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Bound by a Unifying Conflict: the Sage and the *Min* in *Tannaitic* Times

Among many other innovations, the literature and consequently the religious discourse developed in the *Tannaitic* period brings to life a social group non-existent in earlier times: the *Minim*. Considering them as a category specific to early rabbinical discourse throughout this analysis I shall attempt to describe and explain the relationship between this newborn category (the *Min*) and its creator, the generic Sage.

The term *Minim* is the plural form of the singular *Min* most probably derived from the Hebrew word “kind”. None of the sources from the first century use this term, attested for the first time in rabbinical texts dating to the second century CE. Once invented, the history of our term is not a short one and, while its use is most frequent in the interval between the second and the beginning of the fourth century¹, it can still be found in later texts from the Babylonian Talmud, or from different midrashic collections. Related to the use of the term in post-*Tannaitic* sources, even if this is not the subject of our research, we have to emphasize the fact that in the later texts of the Babylonian Talmud a shift has occurred, and what the Rabbis from the Mishnah or Tosephta have defined as *Minuth* is not identical with the definition associated by later sources with the same category².

Contrary to the *Min*, the Sage of *Tannaitic* times is a member of a group that

shares a long history. For our present subject the history of the group is not important, but as we shall see, to understand who the Sage was in “our times” we shall have to refer to the history of his group. Accepting the lineage upon which most of the scholars agree (Hasidim – Pharisees – Rabbis)³, I shall use either any of this denomination related to the specific period of time or the term Sage, as a generic denomination. The element that allows us to use the term Sage as a generic denomination is the ideological continuity that characterizes the analyzed group, this approach enabling a comparative analysis of the positions occupied by the same group in different historical and social contexts.

Before we go further some theoretical clarifications related to our categories are necessary. The two categories that I work with – the *Min* and the Sage – are asymmetric categories: the Sage is a generic denomination that cannot be found in this form in the Hebrew texts, whereas the *Min* is a term extracted as such from the sources, which will be used in its original form due to the fact that its *a priori* content is unknown. If we remained with the analysis at this level, the two categories would be non-homologous categories, but we shall try to go deeper and demonstrate that this imbalance is overcome by the fact that, in the *Tannaitic* texts, both the Sage and the *Min* are constructed categories, with the only



difference that in the case of the Sage there was a group that assumed this constructed identity (the Rabbis from *Tannaitic* times), whereas regarding the *Min* this was not the case.

All the previous studies that have analyzed the relation between the Sage and the *Min* attempt to explain how this category was constructed, and what was the role that the conflict in itself played in its construction. To accomplish this, I will reconstruct the social reality following a bi-dimensional theoretical model: the analysis of social conflict generated by Georg Simmel⁴, and the sociology of knowledge developed by Thomas Berger⁵. Simmel's perspective will allow us to distinguish between different functions of the social conflict and to understand its generative force, while Berger's approach will make comprehensible the social change and the process of institutionalization. Inside the phenomenological model developed by Berger, reality is a constructed category taken for granted by the individuals, meaning an objective datum, even if the constructed reality and the objective datum (the objective reality) are not overlapping entities. Following this approach, I shall emphasize the comparison between the constructed reality that is meant to be, but is not yet perceived as a reality taken for granted, and reality as an objective datum. Consequently, I shall bring into discussion the differences between the "real world", the empirical datum and the "world of the Sages", a constructed reality that will become a reality taken for granted only in time.

As regards the methodological approach, the *Tannaitic* texts subjected to our research will be analyzed from two different but equally important perspectives. Firstly, they will be treated as a *historical instrument* that helps us understand the

emergence of the rabbinic society, the reasons that explain it or the stages undergone by this new social entity. And secondly, the *Tannaitic* texts will be treated as an *instrument of knowledge* that helps us identify the taken for granted knowledge used by the individual Jew to interpret reality once the rabbinical society was established and the Rabbi became an institutionalized religious leader.

Following the idea that in order to understand the result of any interaction we have to identify the physical or social entities involved in it, our analysis will be divided into three parts: in the first two, I shall try to establish who the Sage and the *Min* were, while in the third part the analysis will be developed on a explanatory dimension that will try to reveal how the category of the *Min* was constructed, and how we may explain the relation between our two categories.

1. Who was the Sage?

The answer to the question above is not a unitary one, and it must be elaborated considering the main historical event that affected the Jewish society in the first century of the Common Era: the destruction of the Temple. The place occupied by the Temple in the Jewish world was so important that its destruction equally transformed the social order and its embedded social statuses. The social structure was, on its turn, redefined as the old social roles became unable to fulfill, in the new historical context, their social and symbolical function. Consequently, mirroring the changes undergone by the broad society, the Sage as generic entity and his social status was equally transformed.

Analyzing late second temple Judaism, Dan Jaffé enumerates its fundamental concepts: monotheism, the divine



election, the ritual law and the Temple⁶. The analysis elaborated by Jaffé is useful in order to identify the points around which the different Jewish groups coexisting at that time met. In this diverse religious environment, in which the Sages represented only a group among others, the destruction of the Temple generated a huge social shock, and consequently massive social change. In order to understand this social change (and in so doing provide an answer to our question) two of the main concepts developed by Berger: symbolic universe and plausibility structure⁷ need to be introduced.

For Berger, the symbolic universe is the specific manner of integrating the reality in a meaningful whole, bearer of a *natural logic* and in the same time of a *natural taxonomy*⁸. This natural logic and taxonomy creates *knowledge the taken for granted*. Including a set of fundamental truths about reality, and being objectified at a social level, any deviation from this order institutionalized by common knowledge is perceived as equal with a deviation from reality itself. Every item included in the category of this knowledge taken for granted becomes coextensive with the capacity of knowledge itself, and sets up the frame by which every element still unknown will be known in the future.

The plausibility structure is viewed by Berger as the fundamental element of the whole construction, the one that by its destruction endangers the existence of the later. As we can see, Berger defines the concept only by mentioning its function. In my opinion this approach is insufficient, and I will therefore attempt to define the plausibility structure as *the sum of objective elements that empirically supports a symbolic system*.

Applying this theoretical scheme to the Jewish cultural space, throughout history the main element of the symbolic universe was represented by the doctrine of

Israel as the chosen people, a people that existed through a conditioned relationship with God. *The quality of a chosen people* has always been the main element of Israeli identity (the fundamental myth of the symbolic universe), an element that can be maintained only through *a continuous relation with God* (the necessary condition of the system). Any cessation in this relationship equals the breaking of the Covenant, and deprives Israel of its elected status.

We can define Jewish society during the Age of the Second Temple as a sacrificial one, in which the relation to divinity was maintained through a sacrificial system. As a result of this model, the elements of the plausibility structure were: 1) The Temple – as the axis of the empirical construction, the one that proves to each individual that the relation between the divinity and his people is a continuous one; 2) The Sacerdotal Elite – as the legitimate mediators of the relationship; and 3) The Ritual Law/ Obligations – as the element that allows each individual to participate in the intermediated relationship with God.

In this sacrificial society, the Sages, as heirs of the hassidim movement, are a pietistic group engaged in a struggle for influence, and developing a conflictual relation with the institutionalized elites. The group is characterized by a profound religious observance and the importance assigned to the study of the Law. Looking for social dominance, and trying to render illegitimate the social status shared by the sacerdotal elite, they will reconstruct the relation with the divinity by positioning it at an individual level. Or, as Carol Newsom formulates, "their development of halakah is focused primarily on those areas of behavior within the control of the individual. That is to say, they engaged dominant discourse, those matters the importance of which



everyone grants, at the level where it was least subject to priestly or any other institutional control”⁹.

When under the influence of the historical context, the main element of the plausibility structure disappears (with the destruction of the Temple in the year 70), the entire complex of empirical reference points disappears as well. The necessary condition of the system (the continuous relation with God) remains unfulfilled, and the fundamental myth (the myth of the elect) is endangered. In order to ensure the survival of the fundamental myth, new ways that will assure a continuous relationship with God had to be found.

From Josephus’s work¹⁰ we know that, in the first century of the common era, four sects shared the Jewish soil: the Saducees, the Essenians, the Pharisees and the Zealots¹¹ and the solution was to be found among them. The Sadducees, with their closeness to the temple cult and to the sacerdotal aristocracy, lost their credibility along with their allies, and had no future in the new historical context. The Essene movement, or at least the Qumranic one, was it its turn destroyed by the Roman legions, and bore in itself no future for the Jewish society. The Zealots, with their belligerent approach, were the last to be perceived as a solution for the social crisis, especially after the destruction of the entire Judea by the Roman army. But the solution was there in the Pharisaic movement. And their success was guaranteed by two related elements: 1) they had traditionally side-stepped the sacerdotal elite’s role as legitimate mediators between Israel and God, so the destruction of the Temple proved, in a way, their case; and 2) their emphasis on the Oral law, and on the fulfillment of God’s will by each individual in everyday life, a religious demand that can be perfectly fulfilled in the absence of the

Jerusalem Temple.

Assuming a reconstruction role, they will build a “new reality”, in which the sacrificial system will be replaced by a continuous application of God’s will, by a transformation of the Law in a way of life, this transformation leading to the construction of a new plausibility structure: 1) The Written Oral Law will replace the Temple – and it will become the axis of the new empirical construction; 2) The Sages, as an Intellectual Elite, will replace the Sacerdotal one becoming the new mediators (a new kind of religious elite) between God and its people, by the construction of a legitimate model for the interpretation of the divine Law; and 3) The Ritual and Moral Obligations (Torah as a way of life) applied to each individual, which will restore individual participation to the intermediated relationship with God after the destruction of the Temple.

Following Jaffé, the Sages’ movement can be defined as self-established. This means that they are the new mediators between God and his people only inside their constructed reality, whereas at an objective level their social position at the beginning of the second century is only that of an emergent elite, struggling for social control with different doctrinal opponents.

Considering, as I have already mentioned, the rabbinical texts both as historical and knowledge instruments, the struggle for power and the constructed knowledge used to win the battle might be reconstituted.

As the Jewish religious life that characterized the period before the destruction of the Temple was a diverse one, with different religious groups sharing the same symbolic space, we have no reason to suppose that with the destruction of the Temple all these groups disappear as well. In the real world they were, undoubtedly, there. But what we can say about the



Rabbis' world?

A first analysis of the *Tannaitic* texts reveals an important element: in the rabbinical literature of the period a new category that designates alterity was born, the *Min*, while their traditional opponents from earlier times (Sadducees or Essenians, for example) might rarely be found in that texts by their proper and traditional denominations. Several important questions arise at this point: Who was the *Min*? Why was this category constructed? And last but not least, how can we explain the fact that in the new definition of reality developed by the Rabbis, the old categories that in earlier times had designated their opponents now tend to disappear?

To reconstruct the portrait of the *Min* in *Tannaitic* literature, I will use at first a more general definition of the term *Minuth*, and then, going deeper, I will try to identify different doctrinal groups that were included together under this unique denomination.

2. Who was the *Min*?

2.1. Rejecting God's commandments

The first text that I will dwell upon is from the book of Sifre, a collection almost contemporary with the Mishnah. The text is important because it provides, with a biblical text (Numbers XV. 39) as reference point, the first definition of *Minuth*:

And ye shall not walk after your heart [Numbers XV.39], this is *Minuth* [...]. (Sifre, pisqa 115, p. 35a)

According to the biblical text, Israel's (or more generally man's) inborn capacities hinder the fulfillment of God's will. Thus, in order to surpass this incapacity, God gave them the Law, demanding

Israel's submissive acceptance. According to this view, the one who rejects God's commandments is a transgressor of Israel. Returning to the fragment from the book of Sifre, a shift has occurred, the one who walks "after his heart" and by this rejects God's commandments (his Law) is not a mere transgressor of Israel, but a transgressor included in a special category, in one word a *Min*. But, going from the biblical text to the book of Sifre, does the perception of God's commandments remain the same? Does the divine Law remain a unitary concept, or did the concept itself undergo fundamental changes?

The thesis of a revealed Oral Torah had always been a major doctrinal point under dispute between Pharisees and their doctrinal opponents, especially the Sadducees. This major theological innovation makes possible, after the destruction of the Temple, the emergence of the Rabbis as a new religious elite. The first chapter of the Tractate Avot unveils their self-instituted religious status, as holders of a divine revelation, a status that later, and due to the use of institutionalized channels, will become knowledge taken for granted:

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: be patient in judgment, raise up many students, and make a fence round the Torah. (Mishnah, Avot I.1)

Sending the Oral Law back to Sinai, the Rabbis add under the designation of God's Law their own interpretations and doctrines, derived from the biblical tradition. This epistemic shift is best seen in a baraita from the Babylonian Talmud:



[...] Rabbi Eliezer said, 'If the Law agrees with me, let it be proven from Heaven.' A Bath Kol issued forth and said, 'What have you against Rabbi Eliezer? The decision of the Law is always with him.' Rabbi Joshua stood up and said, 'It is not in heaven' [Deuteronomy XXX.12]. What does this mean? Rabbi Jeremiah said, 'The Torah was given us from Sinai; we pay no attention to a Bath Kol. For already from Sinai the Torah said, 'by a majority you are to decide'. [Exodus XXIII.2] (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia, 59b)

In the new constructed reality, only the Rabbis and their Torah (their interpretations) are the keepers of Israel's obedience to God. As Boyarin formulates, "only the majority decision of the Rabbis has power and authority, and only their knowledge is relevant"¹².

Related to this rabbinical ascribed capacity to operate the correct interpretation of the Law, three major elements must be emphasized: 1) this ability is defined as belonging to Sinaitic times, being seen on a par with the biblical revelation of the Law; 2) just as the Law, it is a divine gift; and 3) unlike the Law, it has a particularistic character, being circumscribed only to a charismatic group, more specifically to the rabbinical community, whose constructed genealogy goes also back to Sinai.

Returning to the text from the book of Sifre, and considering the theological innovations introduced by the Rabbis, I will conclude that in this text, the name of *Minim* does not designate, as it used to in the text from Numbers, the transgressor of Israel in the biblical meaning of the term, but the ones that read the Scripture using their own interpretations, rejecting thereby the rabbinical approach to the Law. Follow-

ing the doctrinal approach developed in Avot I.1 and Baba Metzia, 59b, the *Minim* are the ones that reject God's commandments, by rejecting the rabbinical interpretive pattern, since the Rabbis are the legitimate holders of the divine charisma, which allows them a correct and true understanding of the Law.

2.2 Multiple Powers in Heaven

Apart from this general definition, early rabbinical texts offer several more specific identities for the individuals designated as *Minim*: those who believe that there are many powers in heaven is one of them. The texts taken into considerations are: Mishnah Sanhedrin IV, 5, Tosephta Sanhedrin VIII, 17, and once again a fragment from the book of Sifre:

Therefore man was created singular... that the *Minim* might not say: there are many Powers in Heaven. (Mishnah Sanhedrin IV, 5)

Man was created last. And why was he created last? That the *Minim* might not say: there was a partner with Him in the work [of creation]. (Tosephta, Sanhedrin VIII, 17)

Shimon ben Azai says, 'Come and see: In all the offering [mentioned] in the Torah, it is not said, in connexion with them, either 'God' (*Elohim*) or 'thy God' (*Eloheikha*) or 'Almighty' (*Shaddaim*) or 'of Hosts' (*S[efebaoth]*)¹³ but 'YHWH', a singular name. So as not to give to the *Minim* an occasion to humble us. (Sifre, pisqa 143, p.54a)

From these texts we can infer that the belief in many powers in heaven grants the individual or the community their inclusion in the category of *Minim*. For the Rabbis, the fundamental issue was the declaration of



the strict monotheism that they professed as the legitimate doctrine about God, and in this process they labeled as *Minim* the groups that denied it, in our case the individuals that held the belief in multiple powers in Heaven.

As to the question: who were the holders of that belief?, the answer is not a unitary one because considering the *Min* as those who believed that there were many powers in heaven is a theoretical construction that can't be plastered on a specific religious group. Among the religious groups that shared the Jewish space in *Tannaitic* times, the Gnostics with their dualistic doctrine, or the early Christians with the divine character ascribed to Jesus, may be counted among the believers in many powers in heaven, and consequently among those labeled by the Rabbis as *Minim*. More importantly, the relation between these religious groups and the theoretical category constructed by the Rabbis is not one of perfect overlapping, but one of mere inclusion, which means that all the believers in many powers in heaven (being Gnostics, early Christians or members of others religious groups) are recorded by the Rabbis among the *Minim*, but not all the *Minim* are believers in many powers in heaven.

Following this approach, I shall conclude that the belief in multiple powers in heaven was only one of the ways that situated an individual or a group outside the line drawn by the Rabbis, but aside from this doctrine, there were also other paths that led other groups outside the same border line.

2.3. The followers of Yeshu

Of the traditions concerning Jesus, the following are contained in the literature of the Tanaitic period: he appears under the name Yeshu ben Stada or Yeshu ben

Pandira, he was born out of the wedlock, he was a magician that brought magic from Egypt, he was hanged/ crucified on the eve of Pesah (sometimes the time is not specified). In relation to our subject, there is another tradition which is more important: his followers spoke in his name words of *Minuth*:

It happened with Eliezer ben Dama, whom a serpent bit, that Jacob from Kfar Soma, came to heal him in the name of Yeshu ben Pandira; but Rabbi Ishmael did not let him. He said, 'You are not permitted ben Dama'. He answered, 'I will bring you proof that he may heal me'. But he had no opportunity to bring proof, for he died. [Whereupon] Rabbi Ishmael said, 'Happy art thou, ben Dama, for you have gone in peace and you have not broken down the fences of the Sages. (Tosephta, Hullin II, 22-23)

It happened that Rabbi Eliezer was arrested for *Minuth*, they brought him up to tribunal for judgment. [...]. When he was released from the tribunal he was troubled that he had been arrested for the words of *Minuth*. His disciples came in to comfort him but he would not accept. Rabbi Akiva entered and said to him, 'Rabbi may I said something to you? Perhaps you will not be distressed'. He replied, 'Say it'. He said to him, 'Perhaps one of the *Minim* said to you a word of *Minuth* and it pleased you'. He replied, 'By heaven, you reminded me! Once, I was walking on the streets of Sephoris found Jacob a man of Kfar Sechania and he said to me a word of *Minuth* in the name of Yeshu ben Pandira and it pleased me. (Tosephta, Hullin II, 24)



Once again, as in the case of the believers in many powers in heaven, the rabbinical texts offer us a more specific identity for those designated as *Minim*: this time they are the followers of Yeshu. Their general transgression is stated in the first of the selected fragments: they broke the fences of the Sages, the same fences that the first mishnah from Avot speaks about, fences that at a symbolical level represent the Oral Law, seen as a divine Law revealed only to the Rabbis. By their transgression, they are placed, as the upholders of the doctrine of many powers in heaven, outside the border built by the Rabbis. Contrary to what Herford asserts, in early Rabbinic literature the *Min* is not always a follower of Yeshu (a Judaeo-Christian in Herford's terms)¹⁴, but a follower of Yeshu is always a *Min*.

2.4 The Sadducees, the resurrection of the dead and the status of the Oral Law

As I have already mentioned, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, and the status of the Oral Torah were the main items that, at doctrinal level, opposed the Pharisees to the Sadducees. Being a part of a destroyed symbolic world, after the destruction of the Temple, the Sadduceean party had no means (either at symbolical or objective level) to win the battle. They were doomed to disappear, and so they did, but the process took time and the debate is still present in early rabbinical literature. For this section, I chose three texts: two from the Mishnah and a later one from the Babylonian Talmud:

All who concluded benedictions in the sanctuary used to say 'from the world'. After the *Minim* corrupted [religion] and said that there was only one world, they

ordered that they should say 'from world to world'. (Mishnah Berachot IX, 5)

These are they who have no place in the world to come: one who denies that the resurrection of the dead is from Torah, that the Torah is from Heaven, and an *epikoros*. (Mishnah Sanhedrin X, 1)

The *Minim* asked Rabban Gamaliel, 'Whence do you prove that the Holy One, Blessed be He, revives the dead? He said to them, 'From the Torah, from the Prophets, and from the Writings'. And they did not accept his answer. (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 90b)

As before the destruction of the Temple, they are perceived as doctrinal opponents, only this time they are not counted as Sadducees, but are included in the new constructed category, the *Minim*. By rejecting the Oral Torah, they break "the fences of the Sages" and choose to "walk after their heart", which, in conformity with the statement from the book of Sifre, is synonymous to *Minuth*. In my opinion this is their main ascribed transgression, a transgression that leads to their exclusion from salvation, while the denial of the resurrection is only an example of their deviant worldview.

Summing up the data that the analysis revealed until now, I can conclude that in early rabbinical literature, the *Min* was the one who denied the rabbinical approach to the Law and refused to acknowledge their status as legitimate mediators between God and his people.

The text of Tosephta helps us to situate them among the Jews, as by their transgression they are not as the idolaters, who are unable to acknowledge God:

Rabbi Tarphon said, '[...] If the pursuer were pursuing after me, I would enter into a house of idolatry, and I enter not



into their houses [of the *Minim*]. For the idolaters do not acknowledge Him and speak falsely concerning Him; but these do acknowledge Him and speak falsely concerning Him [...]. (Tosephta, Shabbat XIII, 5)

Contrary to any expectation, their discrimination from the idolaters doesn't work on their behalf. And this because, even if they have been gratified by the divinity with a special status (as part of the chosen people) they chose to "break the fences of the Sages", so what they now possess is only a false knowledge of God. In later times, and in another cultural space, a special term began to be used in order to designate the false knowledge of God, heresy. For Josephus in the end of the first century, for example, the term *hairesis* still means a group marked by common ideas and aims, while a century later, the invented rabbinical term *Minuth* understood as false knowledge/ doctrine about God bears the exact meaning of what in later times will be known as heresy.

Given these facts, to understand how the term *Minuth* was invented we have to emphasize the idea that its definition as false doctrine about God is only an external definition. In itself, what was designated as *Minuth* was only a doctrine about God that was defined as false only because was different from the one developed by the Rabbis.

In conclusion, the *Min* was the one who opposed the Rabbis. The believers in many powers in Heaven, the followers of Yeshu, the successors of the Sadducees and all the others¹⁵ were equally included among the *Minim*. And what is more important, the main reason that determined the Rabbis to construct this religious denomination was not the content of their beliefs, but their denial of the rabbinical approach to the Law, and by this of their legitimacy as a

religious elite.

As a result of this approach, the *Min* is the hated enemy, who hates God in the same way as the idolaters from biblical times. Their religious books bear no sacred status¹⁶ as their doctrines are characterized by the absence of divine revelation. At the social level, the contract with the constructed category is forbidden, leading to a social and economic boycott. Two texts from Tosephta will help us exemplify this view:

Flesh, which is found in the hand of a Gentile is allowed for use, in a hand of a *Min* it is forbidden to use. That which comes from a house of idolatry, lo! This is the flesh of the sacrifices of the dead, because they say, 'slaughtering by a *Min* is idolatry, their bread is Samaritan bread, their wine is wine offered [to idols], their fruits are not tithed, their books are books of witchcraft, and their sons are bastards. One does not sell to them, or take from them, or give to them; one does not teach their sons trades, and one does not obtain healing from them, either healing of property or healing of life'. (Tosephta, Hullin II, 20-21)

[...] And concerning them [the *Minim*] the Scripture says, 'Do I not hate them, O Lord, which hate Thee, and I loathe them that rise against Thee. I hate them with a perfect hatred, and they have become to me as enemies' (Psalm CXXXIX.21). (Tosephta, Shabbat XIII, 5)

The status ascribed here to the *Minim* stays in perfect opposition with the one ascribed to the Rabbis in the first chapter of the Tractate Avot, and in the Tractate Baba Metzia from the Babylonian Talmud, which I have already mentioned:



the *Minim* hate God, whereas the Rabbis are the keepers of Israel's obedience to God; the rabbinical institution (the decision by majority) is legitimated by Heaven whereas any ritual professed by the *Minim* is equal with idolatry; the Oral Torah is from Heaven whereas the books of the *Minim* are books of witchcraft.

Birkat Ha-Minim¹⁷ (the Genizah version¹⁸), the twelfth benediction of the rabbinic statutory prayer, together with the evidences related to this benediction found in the Gospel of John and in early Church Fathers proves, in my opinion, a unique element: that, from the rabbinical point of view, and in their new constructed reality, the only element that relates the *Min* with the Synagogue's life is the curse. Because of his transgression, the *Min* cannot participate in the institutionalized (meaning legitimate) relation to God, so for him the covenant is broken, and he is no longer Israel, but an outsider. In this way, the final step was made as the belonging to Israel is determined by the acceptance of rabbinical authority.

3. Conclusion: Gaining authority through a unifying conflict

As a constructed category, the *Min* was before anything else an element of the constructed reality generated by the Rabbis. "What a group knows and claims it is important is not merely a matter of content", says Carol Newsom, „but is often related to the social uses of knowledge"¹⁹. Applying this postulate to our case, the *professed knowledge* was the rabbinical image ascribed to the *Min*, while *its social use* was gaining authority.

Returning to our game, the comparison between the real world and the

world of the Rabbis, we find two different images that have in common only one element: the conflict between the Rabbis and their opponents. In the real world their opponents were different religious groups that didn't share a common identity, whereas in the world of the Rabbis their opponents were the members of a unique category, the *Minim*.

We can't explain the conflict between the Rabbis and the *Minim* in terms of Orthodoxy and Heresy, as Karen King²⁰ does, because that would mean that we will use rabbinical beliefs as scientific explanations. To paraphrase Gavin Langmuir²¹, what the Rabbis believed about *Minim* was a consequence not of what *Minim* really were but of what the Rabbis believed or badly wanted to believe about themselves.

In the world of the Rabbis, the *Minim* were defined as possessors of a false knowledge of God, who opposed the possessors of the true knowledge. In the real world, the conflict between them was not a conflict of Orthodoxy vs. Heresy, but one of social power and authority.

In my opinion, the *Min* as a social constructed category is a category generated as a result of this conflict, and therefore, in order to identify the stages of its construction we have to use elements developed by the sociology of social conflict.

As a result of any conflictual situation between different social groups, every party involved in the conflict is pushed into a centralized form.

In our case, given the nature of the conflict, the rabbinical following of this pattern will be once more a necessary one, because, as their quest was one over authority and authority supposes institutionalization, as a group (even in the absence of any conflict) they had to move naturally toward centralization and unification.

Going further, a question remains still unanswered: *How did the Min appear?*



Why did the Rabbis construct this social category?

Simmel helps us understand it. In his analysis of social conflict, he writes, “the centralized form into which the party is pushed by the situation of conflict grows beyond the party itself and causes it to prefer that the opponent, too, take on this form”, and “since every party wishes the antagonist to act according to the same norms as its own, it may come to desire the unification or perhaps centralization of both itself and opponent”²².

As any social movement that pursued the centralization and unification of its own entity, the Rabbis created a unique category, in which they included all their opponents, this construction being generated by their own need for centralization. And from this construction and as result of a unifying conflict, the *Min* was born.

The expulsion of the *Min* outside Israel’s borders proves our point that the construction of this social category was generated by a conflict over authority, and not by the construction of the Rabbis as an Orthodox movement.

The Rabbis haven’t defined themselves as Orthodoxy, but as religious elite, and they merely used the means of Orthodoxy to claim this status. In the new constructed reality developed by the Rabbis, a new community of Israel emerged, one that after losing the Temple, fulfills the necessary condition of the system (the continuous relation with God) by making the Torah a way of life, that is by observing the rabbinical commandments.

And if they are the elite, only those who recognize their status are *the people*, meaning Israel.

What the Rabbis did, was to establish new criteria of belonging to the community of Israel, and in their quest they expelled outside the border all the groups that did not acknowledge their religious

agenda, while uniting them in a unique category built on their refusal to accept the Rabbis self-legitimated religious establishment. As a result, the *Min* became the insider defined as transgressor of the covenant, was expelled across the border.

A final question lingers: *why was the symbolic pattern designed by the Rabbis acknowledged by the broader Jewish society?*

The answer would be that, by their social reconstruction, they provided symbolical means that enabled the Jewish community to keep what was nearly lost in the destruction of the Temple: the status of an elect people. More general, they made possible the survival of Israel’s fundamental myth.

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Notes

¹ Ephraim E. Urbach, “Self-Isolation or Self-Affirmation in Judaism in the First Three Centuries: Theory and Practice” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. II, E.P. Sanders, A.I. Baumgarten, A. Mendelson (editors), Fortress Press, 1981, p. 290.

² See for example, Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004, Richard Kalmin, “Christians and Heretics in Rabbinic Literature of Late Antiquity” in *Harvard Theological Review*, April 1994, v. 87, n. 2, p. 155.

³ See for example, Dan Jaffé, *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme. Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie dans la littérature talmudique I^{er} – II^e siècle*, Cerf, Paris, 2005, p. 18-20.

⁴ Georg Simmel, *Conflict: The Web of Group-Affiliations*, The Free Press, New York, 1955.

⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy – Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Doubleday & Company, 1967, Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality – A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Penguin Books, 1975

⁶ Dan Jaffé, *Le judaïsme et l'avènement du christianisme. Orthodoxie et hétérodoxie dans la littérature talmudique I^{er} – II^e siècle*, Cerf, Paris, 2005, p. 18.

⁷ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy – Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, Doubleday & Company, 1967.

⁸ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion*, The MacMillan Company, 1967, p. 53.

⁹ Carol A. Newsom, *The Self as Symbolic Space. Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2004, p. 58-59.

¹⁰ Given the fact that Josephus wrote his work in a Roman environment and for a

Roman audience, the reliability of his work has its limits, even though his truthfulness as witness is more questionable when he speaks about the Roman authority and its legitimacy as ruling power, than when he describes, for example, social groups that equally belonged to the Jewish society of his times.

¹¹ Flavius Josephus, AJ, XVIII, 1.2-6.

¹² Daniel Boyarin, *Op. cit.*, p. 172.

¹³ The debate is developed around the plural forms of the Hebrew terms: Elohim, Eloheikha, Shadaim and Sebaoth.

¹⁴ R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash*, Ktav, New York, 1975, p. 365-381.

¹⁵ See, for example Mishna Megilla IV, 8-9: "He that saith I will not go before the Ark in coloured garments shall not do so in white ones. [He hath refuseth to do so] in sandals, shall not do so even barefoot. And he that maketh his *tephillin* round, it is danger and there is no fulfilling of commandment in it. If he places it upon his forehead or upon the palm of his hand, lo, this is the way of *Minuth*. [...] If one says, 'The good shall bless thee', lo, this is the way of *Minuth*. [If one says], 'Thy mercies reach to the nest of the bird', 'Let thy name be remembered for good', 'We praise, we praise', they silence him."

¹⁷ See also Tosephta, Yadaim II, 13: "The rolls and books of the *Minim* do not defile the hands."

¹⁷ "For the Apostates let there be no hope. And let the arrogant government be speedily uprooted in our days.

Let the *nostrim* and the *minim* be destroyed in a moment.

And let them be blotted out of the Book of Life and not be inscribed together with the righteous.

Blessed art thou, O lord, who humblest the arrogant."

¹⁸ I used the translation of Reuven Kimelman from "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity" in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. II, E.P. Sanders, A.I. Baumgarten, A. Mendelson (editors), Fortress Press, 1981, p. 226.

¹⁹ Carol A. Newsom, *The Self as Symbolic Space. Constructing Identity and Community at Qumran*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2004, p. 72.

²⁰ *Apud* Daniel Boyarin, *Op. Cit.*, p. 133.

²¹ Gavin I. Langmuir, *History, Religion, and Antisemitism*, University of California Press, 1990, p. 344.

²² Georg Simmel, *Op. cit.*, p.129.