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The Patriarchs and the Matriarchs

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The Patriarchs and the Matriarchs

Rachel Adelman

The patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (or Israel) – are the ancestors of the Jewish people, and their stories are recounted in the book of Genesis (chapters 12–50), covering a span of three hundred years (c. 2000–1700 BCE). God forged an irrevocable bond with them – the covenant of the patriarchs – promising their progeny the land of Canaan as an inheritance. The four matriarchs – Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel – all played pivotal roles in determining the rightful heir to that covenant. The terms of the promise – the possession of the land of Canaan and of progeny as heirs to that land – are deferred, forming the basis for a unique yet fraught relationship with God. First, the patriarchs and matriarchs must endure barrenness and displacement, as ‘strangers in a foreign land’, before the covenant can be fulfilled. Enduring these trials forms the basis for ‘the merit of the forefathers’, a concept often inclusive of the matriarchs. These merits are invoked by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, and throughout Rabbinic literature and liturgy, on behalf of Israel and the Jewish people in order to secure a promise of return to the Land and/or forgiveness of the nation. The Binding of Isaac (*‘Aqedah*) and the voice of Rachel as an intercessor play particularly poignant roles in prayer throughout Jewish history to the present day. The premise is that God’s covenant with the Jewish people remains unbroken, despite their exile from the Promised Land, because of the merits of the patriarchs and matriarchs.

Keywords: Patriarchs, Matriarchs, Ancestral narrative, Covenant, Merit, Intercession, Hebrew Bible, Midrash, Liturgy, *Aqedah* (Binding of Isaac), Land of Israel

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1 Introduction

The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (or Israel), are the eponymous ancestors of the Jewish people. Their stories are recounted in the book of Genesis (chapters 12–50) and cover a span of three hundred years (c. 2000–1700 BCE). With these three patriarchs God forged an irrevocable bond, known as ‘the covenant of the patriarchs (*brit 'avot*)’, promising their progeny the land of Canaan as an inheritance. The four matriarchs – Sarah, the wife of Abraham; Rebekah, the wife of Isaac; Leah and Rachel, the wives of Jacob – all played pivotal roles in determining the rightful heir to that covenant. In the case of Ishmael (displaced by Isaac) and Esau (displaced by Jacob), the pattern follows the ‘overturn of primogeniture’, where the privilege of the firstborn is trumped by divine preference. In the initial call, God appears to Abraham and promises the Land to his descendants, seemingly irrespective of any merit, but later sources, in the book of Genesis and beyond, attribute this ‘covenant of grant’ to a reward for the patriarch’s loyalty. The fulfilment of the covenantal terms – the promise of progeny and possession of the land – are deferred, forming the basis for a unique yet fraught relationship with God. First, the patriarchs and matriarchs must endure barrenness and displacement – being strangers in a foreign land – before the covenant can be fulfilled. Surpassing these trials forms the basis for ‘the merit of the forefathers (*zekhut 'avot*)’, a concept often inclusive of the ‘merit of the matriarchs’. These merits are invoked by the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, and throughout Rabbinic literature and liturgy, on behalf of Israel and the Jewish people, in order to secure a promise of return to the Land and/or forgiveness of the nation. The Binding of Isaac and the voice of Rachel as an intercessor play particularly poignant roles in the prayers throughout Jewish history to the present day. The premise is that God’s covenant with the Jewish people remains unbroken, despite their exile from the Promised Land, because of the merits of the patriarchs and matriarchs. (All biblical citations in the article are taken from the NJPS [1985], based on the Masoretic Text, unless designated otherwise.)

2 The purpose of the ancestral narratives in Genesis

One could argue that the Hebrew Bible (HB) is the history of God’s relationship with the chosen people, Israel. If so, one might then ask why the HB does not begin with the redemption from Egypt. Or, in the words of Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, Troyes, 1040–1105 CE), the great conduit of Jewish tradition: why does the Torah not begin with the first law given to the Israelites on the eve of the Exodus: ‘This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months [...]’ (Exod 12:2). The famous answer that Rashi culls from the Midrashic tradition is telling:

[I]f the nations of the world should ever say to Israel, 'You are thieves – you have conquered the lands of the seven nations [of Canaan]', the Jews can reply, 'All the earth belongs to God. He created it, and gave it to whomever He saw fit. By His will he gave it to them (the Canaanites), and by His will He took it away from them, and gave it to us'. (Rashi on Gen 1:1, based on *Yalkut Shimoni* 187; Eisen 1986: 3)

However, this theology of divine election should give pause, because the Jewish people have been subject to the vicissitudes of banishment and exile for over 2,000 years. Their relationship to the Promised Land is fraught with contingencies, both theological and historical. The clues for this complex relationship between God and Israel can be traced back to the patriarchs and matriarchs.

In Rashi's reading, however, the foundational narratives of the patriarchs justify God's choice of the people Israel and the gift of the land. The Bible scholar Hermann Gunkel similarly argues that the 'legends of the patriarchs' are etiological; they account for the ancestral origins of the Israelite people and how they came to inhabit these locales (Gunkel 1997: 158–161). The patriarchal stories begin with God's command of Abraham to leave his homeland, his kin, and his father's house and go – *Lekh lekha* – to the Land that God will show him (Gen 12:1), that is Canaan (vv. 4, 7). The book of Genesis concludes with Joseph's assurance to his brothers in Egypt that God would surely bring them back to the Land (50:24). Though Canaan is clearly central, 'at decisive points of the narrative, at the beginning, in the middle and at the end, we find the protagonists outside of the land' (Blenkinsopp 1992: 110). The deferred possession of the Promised Land presages the future relationship between God and the Jewish people with respect to homeland and exile, as the medieval adage goes: 'The deeds of the forefathers are a sign for the children (*ma'aseh 'avot siman le-banim*)' – that is, events in the life of the patriarch(s) prefigure the fate of their descendants (often invoked by Ramban [Nachmanides], b. Girona 1194–1270; in particular with regard to the nation's exile[s], as in Gen 12:10 [Abraham] – cf. *Gen. Rab.* 40:6; Gen 26:1 [Isaac]; and 47:28 [Jacob/Israel]; Harlap 2005: 65–93).

Turning Rashi's question on its head, one can turn the negative ('why not [...]') into a positive: why begin the HB with the primordial history of Genesis (chapters 1–11)? The opening chapters recount the common origins of all humankind with 'the first human' (*ha-'Adam*), male and female, made in God's image and likeness (1:26–27; 5:1). They also recount a series of divine disappointments, met with edicts of exile: first the banishment from Eden (3:23–24), then the corruption and violence that led to the Flood; concluding with the scattering of the nations across the face of the earth in response to the Tower of Babel (11:9). It is only when God establishes a covenantal relationship with the first patriarch, Abraham, that the purpose or direction of the Genesis narratives becomes

clear. In contrast to the first human, *ha-'Adam*, created chthonically – ‘dust from the ground (*'adamah*)’ in the second creation story (2:7) – Abraham’s identity is forged in a land not his own. He is not born in the land of Canaan, which would be promised to him as an inheritance for his descendants. Rather, he is brought into the land from elsewhere and the fulfilment of that promise is deferred. Only in exile would his descendants coalesce as a people. Only after the enslavement in Egypt and redemption, followed by forty years of wilderness wandering, would they come to finally possess the Land. Then they would be sent into exile as a consequence of flouting the covenant. It is this conditional relationship between the ‘Eternal People’ and the ‘Promised Land’ which becomes grounds for God’s relationship with the Jewish people.

2.1 The toledot series and the selection of the patriarchs

As Joseph Blenkinsopp points out, the book of Genesis is organized around a series of ten *toledot* (meaning line or generations, from the verb *y-l-d*, ‘to beget, generate, give birth’). With the exception of ‘the story (*toledot*) of the heaven and the earth’ (Gen 2:4a), the expression gestures forward to the male descendants that follow the paternal line. The first set concerns the early history of humanity (Gen 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10), while the second set concerns the prehistory of the Israelite people (Blenkinsopp 1992: 58). In response to God’s progressive disappointment with humankind (Gen 6:5–6; 8:21) there is a selection process, from the universal to the particular, wherein the line (*toledot*) of Shem receives special focus. Just as there were ten generations from Adam to Noah (chapter 5), so there are ten generations from Shem to Abraham (chapter 11). The patriarch Abraham becomes the turning point in the biblical account of human history.

The second series of five *toledot* then focuses on the ancestral narratives:

- ‘Now this is the line of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran [...]’ (11:27), introducing the Abraham stories (11:27–25:11);
- ‘This is the line (*toledot*) of Ishmael [...]’ (25:12), listing the descendants of Ishmael (vv. 12–18), the firstborn of Abraham, excluded from the patriarchal covenant;
- ‘This is the story (or line, *toledot*) of Isaac, son of Abraham, Abraham begot Isaac’ (25:19), introducing the Jacob narrative (25:10–35:29);
- ‘This is the line (*toledot*) of Esau – that is Edom’ (36:1, 9), listing the descendants of Esau (vv. 1–43), firstborn of Isaac, excluded from the patriarchal covenant;
- ‘This, then, is the line (or story, *toledot*) of Jacob: Joseph was seventeen years of age [...]’ (37:2), introducing the narrative of Joseph and his brothers (37:2–50:26).

The first thing to note is that Abraham does not receive his own line (*toledot*), perhaps because he is a universal figure, through whom ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (Gen 12:3; cf. 22:18), who will become ‘the father of a multitude of nations’ (17:4). Secondly, of these five *toledot*, the three that focus on the patriarchs – Terah, Isaac, and

Jacob – mostly concern the descendants of the eponym rather than the eponymous ancestor himself (Blenkinsopp 1992: 99). *Toledot Terah* introduces the story of Abraham (then Abram), *toledot Yitzḥaq* (Isaac) introduces the Jacob stories, and *toledot Ya'aqov* (Jacob) introduces Joseph and his brothers. Thirdly, each of these three 'lines' ironically does not introduce the patriarch's descendants, but an arrested genealogy; no list of sons or sons of sons follows. The line stops short because of bereavement, migration, barrenness, or rivalry between brothers. The simple progression from father to son is subject to 'disequilibrium', an obstruction in the process of establishing the rightful heir (Steinberg 1989: 41–50; Adelman 2015: 13–16). After the death of his son Haran, Terah initiates the migration from Ur of the Chaldeans towards the land of Canaan but settles in Haran (Gen 11:31). Abraham will continue his father's journey to the destined Promised Land, but this time at the behest of God (12:1, 4–7). Three out of four of the matriarchs were barren: Sarah (11:30), Rebekah (25:21), and Jacob's beloved wife Rachel (29:31). Jacob's line is interrupted by the focus on the indulged son, Joseph, which devolves into attempted fratricide and the migration down to Egypt (the names of Jacob descendants, 'the sons of Israel', are eventually provided in a list of the seventy who went down from Canaan, Gen 46:8–27; Exod 1:1–5).

God's relationship to the patriarchs, based on a deferred promise of land and progeny, is fraught with trial; it is these trials that accrue to their merit, and so the patriarchs' *toledot* series become stories rather than lists of descendants. By contrast, the two lines of Ishmael and Esau are excluded from the patriarchal covenant. They constitute real genealogies – '*toledot*' as a list as opposed to '*toledot*' as introducing a narrative. Both Ishmael and Esau are firstborn sons. Their exclusion from the covenant is part of the near-ubiquitous theme of 'the overturn of primogeniture', where the younger son is favoured by God over the firstborn, contrary to birth-right in ancient Near Eastern sources and biblical law (Sarna 1989: 184–187). In Deut 21:15–17, it is stated explicitly that the firstborn shall inherit a double portion, even if he is the son of the less-beloved wife. In addition to Isaac's displacement of Ishmael and Jacob's of Esau, Abel's offering is favoured over Cain's (Gen 4:3–5); Reuben is displaced by both Joseph and Judah (Gen 49:3; cf. 1 Chr 5:1); Perez supplants Zerah at birth (Gen 38:27–30); Ephraim is privileged over Manasseh (48:12); and God chooses David, the eighth of Jesse's sons, as king (1 Samuel 16; Syrén 1993). This process of selection does not hinge on merit; Jacob, after all, is chosen over his older brother, Esau, by God in the womb (Gen 25:23). The recurrent theme illustrates a broader theological principle in which divine election is set at odds with legal or social norms.

3 The covenant with the patriarchs

The covenant or promise made to the patriarchs, known as *brit 'avot*, entails two key terms: *zer'a* (literally 'seed'), meaning descendants or offspring, and '*eretz*, meaning the Land (of Canaan), as in 'I will give *this* land (*ha-'eretz ha-z'ot*) to your offspring

(*zer'a*)' (Gen 12:7; cf. 13:14–17, 15:7–21; 17:7–8; 26:2–4; 28:3–4, 13; 35:12; and 48:4). According to Moshe Weinfeld, this 'covenant of grant' with the patriarchs (as with David in 2 Sam 7:8–16; Ps 89:20–37), is promissory and seemingly unconditional. In terms of treaty formulations of unequal parties, 'it serves to protect the rights of the servant' (that is, Abraham) rather than the master (that is, God).' Further, 'the grant is a reward for loyalty and good deeds already performed [...]' (Weinfeld 1970: 185), yet Abraham has seemingly done nothing yet that would warrant such a reward. God appears to him like a bolt of lightning out of nowhere, with no prior indication of meritorious acts, and commands him:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation (*goy gadol*), and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 12:1–3, NRSV)

As Joel Baden points out, Abraham is destined to become a 'great nation (*goy gadol*)', not a merely a people [*am*] identified with a kin group. This term 'nation (*goy*)' is 'a political category that entails a dedicated territory and a populace to inhabit it' (Baden 2013: 8). Yet no reason has been given as to why or even whether Abraham yet merits the promise of land and progeny – though the departure from his own kin, birthplace, and father's home implies a future basis: the severance from his past. The covenant is only issued after the initial missive to go forth into the unknown, to a 'land I will show you' (12:1). Only once he arrives in the land of Canaan at the age of seventy-five (12:4) does God confirm: 'I will assign this land to your offspring' (v. 7). Though he ostensibly merely completed the journey his father had begun (11:31), Rabbinic tradition claims that Abraham wandered in faith 'like a lost sheep' for five years before arriving at his destination (Ramban on Gen 12:1; *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* 26; discussed in Zornberg 1996: 75). Later, the promise will be understood as a reward in response to Abraham's obedience to sacrifice his beloved son: his willing severance from the promised future. Later, God reiterates the terms of the covenant to Isaac, promising these lands to his heirs, 'inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings' (26:5). Therefore, in contrast to Weinfeld's claim, the initial election of Abraham is made in anticipation of future loyalty.

In terms of the Promised Land, the patriarchs will not abide there with any settled sense of home within their lifetime, as the narrative says: 'The Canaanites were then in the land' (12:6), and, later, 'the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete' (15:16). Abraham remains a mere 'sojourner (*ger*)' and 'resident alien (*toshav*)' in the land of Canaan throughout his lifetime (Gen 23:4; cf. 17:8; 20:1; 21:23, 34). Isaac and Jacob are also

merely sojourners or strangers (28:4; 35:27; 36:7; 37:1); the land is designated as a land of 'sojourning' (*'eretz megurim*; Gen 17:8; 18:4; Exod 6:4).

3.1 The 'Covenant between the Pieces'

The reason that undergirds the deferred possession of the land is intimated in the 'Covenant between the Pieces' (Gen 15). God reiterates the promise of progeny (vv. 1–6) and of land (vv. 7–20) in response to the patriarch's doubts – given he has been granted neither offspring (v. 3) nor a guarantee of inheriting the land. While Abraham accepts the sign of the numberless stars as an affirmation of the promise of progeny (vv. 5–6; cf. 13:16; 22:17), he is more sceptical with respect to the land, asking: 'How will I know (*ba-mah 'ed'a*) that I am to possess it?' (v. 8). The patriarch's query is not answered immediately, and the message is hardly reassuring. First he is commanded to take three animals – a heifer, a goat, and a ram – as well as two birds. The patriarch then cuts the animals in half and sets the pieces across from one another. Only after four ominous images of descent – birds of prey swooping down (v. 11), the setting sun, and a 'deep sleep that fell upon Abram' along with a 'great dark dread' (v. 12) – is the patriarch told: 'Know well (*yado'a ted'a*) that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years' (v. 13). Further, Abraham is not conscious when the message is relayed. The prophecy comes to him through a deep divinely-induced sleep (*tardemah*; Gen 15:12; cf. Gen 2:21; 1 Sam 26:12). Despite the emphatic form of the verb – 'Know well (*yado'a ted'a*) that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs [...] (v. 13) – it is questionable whether Abraham ever consciously remembered the prophecy about the subjugation and exile. There is no explicit reference to it in the rest of the book of Genesis, or in the Pentateuch at all.

Just as the answer to Abraham is deferred in this passage, so possession of the Promised Land is deferred until the fourth generation of descendants, when the quota of sin on the part of the Amorites (who stand in for all the Canaanite peoples) has been completed (v. 16). The passage concludes with an image of 'a smoking oven and a flaming torch' (God's insignia) passing through the pieces (v. 17). Thus the covenant is 'cut' (*krt*; v. 18), with God's signature underscoring the divine obligation to fulfil the promise that Abraham's progeny will indeed possess the Land.

Characteristic of other treaty formulations in the ancient Near East, the cutting of the animals suggests that a curse would befall the party who abrogated the terms of the covenant. Jeremiah, for example, warns the nobility of Jerusalem, who freed their slaves during the Babylonian siege only to reverse that manumission:

I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. I will make the men who violated My covenant, who did not fulfil the terms of the covenant which they made before Me, [like] the calf which they cut in two so as to pass between the halves. (Jer 34:17–18)

The fate of the animal is explicitly projected onto the violator (vv. 19–20). What makes the passage in Genesis so striking is that God, represented by the ‘smoking oven’ and ‘flaming torch’ passing between the pieces, is the one to sign the terms of the treaty. The symbolism implies that God will be ‘cut up’, so to speak, if God does not fulfil the promise of granting the land to Abraham’s progeny. Nahum Sarna comments:

For the first time in the history of religions, God becomes the contracting party, promising a national territory to a people yet unborn. This pledge constitutes the main historic title of the Jewish people to its land, a title that is unconditional and irrevocable, secured by a divine covenant whose validity transcends space and time. (Sarna 1989: 115)

Yet the prophecy of four hundred years of oppression hovers over the future of Abraham’s descendants – horrific and undeserved. Rather than deeming exile as punishment for sin, it can be read as central to the nation’s identity formation – the crux between people, homeland, and exile which is unique to the Jewish people. In this prophecy, Egypt is not mentioned by name. The Rabbinic tradition then reads the prophecy as an allusion to all future subjugations that the Jews will suffer. The four Hebrew terms, the ‘great dark dread falling (*eimah hashekhah gedolah nofelet*)’ upon him (v. 12), become indicative of the oppression by four foreign rulers, known as the motif of ‘the Four Kingdoms’ – here Egypt, Babylon, Medes (Persia) and Greece/Rome (*Gen Rab.* 45:17; cf. *Mekhilta Yitro [Ba-Hodesh]* 9, *Lev Rab.* 13:5; *Exod Rab.* 51:7; *Midrash Tehillim* 52:8; and *Pirque deRabbi Eliezer* 28). The covenant over the Promised Land is contingent on a period of exile before it is realized; for the Rabbis, it is prescient for all the exiles that will follow.

Bible critics suggest that the verse about the iniquity of the Amorites (v. 16), along with the addendum (vv. 18–21), must have been interpolated into the text by a later editorial hand, dating to a period when the Canaanites were finally expelled from the land during the period of the United Monarchy (tenth century BCE). Alternatively, the use of the late term ‘Ur of the Chaldeans’ points to a post-exilic dating, ‘when possession of the land, and indeed the continuing existence of Israel, could no longer be taken for granted’ (Blenkinsopp 1992: 123–124). A significant theological premise about the status of Israel as a chosen people undergirds this retrospective, consistent with the tenor of the Hebrew Bible as a whole. In the context of the ‘Covenant between the Pieces’, Abraham and his descendants are symbolically cut off from the land before they actually inherit it as

an 'everlasting possession (*'ahuzat 'olam*)' (Gen 17:8). Furthermore, unlike the Amorites, God ensures that Israel (later the Jewish people) will be able to return. In Amos 9:7–12, for example, the implication is that God had 'chosen' many other nations – Ethiopians, Philistines, and Arameans – who then sinned and were banished from their land, but only in the case of Israel was the nation sent into exile and the remnant chastised then brought back to the Promised Land.

3.2 The covenant of circumcision

In Genesis 17, God 'establishes' (v. 7) rather than 'cuts' a covenant with Abraham at the ripe-old-age of ninety-nine. This passage also entails a cutting, this time of the foreskin – the binding 'sign' (*'ot*) of obligation between Abraham and his descendants to God. The term *brit* in Jewish tradition will later come to refer generically to the covenant of circumcision (*brit milah*). The focus in the biblical passage is on progeny (*zer'a*), more than the Land (*'eret*). Bible scholars identify it with the Priestly (P) source, while Genesis 15 is attributed to the combined Yahwist/Elohist (J and E) sources. What makes this covenant unique is that it is irrevocable, 'an everlasting covenant (*brit 'olam*) through the ages' (17:7; cf. vv. 13, 19). The land of Abraham's 'sojourning', Canaan, is given as an 'everlasting holding (*'ahuzat 'olam*)' (v. 8). It is confirmed by a sign (*'ot*), just as the covenant with Noah is sealed by the sign (*'ot*) of the rainbow (Gen 9:12–17), and it is accompanied by name-changes of both the patriarch and matriarch – Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah.

The covenant here has both a universalistic and a particularistic dimension. In renaming the patriarch, Abraham is told that he would become 'the father of a multitude of nations' (17:6); whereas Sarah, at ninety, would bear the child, Isaac, sole heir to the patriarchal covenant (vv. 16, 19). At this point, Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn son through Hagar (Sarah's slave-woman), would be excluded. While included in the rite of circumcision and acknowledged as Abraham's seed (*zer'a*; 21:13), Ishmael's progeny will not inherit the Promised Land according to the terms of the patriarchal covenant. Yet both sons are promised a unique destiny – Ishmael would be blessed with many descendants, the father of twelve chieftains, and become 'a great nation' (17:20; 21:18), while Isaac, prenatally named for his father's laughter (*tz-h-q*; v. 17; cf. 18:12 and 21:6), would bear the covenant (17:19, 21; 21:12).

3.3 God's oath to Abraham after the Binding of Isaac

In Abraham's ultimate trial, God demands that he take his beloved son, and 'go forth (*lekh lekha*)' to offer him up as a burnt offering in the land of Moriah, on one of the heights that God will point out to him (Gen 22:2). In silence, he rises, gathers the firewood, saddles an ass, takes his son and two servants, and travels three days with not a word of protest recorded. As in the first trial, he is commanded to go forth '*lekh lekha*' to a destination unknown – to 'the land that I will show you' (12:1), and to 'one of the heights that I will

point out to you' (22:1). Like the first trial, which involves a threefold severance from his 'country', his 'kindred', and his 'father's house' – all markers of past identity – there is now a fourfold designation, a severance from his promised future, 'your son, your favoured one, whom you love, Isaac' (22:2). Unlike his response to Ishmael's banishment, which distressed him greatly (21:11), or Abraham's objection to the utter destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:25), no protest from the patriarch is recorded. Only the double cry, 'Abraham, Abraham! [...]' from the angel of the LORD stays his hand from slaughtering his son (22:11). In the first revelation of the angel, the patriarch is praised for his obedience: '[...] for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favoured one, from Me' (v. 12).

God's demand and the patriarch's silence is one of the great conundrums of biblical theology, to which this short article cannot do justice. Yet the rabbis make use, retroactively, of the irrevocable divine oath in the wake of the *'Aqedah* (Binding of Isaac). In the second revelation, the angel of the LORD assures the patriarch:

By Myself I swear (*bi nishba'ti*), the LORD declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favoured one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command. (Gen 22:16–18)

While the emphasis seems to be on future progeny, as numerous as the stars and the sands, the inheritance of the Land is also implied by the phrase about seizing 'the gates of their foes' (v. 17). According to Jon Levenson, the original promise of land and progeny that followed the first call (12:7) 'rested on pure grace', whereas the purpose of the angel's second speech is 'to renew the great promise of nation, blessing, and land on the basis of Abraham's willingness to donate Isaac for sacrifice' (1993: 138–139).

The Rabbis go further and suggest that it was Abraham who demanded that God swear on oath not to try him again (*Gen. Rab.* 56:11). The patriarch, 'unappeased', demands that God promise that his descendants, the Jewish people, would be collectively saved or forgiven as compensation for his submission and silence (*Tanchuma VaYera* 23:7, discussed in Zornberg 2009: 204–207). This aligns with a certain theodicy of the Binding of Isaac, in which God rewards the patriarch as if the sacrifice had been fulfilled. Based on Abraham's enigmatic naming of the place – 'God will see' (*'Adonai yir'eh*; Gen 22:14; 1 Chr 21:15) – Midrash suggests that God will see the Binding, or 'the blood' or 'the ashes' of Isaac, as a source of merit for the people's salvation or forgiveness in the future (see *Mekhilta Pisha [Bo]* 7 and 12; cf. *b. Ber.* 62b; *Gen. Rab.* 56:10; and Rashi on Gen 22:14;

discussed in Spiegel 1967: 43, 51–59). The Binding of Isaac then forms a cornerstone to principle of ‘the merits of the patriarchs’ throughout Rabbinic literature and liturgy.

3.4 The purpose of the irrevocable covenant

All of Abraham’s ten trials (as enumerated in Rabbinic tradition) involve challenges to the twofold covenantal promise of descendants and land (*M. Avot* 5:3, though not itemized here). The list varies but includes, minimally: the command *lekh lekha*, to leave his father’s house and homeland (Gen 12:1); the abduction of Sara, his wife (once in Egypt, 12:10–12; and again in Gerar, 20:1–13); the war between the four and five Canaanite kings (Gen 14); the circumcision (Gen 17); Hagar and Ishmael’s banishment (Gen 21:9–14); the Binding of Isaac (Gen 22); some sources include the ‘Covenant between the Pieces’ (Gen 15); the death and burial of Sarah (Gen 23); and the Legend of the Fiery Furnace (which is not in the biblical text, but see Gen 11:28, Rashi *loc cit*, *Gen. Rab.* 38:13; compare Jubilees 17:7, 19:9; *Avot deRabbi Natan* A 33; *Sifre Deut.* 355a; *Midrash Tehillim* 18 on Psalm 18:31; and *Pirque deRabbi Eliezer* ch. 26–31). While the ultimate trial, the Binding of Isaac, entails the willingness to suspend any guarantee of a future heir (*zer’a*, progeny), Abraham’s wanderings concern the deferred possession of the Land (*ha-’aretz*). This suspension might be understood as God’s desire not to evict a people from their land until they deserve it, or, in Sarna’s words, until ‘the universally binding moral law has been flouted and the inhabitants of Canaan (here referred to collectively as ‘the Amorites’) have been doomed by their own corruption [...]’ (Sarna 1989: 117).

In the ‘Covenant between the Pieces’ (Gen 15), the reader is told a critical message about the nature of Israelite (and later Jewish) identity. It is clear that the land is conquered only after Abraham’s descendants have emerged as a people and undergone a certain collective trial of being ‘stranger(s) in a foreign land’ (as Moses’ names his firstborn, Gershom, in Exod 2:22; cf. 18:3). From this perspective, the purpose is not punishment, but the development of a moral sensibility. We begin with exile and we are condemned to exile. It frames our consciousness. Franz Rosenzweig characterized the Jews as unique in the history of mankind in that their identity as a nation was formed in exile, not as a result of an indigenous relationship to land. By contrast, the origin of the Athenian people is based on a myth of autochthony (literally, ‘born of the ground’); the claim to the land is founded on never having changed their place of habitation:

The father of Israel came from the outside. His story, as it is told in the holy books, begins with God’s command to leave the land of his birth and go to a land God will point out to him. Thus in the dawn of its earliest beginnings, as well as later in the bright light of history, this people is a people in exile, in the Egyptian exile and subsequently in that of Babylonia. To the eternal people, home is never home in the sense of land, as it is to the peoples of the world who plough the land and live and thrive on it, until they have all but forgotten that

being a people *means something other than being rooted in a land*. (Rosenzweig 1971: 300, emphasis added)

That is, the idea of Jews as a people, as God's people, grounded in the promise to the patriarchs, is very different from other national identities which emerge from a relationship with a native land.

The land is not granted unconditionally then and there to Abraham because the nation, in order to become the chosen people, cannot arise out of the natural play between the land and its indigenous population. The dispossession of the Canaanite nation on moral grounds sets the precedent for the divine dominion over the Land and its status as a conditional gift to the people of Israel.

This covenant over a deferred 'promised land' anticipates the conditional terms of the Sinai covenant, sealed after the exodus. In Genesis, God identifies as the 'LORD, Your God, who took you (Abraham) out of Ur of the Chaldeans [...]' (15:7); at Sinai as 'the LORD, Your God, who took you (Israel) out of Egypt [...]' (Exod 20:1). The salvation from Ur and Egypt and the gift of the land anticipates the tenuous tenure on that land. As the later sources affirm, the Israelites are bound to keep God's statutes and ordinances and not commit any abominations, lest 'the land spew them out' them out for defiling it, 'as it spewed out the nation that came before' them (Lev 18:28; 20:22). Because the 'land is Mine' (i.e. God's) and the people 'are but strangers resident with Me' (Lev 25:23), the land is a tenuous gift conditional upon loyalty to the covenant. Exile is held out as a collective consequence for people's transgressions (as in Lev 26; Deut 28–29; Jer 34 etc.).

There is another dimension to this promise. Schooled as 'strangers in a land not their own', this myth of origins in the patriarchal narrative forms the basis for a higher ethic: 'You shall not wrong or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Exod 22:20, cf. 23:9; Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19 etc.). The consciousness of being foreigners and the claim to the land as contingent upon sensitivity to the other ironically grants the right to that land. Abraham was the first to bequeath this ethical legacy to his descendants.

However, God holds out to Abraham's descendants the possibility of return. After the land has been laid waste by exile, the prophecy at the end of the blessings and curses that seal the Sinai covenant intones:

Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land. For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its Sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws. Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or

spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the LORD am their God. I will remember in their favour the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the LORD. (Lev 26:42–45)

In the end, the land will lay claim to seventy fallow years, commensurate with the 490 years in which the sabbatical (*shmittah*) years were neglected; this period anticipates the length of the Babylonian exile and eventual return (Lev 26:35; Jer 25:11–12; 29:9; 2 Chr 26:21). The particularistic aspect of the covenant with the patriarchs is thus grounded in a contingent relationship to the Land in the context of an irrevocable promise to the people.

In addition, Abraham, as the Bible tells us, will eventually become a source of universal blessing to the families or nations of the earth (Gen 12; 18:18; so too Isaac in 26:4, and Jacob in 28:14) as the bearer of ethical monotheism. Their descendants are set apart as ‘a treasured people’, a ‘kingdom of priests’, and a ‘holy nation’, conditional upon acceptance of the terms of the covenant at Sinai (Exod 19:5–6; cf. Deut 7:6). Much later, the prophet Isaiah envisions the fulfilment of the blessings in the covenant in Israel’s becoming the proverbial ‘light unto the nations’ (Isa 42:6; 49:6; and 60:3). Thus, there is sweeping movement over the arc of biblical history, from the universal to the particular, to the universal recognition of God through the particular. This is only possible if the original covenant with the patriarchs is irrevocable yet conditional upon the premise of exile.

3.5 The covenant with Isaac and Jacob; Rebekah as heir to Abraham’s legacy

Isaac’s narrative spans only a few chapters (Gen 24:63–67; 25:19–28:8), soon overshadowed by his son Jacob’s story. As Everett Fox notes, Isaac’s ‘main task in life seems to be to take roots in the land of Canaan’ – literally and metaphorically re-digging his father’s wells. By chapter 27, a scant two chapters after his father dies, he appears as (prematurely?) old, blind in both a literal and figurative sense, and he fades out of the text entirely, only to die several chapters and many years later (Fox 1995: 111).

As mentioned earlier, the original Abrahamic promise (Gen 12:1–3) is reiterated to the second patriarch as a reward for his father’s fidelity (26:2–5). In the context of renewing the covenant, God adjures Isaac not to leave the land even during a famine. Rashi offers a Midrashic gloss for why he may never leave the land: because he is considered a ‘whole burnt-offering without blemish’ residence outside of the land is not fitting for him (on Gen 26:2, based on *Gen. Rab.* 64:3). The spectre of the Binding haunts him throughout his life.

The true ‘heir’ to Abraham’s legacy is Rebekah. Responding to the query whether she would go as a bride with Abraham’s servant back to Canaan, she answers in a word: ‘I will go (*elekh*)’ (Gen 24:58). While Abraham travelled to the land at God’s behest – *Lekh lekha* (12:1) – she goes of her own accord. Her father and brother’s parting blessing – ‘[...] may

your offspring seize the gates of their foes' (24:60) – resonates with the angel's words to Abraham after the Binding (22:17). She is characterized, like the patriarch, by her alacrity and generosity (*hēsed*). Tikva Frymer-Kensky suggests that, though God grants Isaac the promise of progeny and the land (26:3–4), the process of inheritance entails a passage 'from Abraham to Rivka to Jacob and to the people of Israel. Her decisiveness, her strong will, and her embrace of her destiny make her a strong active link between Abraham and Jacob' (Frymer-Kensky 2002: 14).

Rebekah, not Isaac, is told about the divine plan with regard to her sons, and she acts upon that insight resolutely (Adelman 2015: 11–37). In response to her direct inquiry of God about the tumult in her womb, she is told that she is carrying twins, two distinct nations, and the 'older shall serve the younger' (Gen 25:23). This aligns with the near ubiquitous theme of the 'overturn of primogeniture' discussed earlier. As the recipient of the oracle, she ensures that her beloved younger son (v. 27) would receive Isaac's blessing, not Esau the firstborn, whom his father favours. After stealing the blessing, she hears that Esau plots to kill his brother and urges her husband to send Jacob off to Paddan-aram (her own homeland, as well as Abraham's, see 24:3–4), under the pretext of not intermarrying with the local Hittite women as Esau had done (27:46–28:1; cf. 26:34–35). However, she pays a heavy price for the deception in having to send Jacob away; she never sees her beloved son again. It is precisely the intersection between human and divine will, and the use of deception – both Rebekah's and Jacob's – that makes the covenantal relationship with the third patriarch different. Of the three forefathers, Jacob actively sets himself up as the recipient of the covenant – tricking Esau out of the birth-right (*bekhorah*; 25:29–34) and stealing the blessing (*berakhah*; 27:18–29). Yet neither the birth-right nor the stolen blessing contain the essential elements of the patriarchal covenant – the promise of the Land (*ha-'aretz*; of Canaan) to the patriarch's descendants (*zer'a*).

After the blessing is stolen from Jacob's blind old father, it seems that it cannot be rescinded (27:33), and this justifies Isaac's choice of Jacob as the recipient of the patriarchal covenant. Isaac then consciously grants him a second blessing before Jacob leaves to find a wife in Paddan-aram:

May El Shaddai bless you, make you fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which God assigned to Abraham. (Gen 28:3–4)

Where the prior blessing did not contain the key terms of offspring (*zer'a*) and the land (*ha-'aretz*), this one does, resonant with the covenant of circumcision (of the P-source),

where God is also named 'El Shaddai' (17:1, often rendered 'God Almighty'). The same name is invoked as associated uniquely with the patriarchs in God's call to Moses (Exod 6:2–3, also P-source). God directly affirms Jacob as the recipient of the covenantal promise in the night vision of the so-called 'ladder' (*sulam*, or 'ramp') to heaven (28:13–15, J/E-source), and reaffirms that promise upon his return to Bethel (35:11–12, P-source), which Jacob then recounts to his beloved son Joseph in Egypt (Gen 48:4).

Yet nothing guarantees the land as an 'everlasting possession', except God's promise and the memory of that promise; and perhaps the ancestral burial cave of Machpelah, which Abraham had purchased after Sarah's death (Gen 23), where all three patriarchs were buried alongside their wives (with the exception of Rachel).

Of all twelve brothers (who become the tribes of Israel), only Joseph recalls God's promise:

Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.' So Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, 'When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here'. (Gen 50:24–25)

The arc of Genesis ends by pairing two oaths, one of the past and one for the future; the one God made to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the one Joseph demanded of his brothers, 'the sons of Israel', making them swear on oath that they would bring his bones up from Egypt and bury him in the Promised Land. Joseph then links the legacy of the patriarchs to the fate of his bones, in anticipation of Moses and the exodus. It is, indeed, the last thing the great prophet will do before he leaves Egypt (Exod 13:19; cf. Josh 24:32).

4 From the patriarchs to the redemption and prophetic intercession

The covenant with the patriarchs serves as the cornerstone of biblical theology, and it is deployed in two distinct ways, tying the patriarchs to the rest of the Pentateuch: first, God remembers the patriarchal promise, especially the promise to settle the land; secondly, the prophets invoke the patriarchs (and, by implication, the promise) when they stand in the breach as intercessors on behalf of the people. It is clear from the opening of the Exodus narrative that God has fulfilled the first part of the promise, with the multitude of descendants now called the Israelites (*bnei Yisrael*, 'the children of Israel'; Exod 1:1–7). Despite (or perhaps because of) their proliferation into 'swarms' (*sh-r-tz.*), they are soon enslaved and oppressed in fulfilment of God's decree in the 'Covenant between the

Pieces' (Gen 15:13). According to combined J/E-source, God hears their inchoate cries from the hardship of their bondage and God remembers:

God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant [*britto*] with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them. (Exod 2:24–25)

In the very next scene, God recalls the three patriarchs in the context of the revelation to Moses at the burning bush, introduced as: 'I am the God of your (sg.) father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob [...]' (3:6; compare 'the God of your fathers [plural], the God of Abraham etc [...]', vv. 13, 15, 16; 4:5). This immediately establishes continuity between the ancestors of the Hebrew slaves, Moses' own father, and the nascent prophet, raised a 'prince of Egypt' in Pharaoh's palace. God then tells Moses the purpose of his mission: not only to save Israel from the Egyptian oppression, but to bring them into the land 'flowing with milk and honey', the land of Canaan (vv. 8, 17), promised to the forefathers. Thus the second part of the covenantal oath is on the brink of fulfilment.

In the P-source, on the other hand, God prefaces the relationship to the patriarchs in terms of His identity as El-Shaddai:

God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am the LORD [YHWH]. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name YHWH'. (Exod 6:2–3)

Indeed, God as El Shaddai appeared to Abraham at the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17:1); Isaac invoked that name upon granting Jacob the patriarchal blessing (28:3–4); and God appeared as El Shaddai to Jacob at Bethel, upon granting him the name change (for the second time, 35:11–12; cf. Gen 48:3–4). This reintroduction of God to Moses seems to have been composed by a person (or persons) unaware of the scene at the burning bush and the sources in which God appears to the patriarchs as YHWH, the Tetragrammaton (Gen 12:1–3, 7; 3:14–17, 15:5, 18–21; 26:3–5 and 28:22 are all attributed to J/E: Baden 2013: 57–100). In this context, God reiterates hearing their moaning and remembers the covenant (v. 5), and re-states the purpose of the redemption from Egypt:

And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the LORD [YHWH], am your God who freed you from the labours of the Egyptians.

I will bring you into the land which I swore [lit. 'raised my hand'] to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession [*morashah*, alternatively 'inheritance'], I the LORD [YHWH]. (Exod 6:7–8)

This oath language is reiterated at the renewal of the covenant, in the Plains of Moab, just on the brink of entry into the land: 'Go, take possession of the land that I (God) swore (*nishb'ati*, alt. promised on oath) to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob' (Deut 1:8; cf. 6:10, 9:5, 29:12, and 34:4; cf. Exod 33:1; Num 32:11).

The promise to the forefathers is also invoked by God's human counterpart to the mission of redemption, most often in Moses' role as intercessor on behalf of the Israelites. In the wake of the sin of the golden calf (Exod 32), God proposes to wipe out the whole people and make Moses into a new progenitor of a chosen people. Yet the prophet, even before seeing the evidence of the Israelites' apostasy while still on the mountain top, pleads with God to consider His reputation and what the destruction of the people would look like to the Egyptians. Moses then reminds God of the ultimate objective of the mission, the fulfilment of the promise to the forefathers:

Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever. (Exod 32:13)

God responds to this plea by renouncing the punishment (v. 14). That is, God would have annulled his relationship with the Israelites because they abrogated the terms of the Sinai Covenant in making a molten image of God (or gods; 32:4; cf. 20:4–5, 20), 'had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, to turn back His wrath' (Ps 106:23). By invoking the patriarchs, the prophet reminds God of the irrevocable covenant. This sets the precedent for later invocations throughout the Hebrew Bible (cf. 2 Kgs 13:23; Ps 105:8–11; Neh 9:7–8; and 1 Chr 16:15–18), and becomes the basis for the rabbinic concept of 'the merit of the forefathers [*zekhut 'avot*]'. Further, as discussed earlier, it justifies God's promise of return in the prophecies concerning the people's exile, found in the blessings and curses that seal the covenant at Sinai (Lev 26) and the covenant in the Plains of Moab (Deut 28).

5 The role of the matriarchs

The four matriarchs – Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah – all play pivotal roles in the second component of the covenant: the fulfilment of progeny (*zer'a*, 'seed') and the selection of the chosen heir. Yet their role as the conduit of continuity was fraught precisely

because of the patriarchal wanderings. On three occasions, a patriarch's wife is passed off as a sister. These 'wife-sister tales' (Niditch 1987: 23–69) highlight the precarious status of the patriarchs as sojourners in the land. The second major obstacle to continuity was the matriarchs' near-ubiquitous barrenness. Their stories are part of a larger paradigm where barrenness and conception become the fertile ground for the working of divine providence.

5.1 The wife-sister tales

The paradigm of the wife-sister tales demonstrates the tension between social norms in a foreign land and the precarious status of the matriarchs and patriarchs as 'strangers in a land not their own' (Gen 15:13). Fearing the power of the local king, Abraham twice passes off his wife Sarah as his sister – in Egypt (Gen 12:10–20) and in Gerar (20:1–18); Isaac then follows in his father's footsteps, with his wife Rebekah (26:6–11). In the first two stories, God intervenes, striking the pharaoh and his household with plagues and warning Abimelech the king of the Philistines in a dream, to save Sarah from being violated. Critique of the patriarchs is muted in the biblical text, as though to say that they had been right to fear for their lives in a land where a man might be killed and his beautiful wife abducted (see Gen 20:11), adultery being deemed more heinous than murder (Biddle 1990: 599–611). Although biblical law mandates that a woman's sexuality belongs solely to her husband, the patriarchs sometimes undermined their wives' fidelity when in fear for their own lives. Divine intervention presents a subtle critique of the heroes' actions and, perhaps, the paternalistic system that undergirds them. In the first story, God intervenes to protect Sarah, afflicting 'Pharaoh and his house with great plagues' (12:17), a foreshadowing the ten plagues and Israel's redemption from Egypt in the Exodus (Levin 2020).

5.2 The barrenness of the matriarchs

In the Bible, the problem of infertility was attributed physiologically to women, though ultimately it was God who held the keys to opening and closing the womb, as the Rabbis noted (*M. Taan.* 3:8, *b. Sanh.* 113a). Three of the four matriarchs were deemed 'barren' (*'aqarah*) – Sarah (Gen 11:30), Rebekah (25:21), and Rachel (29:31). The term derives from the Hebrew root *'-q-r*, meaning 'to uproot or pluck up', the opposite of 'to plant' (*n-t-*; Eccl 3:2). According to Midrashic tradition, even Leah was initially barren, as it says: 'The LORD saw that Leah was unloved [*snu'ah*, literally 'despised'], and He opened her womb' (Gen 29:31; *Pesiqta deRab Kahana* 20:1). Often, these biblical women suffered deep shame as a consequence, their barrenness attributed to some hidden wrong, sin, or flaw. Sarah confronts Abraham, when she is slighted in Hagar's eyes: 'May the wrong done to me be on you!' (Gen 16:5). When Rachel pleads with Jacob, 'Give me children or else I die' (30:1), her husband answers: 'Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?' (v. 2); when the matriarch finally conceives, she names her son

Joseph (Yosef), 'for God has taken away my reproach' (v. 23). Maternity was obstructed in order to heighten the drama of the arrival of the promised son, emphasizing the divine role in conception and birth. In the case of the patriarchal stories in Genesis, the matriarchs' barrenness emphasizes that it is God who disrupts continuity in the transition from one generation to the next, and it is God who opens the womb (Moss and Baden 2015: 49–62). In alignment with the matriarchs, God then guides the election of the heir to the covenant (Adelman 2015: 25–29).

5.2.1 Overcoming barrenness

In a polygynous society, the barren woman was often compelled to share her husband with a more fertile (though often less beloved) rival wife. In some cases, this was at the initiative of the barren woman herself, who would use her handmaid to bear children for her in a kind of proto-surrogacy: Sarah uses Hagar (Gen 16), Rachel uses Bilhah (30:3–8), and Leah uses Zilpah (30:10–13). Other strategies include the use of herbal concoctions, as in Rachel's use of mandrakes (31:14–16), or of intercessory prayer: Isaac prays for Rebekah (25:21). In several of the narratives, the barren woman is promised the much-desired son by an angel of God or an emissary in an 'Annunciation Scene' that heralds the birth of the beloved son (Alter 1981: 51). While Sarah is sequestered in her tent, three men/angels appear to Abraham to announce the birth of a son to them in their old age (18:10, 14). Similarly, Rebekah is privy to an oracle about the destiny of her twins, Jacob and Esau, who become the progenitors for the nations Israel and Edom (25:21–23); God hears Rachel and remembers her (30:22). The resolution to the woman's barrenness is often marked by the phrase: 'And God remembered/took note of (*pqd/zkhr*)' Sarah or Rachel (21:1, 30:22).

The motif of barrenness highlights the unique destiny of the promised son. As Susan Ackerman has pointed out, in each of these stories the life of the son is somehow threatened and/or dedicated to God. Isaac, for example, is bound on the altar (Gen 22:10–12), while Jacob flees for his life from his murderous brother and wrestles with a divine being upon his return, before facing Esau again (27:41; 32:23–25). Joseph is nearly killed by his brothers and sold into slavery (37:18–24, 28). These narratives suggest that God, who opens the womb, has the right to demand the life that emerges from it (Ackerman 1993: 20–28, 56; Levenson 1993).

5.3 The matriarchs' role in selecting the chosen son

All four matriarchs play a pivotal role in determining the heirs to the covenantal promise: Sarah actively excludes Ishmael from inheriting with Isaac, her own biological son; Rebekah, who alone is privy to the divine oracle, favours Jacob, the younger son, promoting him to receive the blessing; and the two sister-wives of Jacob, Rachel and

Leah, collude to maintain all twelve sons as ‘the House of Israel’, according to Rabbinic tradition.

While Sarah initiates her Egyptian slave-woman Hagar into surrogacy, it seems that Hagar is promoted to the status of wife (Gen 16:3), and Ishmael never really becomes Sarah’s son. Consequently, when Isaac is born (21:1), ambiguity about the rightful heir arises. Even before his conception, God assured Abraham that Sarah would bear the promised son (17:19), while Ishmael would be father to twelve chieftains and become a great nation (v. 20). Nevertheless, Sarah demands Abraham ‘banish that slave-woman and her son’ upon seeing Ishmael ‘playing (*metzahēq*)’ – or, in Alter’s translation, “Isaac-ing it” – that is, Sarah sees Ishmael presuming to play the role of Isaac, child of laughter, presuming to be the legitimate heir’ (Alter 1996: 98). God then urges the patriarch to heed Sarah’s voice, promising that Ishmael will survive and prosper but reiterating that Abraham’s covenantal line must continue through Isaac (21:11–12). The banishment of Hagar and Ishmael is certainly a ‘text of terror’ (Trible 1992: 9–35); anticipating the Binding of Isaac (Adelman 2016). Classic commentary reads it as prescient of the fraught destiny of Jews under the banner of Islam (Ramban on Gen 16:6; *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* 30; Adelman 2008: 35–42). Frymer-Kensky, on the other hand, reads Hagar as *ha-ger*, ‘the stranger’ in our midst, an archetype for Israel, the redeemed slave (2002: 225–237).

In the context of the passage of the covenant from father to son, this article has already discussed Rebekah’s active role in forwarding Jacob as the candidate for his father’s blessing. Like Rebekah, the two sisters, Leah and Rachel, engage in a ‘female ruse’ to marry the same husband (Adelman 2015: 38–67). According to the plain reading of the biblical text, they become rivals – the elder Leah for her husband’s love, the younger, barren but beloved Rachel, for progeny. Yet Jacob never separates from either one. In fact, he acquires ‘four mothers’ (including the handmaidens, Zilpah and Bilhah) for his twelve sons. The Rabbinic tradition attributes the unity of the ‘House of Israel’ to the collusion between the two sisters. The ruse entails Rachel’s self-abnegation. Knowing her father would switch the brides on the wedding night, she gives Leah the ‘secret signs’ that she and Jacob had agreed upon in order to spare her sister from being shamed at the wedding (*b. Meg.* 13b; *B. Bat.* 123a, *Lam. R.* Proem 24, and *Gen. Rab.* 73:6). Further, as an explanation for Leah’s ‘weak’ or ‘soft’ (*rakot*) eyes (Gen 29: 17), the Midrash suggests that they were soft from weeping, having found out that she was destined to marry the wicked older son, Esau. Yet Leah resists her fate, and plays an active role in choosing Jacob over his brother (*B. Bat.* 123a; *Gen. Rab.* 70:16, *Tanchuma* ed. Buber *Va Yetzei* 12, see the discussion of these sources in Adelman 2015: 38–67). Though marriage to two sisters is considered one of the forbidden incestuous relations (Lev 18:18), the union holds. The consequences for Rachel, however, are tragic. She, who yearned for a son (Gen 30:1), and then, upon naming her firstborn, Joseph, demanded another one (v. 24), died prematurely upon giving birth to Benjamin. She is buried by the wayside on the road

to Bethlehem as they journey back to the Promised Land (Gen 35:16–20; 48:7). There she serves as an intercessor in her after-life (Jer 31:15–17), when her children are captured as slaves and sent into exile (*Gen. Rab.* 82:10, *Lam. Rab.* Proem 24; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 3:11b, and Rashi on Gen 48:7).

6 The merits of the patriarchs and matriarchs

The concept of ‘the merits of the ancestors’ (*zekhut ’avot*) has its roots in the biblical text but was not fully developed until the classic Rabbinic period. After the close of the biblical canon, the covenant with the patriarchs shifts into the ‘merit of the patriarchs’, largely because the oath was thought to have been fulfilled. The assumption, as in the biblical corpus, was that the covenant with the patriarchs nevertheless stands irrevocable, and could be transformed into future credit even when the people proved unworthy.

The Rabbinic term derives from the verb *z-k-h*, ‘to exonerate, declare innocent, credit’, or ‘to merit’. The righteous shore up merit and thereby cause beneficence to accrue to future generations, as David is invoked throughout the HB for the salvation of Jerusalem and the preservation of the Judean royal line: ‘for the sake of My servant, David [...]’ (1 Kgs 11:12–13, 32–34; 2 Kgs 8:19; 19:34, 20:6; Isa 37:55; cf. Ps 122:8 and 132:10). Likewise, Moses rallies to Israel’s defence after the sin of the golden calf: ‘Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel [...]’ (Exod 32:13; cf. Ps 106:23), and he invokes the oath to the patriarchs as the basis for the redemption from Egypt and the settlement of the Promised Land, ‘because He (God) loved your fathers [...]’ (Deut 4:37; cf. 7:8, 10:15). Later, invocation of the righteous ancestor(s) would be used in *aggadah*, prayer, and liturgy to serve not only as the basis for continuity and the fulfilment of divine promise, but more importantly for the sake of forgiveness, passing over sin and punishment.

This has its shadow side; salvation might be ascribed to the forefathers, and not to the merits of Israel. Two Tannaim debate on what basis God was willing to split the Sea of Reeds for them:

Shema’ya says: The faith that their father Abraham had in Me was sufficient that I (God) would divide the sea for them, as it is said: ‘And he believed in the LORD and He counted it to him for righteousness [*tzedaqah*, alt. ‘merit’]’ (Gen 15:6). Avtalyon says: It was sufficient the faith that they (Israel) had in Me that I would divide the sea for them, as it is said: ‘And the people believed. When they heard that God had taken note of the Israelites...’ (Exod 4:31). (*Mekhilta VaYehi BeShallach* 4:17–18)

Similarly, the Tannaim in the *Mekhilta* debate other miracles through the desert sojourn, as in the manna, ‘bread from heaven’, and the defeat of Amalek: were they granted because Israel was worthy or because of the merits of the forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

Ephraim Urbach suggests that the debate among the Rabbis really concerns how merit of the ancestors might be relied upon by Jews, with ‘the consequent weakening of the sense of duty of the need to fulfil the commandments’ (Urbach 1979: 497). In principle, punishment would still be meted out, even if the Israelites neglected to fulfil the Law, but the consequences would not entail the annulment of the covenant itself.

Martha Himmelfarb traces the shift from ‘covenant’ to ‘merit’ to the return from the Babylonian exile, when a new criterion of membership in Israel was established, based on piety rather than birth – what Shaye Cohen has called the transformation from ‘ethnos’ to ‘ethno-religion’ (1999: 109–139), when Israel, in the Second Temple period, becomes the ‘Jewish people’ with a shared ethnic identity and religion across the land of Judea and the Diaspora (Himmelfarb 2006: 3–10, 77–81). Alon Goshen-Gottstein, however, traces the shift to the move away from the centrality of the land, following the destruction of the Second Temple and the Bar Kochba revolt (70 and 132 CE). The ‘merit’ of the patriarchs takes on cosmic dimensions. The Rabbis engage in a more universalistic vision of the patriarchs, transforming them into guarantors of the cosmic order; ‘not only the land of Israel, but heaven and earth are now the patrimony of the Patriarchs’ (1995: 92).

However, the theurgic invocation of the forefathers (and, more recently, the matriarchs) in liturgy, serves a particularistic vision of the Jewish people. The Hebrew prayer service (in the Siddur) is mostly articulated in terms of the first person collective ‘we/us/our’.

6.1 The merit of the patriarchs in liturgy

The ‘*Amidah* (also called ‘the Eighteen’ [*shemoneh ‘esrei*]), the silent prayer central to every Hebrew prayer service, invokes the three patriarchs in the opening benediction:

Blessed are You, Lord, *our* God, and God of *our* fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, God most high, who bestows kindness and creates everything, who remembers the good deeds of the ancestors and brings a redeemer to their children’s children, for the sake of His name, with love. (emphasis added, translation adapted from Davis 1981: 108–109)

Just as God remembers Israel before the exodus by virtue of his promise to the patriarchs, and Moses recalls Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the wake of the golden calf, every Jew opens their silent prayer with this invocation. As Himmelfarb comments:

So too the ‘*amidah* [...] assures Jews that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will remember the good deeds of the ancestors and bring a redeemer to their descendants. The connection to the ancestors, who merit is beyond dispute, reduces the pressure on the

conduct of ordinary Jews since the merit of the ancestors guarantees the salvation of the Jewish people, if not of individuals. (Himmelfarb 2006: 10)

The morning service (*Shacharit*) also includes a reading of the Binding of Isaac (Gen 22:1–19), which is prefaced by recalling the oath made to Abraham on Mount Moriah, and concludes with the following prayer for God’s compassion:

Master of the Universe! May it be Your will Adonai, our God and God of our fathers, to recall for our sake the covenant of our fathers. Just as our father, Abraham suppressed his compassion for his only son and would have slaughtered him to do Your will, so may Your compassion suppress Your anger against us; and may Your compassion prevail over Your [other] attributes, to deal with us more leniently than the letter of Your law. Deal with us, Adonai, our God, kindly and with compassion. In Your great goodness, turn Your fierce anger away from Your people, and from Your city, from Your land, and from Your territorial heritage. Fulfill for us, Adonai, our God, the promise You made, through Your servant Moses, as was said, Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land. (Lev 26:42; translation adapted from Davis 1981: 22–23)

What is most striking about this prayer is the invocation of the Binding, the irrevocable covenant, and the return to the land as the basis for returning to God. Likewise, the liturgy of the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, explicitly invokes the Binding as a basis for God’s wholesale forgiveness of the people. Himmelfarb comments:

The prominence in the liturgy of the merit of the ancestors as a guarantee of redemption suggests that, in the face of painful reality, some saw reassurance that redemption was on the way as more necessary than exhortation to repentance. (Himmelfarb 2006: 180)

6.2 The merit of the matriarchs

In recent decades there has been a surge of scholarship concerned with including ‘the merit of the matriarchs’ alongside the patriarchs, in studying their role in Midrashic texts and including their names in liturgy (Gribetz 2018: 263–296; Ramon 2005: 154–177; Kaunfer 1995: 94–103). A precedent for this inclusion of the matriarchs in blessing is found in scroll of Ruth, where the eponymous heroine is blessed by all the people at the city gate upon her marriage to Boaz, to be ‘like Rachel and Leah, both of whom build up the House of Israel!’ (Ruth 4:11). In the past century, a similar practice has been adopted on Friday evenings before kiddush, the sanctification of the Sabbath wine. The parent places their hands on the child and utters the priestly blessing (Num 6:24–26), adding (for a daughter):

'May you be like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah'; which is comparable to the blessing of a son: 'May you be like Ephraim and like Menashe', a much older tradition based on Gen 48:20.

Similarly, recent egalitarian practice has introduced the four matriarchs alongside the patriarchs in the first blessing of the *'amidah*: '[...] and God of our fathers *and our mothers*, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, *God of Sarah, God of Rebekah, God of Rachel and Leah* [...]' (Ramon 2005: 154, emphasis added; Harlow 1998: 36, emphasis added). Some include an addition to the closure: '[...] shield of Abraham, who remembers Sarah (*magen Avraham u-poqed Sarah*)' (based on Gen 21:1). Einat Ramon links the inclusion of this feminine formulation to a passage in the Babylonian Talmud: 'We give the title "patriarch" to only three of our ancestors, and "matriarch" to only four' (*b. Ber.* 16b). An alternative tradition mentions six matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah (*Pesiqta deRav Kahana* 1:7; cf. *Shir. Rab.* 6 and *Est. Rab.* 1:12; quoted in Ramon 2005: 162).

The principle is that the 'merits of the matriarchs' (*ma'aseh imahot or zekhut ha'imahot*) stand alongside the 'merits of the patriarchs' (or forefathers), either implicitly or explicitly in the Rabbinic corpus (Gribetz 2018: 263–296). As Sarit Katan Gribetz argues, the actual term '*zekhut 'avot*' is used in two senses: inclusive of both the matriarchs and patriarchs (in most cases), or only with reference to the three forefathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – while mentioning a separate merit associated with the foremothers (as in, for example, the *Mekhilta Amalek* 1 on Exod 17:9, on Exod 17:10, and on Exod 17:12; *Lev. Rab.* 36:6; *Song Rab.* 2:8; *Pesiqta de Rav Kahana* 3 [*Zakhor*] and 5 [*Haḥodesh*]; as analysed by Gribetz 2018: 267–275). Further, Rachel the matriarch plays a unique role as an intercessor throughout the Rabbinic Midrashic tradition, comparable to the invocation of the Binding in liturgy.

6.3 Rachel as intercessor

As a consequence of her burial on the way, Rachel plays a critical role as intercessor in her after-life. In a famous oracle of consolation, Jeremiah addresses the Northern tribes (collectively called 'Ephraim'), and promises their return to Zion:

Thus said the LORD: A cry is heard in Ramah – wailing, bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone [*einenu*]. Thus said the LORD: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; For there is a reward for your labour – declares the LORD: They shall return from the enemy's land. (Jer 31:15–17)

In her after-life, Rachel pleads with God for the release of her children from captivity and their return from exile. Jeremiah deploys Rachel's voice of bitter crying and lamentation – 'weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone (*'einenu*)' – literally 'who are not', disappeared, absent, taken into captivity. She plays this unique role precisely because she was buried on the cusp between exile and homeland upon the family's return, a monument marking her grave (Gen 35:16–20; 48:7). She too is emblematic of the mother of Israelite children of the Diaspora: of Joseph, who rises to prominence in Egypt; of the ten northern tribes, collectively called 'Ephraim' (son of Joseph), who were sent into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BCE; and of Esther and Mordecai (of the tribe of Benjamin), in the court of the Persian King Ahasuerus. As such, she becomes the 'Rachel, Our Mother', symbol of *Knesset Yisrael*, 'the principle of cohesion for a dispersed people' (Zornberg 1996: 305).

Following the Midrashic tradition about her role as intercessor as her children are sent into exile (*Lam. Rab. Proem 24*), Gribetz attributes the 'reward for (her) labour' (Jer 31:17) to Rachel's effort in suppressing her claim to her husband on the wedding night, when she hands her sister the secret signs.

If she, a mere mortal, was able to resist jealousy and help her sister despite great personal loss and suffering, God should be able similarly to resist the emotion of jealousy in God's treatment of the Israelites in exile, even though Israel betrayed God (Gribetz 2018: 42; cf. Adelman 2015: 63–67; Zornberg 1996: 213–214, 303–305)

God responds not to the patriarchs, who each appeal for the return of the exiles from their afterlife, but only to Rachel, the matriarch. Her voice uniquely, conveyed through the power of lament, has the ability to move God, unlike Abraham's voice in his claim to have bound Isaac on the altar for sacrifice, or his son's voice in his willingness to be the sacrifice.

According to Gershom Scholem, the matriarch is associated with the mystical concept of 'raising up the sparks' of the Jews who are forced to live under foreign rule in the Diaspora:

This is the secret of why Israel is fated to be enslaved by all the nations of the world. In order that she [*Knesset Yisrael*, identified with Rachel] may uplift those sparks which have also fallen among them [...] And therefore it was necessary that Israel should be scattered to the four winds in order to lift up everything. (haRav Chaim ben Yosef Vital, *Sefer ha-Likuttim*, cited in Scholem 1941: 284)

Rachel, as intercessor, emblematic of the collective *Knesset Yisrael*, serves a cosmic purpose comparable to the 'merit of patriarchs' in bringing about universal redemption.

7 Conclusion: from covenant to merit

This article has traced God's relationship to the forefathers and mothers, from the patriarchal period in Genesis to the memory of the divine promise in later biblical sources, Rabbinic literature, and liturgy. There is a strong continuity between the terms of covenant – the promise of the Land of Canaan and of descendants, as heirs to that land – and the merit of patriarchs and matriarchs. Both aspects of the promise are deferred; both fraught with trial. In terms of the heir, God shows special regard for the younger son, disinheriting the elder. That chosen son is born in adverse circumstances – the patriarchs were forced to wander as sojourners in the land and three of the four matriarchs were barren. While Sarah and Rebekah play pivotal roles in selecting the chosen son and rejecting the other, the sisters, Rachel and Leah, collude to establish the united 'House of Israel' – the twelve tribes, sons of Jacob, who become the Jewish people. In terms of the land, the patriarchs lived as sojourners and strangers in a land not their own in anticipation the period of exiles – in Egypt, Babylon, Persia-Medea, and under Rome. Their claim to possess 'the Land' as a nation and later return to it after exile becomes conditional upon the Sinai covenant and adherence to the Law (Torah). The faith of the patriarchs in the promise and the endurance of the covenant, despite Israel's sins and consequent exile, becomes the basis for the concept of 'the merit of the forefathers' (and mothers). It is this enduring legacy of the patriarchs and matriarchs that has served the people as a cornerstone of faith and prayer throughout Jewish history.

Attributions

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