

Whole Stones That Make Peace

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The above image shows a few courses of the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Photographed by the author.

According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus sent his disciples ahead of him to prepare people for receiving his message, he told them to be on the lookout for “sons of peace”:

When you enter a house, first say, “Peace to this house.” If a son of peace is there, your peace will remain with him.... (Luke 10:5-6a)

The expression “son of peace” is unknown in the Hebrew Scriptures and is not attested in ancient Jewish sources such as the writings of the Apocrypha

and Pseudepigrapha or the Dead Sea Scrolls. Neither is it found in rabbinic texts. What, then, might be the meaning of this unusual turn of phrase?

To begin with, the phrase “son of peace” must be contextualized within Jesus’ overall message of peace. “Peace” was the blessing with which the resurrected Jesus greeted his disciples (Luke 24:36), and in the Beatitudes peacemaking is what identifies a human being as a son (or daughter) of God (Matt. 5:9).^[1] It must be recognized, moreover, that Jesus’ talk of peace was not uttered in a vacuum. Jesus, like all other first-century Jews living in Palestine, was constantly and painfully aware of the fact of Roman rule. Roman imperialist rule affected every aspect of their lives and impinged on their social, economic, political, and even religious freedoms. There were those among Jesus’ contemporaries who believed that the only solution to their political distress was to take up arms against the occupying power. Jesus, though no fan of Roman imperialism, believed that true freedom—including political freedom—could be achieved only through the spiritual power of love.

A central element of Jesus’ message was the concept of the “Kingdom of Heaven,” the idea that even in the midst of political oppression God was asserting his divine reign over Israel. A Jewish scholar, the late David Flusser, suggested that the “Kingdom of Heaven” was an anti-revolutionary slogan among those Jewish leaders who opposed an armed uprising against Rome.^[2] Jesus picked up on this slogan and refashioned the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven to suit his own message of peace. For Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven was a human and a divine cooperation through which God would bring his redemption into the world. As human beings participate in the Kingdom by loving their neighbors, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, giving to the needy, forgiving monetary debts and physical injuries—as human beings participate in these ways, God’s divine power is unleashed, bringing about redemption on a personal, communal, and even a cosmic level. Pursuing the way of peace was not a retreat from political realities or a giving up of aspirations for freedom, it was for Jesus the very means by which liberation could be achieved.

Another ancient Jewish teacher who advocated a policy of peace with regard to the Romans was Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who lived through the Jewish Revolt that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai became an important figure in the development of Judaism as it exists today, as he helped his community to come to terms with the loss of the Temple. One of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai's sayings may shed light on Jesus' elusive term "son of peace":

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai says, "Behold, it says, *[From] whole stones* [אבנים שלמות; *ʿvānim sh^ēlēmōt*] *you shall build [the altar]* [Deut. 27:6]. That is, stones that establish peace [שלום; *shālōm*]. And it is a matter of *gal vaḥōmer*: if the Holy One, blessed be he, said, *Raise no iron against them* [Deut. 27:5] of the stones of the altar—which neither see nor hear nor speak—simply because they establish peace between Israel and their Father in heaven, how much more in the case of a human being who establishes peace between one person and another, or a man and his wife, between one city and another, or one people and another, between two families, or between two governments, that for such a man no retribution should come to him?" (Mechilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, *BaḤodesh* ch. 11 [ed. Lauterbach, 2:352-353])^[3]

It is possible that this saying was originally formulated before the Jewish Revolt against Rome, since it was prior to the revolt that pro-war assassins (the *Sicarii*) murdered fellow Jews who adopted a moderate stance toward the Roman occupation. In this homily Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai argues that peacemakers among the people should be honored, not treated like traitors or enemies. To make this point Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai made use of a pun: the stones of the altar were supposed to be left whole (*sh^ēlēmōt* in Hebrew) because they created peace (*shālōm* in Hebrew) between Israel and their Father in heaven.

The wordplay is a pleasing one, but it does not extend throughout the entire homily. The wordplay would have had greater resonance if it had also somehow been applicable to the human peacemakers. In fact, such a

wordplay was available: in Hebrew, the phrase for “whole stone” (אֶבֶן שְׁלֵמָה; *’even sh^elēmāh*) is similar to that for “son of peace” (בֶּן שָׁלוֹם; *ben shālōm*). The stone/son wordplay is well attested in the Synoptic Gospels. According to John the Baptist, God could raise up sons for Abraham from stones (Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8). Likewise, in the parable of the Wicked Tenants, Jesus compared the rejected son with the rejected stone (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17).

In light of this stone/son wordplay, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai’s homily could be paraphrased as follows: “If God forbids violence toward a whole stone (*’even sh^elēmāh*) of the altar, how much more so toward a son of peace (*ben shālōm*)?”

What I am suggesting here is that this rabbinic tradition on the whole stones of the altar may reveal the origin of the unusual designation “son of peace” in Jesus’ instruction to his disciples. Several variations of the homily on the altar’s whole stones exist in rabbinic sources. Perhaps Jesus was familiar with an early version of this homily in which the stone/son wordplay was explicit.
[4]

If so, we have gained a deeper understanding of the disciples’ mission: Jesus’ purpose in sending the disciples out was to identify a receptive audience for his message of peace. We also find that Jesus regarded peacemaking as a divine mission: making peace is as holy an endeavor as worship in the Temple. Finally, we learn that violence, even toward one’s enemies, has no place in the moral framework Jesus imparted to his followers.



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Notes

[1] On Matt. 5:9 (“Blessed are the Peacemakers”), see Joshua N. Tilton, “[Perfect Children](#).”

[2] David Flusser, *Jesus* (3d ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), 106-108.

[3] Other variations of this homily on the whole stones of the altar, not all in the name of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, are found in t. Bab. Kam. 7:7; Sifra, *Kedoshim* ch. 10 [ed. Weiss, 92d]; Semahot 8:16.

[4] Tilton first proposed this interpretation of “son of Peace” in David N. Bivin and Joshua N. Tilton, “[Sending the Twelve: Conduct in Town](#),” a segment of the [Life of Yeshua](#) project on [JerusalemPerspective.com](#).