, *New Testament Studies*, 58–62; Trilling, *Das wahre Israel*, 41–42. Contrast B. T. Viviano, *Study as Worship: Aboth and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 70. The only arguments adduced in favor of Matthean priority are (a) that Matthew predates all rabbinic authorities quoted with Avot 3:2b, 6 and (b) that the quorum required makes sense in Mt 18:20 (consult v 16b) but not in Avot. But (a) applies to many tannaitic parallels to the gospels and does not account for the disagreements in attribution and the anonymity of the Mekhilta tradition and (b) fails to recognize the rabbis’ interpretation of scriptural proof texts. B. Englezakis [NTS 25 (1979), 264] denies any connection between the origin of Mt 18:20 and the Avoit sayings simply because “they are later than Matthew.”


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On the surface, the differences are quite obvious: Matthew has “my name” instead of “words of Torah” and refers to Jesus instead of the Shekhinah. These divergences, however, are more understandable when we recognize that we are dealing with a “parallel with a fixed difference.” Almost consistently the Gospels attribute to Jesus what rabbinic texts say about God and the Torah. If we further consider that the passages under consideration are distinct theological statements and not general ethical norms, the parallelism becomes even more interesting. Even though to “sit together” and to be “gathered together” are distinct formulations, they are not far from each other.

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lightly. In fact, a connection with Psalms 82:1 and its rabbinic interpretation becomes even more plausible in a parallel apocryphal saying, “Jesus said: Where there are three gods, they are gods; where there are two or one, I am with him” (Gospel of Thomas 30).

It is unclear whether there is any direct relationship between the two or three in Matthew 18:20 and in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* B quoted above.

Are gathered (*eisin . . . synēgmenoi*): It has been suggested that Matthew 18:20 refers to liturgical gatherings only. This, however, goes counter to the evidence: (a) In the NT, the verb *synagein* is rarely used for liturgical assemblies, although synagogues were of course known as places of assembly, including liturgical ones. In Matthew, where it occurs most frequently (24 times), the verb never has such connotations; (b) verse 20 speaks in a more general way than verse 19 does and does not specify a setting; (c) even verse 19 is not strictly limited to liturgical prayer; (d) verses 15–18 deal with disciplinary, not liturgical, matters; (e) 1 Corinthians 5:4, which in several respects resembles Matthew 18:20, speaks of an assembly for disciplinary action, not liturgical celebration (see Col 3:17); and (f) *m. Avot* 3:2 and similar rabbinic texts do not presuppose a liturgical setting or any formal gathering.

In my name (*eis to emon onoma*): It has frequently been indicated that this phrase translates the Hebrew/Aramaic *lishmi*. This can be rendered “for my sake.” One should compare a saying attributed to Rabbi Yohanan the Sandal-maker (mid-second century): “Every assembly which is for the sake of Heaven (*leshem shamayim*) will in the end endure; but one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure in the end” (*m. Avot* 4:11; see 5:17).

Here, as frequently in rabbinic and NT texts, Heaven is a synonym for God. We should note that several biblical texts that the rabbis connected with the Shekhinah reference God’s name. Malachi 3:16, the prooftext for the Shekhinah between two, speaks of those who “think of his name” (see also Ex 20:24). It is unclear whether in the Jewish tradition underlying Matthew 18:20 there was a reference to the Torah or to God. In several passages in the synoptic gospels Jesus takes the place of Torah. This fact, however, must be seen in conjunction with Matthew 5:17: “Think not that I have come to abolish the Law [i.e., the Torah] and the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.”

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78. David Flusser, “‘I am in the midst of them’ [Mt 18:20],” in *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 517–18n15 maintains that the “two or three” in Matthew and *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* may be mere coincidence.


82. Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels*, 156.
There am I: This statement is the most radical departure from other Jewish traditions. Some authors consider it in polemical antithesis to the rabbinic concept of God’s presence. It appears, however, that Matthew’s source does not intend to replace but to explain that idea: The Shekhinah is manifested in Jesus. This impression is reinforced by the present context, which speaks of reconciliation, prayer, and forgiveness, rather than of polemics. It obviously cannot be proven that the underlying Jewish tradition used the term Shekhinah. The likelihood, however, is rather great. We are dealing with a motif of presence that can easily be traced to notions in the Hebrew Bible. God’s dwelling in the midst of the people is emphasized in several Exodus passages, in particular “They shall make a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell (ve-shakhanti) in their midst” (Ex 25:8 NAB) and “In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you” (Ex 20:24 NRSV). But verse 20 appears to be modeled on rabbinic formulations that in this context use Shekhinah. An allusion to the concept of Shekhinah itself may probably be found in the prologue of John’s Gospel (1:14) and perhaps also in Revelation 21:3.

In their midst: Neither the rabbinic texts nor the NT presuppose a visible presence. In the rabbinic texts, the Shekhinah is sometimes imagined as standing or hovering above the people. Trilling compares the presence of Jesus “in their midst” to the Shekhinah in the Temple. He emphasizes its static nature and cultic connotations. But Goldberg has shown that although the Shekhinah is sometimes connected with a place, for example, the Temple, it is at other times associated with people or events regardless of location. Heschel emphasizes that “the desire to purge the notion of Divine Presence of its spatial connotations is reflected and highlighted in several sayings of the school of Rabbi Ishmael.”

Also in a Qumran prayer that is part of the so-called War Scroll we find similar expressions for a divine and angelic presence “in the midst” of his people.

In addition to the similarities in wording, verse 20 closely resembles m. Avot 3:2 in structure, too. Whereas Matthew 18:15–19 contains a sequence of conditional sentences (ean plus aorist subjunctive is used nine times), verse 20 uses the indicative present. In contrast to verses 15–19, it is not directed to a specific audience but has the form of a general statement, with the dependent clause in the third person. This is apparently not a redactional development but is another indication that verse 20 is, at least in part, based on a separate source.

87. Das wahre Israel, 41.
90. 1QMS 12.7–9; cf. Frankemöller, Jahwebund, 31–32.
91. Contrast Rossé, Gesù in mezzo, 146, but see iSIn151. Flusser even suggests that “it seems probable that in Mt 18:20 a lost saying of Hillel is preserved”—a daring proposal that underlines the close affinity of our verse to Jewish traditions (Flusser, “I am in the Midst of Them,” 524). Flusser’s position has been strongly criticized by Domingo Muñoz León, “Allí estoy yo en medio de ellos (Mt 18:20). Un ejempla mateano de derás de traspaso,” Revista Catalana de Teología 14 (1989): 133–48, esp. 134–42.
If, as our findings suggest, a Jewish saying underlies Matthew 18:20, the concept of God’s presence with two or three persons must have existed at least some time before the redaction of Matthew’s Gospel. Furthermore, if we can find a terminus post quem for the Jewish tradition, this applies to Matthew 18:20 as well. In this regard, however, our sources yield no precise data and we can only list the possibilities.

On the one hand, it is possible that the concept of the Shekbinah with ten or fewer people existed already during the Second Temple period, although we have no verification for this. In this case, we have no way of dating the origin of Matthew 18:20. There is, however, substantial agreement that its present formulation presupposes the Easter event, although Flusser assumes “that Mt 18:20 is an authentic saying of the ‘historical’ Jesus.”

On the other hand, it has frequently been suggested that the broadened understanding of Shekbinah may be explained most plausibly as a response to the crisis caused by the destruction of the Temple: The Shekbinah is no longer in the Temple, but under certain conditions its presence can still be experienced, even by two or three people. If this was so, Matthew 18:20 attests to the continuing links between Matthew’s source and rabbinic Judaism as it developed after the destruction of the Temple in Jamnia (Yavneh)

92. So Goldberg, Untersuchungen, 500.
93. Rudolf Bultmann, History of the Synoptic Tradition, 149; Pesch, Matthäus der Seelsorger, 37; Caba, Oración, 218; Luz, Matthew 8–20, 450. See, however, Englezakis, NTS 25 (1979): 263.
97. Similarly, also Flusser, “I am in the Midst of Them,” 517.
On the Christian side, the Vatican’s Guidelines for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (n. 4) state:

In whatever circumstances as shall prove possible and mutually acceptable, one might encourage a common meeting in the presence of God, in prayer and silent meditation, a highly efficacious way of finding that humility, that openness of heart and mind, necessary prerequisites for a deep knowledge of oneself and of others. In particular, that will be done in connection with great causes such as the struggle for peace and justice.98

On the other hand, Martin Buber affirms, in reference to a meeting with a Christian colleague, that “where two or three are truly together, they are together in the name of God.”99 Ultimately, the question is not only theological, but, especially for Jews, also historical. How can hundreds of years of separation, conflict, persecution, and indifference be overcome? Can Jews and Christians truly be together again? Hopefully, in the 21st century, at least in some situations, this question may be answered in the affirmative. The search for living in the “divine presence” or “presence of the Lord” is common to Jewish and Christian traditions and, hence, there is room at least for private personal dialogue about and support for/in this search. It may be hoped that it will be possible to include in such dialogue between Muslims and members of other religions as well.100

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