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IN THE THREE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

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THE PROMISE TO THE PATRIARCHS IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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Before we can begin discussing the problem of the promise to the Patriarchs as interpreted in rabbinical literature, I would like to define the biblical conceptual context to be used in this article. The term "promise" does not exist in the Bible.¹ When we focus our attention on the Bible, using the category "promise," and in particular when this term is used in the context of inter-faith discussion, we must realize that we are importing this concept into the conceptual world of the Bible. This does not mean that we cannot identify promises to the Patriarchs in the Bible, but these promises are not expressed as such.² We must recognize the fact that the category "promise" is not a neutral descriptive category, but itself bears a heavy theological load in the tradition that serves as the setting for the present discussion.³ There is thus something weighted in the very formulation of the subject under discussion as "the promise to the Patriarchs." This formulation presupposes the Christian view that assumes a broader application of this promise. I must therefore preface my remarks by establishing the fact that the religious tradition I will be describing here does not make use of the term "promise," and does not accept the extension of the promise's validity outside the borders of Israel. I make this point at the beginning of this paper because, in a certain sense, everything that follows constitutes an interpretation of this fact. While Paul expands the boundaries

1. The category "promise" is absent both from the system of interpersonal relations and the system of relations between man and God. Promises between humans are made in the form of covenants or oaths. It seems that the very use of a theological category such as "promise" demonstrates the move away from the very different theological context characteristic of the Bible. I should note that throughout the article "Bible" indicates the Hebrew Scriptures, i.e. *Tanakh*. The use of Hebrew Bible might have been preferable in this context, and was not adopted only in order to simplify the writing.

2. The term used to express these promises is either the simple "say," e.g. Gen. 12:1, or the term "covenant" is used, as will be seen below.

3. Paul's discussion of Abraham as a prototype of religiosity based on faith, while employing the concept of the promise, is fundamental in this context. See Rom. 4:13ff, and Gal. 3:21ff.

of the openness of the Bible to include those outside the borders of Israel, the Sages constrict these boundaries, albeit unconsciously.

Having made this clarification, I would like to redefine the focus of this paper's subject. I prefer to discuss this matter as part of the most important biblical category, which defines the context and significance of the promises made to the Patriarchs in the Bible – in other words, the category of the covenant. By examining the changes that took place in the rabbinic sources in relation to the idea of the covenant and to the promises to the Patriarchs that form part of it, we can trace the principal changes in rabbinic thought in comparison to biblical thought. Only after an examination of the logic of the rabbinic sources in their own terms can we return and ask the question that lies at the basis of the subject's definition: What share does someone who is not of Israelite descent possess in the promise to the Patriarchs? It seems to me that if we follow this course, it will be easier to treat the subject defined here in a manner that is derived from the rabbinic sources, without forcing them into an alien agenda. We will thus begin with a few words on the biblical covenant and the promises embodied in it, and on the position of the idea of the covenant in rabbinic literature.

The concept of the covenant is one of the foundations of biblical theology.⁴ The covenant describes the link between God and His people. The covenant establishes the relationship of Israel and God and that of God and his people.⁵ The covenant established with the Patriarchs occupies a special place in the history of the covenant in the Bible. The patriarchal covenant anticipates the covenant made with the entire people, and serves as its foundation. The promise concerning the link between the people and God has its origin in the patriarchal covenant. We find the establishment of a covenant with the Patriarchs and promises to the Patriarchs in several places in Genesis. Let us consider here the elements that appear in Chapter 17.

"And I will make My covenant between Me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly... And I will establish my covenant between Me and thee and thy seed after thee throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee and to thy seed after thee. And I will give to thee, and to thy seed

4. On the importance of the covenant in biblical theology, see Eichrodt 1961. For a survey of developments and trends in research on the concept of the covenant in the Bible, see McCarthy 1986, 54-69.

5. See, for instance, Deut. 29:11-12.

after thee, the land of thy sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."⁶

We can distinguish three separate promises in this excerpt. One promise concerns the seed, i.e. the foundation of a people descended from Abraham. The second promise concerns the inheritance of the land by this seed. The third promise defines the type of link created by the covenant - a link between a people and God. When discussing the subject of the promises in the patriarchal covenant, we must first of all define those promises to which we are referring. A more precise definition of the patriarchal covenant's content is particularly important in the context of inter-faith discussion. When Paul speaks of the promises to the Patriarchs, their content differs from that of the promises in Gen. 17. For Paul, the promises include the inheritance of the world⁷ and the receiving of the Holy Spirit.⁸ When the religious context changes, the promises to the Patriarchs are understood in a different way.

From the point of view of rabbinic literature, the subject of this paper, it can be claimed that the three promises have already been realized. The Jewish people have been established, have inherited the land of Canaan, and have merited a close relationship with God. We thus find no active expectation of the fulfillment of these promises in rabbinic literature, since they have already been fulfilled. The messianic hope in rabbinic literature is not dependent on a close link with the concept of the promises to the Patriarchs.⁹ The promise to the Patriarchs is thus not a central motif in rabbinic literature. However, it seems that not only is this motif not central, it is occasionally completely misunderstood in rabbinic sources. The reason for this seems to be linked to the general decline in the position of the covenantal concept in rabbinic literature. This decline leads in turn to a lack of understanding of various theological ideas connected with the concept of the covenant, including the promises made to the Patriarchs as a covenant.

6. Gen. 17:2-8, excerpts.

7. Rom. 4:13. Inheritance of the world, and not of the land, probably in the sense of messianic salvation.

8. See Rom. 4:13ff; Gal. 3:14ff; Eph. 1:13.

9. The commentary at the end of section 44 in *Bereshit Rabba* provides an example of how a promise made to the Patriarchs which was not realized in the course of history has been postponed to the messianic future.

The centrality of the covenant in biblical thought does not guarantee the importance of this concept in the thought of later generations. My research on the position of the covenantal concept in rabbinic literature suggests that in this literature the concept lost the central position it had enjoyed in various areas of biblical literature.¹⁰ In my opinion, fundamental changes from the biblical outlook took place in the Sages' world view. In the wake of these changes, the conceptual structures which made up the biblical concept of the covenant were neither understood nor appreciated in rabbinic literature. The change in the conceptual emphases in the rabbinic literature meant that not only was the covenantal concept relegated from its central position to obscurity, but it often seems to be completely misunderstood by the Sages. In this paper I will present a thesis dealing with one of the three promises enumerated above: the promise of the inheritance of the land. It is obvious that if we try to transcribe the religious meaning of a promise to the Patriarchs from one religious context to another, this may be the most difficult one to transcribe. We can trace changes in the meaning of the inheritance of the land both in the sayings of the Sages, as we shall see below, and in the interpretation of this promise in early Christian literature. The motif of the inheritance of the land, in the context of the covenantal promises, will serve as an example of far-reaching changes that took place in the conceptual world of the Sages, in comparison to the world of biblical thought.

The Patriarchal Covenant and the Inheritance of the Land in Biblical Thought

One of the components of the concept of the biblical covenant is that of the inheritance of the land.¹¹ The promise of inheriting the land is given to Abraham when the covenant is established: "On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: Unto thy seed have I given this land..."¹² The covenant made with Abraham is for his descendants. The promise of inheriting the land was made to Abraham, but it is intended to be realized

10. Several scholars have already noted the fact that the concept of the covenant rarely appears in rabbinic literature. See Davies 1974, 107, n. 80.

11. See Weinfeld 1984, 115-137.

12. Gen. 15:18.

by his descendants. This phenomenon was apparent in the verses from Gen. 17 examined above. The promise of the land made to the Patriarchs in a covenantal context assumes a link between the covenant made with the Patriarchs and the future covenant to be established with Israel. The covenant with Israel is the realization and fulfillment of the covenant made with the Patriarchs. It enables Israel to realize the promise concerning the land which was made to the Patriarchs at the first stage of covenantal linkage:

"And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob... and I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan... and I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be to you a God... And I will bring you in unto the land, concerning which I lifted up My hand to give it to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; and I will give it to you for a heritage: I am the Lord..."¹³

This connection between the covenant with the Patriarchs and that with Israel also explains one way of dealing with the problem of violation of the covenant. If the covenant with Israel is the realization of the patriarchal covenant, then when the people violate the covenant, it is still possible to go back and rely on the patriarchal covenant in order to preserve and restore the violated covenant. "...then will I remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land."¹⁴ The mention of the land in this context of remembering the covenant is evidence of the assumption that the land was given to the Patriarchs by means of a covenant, and that the remembrance of that covenant permits the renewal of the link to the land.

The covenant made on the plains of Moab also reflects a similar pattern of linkage between the covenant with the Patriarchs and that with Israel...

13. Exod. 6:3-8, excerpts. It should however be noted that the traditions of the covenant at Sinai do not explicitly rest on the Patriarchal covenant. However, see Exod. 19:5, which may be read as the second part of the formula of "people and God," together with Gen. 17:8. See also Nachmanides' commentary on Exod. 19:5.

14. Lev. 26:42. This is also the logic behind Moses' protection of the people from destruction after the sin of the golden calf. See Exod. 32:13. The mention of the oath to the Patriarchs appeals to a more basic level of the violated covenant. This level includes the promise of the land. See also the prayer in the *Words of the Luminaries* from Qumran, 4Q504, where God's forgiveness after the sin of the golden calf is described: "for the sake of your covenant." See Chazon 1991, 230.

"... that thou shouldst enter into the covenant of the Lord thy God - and into His oath - which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day; that He may establish thee this day unto Himself for a people, and that He may be unto thee a God, as He spoke unto thee, and as He swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."¹⁵

Here, however, the term "covenant" is replaced by the term "oath" to the Patriarchs. This occurs with every mention of the patriarchal covenant in Deuteronomy. The promise of the land to the Patriarchs in the covenant is replaced by the oath to the Patriarchs.¹⁶ We find that in Deuteronomy there is full consciousness that the inheritance of the land is by virtue of the Patriarchs, but this inheritance is distinct from the terminological context of a covenant. The covenant with the Patriarchs is understood as an oath, with the oath to the Patriarchs taking the place of the covenant with the Patriarchs.

Later biblical literature also reflects the assumption that the land was given to the Patriarchs, for their descendants, in a covenant. In Ps. 105, there is an account of biblical history from the patriarchal period to the Exodus. The term "covenant" does not appear in the context of establishing a covenant with the people, but only in the context of the promise of the land to the Patriarchs.

"O ye seed of Abraham His servant, ye children of Jacob, His chosen ones... He hath remembered His covenant for ever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations; [the covenant] which He made with Abraham, and His oath unto Isaac; and He established it unto Jacob for a statute, to Israel for an everlasting covenant; saying: 'Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance.'"¹⁷

Even as late as Neh. 9:7, we hear:

"Thou art the Lord God, who didst choose Abram... and foundest his heart faithful before Thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, even to give it unto his seed..."

It should be noted that this passage is also an account of Jewish history from earliest times up to the Return to Zion. The establishment of a

15. Deut. 29:12.

16. This occurs from Deut. 1:8 onwards.

17. Ps. 105:6-11, excerpts. See also 1 Chr. 16:13ff.

covenant¹⁸ appears exclusively in connection with the promise of the land. Even the description of God's descent to Mount Sinai in verse 13 does not make use of the term "covenant." From this it follows that the pattern we have assured concerning the Torah – in which the covenant with the Patriarchs and that with Israel form two parts of a protracted process – does not appear in the later books of the Bible.¹⁹ In Deuteronomy too, there is no mention of two stages in a single covenant, since the term "covenant" is replaced by "oath." This change, however, does not invalidate the basic understanding that links the Patriarchs with the gift of the land. In spite of this separation of covenants, we can safely conclude that both the early and the late biblical evidence demonstrates that the land was given in a covenant to the Patriarchs for their descendants.

Before examining the transformation of the concept of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the patriarchal covenant in rabbinic literature, it is worth noting the appearance of this motif in a corpus close to the rabbinic literature – the literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls. At the beginning of the Damascus Document, we read:

"And remembering the covenant with the first ones, He left a remnant of Israel and did not allow them to be destroyed... and He sprang up from Israel and from Aaron, a plant to inherit His land and to wax fat on the good produce of His earth."²⁰

The renewal of the covenant includes a promise of inheriting the land. The reference to Lev. 26:45 in the phrase "and remembering the covenant with the first ones" suggests a possible interpretation according to which this renewed inheritance is a remembrance of the patriarchal covenant.²¹ In another passage, from the Temple Scroll, we read about the consequences of violating the covenant, and of the return that will come after the punishment.

"And those in the lands of their enemies sigh and cry out because of the heavy yoke, and they will cry and I shall not hear, and they will call and I shall not an-

18. As distinct from the formulaic use of the phrase "who keepest the covenant and mercy" in verse 32.

19. The only source where this pattern is found is in 2 Kgs. 13:23.

20. *Damascus Document*, 1:4.

21. Proceeding from the assumption that Lev. 26:45 is understood in parallel to Lev. 26:42. Another possible interpretation is that the remembrance of the covenant of the first ones refers to the original covenant with Israel.

swer them because of their evil deeds, and I shall hide My face from them, and they will be a prey and a spoil and a mockery, and none will save them, because of their evil, when they violated My covenant and their souls abhorred My Torah. Until they are guilty of every sin, then they will return to Me with all their heart and with all their soul, according to all the words of this Torah, and I shall save them from the hand of their enemies, and I shall redeem them from the hand of those who hate them, and I shall bring them to the land of their fathers. And I shall redeem them and multiply them and rejoice over them, and I shall be their God and they shall be My people."²²

Bringing the people to the land of the Patriarchs is connected to the restoration of the covenant, to repentance for violating the covenant, and to a return to the ideal relationship of people and God.²³ However, it should be noted that the inheritance of the land does not appear in several passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls that deal with the covenant, in which it might have been expected that this motif would appear.²⁴ Another motif appears in its place: the motif of atonement for the land.²⁵ It may be that the Dead Sea sect's attention was given more to the atoning influence of their existence as a sect in the present than to the realization of the promise of inheriting the land in the future.

The Patriarchal Covenant and the Inheritance of the Land in Rabbinic Thought

When we come to assess the position of the *theologoumenon* of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the patriarchal covenant in rabbinic litera-

22. *Temple Scroll*, 59:5 onwards. It must be noted that the pseudo-biblical character of the scroll, and the formation of this passage out of combinations of biblical verses, somewhat weakens the value of this quotation as evidence of the continued existence of the concept of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the patriarchal covenant.

23. In the fragmentary passage that has survived from the prayer in the *Words of the Luminaries*, we find a mention of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the choosing of their descendants after them. The entreaty for the remembrance and restoration of the violated covenant is an important part of the liturgy of the Words of the Luminaries. It is possible that the link between the patriarchal covenant and the covenant with the Jewish people is also expressed in the above passage. See Chazon 1991, 184.

24. See for instance the *Manual of Discipline* 4:7.

25. See the *Community Rule* (1QS) 8:6; 8:10; 9:4; and the *Rule of the Congregation* (IQSa) 1:3.

ture, we can first of all establish that, generally speaking, this *theologoumenon* very rarely appears in this literature. With very few exceptions, echoes of this *theologoumenon* only appear in the interpretation of verses that explicitly employ this concept.²⁶ Rabbinic interpretation does not focus principally on the biblical message, but diverts it into other meanings while emphasizing other aspects of the text and almost ignoring the biblical message. The rabbinic interpretation of these verses resembles a man who is gazing at his friend, but who is so deeply absorbed in himself that he looks through the friend instead of looking at him and giving him his attention.²⁷

I would like to stress here that I am not claiming that the Land of Israel was not important to the Sages, or that they renounced the patriarchal covenant. We are dealing with the internal parameters of rabbinic thought in comparison with biblical thought, and are trying to trace changing patterns of thought. The question here is not whether the Land of Israel was important to the Sages, but which conceptual context encompassed the importance of the land. The significance of the changes in thought patterns does not necessarily imply anything about the actual attachment to the land. The conceptual changes are reflected in the adoption of specific theses, such as the inheritance of the land by virtue of the Patriarchs, and in their replacement by other theses, such as the inheritance of the land by virtue of the Torah. Thus, if we speak of the abandonment of the *theologoumenon* of the inheritance of the land from the Patriarchs, we must realize that this was a silent abandonment resulting from changes in emphasis in conceptual patterns, and was not a rejection of or disagreement with the *theologoumenon*, and definitely not an attempt to weaken the attachment to the land.

26. In order not to complicate the discussion, I will not list all the possible echoes of the biblical *theologoumenon*, which abound in the wake of the interpretative process. The reader can find a discussion of these sources in Goshen-Gottstein (forthcoming). What is common to these sources is that they do not rely on the biblical *theologoumenon* on its own, except through the interpretative process. The way in which the *theologoumenon* is reflected is always different from the biblical context in which it appears, due to the changes that took place in the rabbinic conceptual world.

27. English distinguishes between "look at" and "look through." This distinction characterizes the different ways of reading. In certain circumstances, midrashic commentary can look at verses as if they were glass partitions which can be looked through, without looking at the object itself.

What we find is not an abandonment of the attachment to the land, but a decline in the connection made between the land and the Patriarchs. Instead of this, Israel's direct link to the land is emphasized.²⁸

The expressions most frequently employed in rabbinic diction regard the Land of Israel as a gift made to Israel as a nation, with no need for the participation of the Patriarchs in this process of giving.

"Three goodly gifts were given to Israel... Torah and the Land of Israel and the world to come."²⁹

"The Holy One, blessed be He, measured all the lands and did not find any that was fitting to be given to Israel except the Land of Israel."³⁰

It is obvious that the description of the giving of the land to the people of Israel does not contradict the *theologoumenon* under discussion. However, in the absence of any consideration of the Patriarchs' place in the process of acquiring rights over the Land of Israel in other statements, those statements that describe the giving of the land to the people of Israel become the only way of describing the link between the land and Israel.

Our main argument here is one from silence: the very fact that the *theologoumenon* that the inheritance of the land is part of the framework of the covenant made with the Patriarchs, or at least exists by virtue of the Patriarchs, does not appear in the rabbinic sources that discuss Israel's relationship to the land. Since the argument from silence is sometimes regarded as a weak one, as it is possible to argue against it that these matters are self-evident and need no explicit expression, we must look for other ways of confirming our hypothesis that the *theologoumenon* linking the relationship between Israel and the land to the patriarchal covenant was indeed rejected, or at least not fully absorbed, in rabbinic thought. In order to base this claim, I shall analyze rabbinic sources that interpret or make use of those biblical passages that express this *theologoumenon*. This interpretation would go against the theoretical claim that the concept was generally agreed and needed no explicit formulation. It would be hard to make such a claim, since the interpretation ignores the contents made explicit in the Bible and emphasizes other contents in their place.

28. It is worthwhile noting that out of a range of biblical names, "the Land of Israel" is used almost exclusively for the land in rabbinic literature. This name best expresses the link between the people and the land. The land is regarded as the land of the people.

29. *Sifrei Devarim*, section 32, p. 57.

30. *Vayikra Rabba*, 13:2.

The emphasis of alternative contents is also the key with which we can answer the question why rabbinic literature does not have recourse to the *theologoumenon* of the patriarchal covenant. It does not seem to be because something in this thesis was alien to the Sages. The ability of the thesis, or of its echoes, to emerge in several, mostly later, sources (which will not be dealt with in this survey),³¹ also furnishes evidence that there is nothing wrong with the thesis itself. It seems that this phenomenon is a side effect of changing systems of thought. A *theologoumenon* that is significant in the context of a theological system based on the concept of the covenant does not occupy a central place in a theological system based on other concepts. In order to understand the significance of the *theologoumenon*'s decline, we must clarify the significance of the decline in importance of the covenantal concept in rabbinic literature. What is the reason for this decline? Several scholars have already dealt with this matter.³² In my understanding, the concept of the covenant is vulnerable to the danger of being undermined. The covenant is linked to the religious behavior of the people, and is thus necessarily subject to the continual threat of violation. We have already discussed one of the biblical mechanisms of coping with violation of the covenant – reliance on the patriarchal covenant. The concept of the covenant is stamped with an obvious historical consciousness. The covenant was made at a particular historical moment. History is the stage where the covenant is embodied – good and evil religious behavior alike find their expression on the stage of history.³³ In my opinion, the decline in the position of the covenantal concept in the rabbinic literature stems from the uncertainty associated with this concept. Rabbinic thought therefore adopted another way of establishing its conceptual values. It seems to me that one of the changes that took place in the world of rabbinic thought is linked to a move from the historical to the cosmic sphere. Basic values in rabbinic literature derive their significance from a cosmic context. The role of Israel is no longer described in historical terms, linked to the concept of the covenant. Instead, we find sayings such as “The heavens and earth were only created for the sake of Israel,”³⁴ “Were they not already

31. See above, note 26.

32. See above, note 10.

33. This is the significance of the covenant's blessings and curses; see for instance Lev. 26.

34. *Vayikra Rabba*, 36:4. Several versions identify Israel here with Jacob, and not with the people as a whole.

formed before the six days of Creation?,"³⁵ "The thought of Israel preceded everything."³⁶ The Jewish people existed before the creation of the world, and the world exists for them and because of them. This cosmic understanding of the position of Israel is not as vulnerable as the historical understanding of the covenant. The position of Israel is anchored in the cosmic order, from whence comes its greater stability.³⁷

The cosmic vision does not entail dissociation from the duties of religious practice – but the religious obligation is no longer conceived of in terms of a covenant. Rather, the Torah becomes the supreme principle in the world of the Sages. Yet it too achieves the same cosmic status. "Six things preceded the creation of the world... the Torah,"³⁸ "The Holy One, blessed be He, looked into the Torah and created the world."³⁹ The Torah changes from a constitution for a particular nation into a blueprint for the creation of the entire world. Israel and the Torah are the two central key concepts of rabbinic thought. These two values already exist in the Bible. However, the relative position which they achieve and the way in which they are justified in rabbinic literature are quite different from what we find in biblical literature. They are no longer tied together by an organizing concept such as that of the covenant, but by a religious pattern with different emphases, in particular the cosmic emphasis.

The decline of the concept of the covenant in rabbinic literature is obvious from these shifts in emphasis. What are the implications of this decline for the position of the Land of Israel in rabbinic thought? We can identify several of them. First and foremost, it seems that the Land of Israel no longer plays the central role that it did in biblical theology. While the

35. *Mekhilta, Masekhta d'Vayehi*, section 3.

36. *Bereshit Rabba*, 1:4.

37. The idea that the world exists for the sake of Israel serves a specific conceptual purpose, in my opinion. This concept reflects the process of introversion in rabbinic thought, which even more than biblical thought emphasizes the status of Israel. In my opinion, this phenomenon represents a specific stage in Jewish thought and religion. This stage is the result of specific historical pressures and influences, which led to Judaism's retreat inward. However, we can still hear other voices in this stage, which teach that the world was created for the sake of all mankind, not only for Israel. For different views on the question of why the world was created, and for an explanation of the historical circumstances that led to the emphasis of Israel's position, see Marmorstein 1920, 108-128.

38. *Bereshit Rabba*, 1:4.

39. *Bereshit Rabba*, 1:1.

story of the Bible, or at least of extensive parts of it, focuses on the Israelites' entry into the land and settlement there, the story told by the Sages does not seem to preserve this centrality of the land. Their story concerns the people and their Torah, not the people and their land.⁴⁰ The decline in the position of the concept of the covenant on one hand, and in the centrality of the Land of Israel in rabbinic thought on the other, make it easier to understand how the *theologoumenon* of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the patriarchal covenant disappeared from rabbinic thought.

As noted above, the Land of Israel is described as being given to Israel. This giving is not linked to the gift to the Patriarchs, nor to the establishment of a covenant. This dissociation from the covenantal context deepens the significance of the giving of the Land of Israel. The land is not a conditional gift, dependent upon correct religious behavior. It thus seems likely that not only the status of the people of Israel but also the status of the Land of Israel is fortified by the separation from the conceptual context of a covenant.

As I suggested above, the central spiritual values of rabbinic culture are presented as having cosmic significance. The possibility that the Land of Israel also has cosmic status appears in at least one important text in midrashic literature.

"And thus you find in the ways of God, that whatever is precious takes precedence. The Torah, which is most precious, was created first of all... the Temple, which was most precious, was created before everything... the Land of Israel, which is most precious, was created before everything."⁴¹

The idea of the Land of Israel preceding all other lands is presented here as an expression of endearment. The precedence of the Land of Israel can be interpreted as relevant not only to the land itself, but also to the status of the land in relation to the people. A land created before everything else is cosmically suited to a people who were thought of before creation. The text given here does not make this link, but the conceptual complex that trans-

40. On the decline of the centrality of the Land of Israel in rabbinic theology, see S. Rabidovitch, *Studies in Jewish Philosophy*, Vol. 1, Jerusalem, 112ff (Hebrew). Rabidovitch rightly emphasizes the decline in the status of the Land of Israel, paralleling the rise in the status of other values – especially the people and the Torah. See also Davies 1974, 58, n. 12. Davies, who has collected the rabbinic dicta that emphasize the importance of the Land of Israel, does not discuss the significance of the finds he has made.

41. *Sifrei Devarim*, section 37.

fers values from a historical to a cosmic context raises this possibility as one way of interpreting this text. The dissociation from the biblical *theologoumenon* of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the Patriarchs is quite clear in this complex of changes.

The changes in conceptual emphases in rabbinic thought account for the decline in the position of the covenantal concept, in the position of the Land of Israel, and in the understanding of the inheritance of the land as derived from the patriarchal covenant. We can add several other comments to this description that will help us to evaluate the nature of the changes between biblical and rabbinic thought concerning this issue. The problem of the inheritance of the land by virtue of the patriarchal covenant is used to deal with the question of the right to the Land of Israel. This is one method of coming to terms with the "ethical" problem of the right to the land, and the justification of its conquest and the dispossession of the peoples of Canaan.⁴² This ethical problem was definitely not of central importance for the Sages.⁴³ The status of the Jewish people down in their time is that of the conquered, not the conqueror. The religious world of the Sages deals with another agenda.

A large part of the Sages' religious activity was devoted to giving value to religious practice. Their attention was focused on defining forbidden and permitted practices, and on clarifying the religious value of action in general. This project, Torah study in its broadest sense, left its imprint on the attitude to the Land of Israel. The question that occupies the Sages is not the right to conquer or inherit the land, but the religious value that is associated with residing in the land, or that justifies or permits residence there. The Land of Israel is thus examined in the typical rabbinic religious context. The questions that occupy the Sages deal with the limits of the obligation to live in the Land of Israel, the definition of its boundaries, the performance of the commandments that are associated with the land, and other practical matters. The common denominator of the *halakhic* concern with problems associated with the Land of Israel is the central place ac-

42. See Davies 1974, 25ff, and Weinfeld 1984, 117ff.

43. We do of course find several texts that are devoted to this problem. See for instance the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 91a and *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, Gen. 11. However, these sources play out the inner biblical rhetoric, while using biblical components. They do not reflect the Sages' independent moral interest, and in any case, in my opinion they do not reflect a problem that is central for the Sages.

tually occupied by the land in their legal discussions. The fact that the Land of Israel does not occupy a central position in rabbinic theology does not obviate a detailed and intense concern with the practiced *halakhic* aspects of residence in the land. In this matter, *halakha* acts as a sort of practical theology, which demonstrates the practical importance of the Land of Israel even when the conceptual framework has changed, as described above.

One of the characteristics of *halakhic* thought is the central position of man, who acts and constitutes legal reality by his acts and decisions.⁴⁴ This concern for the action of man, who constitutes reality in all its central aspects, is also reflected in the discussions on the Land of Israel and its sanctity. The discussions in rabbinic literature deal with first (earlier) sanctity, derived from Joshua's conquest of the land, and with second (later) sanctity, derived from Ezra's return to the land.⁴⁵ The discussion of the sanctity of the land is distinct from the promise of the land to the Patriarchs⁴⁶ and from any concept of covenant whatsoever. The strength of the land's sanctity is linked to the actions of the entire people at a decisive stage of the process of conquering the land. This is an excellent example of the way in which the centrality of the Land of Israel is preserved in rabbinic thought, even though the biblical *theologoumenon* has been abandoned. The importance of the Land of Israel is not expressed in terms of a covenant, but in terms of sanctity. This sanctity is not connected with the Patriarchs, but with the way in which the entire people settle the land at de-

44. See Neusner 1981, 270ff.

45. See Babylonian Talmud, *Shevu'ot* 17a and parallels. See Ravidovitch's discussion, *ibid.*, 52ff and 115ff.

46. See the discussion in the Gemara in *Baba Batra* 119b. Inheritance from the fathers does not refer to the Patriarchs of the people, but the generation which left Egypt, who bequeath the land to their children. It is interesting in this context to note the words of the Jerusalem Talmud, *Hallah*, 2:1, p. 58b. Even when the discussion refers to the inheritance of the land by the Patriarchs, in order to establish the time from which it is obligatory to fulfill the commandment of *hallah*, this inheritance becomes a retroactive inheritance. In other words, the central point of the inheritance is not the action of the Patriarchs who bequeath it to their sons, but the action of the sons, who inherit retroactively from the time of their fathers. The Jerusalem Talmud's comment here: "It is not written here 'I will give it to your seed' but 'I have given it to your seed,' I have already given it" stresses the conceptual difference. It seems that the promise to the Patriarchs becomes subsidiary, and the inheritance of the children becomes primary.

cisive moments in their history. There is no negation of the link to the land, simply a different agenda.

When a later stage of a particular culture resorts to a different agenda from that of an earlier stage, it naturally becomes necessary to interpret the literary sources that belong to the earlier conceptual formulation. How, then, are the biblical passages associated with the biblical *theologoumenon* interpreted in rabbinic literature? We will begin by examining the midrashic commentary on the stories describing the promising of the land to Abraham. As I will suggest, the obvious biblical message – that the land was promised to Abraham's descendants – finds no echo in midrashic commentary. Instead, the Sages read these biblical passages in the light of a completely different agenda. All the examples given below are taken from the midrashic commentary of *Bereshit Rabba* to Chapters 15 and 17 of Genesis. Let us start with the commentary on Gen. 15:18:

"'In that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram etc.' Rabbi Yudan Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva. One said: This world He revealed to him, the next world He did not reveal. The other said: He revealed this world and the next to him. Rabbi Berachia said in the name of Rabbi Leazar and Rabbi Yose ben Chanania. One said: He revealed to him up to that day, and the other said: He revealed to him from that day onwards."⁴⁷

The biblical story describes how Abraham receives information on what will happen in the future to his descendants. The midrashic commentary broadens the bounds of this knowledge, so that it includes not only what is going to happen to Abraham's descendants in Egypt, but their entire future. This interpretation attempts to define the extent of the knowledge of the future granted to Abraham. The issue disputed here concerns whether Abraham's knowledge of the future included the next world. The two Sages mentioned last of all emphasize the words "in that day," but come to differing conclusions on this basis. What link does this commentary have to the establishment of a covenant? The midrash here seems to reflect the understanding that the establishment of a covenant consists of the revelation of a secret. This is not such a far-fetched interpretation as it might seem at first glance. Already in the Bible, we find covenant and secret exist in parallel. Thus we find in Ps. 25:14: "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and His covenant, to make them know it."⁴⁸ If the Torah,

47. *Bereshit Rabba*, 44:22.

48. For the juxtaposition of secret and covenant in the Dead Sea Scrolls, see the

which reveals God's wisdom, is seen as a covenant,⁴⁹ it is but a short step to say that every revelation of the wisdom or knowledge of God is a covenant. This is thus the origin of the interpretation of "establishing a covenant" as the revelation of the secrets of the future. However, even if this interpretation can be "justified," it is clear that this establishment of a covenant does not pertain in any manner to the biblical message of making a covenant concerning the promising of the land. The continuation of the commentary in *Bereshit Rabba*, on the words "Unto thy seed have I given this land," is only of interest for the fact that it demonstrates that God's word is like His action; the commentary does not deal with the issue of the giving of the land as such.

From the Promise to the Patriarchs to the Reward of the Commandments

In the context of this discussion, it may be useful to note a comment in an earlier verse in this passage of the Midrash (44,21). On the verse "behold a smoking furnace and a flaming torch" (Gen. 15:17), the midrash comments:

"Shimon bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: He showed him four things: Gehinnom and [the subjugation of the] kingdoms and the giving of the Torah and the Temple. He said to him: As long as your children are busy with these two, they will be saved from these two. When they remove themselves from these two, they will be judged by these two. He said to him: To which would you rather your children will descend – to Gehinnom or to the kingdoms?"

Abraham's vision of the future is not a passive watching of future events. Abraham is involved in the decision-making process concerning his descendants' future. His vision of the future concerns religious phenomena and their implications for history. Abraham plays an active part in the religious structure, which includes Torah study and the offering of sacrifices. The main emphasis in this dictum is on the behavior of the descendants and not on that of their father or on what they receive because of him. Abraham's role is to decide on the most suitable form of punishment.

Thanksgiving Scroll 4:23; 5:9; 5:23ff; 14:21ff; see also the *Community Rule*, 5:11.

49. There is no covenant but Torah. *Sifrei Bamidbar*, section 111, p. 116 etc.

However, the decisive factor influencing the fate of his descendants is their own religious behavior. The appearance of Gehinnom in this source is interesting. As will be seen below, the meaning of the Land of Israel in rabbinic sources widens from the physical land and life there to include existence after death: the resurrection of the dead, the world to come and even Gehinnom.⁵⁰ Even though the mention of Gehinnom in this passage is derived from the "smoking furnace" described in the verse, it is interesting to note that the biblical context in which the land is promised to Abraham's descendants has been transformed into a description in which Abraham sees and determines the results of his offspring's sins in Gehinnom. This might provide us with another key to understanding the commentary quoted earlier: "He revealed this world and the next to him." In the light of the identification of the Land of Israel with the next world, it is easier to understand how an interpretation that describes the giving of the land to Abraham's descendants can be transformed into the revelation of the next world to Abraham. In any event, these verses are not read with their original conceptual weight but with a new conceptual program that pegs its concerns on the biblical verses. The agenda now includes Torah study and the world to come, two central concepts for the Sages which did not form part of biblical thought. The content of biblical thought itself is not here expressed in rabbinic commentary.

The commentary of *Bereshit Rabba* (to Gen. 15:8) is typical of rabbinic ways of thought:

"And he said, O Lord God, whereby shall I know etc. Rabbi Chama bar Chanina said: He did not say it as a complaint, but he asked Him, By what merit, and He said to him, By the atonements that I will give to your children."

The concept of "merit" (*zechut*) is a conceptual novelty of the rabbinic world view.⁵¹ This concept refers to the value or the power obtained by proper religious behavior. Merit is also the power that sets in motion the world's events. Central events that at first glance seem to be set in motion by God's unilateral action, such as the creation of the world⁵² or the

50. For Gehinnom, see *Bamidbar Rabba*, 23:5. See also the juxtaposition of the commentaries on the enjoyment of the Sabbath as redemption from the torments of Gehinnom, and conferring an unbounded heritage, in the Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 118a.

51. See Marmorstein 1920.

52. See *Bereshit Rabba*, 1:4.

Exodus,⁵³ are interpreted in midrashic commentary as being set in motion by merit, i.e. by the power of human action. Abraham's question: Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?, which at first seems to be a request for a sign or a divine promise, is interpreted by the Midrash by means of the concept of merit. Abraham is asking to know upon what merit the inheritance of the land is founded. This implies that the inheritance of the land does not depend on the divine promise to Abraham. It depends on merit, which comes from the performance of a commandment. The role of the divine promise as the basis for inheriting the land is replaced by the performance of a commandment, which bestows merit. This seems to be the key to understanding the abandonment of the *theologoumenon* of inheritance of the land by force of the patriarchal covenant. In a religious context which treats the Torah, its commandments and its power as central. The promise is not, in and of itself, a sufficiently powerful factor. In order that the promise be fulfilled, some objective power is needed to enable its realization. This objective power, merit, takes the place of the original promise. The Torah thus comes to occupy the conceptual position of the promise to Abraham.

The answer given by the Midrash is that the land will be inherited through atonements, i.e. sacrifices. The commentary quoted from *Bereshit Rabba* goes on to link the covenant made with Abraham in Gen. 15 to the Temple sacrifices, and discovers references to all the sacrifices of the Temple in the account of this covenant. The importance of the Temple cult is also emphasized in the extract quoted above, in which Abraham has to decide between Gehinnom and enslavement to the kingdoms after the destruction of the Temple and the end of the sacrificial cult. However, the sacrifices are not the only commandment that is presented as the basis for the inheritance of the land. The midrashic commentary on Gen. 17, where there is another version of the promise of the land to Abraham's descendants, also presupposes a similar conceptual background. Here too, there is no discussion about the meaning of the promise of the land to the Patriarchs. The only interpretative note in section 46 which concerns the Land of Israel is in 46:9, on the verse "And I will give to thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land of thy sojournings":⁵⁴

53. See *Mekhilta, Masekhta d'Vayehi*, section 3, p. 98.

54. Gen. 17:8.