

“Where Two or Three . . .”: *Shekhinah* and Matthew 18:20: Foundations for Jewish-Christian Dialogue and Beyond?¹

Joseph Sievers
Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome

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*

1. An earlier shorter version of this article was published under the title “Where Two or Three . . .”: The Rabbinic Concept of *Shekhinah* and Mt 18:20” in *Standing before God: Studies on Prayer in Scriptures and in Tradition with Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterreicher*, edited by Asher Finkel and Lawrence Frizzell (New York: Ktav, 1981). I thank Rev. Prof. Lawrence Frizzell for granting permission to use that material here for an updated and revised publication. The contribution of Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher (1904–1993) to the preparation and practical application of *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council’s declaration on relations with non-Christian religions,

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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.

remains a shining example even today. My essay has been reprinted in *SIDIC* 17, no. 1 (1984) [English edition]: 4–10 and in *The Jewish Roots of Christian Liturgy*, ed. by E. Fisher (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), 47–61. It has been translated into French (*SIDIC* 17, no. 1 [1984] [French edition]: 4–11), Italian (*Nuova Umanità* 4, no. 20 [1982]: 56–71), and in an abbreviated version in German (*das prisma: Beiträge zur Pastoral, Katechese & Theologie* 17, no. 1 [2005]: 18–29).

The Origins of the Term *Shekhinah*²

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.³ The term *Shekhinah* itself, however, never occurs in the Hebrew Bible⁴ or in the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵ Thus, when scholars have searched for the origin of the concept, they have relied almost exclusively on the rabbinic texts themselves.⁶ While this method is legitimate, it

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. Popkes (WUNT 318; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

3. E.g., Exodus 25:8.9; 29:45; Numbers 5:3; 35:34; Psalms 74:2. For the pervasive theme of God's presence, see Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

4. Janowski has attempted to trace the concept of *Shekhinah* back to preexilic literature, in which the idea of God who "dwells among his people" is frequently to be found, but not the concept of *Shekhinah* itself (Bernd Janowski, "Shekhina I. Altes Testament," in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th ed., vol. 7, ed. Hans-Dieter Betz et al. [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004], col. 1274; Janowski, "Ich will in eurer Mitte wohnen. Struktur und Genese der exilischen *Schekina*-Theologie," *Jahrbuch für biblische Theologie* 2 [1987]: 165–93). See also Janowski, "Gottes Wohnung bei den Menschen: Eine Skizze der alttestamentlichen *Schekina*-Theologie," *Sacra Scripta* 13, no. 1 (2015): 9–33.

5. The Temple Scroll, as do many Hebrew Bible texts, has God say "for I dwell in their midst" (11QT 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

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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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."⁹ If we knew that the *hasidim ha-rishonim* were connected with the Asidaioi/Hasidim of the early second

online through <http://www.sefaria.org/> or <http://www.halakhah.com/> or <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/>.

7. For a brief overview of rabbinic references to *Shekhinah*, see Craig R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament* (CBQMS 22; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1989), 71–72, but see also the extensive and unsurpassed study by Arnold M. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen über die Vorstellungen von der Schechinah in der frühen rabbinischen Literatur* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1969).

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.

9. *Midrash Tehillim* 17, ed. S. Buber (Vilna: Romm, 1891), 127. English translation (here adapted): William Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale, 1959) I, 208. For the difficult question of the date of this text, see H L Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 350–52; revised and updated German version: G. Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrash*, 9th ed. (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2011), 358–59. See also *Daily Prayer Book*, translated and annotated by Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing Comp., 1977), 91–92. Concerning the Passover Haggadah, see Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 435.

century BCE,¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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.¹³ Therefore, they are of limited assistance in establishing the origin of the term *Shekhinah*.¹⁴

10. See 1 Maccabees 2:42; 7:13; 2 Maccabees 14:6.

11. See Johann Maier, *Geschichte der jüdischen Religion* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1972), 134. Elias Bickerman, “The Civic Prayer for Jerusalem,” *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962): 164.

12. Domingo Muñoz Leon, *Gloria de la Shekina en los Targumim del Pentateuco* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1977), 171–230; cf. Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament Revisited: Aramaic Paraphrases of the Bible; A Light on the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 148–53.

13. McNamara, *Targum and Testament Revisited*, 150; Steven D. Fraade, “Targum, Targumim,” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 1278–81, here 1278.

14. A. Diez Macho [*Neofiti I*] (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1970) vol. 2, 55*n4] admits additions to *Neofiti* under the influence of *Targum Onqelos*. See also Arnold M. Goldberg, “Die spezifische Verwendung des Terminus *Shekhina* im Targum Onkelos,” *Judaica* 19 (1963): 43–61, and Andrew Chester, *Divine Revelation and Divine Titles in the Pentateuchal Targumim* (TSAJ 14; Tübingen: Mohr, 1986), 313–24.

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,¹⁵ 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*).¹⁶ *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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, the *Peshitta*, the Syriac version of the Bible, translates *skēnōsis* in 2 Maccabees 14:35

15. Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 11–15.

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 *shakan* 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).

18. J. Luzarraga, *Las tradiciones de la nube en la Biblia y en el Judaismo primitivo* (Analecta Biblica 54; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1973), 155–56n634.

as *shekhinta*.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ Apparently, they derived this usage from the Jewish Aramaic Bible translations, the *Targumim*, especially *Targum Onqelos*.²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴ The

19. See *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version*, Part IV Fasc. 4. *Ezra and Nehemiah, 1–2 Maccabees*, edited on behalf of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament by the Peshitta Institute, Leiden, prepared by A. Penna† et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 197. Dominique Cerbelaud, “Aspects de la Shekinah chez les auteurs chrétiens syriens,” *Le Muséon* 123, no. 1–2 (2010): 91–125, here 96.

20. Cerbelaud, “Aspects de la Shekinah,” 92–95.

21. Cerbelaud, “Aspects de la Shekinah,” 124–25.

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.

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.²⁵ 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.”²⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, too, saw the concept of *Shekhinah* as a key idea in rabbinic Judaism.²⁷

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,²⁸ 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:

25. Ibid., 471–530, 457. See also 1 Kgs 8:12–13.27.

26. Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), 65, see also 40–65.

27. Abraham J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker (New York/London: Continuum, 2007), 93–126.

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 tetragrammaton²⁹ is not to be pronounced outside of the Temple.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).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.”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.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 *Shekinah* 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 (*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 *Shekinah* in the Temple and in the community.³⁴ The presence of the *Shekinah* 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.³⁵

The *Mekhilta* attaches no conditions other than fear of the Lord and remembrance of God’s name to the presence of the *Shekinah* 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 *Avot* illustrate this. They include the only two occurrences of the term *Shekinah* in the entire Mishnah.³⁶ The first and best-known saying is:

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

34. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 500.

35. Ibid., 376–85.

36. *M. Avot* 3:2b, 6. Concerning a textually doubtful third passage, *m. Sanhedrin* 6:5, see Urbach, *Sages*, 702n17.

29. The divine name spelled out YHWH, often pronounced as *Adonai*, and translated “Lord.”

30. This appears to be referring to the priestly blessing (Nm 6:24–26). According to *m. Sotah* 7:6, the divine name contained in it three times was to be pronounced in the Temple, but *Adonai* was substituted for it in the synagogues.

31. This idea is taken up polemically in a question, attributed to a Roman Emperor, who asked Rabban Gamaliel, “How many *Shekinahs* are there then?” (*b. Sanhedrin* 39a).

32. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Tractate *Bahodesh*, chap. 11), ed. and trans. Jacob Z. Lauterbach (3 vols.; Philadelphia: JPS 1933–35, repr. 1976), vol. 2, 287. A Christian parallel to the divine presence with one person is found in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, 30. See B. Englezakis, “Thomas, Logion 30,” *NTS* 25 (1979): 262–65.

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.

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).

38. *M. Avot* 3:2. Translation from http://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.3.2?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en.

39. *B. Avodah Zarah* 18a; cf. *Sifre Deut.* 32:4, para. 307.

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

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.

41. *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* B 34, ed. Schechter, 74. English translation: A. J. Saldarini, *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan (Abot de-Rabbi Nathan) Version B: A Translation and Commentary* (SJLA 11; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 199–200.

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.⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ In rabbinic thought, occupation with Torah is not merely an intellectual enterprise but a sharing in God’s own activity.⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷ 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

44. *B. Berakhot* 6a; *Leviticus Rabbah* 34:7 (a fourth–fifth century Midrash). See Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (new ed., New York: Schocken, 1961), 125–26, 134–37.

45. I. M. Bunim, *Ethics from Sinai* (2nd ed.; New York: Feldheim, 1964), 1.235.

46. Louis Finkelstein, Introduction to new edition of Schechter, *Aspects*, xix–xx.

47. *B. Sotah* 17a. Urbach, *Sages*, 43. Contrast Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 419.

departure.⁴⁸ On the other hand, “whoever is meek will ultimately cause the *Shekhinah* to dwell with man [*ha-adam*] on earth.”⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

Shekhinah-Like Terminology in the Qur’an

The Arabic term *Sakīna* recurs six times in the Qur’an.⁵¹ Scholars consider it possible⁵² or certain⁵³ 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,”

48. *Sifre Deut* 23:10, para. 254; Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 142–60, esp. 147–48.

49. *Mekilta, Bahodesh, Jethro*, chap. 9; text and trans. Lauterbach, *Mekilta*, vol. 2, 273.

50. For brief but well-informed treatments of these topics, see Rivka G. Horwitz, Joseph Dan, and Sharon Faye Koren, “Shekhinah,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Keter/Macmillan USA, 2007), 18:442–44, with bibliography. For an in-depth study, see Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 86–134, 169–72.

51. Qur’an, 2:248 (249); 9:26, 40; 48:4, 18, 26. Different verbal and noun forms of the root *s-k-n* recur sixty-nine times in the Qur’an. For a concise discussion of the concept in the Qur’an and later Muslim tradition, see. T. Fahd, “Sakīna,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs. http://dx.doi.org.proxy.library.georgetown.edu/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_6505.

52. *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage*, ed. Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 444–45.

53. Ignaz Goldziher, “La notion de la Sakīna chez les Mohamétans,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 28 (1893), 1–13; Reuven Firestone, “*Shekhinah*,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2004), vol. 4, 589–91.

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).⁵⁴

In at least one instance, such an interpretation seems to be forced, where there is a reference to the *Sakīna* 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.”⁵⁵ Similarly, the French translation by Régis Blachère reads “l'Arche de l'Alliance reviendra à vous, portée par les Anges, contenant une Présence Divine (*sakīna*) [venue] de votre Seigneur.”⁵⁶ Another important French translation, by Denise Masson, leaves the term *Sakīna* 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 1:14.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ Further studies of the relation

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

Divine Presence in the New Testament:

The Context of Matthew 18:20

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.⁵⁹ 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).⁶⁰

59. In addition to Matthew 18:20, John 1:14 and Rev 21:3 are frequently mentioned. On the latter passages, see Uta Poplutz, “und hat unter uns gezeltet’ (Joh 1,14b): Die Fleischwerdung des Logos im Licht der Schechina-Theologie,” *Sacra Scripta* 13, no. 1 (2015): 101–14; Jörg Frey, “God’s Dwelling on Earth: ‘Shekhina-Theology’ in Revelation 21 and in the Gospel of John,” in *John’s Gospel and Intimations of Apocalyptic*, ed. Catrin H. Williams and Christopher Rowland (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 79–103. Among earlier literature, the following may still be of interest: L. Bouyer, “La Shekhinah: Dieu avec nous,” *Bible et vie chrétienne* 20 (1957): 19; R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (AB 29; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 33–34; Joshua Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 80–81. Contrast Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 419–20.

60. See, e.g., David D. Kupp, *Matthew’s Emmanuel: Divine Presence and God’s People in the First Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 192–96.

54. *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage*, 444.

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

56. Régis Blachère, *Le Coran: traduit de l’arabe* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1966), 67 (<http://www.lenoblecoran.fr/regis-blachere/>).

57. Denise Masson, *Le Coran*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 798–99, note 1 at 2:248 (<http://www.lenoblecoran.fr/denise-masson/>).

58. Cf. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 83–88.

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

63. Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 459.

64. Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 458.

65. H. Frankemölle, *Jahwebund und Kirche Christi* (NTAbh NE 10; Münster: Aschendorff, 1974), 27–36; similarly Gérard Rossé, *L’ecclesiologia di Matteo: Interpretazione di Mt 18:20* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1987), 97–98.

66. See Karlheinz Müller, “Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und Judaistik,” in Lutz Doering et al. (ed.) *Judaistik und neutestamentliche Wissenschaft: Standorte–Grenzen–Beziehungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 38–44; Günter Stemberger, “Dating Rabbinic Traditions,” in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 96.

67. See especially studies regarding the document called 4QMMT, e.g., Y. Sussmann, “The History of the Halakha and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4 V: Miqsat Ma’ase Ha-Torah* (DJD 10; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 179–200.

61. On the proposed structure of the section, see Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 448.

62. G. Rossé, *Gesù in mezzo: Matteo 18:20 nell’esegesi contemporanea* (Rome, Città Nuova, 1972), 114, 137–38. J. Caba, *La oracion de peticion: Estudio exegetico sobre los evangelios sinópticos y los escritos joaneos* (AnBib 62, Rome, Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 199–200, 213–14.

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.⁶⁸ 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*.⁶⁹

There have been several in-depth studies of Matthew 18:20 and its context.⁷⁰ Therefore, instead of attempting a complete exege-

sis, 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.⁷¹ One of the reasons for this certainly lies in the difficulty of relating a gospel passage dating from the first century to rabbinic sayings redacted at least over a century later. Samuel Sandmel rightly warned of “parallelomania.”⁷² And yet, a careful attempt at comparison of parallel features can be made.

(New York: New City, 1976); see also B. Englezakis, “Thomas, Logion 30,” *NTS* 25 (1979): 262–72; Stephanie von Dobbeler, “Die Versammlung ‘auf meinen Namen hin’ (Mt 18:20) als Identitäts- und Differenzkriterium,” in *Novum Testamentum* 44 (2002): 209–30; Horacio E. Lona, “In meinem Namen versammelt: Mt 18:20 und liturgisches Handeln,” *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 27 (1985): 373–407; Petr Pokorný, “Wo zwei oder drei versammelt sind in meinem Namen . . .” (Mt 18:20), in *Gemeinde ohne Tempel: Community without Temple. Zur Erneuerung und Transformation des Jerusalemer Tempels und seines Kults im Alten Testament, antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum*, ed. Beate Ego et al. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1999), 477–88. Rudolf Pesch, “Wo zwei oder drei versammelt sind auf meinen Namen hin . . .” (Mt 18:20): Zur Ekklesiologie eines Wortes Jesu,” in *Studien zum Matthäusevangelium: Festschrift für Wilhelm Pesch*, ed. Ludger Schenke (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988), 227–43; Tomás Joseph Surlis, *The Presence of the Risen Christ in the Community of Disciples: An Examination of the Ecclesiological Significance of Matthew 18:20* (Tesi Gregoriana Serie Teologia 188; Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011); 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).

71. Despite a great amount of recent literature on Matthew 18:20 and on *Shekhinah*, 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 éclairé 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 *Shekhinah* 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.

72. Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1–13 (the author’s presidential address to the *Society of Biblical Literature*).

68. Frankemölle, *Jahwebund*, 30–32; see also Frankemölle, *Matthäuskommentar 2* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1997), 262–63.

69. Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 459.

70. In addition to the works by G. Rossé and J. Caba cited above, one may consult J. M. Povilus, *La presenza di Gesù tra i suoi nella teologia di oggi* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1977), and, with particular emphasis on patristic exegesis, C. Lubich, *Jesus in the Midst*

<i>M. Avot</i> 3:2	<i>Avot de Rabbi Nathan</i> B 34	Mt 18:20
But		For
two who	If two	where two
	or three	or three
sit together	sit together in the marketplace	are gathered together
and between them there are words	and the words between them	
of Torah,	are of Torah,	in my name,
the <i>Shekhinah</i> is	then the <i>Shekhinah</i> is revealed	there am I
between them.	to them.	in the midst of them.

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.”⁷³ 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.⁷⁴

73. Morton Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* (Philadelphia: SBL, 1951, reprint Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 152–60. See also W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 790.

74. Pace Frankemölle, *Jahwebund*, 30. Marcus Jastrow (*A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London/New York,

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.⁷⁵ 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.”⁷⁶

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 *Avot* sayings simply because “they are later than Matthew.”

76. Davies and Allison, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, vol. 2, 790.

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).⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

Are gathered (*eisin . . . synēgmenoi*): It has been suggested that Matthew 18:20 refers to liturgical gatherings only.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰

In my name (*eis to emon onoma*): It has frequently been indicated that this phrase translates the Hebrew/Aramaic *lishmi*.⁸¹ 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 proof-text 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.⁸² 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.”

77. Trans. Bruce Metzger in *Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, ed. Kurt Aland, 7th ed. (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1971). See text and variant readings in Englezakis, *NTS* 25 (1979): 62, consult 266. Attridge acknowledges the close relation between this saying and Matthew 18:20. However, based on his reading of a fragmentary early Greek papyrus, he suggests the following translation: “Jesus said, ‘Where there are three, they are without god, and where there is but a single one I say that I am with him,’” interpreting it as a monastic polemic and asserting “that any group lacks divine presence.” Harold Attridge, “The Original Text of Gos. Thom., Saying 30,” *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 16 (1979): 153–57, here 156.

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.

79. Englezakis, 264. Caba, *Oración*, 218, speaks of “reunions catequéticas y litúrgicas.”

80. Rossé, *Gesù in mezzo*, 132–34; Rossé, *L’ecclesiologia di Matteo: Interpretazione di Mt 18:20* (Rome: Città Nuova, 1987), 93; H. Frankemölle, *Jahwebund und Kirche Christi* (NTAbh NE 10; Münster: Aschendorff, 1974), 35. Stephanie von Dobbeler, “Die Versammlung ‘auf meinen Namen hin’ (Mt 18:20) als Identitäts- und Differenzkriterium,” *Novum Testamentum* 44, no. 3 (2002): 213. Contrast J. D. M. Derrett (“Where two or three are convened in my name . . . : a sad misunderstanding,” *Expository Times* 91 [December 1979]: 83–86), who unduly narrows the meaning of Matthew 18:20 to the settlement of disputes between church members.

81. Flusser, “I am in the midst of them,” 516–17, 520–21. See also H. Bietenhard, “Onoma,” *TDNT* 5 (1967): 274–76.

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.⁸³ 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).⁸⁴ 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 21:3.⁸⁵

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.⁸⁶ Trilling compares the presence of Jesus “in their midst” to the *Shekhinah*

in the Temple. He emphasizes its static nature and cultic connotations.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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.”⁸⁹ 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.⁹⁰

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.⁹¹

87. *Das wahre Israel*, 41.

88. *Untersuchungen*, 388, 453–54; consult M. Kadushin (*The Rabbinic Mind*, 3rd ed. [New York: Bloch, 1972], 227) about “normal mysticism.” See also Rossé, *Gesù in mezzo*, 135–36.

89. Abraham J. Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker (New York/London: Continuum, 2007), 96.

90. 1QM 12.7–9; cf. Frankemölle, *Jahwebund*, 31–32.

91. Contrast Rossé, *Gesù in mezzo*, 146, but see 131n151. 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 ejemplo mateano de derás de traspasso,” *Revista Catalana de Teologia* 14 (1989): 133–48, esp. 134–42.

83. Walter Grundmann proposed this in a deplorable publication, *Christentum und Judentum* (Leipzig: Wigand, 1940), 76; for a more moderate view, see G. Bornkamm, “The Authority to ‘Bind’ and ‘Loose’ in the Church in Matthew’s Gospel: The Problem of Sources in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Perspective* 11 (1970): 41.

84. See Frankemölle, *Jahwebund*, 27–36.

85. For bibliography on this point, see n. 59 above.

86. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 448.

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.⁹² 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,⁹³ although Flusser assumes "that Mt 18:20 is an authentic saying of the 'historical' Jesus."⁹⁴

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.⁹⁵ 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)

and elsewhere. In this case, it also reflects a continuing profound experience of the Lord's presence in the Christian community.⁹⁶

Conclusion

The theme of God's presence among people, ultimately derived from the Hebrew Bible, runs through much of the rabbinic tradition as well as through the New Testament in general and the Gospel of Matthew in particular, and also in places the Qur'an. None of these traditions denies that God can be with a single individual, but they attach special meaning to God's presence with a group, however small it may be.⁹⁷ The origins of the term *Shekbinah* lie in the Temple. Its adaptation to other situations has in part a liturgical basis (Ps 82). Very soon after the destruction of the Temple, at the latest, it was felt that the *Shekbinah* was not bound to a particular place, that it could be found anywhere, not only in liturgical settings, if certain conditions were met.

It seems that the above sense is what Matthew adopted. While common prayer is a principal occasion in which "two or three" can experience Jesus' presence, the only condition is that they are together in his name or "for his sake." The rabbis call God's presence *Shekbinah*, a circumlocution that affirms God's nearness without denying God's otherness. Christians recognize this presence in (and through) Jesus. Can one compare these two expressions without sounding blasphemous to a Jew and watered-down to a Christian? Can Jews and Christians meet again "for the sake of Heaven," "in the name of God," and "in his presence?"

96. One should compare here Luke 24, 13–35.

97. Similarly, also Flusser, "I am in the Midst of Them," 517.

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.

94. Flusser, "I am in the Midst of Them," 523. Muñoz León argues that Jesus himself may have referred divine attributes to his own person ("Allí estoy," 145–47).

95. Goldberg, *Untersuchungen*, 443; Urbach, *Sages*, 43; Arthur Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1927–1937) vol. 1, 104.

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

Joseph Sievers began his studies at the University of Vienna and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He holds a Ph.D. in Ancient History from Columbia University (1981), a Bachelor in Theology from the Pontifical Lateran University, and a Lic. Theol. from the Pontifical Gregorian University (1997). He has taught at CUNY, Seton Hall U., Fordham University, Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, Pontificia Università Urbaniana, Pontifical Lateran University, and other institutions. Since 1991 he teaches Jewish history and literature of the Hellenistic period at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome, where he is Professore Ordinario. In addition, from 2003 to 2009 he served as Director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Since October 28, 1965, he is a member of the Focolare Movement, with whose Center for Interreligious Dialogue he collaborates since 2002. He has published several books and numerous articles, primarily in the areas of Second Temple History (especially Flavius Josephus) and of Christian-Jewish relations.

98. Emphasis mine. See http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19741201_nostra-aetate_en.html. See also <http://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/vatican-curia/277-guidelines>. Reprinted in H. Croner, ed., *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations: An unabridged collection of Christian Documents* (London/New York: Stimulus Books, 1977), 12.

99. *Eclipse of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 9.

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