

Biblical Covenants

Jewish Publication Society. *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: the traditional Hebrew text and the new JPS translation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003.

Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel, much like Judaism itself, has evolved throughout history and changed with respect to environment and the situations of time and place. The Covenants made between God and the Jewish people as recorded in the Bible, presented here, reveal the origins of this change, helping to explain it. As the people evolved from a clan of forefathers and foremothers into a nation with laws, so too does their relationship with both God and the land. The nine covenants can thus be divided into two distinct sections; pre and post exile from Egypt and the reception of the laws at Sinai.

The first five covenants, all from the book of Genesis, present a fundamentally “triadic” relationship between God, the people and the land. In these covenants, God’s promises to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are presented as unconditional and eternal: their descendants will live in the land, reaping the benefits that God has promised them, namely that they will become numerous and that they will be blessed by other nations (or that other nations will be blessed through them).

Following the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent reception of the Laws at Sinai, the people’s shift of status into a nation required a different type of agreement, one with a different focus. Once there was a background of laws designed to maintain cohesion amongst the people and guide their behavior, being in the land is no longer presented as an unconditional promise. Beginning in the book of Exodus, a different triadic covenant emerges between God, the people and the Law (or Torah). In these covenants, keeping the land becomes dependent on observing the laws that God has given to the people. Rather than being an essential part of the covenant, presence in the land becomes one of the rewards of the new triad: as long as the people remain faithful to both God and the law, they will remain in the land. If they are in exile, it will be because they have forsaken the law and their return to the land will be dependent on a return to following the laws.

In both triads, the land is central to the covenants between God and the people. Being in the land is positive and exile represents divine anger. Even when being in the land is conditional upon following the law, God never abandons the people. This represents merging the eternal aspect of the patriarchal covenants with the conditional aspect of the post Sinai covenants. The promise of repentance and the chance to return to God’s law represent an eternal opportunity to return to the land: the land is the arena in which the Sinai covenant plays out. This shift was borne out in the period after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE by the Babylonians. Jews were faced with a crisis of exile and survival outside of the land, and their return to the land shortly thereafter under the Persians validated this view of their covenant with God – return is always possible. During the period of the Second Temple, the land became a center for a new emerging Diaspora which expanded under the Persian, Greek and Roman Empires. Jews throughout the Near East looked to the land, and especially Jerusalem and its Temple, as their homeland and birthright, even though they lived elsewhere. Once the Second

Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the immediate reaction by most Jews was to see this as another instance of the Biblical covenants, with the exile temporary and the return, imminent.

But the history that followed in the 2nd century CE necessitated another shift in ideology, one which would last until the emergence of the Zionist movement in the nineteenth century. A series of failed revolts that were waged against the Romans in an effort to regain the land undermined the belief that a return to the land was soon to come as it had in the past. In particular, the calamitous Bar Kochba revolt of 132-35 CE which, according to Roman sources, saw 580,000 Jews killed in battle and the land devastated, demanded a change. After this great tragedy, the Rabbis adopted a new emphasis towards the Land of Israel, transforming it into an object of Messianic hope. They stressed both the spiritual connection between Jews and the land and a return that would come due to miraculous, divine intervention. This utopian future was dependent, as always, on the Jews following the Torah's laws, but they would be bystanders to the historical drama. This de-emphasis of the human initiative is consistent with the final four Biblical covenants that are presented here, and which come to dominate Jewish liturgy and prayer.

This belief, that a return to Israel was based exclusively on adherence to Jewish law would also be at the center of the opposition of many religious Jews to the Zionist movement. Based on the post Sinai covenants and the ideological shift of the rabbis in the first and second century, these religious Jews were opposed to a return to the land based on human initiative and in the concept of non-observant Jews going back to the land. In fact, 19th Century Zionism successfully attracted mostly non-observant Jews; they composed the demographic and ideological backbone for evolution of modern Zionism and the state of Israel.

1. Genesis 12:1-3

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you And curse him that curses you; And all the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you.”

2. Genesis 12:7

The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “I will assign this land to your offspring.” And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

3. Genesis 13:14-17

And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, “Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted. Up, walk about the land, through its length and its breadth, for I give it to you.”

4. Genesis 26:1-5

There was a famine in the land...and Isaac went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar. The Lord had appeared to him and said, “Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs—inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings.”

5. Genesis 28:13-15

And the Lord was standing beside him [Jacob] and He said, “I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

6. Exodus 19:3-6

And Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

7. Leviticus 18:24-30

Do not defile yourself in any of those ways, for it is by such that the nations that I am casting out before you defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants. But you must keep My laws and My rules, and you must not do any of those abhorrent things, neither the citizen nor the stranger who resides among you; for all those abhorrent things were done by the people who were in the land before you, and the land became defiled. So let not the land spew you out for defiling it, as it spewed out the nation that came before you. All who do any of those abhorrent things—such persons shall be cut off from their people. You shall keep My charge not to engage in any of the abhorrent practices that were carried on before you, and you shall not defile yourselves through them: I the Lord am your God.

8. Leviticus 26:40-45

And they [the Israelites] shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, in that they trespassed against Me, yea, were hostile to Me. When I, in turn, have been

hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their obdurate heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity. 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 and their God. I will remember in their favor 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. These are the laws, rules and instructions that the Lord established, through Moses on Mount Sinai, between Himself and the Israelite people.

9. Deuteronomy 30:1-5

When all those things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you—and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the Lord your God has banished you, and you return to the Lord your God, and you and your children heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. Even if your outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there the Lord your God will gather you, from there He will fetch you. And the Lord your God will bring you to the land that your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your fathers.