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THE AGGADOT OF R. ISAAC NAPPAḤA
A JEWISH RESPONSE TO CONDITIONS IN THIRD CENTURY PALESTINE

CONSTANCE REISA ABRAMSON

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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Referee: Professor Norman J. Cohen

On July 14, 1978 I was asked the following question: "If you could do anything in the world you wanted to do, with no requirements or limitations, what would it be?" My answer was that I would stop working for a few years and study Judaism. At the time it seemed a fantasy, yet that dream, once spoken, had to become a reality.

The process of learning about Judaism has encompassed many things. There have been triumphs and there have been frustrations. But, whether in the classroom or in the field, the growth has been steady. The program of study over the past five years has not only increased my knowledge of Judaism. It has caused me to be more and more certain that the path I have chosen is rich and right for me.

It is with the sense of facing an impossible task, then, that I express my appreciation to those who have helped me take the first steps along that path. There can be no adequate thanks given to Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, who asked the crucial question in 1978, and who has never ceased giving me his support, his guidance, and his wisdom since that time.

The entire faculty of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion has done more than simply teach me. Each professor has been not only "Dr." but also "Rabbi," filling my learning with personal caring that has made the process meaningful on far deeper levels than the academic. Dr. Lawrence Hoffman, in particular, has been a true rabbi

for me throughout the four years I studied in New York.

But without Dr. Norman Cohen my growth would have been incomplete. He does indeed live Torah, sharing with his students not only his knowledge of it but his love for it. It is because of him that I live and love Torah in an especially vibrant way.

The frustration of too much to do in too little time is offset by the ability to focus in on a thesis. The gratification I have felt at drinking deeply of Midrash defies expression. I thank Dr. Norman Cohen for responding to my motivation for a choice of topic, for guiding my research and writing, and for challenging me throughout the process to reach higher than I ever had before. I thank Robert Leib for his most patient proof-reading of the result of the work.

Finally, and most important, I thank my parents, whose love has transcended even death. With my love, now, I dedicate this thesis to them.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a major trend has been the search for one's roots. Whether it is the black seeking his African ancestry or the Bostonian linking his heritage to a passenger on the Mayflower, people have been looking into their personal histories. The fascination goes beyond filling in names on a family tree. There is a need to know the nature of our forebears, to fill out the fabric of our personalities with the colors of those from whom we are descended.

For many people the heritage can be traced back only as far as printed records exist. Some are fortunate enough to have stories that come from deeper in the past. But Jews have what may be the richest treasure of all, for we possess a literary tradition which reaches back to the story of Creation itself. If I want to search out the essence of my Jewish roots, I have a wealth of material in which to look. I may be able to trace my family name back only a few generations, but I can link my being with King David or even Moses.

These historical biblical characters have limited dimensions, however. The Bible tells of their actions, but I know little about their personalities and motivations. I must look to the rabbis of the early centuries CE for interpretations of biblical figures which will reveal the essence I seek. Thus, if I want to know how the Jewish tradition believes King David or Moses may have felt, I turn

to the midrashim created by the tannaim and amoraim. These texts were compiled and redacted and passed on to later generations in specific midrashic compilations. Here I will find not only rabbis' personal responses to the biblical text and characters, but also, within the responses, a reflection of the times in which each rabbi lived. It is to the Midrash, then, that I must turn for a glimpse at that basic quality of Judaism which even now pervades my world view. It is that interpretive aspect of the rabbinic tradition which represents the roots I seek.

In my search, I will do best to look where Judaism will stand out in most vivid contrast to surrounding beliefs. The true essence of a people is seen most clearly in the way it handles conflict. For when times are good, most people deal in similar ways with their daily life. There are universal values of justice, righteousness, and peace which are adhered to relatively easily when living conditions are comfortable. But in times of conflict, the particular characteristics of a people will surface. Priorities change when one fights for survival. The changes show the true colors of the fabric of personality which clothes a people. In the search for my Jewish roots, then, I chose a period and place of great conflict and pressure: the third century CE, in Palestine. I had read historical and theological studies of the period, but nothing had satisfied my desire to know how people felt. Secure in my American Jewish life, I wanted to know what it felt like to live under Roman rule

and to have my faith shaken by the threats and challenges of Christianity and Gnosticism. The more midrashim I studied, the more I realized that they would provide the easiest entre into the thoughts and feelings of the Jews of the time.

Though most studies in Midrash trace the development of themes, topics, or symbols in the rabbinic tradition, my goal was to understand a range of ideas; to draw a total picture of a particular epoch in Palestinian Jewish experience. Therefore, I chose a different approach, that of rabbinic biography. Since there were certain rabbis who were considered spokesmen for their times, I looked for one who would speak to me about third century Palestine. If I could find enough material, I could develop a portrait of a representative response of the time. That response had to be personal and emotional, so I wanted to concentrate on aggadic rather than the more cut and dry halachic material.

Fortunately, Palestine in the third century was full of amoraim from whom I could choose. The Sanhedrin was seated in Tiberias, and rabbinic study was flourishing throughout the Galilee.[1] My choice was limited by only two factors. First, biographies of some of these rabbis had already been done.[2] Second, I needed to select a rabbi about whom there was sufficient material for a valid study.

Actually, some scholars have questioned the validity of any rabbinic biography, given the fact that we can refer only to statements such as "R. Ploni amar" for the words of the rabbi we want to study. Jacob Neusner claims that we

can never be sure of such attributions, as we must read past the redaction of an editor who was influenced by his own time and place in order to know what a rabbi said.[3] Any transmission of information colors the original information with the opinion of the transmittor. Each redactor has his own agenda, his own statement to make about the issues with which he deals. He may attribute something to a rabbi known for a particular viewpoint, even if the citation itself did not come from that rabbi. It might be enough for the redactor to connect the content of the statement with the viewpoint of the rabbi. So, while Neusner believes it is possible to identify a rabbi's tradition by following theme and logical developments within the overall rabbinic tradition, he says it is not possible to be accurate regarding attribution of any specific statement to that rabbi.[4]

Other scholars have agreed with Neusner, accepting the fact that we can never know direct information about the rabbis. William Scott Green, for example, discussed the kinds of problems posed by Neusner and concluded:

> All of this means that we know about early rabbinic figures what the various authorities around the documents want us to know, and we know it in the way they want us to know it.[5]

Given these objections, one wonders why Neusner himself attempted rabbinic biography. Yet he published a study on Yoḥanan ben Zakkai.[6] The title of this study provides the

answer: Neusner dealt with the traditions concerning ben Zakkai, which he believed could be determined with relative accuracy.

It is traditions such as these which I believed would provide me with the essence of my Jewish roots. I sought to uncover them in relation to a rabbi who has not been studied, yet whose position in his day was important enough for him to be considered a representative of Jewish thought and feelings in that time and place.

The rabbi I selected was R. Isaac, sometimes referred to as R. Isaac Nappaḥa. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter One,[7] there is sufficient material about him to place him in Palestine in the third century, and to determine his position in the chain of the rabbinic tradition. This plethora of citations points to his importance in the community and the major role he played in voicing the Jewish response to contemporary conditions. Were he not highly respected and were his words not representative of the opinions of the people, they would not have been preserved in such abundance.

Once I knew R. Isaac would be the subject of my search, I proceeded to look for all relevant materials. First, I studied key background sources, such as histories of the third century. To learn about specific issues, I read books and articles on Christianity and Gnosticism, as well as on the Roman presence. In many of these books I found references to R. Isaac which gave me a start on information on the man

himself. From them I moved on to more direct sources, such as indices of information on the early rabbis. The latter included Aggadat Amoraei Eres Yisrael by Wilhelm Bacher and Sefer Toledot Tannaim ve-Amoraim by Aharon Hyman.[8]

Having done this, I moved to the textual sources themselves. Using various indices, I extracted citations of R. Isaac in aggadic sources ranging from the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds through the later Yalkutim (midrashic anthologies). In addition to the lists of citations I had from Bacher and Hyman, I pulled lists from specific collections of aggadot. From Hokhmei ha-Talmud by Yosef Omnaski I learned where R. Isaac was quoted in the Palestinian Talmud.[9] The index volume of the Soncino translation of the Babylonian Talmud includes a listing of places where he was quoted.[10] There is an index by Ḥanokh Albeck to Bereishit Rabbah which gave me R. Isaac's citations in that collection.[11] The Braude-Kapstein translation of Pesikta de-Rab Kahana includes an index of citations by rabbis, as does the Braude translation of Pesikta Rabbati.[12] References to the Yalkutim were found in footnotes of earlier citations.

When I had looked up all the source materials and arranged copies of each citation in chronological order by compilation, I did a close analysis of each one. Having completed that analysis, I went through the material once again to chart R. Isaac's statements by theme. By studying the chart I was able to see where his focus was and outline his responses to the various issues prevalent in his day.

After discussing in Chapter One the requirements for a valid determination of a rabbinic biographic tradition and showing how I meet them relative to my study of R. Isaac, I present what few facts we do have about his life. I go on to locate him in third century Palestine by referring to specific texts which associate him with other amoraim of that time and place. Finally, I show how he can be placed in the overall rabbinic chain of tradition.

In Chapter Two I deal with R. Isaac's understanding of Judaism's theology and its values. I begin with his concept of God as an ever-present merciful redeemer and his delineation of the path to God via observance of miṣvot, study, prayer, and atonement. I continue with a discussion of his value system, which included the concept that because Jews had free will, their actions had consequences attached to them. Righteous behavior was desirable while evil acts were condemned by God. A Jew's lineage affected his life also, as values were passed on from generation to generation. If Jews had a righteous heritage, and lived by the right values, the consequences were ones of blessing. These Jews would earn their place in the world to come and would be deserving of resurrection when the Messiah came. Then I present R. Isaac's attitude toward tradition, showing how he stressed the importance of maintaining the chain from Sinai of the Law, both Written and Oral, and of Prophecy. Finally, I point out that R. Isaac's message to the Jews of his day was one of hope that the Messiah would come and their

conditions would improve.

In Chapter Three I look at the conditions of Jewish life under a Roman rule which was oppressive, not theologically but economically. Though Rome allowed the Jews to worship and study freely, the political state of anarchy which reigned for most of the third century meant it had to raise a great deal of money to support its army. This led to high taxation, which brought considerable hardship to the Jews. As the Roman army fought with invading barbarians, the soldiers trampled the Jews' farmlands, causing their crops to fail, thus threatening their very survival. R. Isaac assured the Jews that Rome would fall, however, because she was one of the nations of the world, all of which lacked God's support. At the end of the chapter, I present R. Isaac's characterization of the Roman population as heathens, from whom Jews should keep their distance.

Other non-Jews in Palestine were members of various Christian sects, with whom I deal in Chapter Four. First, I discuss their theology and the Jewish response to the concepts of duality, trinity, and Jesus as the Messiah and son of God. I emphasize R. Isaac's insistence that God was one, that the Messiah was yet to come, and that Israel was the son of God. Next, I present R. Isaac's answer to the Christians' claim that they were the true elect of God. He showed how God gave Torah, both Written and Oral, and the Land of Israel to the people Israel and not to anyone else.

Finally, I discuss his assurance to the Jews that God was with them in spite of the Christian accusation that He had deserted them when He caused the destruction of the Temple. I close this chapter with a reiteration of R. Isaac's description of the path to God, focussing here on the misvot, since Christians were observing them less and less.

The final chapter contains a presentation of the Gnostic challenge and R. Isaac's response to it. Again he insisted on God's unity, this time in the face of the dualistic theology of the Gnostics. He claimed God was good, and not inferior to some supreme deity. Further, I describe R. Isaac's path to God once more, in order to show that he considered study, prayer, atonement, and observance of misvot all to be important, as opposed to study alone which was the Gnostic path. R. Isaac stressed that misvot particularly were a good and positive sign of God's love for the Jews.

I close this chapter by pointing out the appropriateness of R. Isaac's polemic against Gnosticism and all the issues of his day. This leads to my conclusion, where I present an overview of his response to conditions in third century Palestine, as well as a statement on the value of rabbinic biography as a method of study.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., A History of the Jewish People, trans. George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 335-336.

2. For example, see Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yoḥanan of Tiberias: Aspects of the Social and Religious History of Third Century Palestine" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1977); Lee I. Levine, "R. Abbahu of Caesarea" in Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults (Leiden, 1975), 12:56-76.

3. Jacob Neusner, "The Teaching of the Rabbis: Approaches Old and New," Journal of Jewish Studies 27 (1976): 30-32.

4. Ibid., p. 33.

5. William Scott Green, "What's in a Name? - The Problematic of Rabbinic Biography," in Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press for Brown University, 1978), 1:80.

6. Jacob Neusner, Development of A Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yoḥanan ben Zakkai (Leiden, 1970).

7. See below, pages 8-10.

8. Wilhelm Bacher, Aggadat Amoraei Eres Yisrael, trans. A. Z. Rabinowitz (Tel Aviv: Devir Co. Ltd., 1926), pp. 187-193; Aharon Hyman, Sefer Toledot Tannaim ve-Amoraim (London: Express, 1910), 2:800-802.

9. Yosef Omnaski, Hokhmei ha-Talmud (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook she-al yad ha-misraḥei ha-olami, 1952), p. 104.

10. Judah J. Slotki, compiler, Index Volume to the Soncino Talmud (London: The Soncino Press, 1952), pp. 659-661.

11. Ḥanokh Albeck, Mavo u-maftehot le-Midrash Bereishit Rabbah: Maftehot ve-hosafot, vol. 3, part 2 (Berlin: Verlag M. Poppelauer, 1936), p. 59.

12. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, trans., Pesikta de-Rab Kahana (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975), p. 532; William G. Braude, trans., Pesikta Rabbati (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 2:939.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN AND HIS BIOGRAPHY

The literature of the Jewish Tradition reflects the ideas of human beings. The rabbis who are cited in the Talmud and the Midrash actually lived. Unfortunately, we know little about the details of their lives, as there were no biographies written in those early centuries. But it would appear that the essence of their lives was their work and study, so that we do have the most important information they could pass on. To learn from a particular rabbi, then, the contemporary scholar faces the task of determining that rabbi's tradition. This task can be accomplished when certain analytic factors are present. Given these factors, we may approach an understanding of the rabbi's response to his times.[1]

The first factor is a sufficient number of citations in the name of the rabbi.[2] While it may be difficult to determine whether or not there is ample material in certain cases, it is not difficult in the case of R. Isaac. Even limiting this study to his aggadot, it is possible to locate over three hundred and fifty citations of R. Isaac in the Talmud and the Midrash. These citations cover a wide range of topics, thus providing an abundant source for his response to the conditions prevalent in his time and place.

Once we have the first factor, it remains to draw out his ideas with care. The second factor, therefore, is the removal of his citation from the contextual framework in which it is found.[3] A statement by R. Isaac found in a

midrash dated several hundred years after he lived may reflect the conditions of the latter time period rather than those of his lifetime. Where there is no clear evidence to the contrary, we can only guess as to the authenticity of such citations. However, in a significant number of cases, we find repetition of the same midrash in collections compiled centuries apart from one another. In many of these cases, the wording of the midrash is the same in each compilation. When this occurs, we may assume, with relative assurance, that the compiler has quoted the midrash as it was transmitted by R. Isaac, without redacting it to suit his particular compilation. Even if he merely pulled it from the earlier compilation, he did so without contemporary embellishment. For example, the following midrash is found in collections redacted in three different centuries:

> R. Isaac said, "[God's] judgment of man [is like His] judgment of beasts. [Regarding His] judgment of man, 'On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised' (Leviticus 12:30). [Regarding His] judgment of beasts, '....and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable'" (Leviticus 22:27).
> [Vayikra Rabbah 27:1
> Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 9:1
> Tanḥuma Buber, Emor 9 and 17][4]

When the wording of a midrash is not the same in each collection in which it is found, we are faced with a different problem. This leads to the third, and final, analytic factor necessary for determining the tradition of a particular rabbi. This factor is the ability to be certain

of his original thought, not only as removed from the documentary setting, but as stripped of editorial or redactional influences.[5] The question must be asked: is this R. Isaac's thought, or is it the thought of his disciple, or of the editor of the compilation, or of another rabbi who is citing him for his own purposes? It would seem impossible to make a determination regarding this factor, as we can deal only with the texts as we find them. However, in repetitive citations we can compare the wordings of each midrash and try to strip away the additions to R. Isaac's original thought.

R. Isaac's belief that the righteous cause the Shekhinah to dwell on earth, and that the wicked prohibit the Shekhinah from dwelling on earth, is made clear in several midrashim. While the wording is different in each midrash, there is no doubt that the concept is exactly the same in each case. Looking at these citations, we can determine this basic concept with ease, regardless of each individual redactor's style. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the wording of R. Isaac's original midrash, but we can identify his original thought without question. Note three parallel passages in this regard:

> R. Isaac said, "It is written,
> The righteous shall inherit the land,
> and abide forever in it.
> (Psalm 37:29)
> And the wicked, what shall they do, range in the air? This means, rather, that the wicked do not allow the Shekhinah to dwell on the earth."
> [Bereishit Rabbah 19:7]

R. Isaac said, "Thus it is written (Psalm 37:29),
The righteous shall inherit the land,
and abide forever in it.
What will the wicked do? They will hang in the air, because they do not allow the Shekhinah to dwell on the earth. But the righteous cause the Shekhinah to dwell on earth. Why?
The righteous shall inherit the land,
and abide forever in it [emphasis mine].
They cause the Shekhinah to dwell on it.
[God] forever dwells, whose name is holy."
(Isaiah 57:15)
[Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 5:1:1]

R. Isaac said, "It is written (Psalm 37),
The righteous shall inherit the land,
and abide forever in it.
Where shall the wicked dwell, in the air? Rather, the wicked cause the Shekhinah to depart from the earth, but the righteous cause the Shekhinah to dwell on the earth. When did the Shekhinah rest on the earth? On the day the Tabernacle was erected, as it is said (Exodus 40[:34]), '....the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.'"
[Bamidbar Rabbah 13:2]

The first citation, in Bereishit Rabbah, is the simplest. The righteous will inherit the land, and the wicked do not allow the Shekhinah to dwell on earth. But the later embellishments do not change the basic concept. In Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah the idea that the righteous do cause the Shekhinah to dwell on earth is added. In Bamidbar Rabbah we learn that the wicked actually cause the Shekhinah to depart from earth, yet She rested on earth when the Tabernacle was erected (by the righteous). Each addition serves only to elaborate on the original thought. No matter how the

specific midrash is worded we glean the central idea from it. The ways in which various redactors have phrased their transmissions of R. Isaac's thought may teach us about how each generation has used his ideas. But the ideas themselves do not change, and once we know them we can draw a portrait of him as a man who was known for certain beliefs and who responded to his times with messages which were remembered in the following centuries. Not only were they remembered for themselves; they were used time and again as valuable messages to people in similar circumstances, no matter what the time or place. R. Isaac's words pointed to the universal importance of various concepts, regardless of the exact interpretation of the words themselves.

In one case, a single clear message of consolation and hope arising out of acknowledgment of God's awesome deeds is associated with R. Isaac and comes through two seemingly contradictory citations:

> Answer us with victory through awesome deeds,
> O God, our deliverer.
> (Psalm 65:6)
>
> R. Judah [said] in the name of R. Isaac, "Awesome deeds which You did for us in this world [make up] for afflictions that You bring on us in this world." R. Ḥaggai [said] in the name of R. Isaac, "Awesome deeds which You will do for us in the future in the world to come [will make up] for afflictions that You bring on us in this world."
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 24:2]

R. Judah cited R. Isaac as saying that God's help will come to us during our lifetimes, while R. Haggai cited him as saying that God's help will come to us in the world to come. The specific message here is unimportant within the broader message: God will help us. Both rabbis chose to make their points through R. Isaac's words because they knew him as a rabbi who brought consolation and hope to the Jewish people. The consolation and hope are all we can draw out of R. Isaac's original thought here, yet this is enough to teach us an essential aspect of R. Isaac's tradition.

I hope during the course of this Thesis to describe the tradition associated with R. Isaac in as clear terms as possible. Nevertheless, it must be said that we know relatively little about the man himself, though we do have certain documented facts.

A. Personal and Family Life

The rabbis spent a significant part of their time in study, but they did work at various trades as well. Sometimes the word for their trade was added to their names as an identifying epithet, particularly in cases of names as common as R. Isaac's. Thus we find "R. Isaac Nappaḥa," meaning 'R. Isaac the blacksmith,' many times in the Babylonian Talmud as well as a few times in later midrashim.[6] Every other reference to him is simply "R. Isaac," but we are fortunate to have a statement in the Babylonian Talmud which links the simple name to the complex one,

identifying them both as the same man. Following a discussion of several rabbis, among whom is R. Isaac, we find R. Naḥman bar Isaac saying, "This Isaac is Rabbi Isaac Nappaḥa" [B.T. Ketubot 111b].

We have one other biographical piece of information about R. Isaac. In the middle of a talmudic discussion about whether or not a Jew may eat the udder of a milch cow, a story is told about R. Papi's wife serving this dish. Her action is considered proper since she was the daughter of R. Isaac Nappaḥa, who maintained strict observance in his actions.[7] We know nothing of his wife or any other children, but we do know from this story that he had one daughter, and that she was married to R. Papi, a fourth century Babylonian amora.

B. Location in Time: Third Century CE

The information we have regarding when R. Isaac lived is more substantial than that regarding his personal and family life. The practice of recording participants in discussions in the two Talmuds has made it possible to place R. Isaac in the company of amoraim who lived in the late third and early fourth centuries. While we have no records to indicate specifically when any rabbis lived, it is possible to derive from the Talmuds a reliable schema of generations. R. Isaac has been included in various such schemata, but we could place him even if he were not included in them.[8]

We find R. Isaac many times with R. Naḥman, for instance, who was a third generation *amora* living in the early fourth century.[9] We find him several times also with R. Ammi, a third generation *amora* who lived in the late third century.[10] All other rabbis with whom R. Isaac is placed, and there are a significant number of them, lived in the late third century and were of the third generation of *amoraim*.[11] Thus we know he was already considered a rabbi, and accepted in the company of other rabbis, by the latter part of the third century.

C. Location in Place: Palestine

The only indication of R. Isaac's place of origin is found in the Babylonian Talmud, where he is referred to as "the man from Kfar Akko" [B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 7b]. Kfar Akko is identified elsewhere as a village in the lower Galilee.[12] Since the majority of the *amoraim* with whom he is found in the discussions referred to above were Palestinian, it is reasonable to assume he continued to live in Palestine. But some of those *amoraim* were Babylonian, and it appears that R. Isaac was one of the "*neḥutei*," the rabbis who travelled back and forth between Palestine and Babylonia.[13] These rabbis carried stories, as well as legal opinions, from one place to the other. Indeed, there are a number of times in the Babylonian Talmud where it is clear that R. Isaac travelled to Babylonia from Palestine with information about events in Palestine. One such instance

is in Berakhot 44a, where he came to Babylonia and told a story about a town in Ereṣ Yisrael named Gofnit.

In addition to specific references to place names in connection with R. Isaac, we have another clue as to where he lived as a rabbi. Part of the exegetic literary style characteristic of homiletic midrashim, which emerged from Palestine, was the proem, containing the opening phrase "R. Ploni petakh."[14] We have the opening phrase "R. Isaac petakh" numerous times in midrashim, indicating he followed this Palestinian style.[15]

D. Placement Within the Chain of Tradition

Just as we can locate R. Isaac in time by noting the rabbis with whom he is mentioned, so we can uncover his position in the rabbinic tradition in a similar manner. Of all the rabbis named in the Talmud and the Midrash, some appear more frequently than others, and some appear to carry more weight than others. One of the more important rabbis was R. Yoḥanan of Palestine, a second generation amora living in the late second to middle third centuries.[16] We know that R. Isaac was a student of R. Yoḥanan, passing on his tradition by citing ideas in his name. For example, a significant concern of the third century was the Messiah, as will be seen later. This concern was dealt with by R. Yoḥanan, and his tradition was carried on by R. Isaac:

> R. Naḥman said to R. Isaac, "Have you heard when Bar Nafle will come?" [R. Isaac] said to him, "Who is Bar Nafle?" [R. Naḥman] said to him, "The Messiah." [R. Isaac said to him], "You call Bar Nafle, the Messiah?" [R. Naḥman] said to him, "Yes. It is written,
>
> 'In that day,
> I will set up again the fallen booth of David.'"
> (Amos 9:11)
>
> [R. Isaac] said to him, "Thus said R. Yoḥanan, 'In the generation in which the son of David [the Messiah] will come, scholars will be few, and as for the rest, their eyes will fail from sorrow and grief, and many troubles and severe decrees will be newly made, so that the second [decree] will hurry to come fast upon the first.'"
> [B.T. Sanhedrin 96b-97a]

Both R. Yoḥanan and R. Isaac are associated with giving hope to people living in troubled times by speaking of the coming of the Messiah. In turn, this message of hope was brought to people in later, equally troubled, times by rabbis who followed R. Isaac. Among these, the more well known were R. Ḥaggai and R. Berechiah. R. Ḥaggai was a fourth generation Palestinian amora living in the middle fourth century, and R. Berechiah was a fifth generation Palestinian amora who lived in the late fourth to middle fifth centuries.[17] R. Ḥaggai gave hope to the Jews when he spoke of God's readiness to be with them, in Bereishit Rabbah 48:7. There, he quoted R. Isaac as pointing out that God is not pictured as "standing," but actively "ready" in Psalm 82:1 ("God stands [not 'omed' but 'niṣav'] in the divine assembly"). Similarly, R. Berechiah gave hope to the Jews when he discussed the coming of the second redeemer, in Kohelet Rabbah 1:9:1. There, in R. Isaac's name, he

paralleled biblical verses to show that the second redeemer, like the first (Moses), will come and bring good things for the Jews.

The tradition of which R. Isaac was a part was both halachic and aggadic. He cited much halakhah in the name of R. Yohanan, and R. Haggai and R. Berechiah both cited halakhah in his name.[18] However, R. Isaac believed that the message of consolation and hope he wished to convey would be conveyed best through aggadah. We learn this directly from him:

> "For I am faint with love" (Song of Songs 2:5). R. Isaac said, "Formerly there was enough money, [so] people wanted words of Mishnah and Talmud, but now that there is not enough money, and further that we are faint from the kingdom, people want to hear words of Scripture and aggadah."
>
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 12:3]

Not only was aggadah the best vehicle for consolation, it was also the best vehicle for the polemic which was characteristic of R. Isaac's thought. We will see this polemic play a large role in our portrait of him and in his response to the conditions under which he lived. But before analyzing the polemic, we will look at the details of this rabbinic tradition of which he was a part.

NOTES

CHAPTER ONE

1. Green, "What's in a Name?" 1:87.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. All translations of biblical tests are taken from:
   The Torah: The Five Books of Moses. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962.
   The Prophets: Nevi'im. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978.
   The Writings: Kethubim. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979.
   All translations of talmudic and midrashic texts are mine.

5. Green, "What's in a Name?" 1:88.

6. See, for example, Esther Rabbah 7:13 and Tanḥuma Buber, Toledot 10.

7. Babylonian Talmud (New York: Shulsinger Bros., 1908), Ḥullin 110a.

8. Shmuel Safrai, "Amoraim," Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1972), 2:871-872.

9. David Joseph Bornstein, "Naḥman ben Jacob," E.J., 12:773-774; see, for example, B.T. Ta'anit 5a-6a.

10. Zvi Kaplan, "Ammi bar Nathan," E.J., 2:852-853; see, for example, B.T. Ḥagiga 26a.

11. For example: R. Hisda, R. Ḥiyya bar Abba, R. Ḥanina bar Papi, R. Abbahu, and R. Assi.

12. The Babylonian Talmud, translated under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1952), Mo'ed vol. 4, Ta'anit p. 28, n. 4.

13. Moshe Beer, "Neḥutei," E.J., 12:942-943.

14. Joseph Heinemann, "The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim," Scripta Hierosolymitana 22 (1971), p. 103.

15. See, for example, Bereishit Rabbah 82:2 and 83:1.

16. See Kimelman, "Rabbi Yoḥanan of Tiberias;" and "Rabbi Yoḥanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation," Harvard Theological Review 73 (1980): 567-595.

17. Editorial Staff of Encyclopaedia Judaica, "Ḥaggai of Sepphoris," E.J., 7:1115; Zvi Kaplan, "Berechiah," E.J., 4:596.

18. See, for example, B.T. Avodah Zarah 7b; Bereishit Rabbah 46:13 in this regard.

CHAPTER TWO

THEOLOGY AND VALUES ASSOCIATED WITH R. ISAAC

At the core of R. Isaac's response to conditions in third century Palestine was his Jewish world view. His response grew out of his basic belief system and each aspect of his response reflected the various components of the Jewish tradition in rabbinic times. Before examining his polemic, then, we must understand R. Isaac's theology and values. From R. Yoḥanan, his teacher, he learned the Jewish views on God and the relationship to Him, on life and death, on human relationships, and on an approach to daily life. As a teacher, he passed on those views, handing down the tradition by which he lived.

A. God Concept

R. Isaac saw God as compassionate, a merciful redeemer who was ever-present in the world. God's strength and power were unquestionable, but it was His compassion that was the focus of R. Isaac's theology. For the God of judgment portrayed in Torah was also a God of mercy. In the midrash cited in the beginning of Chapter One drawn from Vayikra Rabbah 27:1 and cited in R. Isaac's name, we learned about God's judgment of man and of beasts.[1] Taking a closer look at that midrash we can see this judgment to have been compassionate. The demand for circumcision of all male children was made on the condition that it be no earlier than the eighth day. The health and safety of the child

came before the ritual adherence to the covenant. God did not allow the Jews to cut the tender flesh of the infant until the child's body was strong enough to withstand the physical cutting, and to heal. God knew them to be human beings and treated them with care, even in regards to the most demanding of His misvot. Yet God's compassion extended also to the beasts. The ox or sheep or goat which was to become an offering by fire was unacceptable until it was eight days old. God did not allow a new mother to suffer the pain of loss of her young animal until that pain would be greatly diminished. (The animal attachment between mother and young is strongest at birth, and lessens as each day passes.) The God who demanded circumcision and sacrifice did so not coldly, but with full compassion.

We learn from R. Isaac that God's mercy was evident not only in His basic law, but also in His allowances for human frailty. As imperfect creatures, we may transgress God's law in error, bringing upon ourselves a severe penalty for something beyond our intent. The conscious sinner must take full responsibility for his actions, and no one should go unpunished even for a sin made in error, or God's law would be ineffective. But God's allowance for our human errors was part of what gave His law its strength. God's mercy gave the Jew a sense of trust and faith, taking away the sense of helplessness that would accompany an inflexibly strict law. For example, the rigid law would demand death for a man who incurred such a penalty by a particular

transgression. But in Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 24:17, R. Isaac taught that if that man transgressed in error, one of his animals might die, or one of his possessions may break, or a part of his body may be injured. God, in this case, considered part of the man, or his belongings, to stand for all of him, and called for an appropriate penalty.[2]

R. Isaac portrayed the merciful God as more than just a compassionate figure. He was a redeemer, protecting the Jews and saving them from all harm. When the evil Sodomites took Lot, God helped Abraham to free him. But Abraham was upset that in the process he had to kill people, and he feared punishment. God calmed him, reminding him that He was his shield and protector. Since the killing had been done with God's help, there would be no punishment. God, as Abraham's redeemer, would always protect him:

> R. Isaac said, "[Abraham said to God] 'I feel bitter. Perhaps I have killed righteous men among them.' God said to him, 'Do not fear that. They were thorns, and you have only reward for [having killed] them.' As is said,
>
> [God said] 'Fear not, Abram,
> I am a shield to you;
> Your reward shall be very great.'"
> (Genesis 15:1)
> [Tanḥuma Buber, Lekh Lekha 13]

God helped Abraham redeem Lot and has continued to redeem Jews throughout their history. R. Isaac recalled such redemptions several times. God saved Moses from Pharaoh's sword, He caused the fish to spit out Jonah, He shut the lions' mouths when Daniel was in their den, and He

destroyed the legions who suggested to Nebuchadnezzar that he destroy the Temple.[3]

The fact that God had always redeemed the Jews led to their awareness that He was ever-present with them. God's continuous presence was one of the important points in R. Isaac's theology. This presence was manifested in two ways: directly, in the figurative form called the Shekhinah, and indirectly, in Nature.

The biblical anthropomorphic tradition taught that the Shekhinah sometimes was considered to be that part of God's body which rested on earth. In Isaiah 66:1 we read:

> Thus said the Lord:
> The heaven is My throne
> And the earth is My footstool.

R. Isaac picked this up, warning the Jews they would insult God if they pushed aside the feet of the Shekhinah by attempting to sin in secret.[4] The concept raised by this midrash went beyond a description of the Shekhinah. There was a further lesson here, that the Jew could have no secrets from God because He was right on earth with him. Indeed, to attempt to sin in secret was to either deny His presence or to defy it.

R. Isaac knew that there were those who did deny this presence, who did not allow the Shekhinah to be present on earth. It was only the righteous who brought God's presence here:

R. Isaac said, "Thus it is written (Psalm 37:29),
The righteous shall inherit the land,
and abide forever in it.
What will the wicked do? They will hang in the air, because they do not allow the Shekhinah to dwell on the earth. But the righteous cause the Shekhinah to dwell on earth. Why?
The righteous shall inherit the land,
and abide forever in it [emphasis mine].
They cause the Shekhinah to dwell on it.
[God] forever dwells, whose name is holy.
(Isaiah 57:15)
[Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 5:1:1][5]

Because of the righteous, the Shekhinah has appeared many times in many places. Using grammatical exegesis, R. Isaac made this clear in B.T. Sotah 11a. Just as Miriam had stood (va-teitaṣev) at a distance (meirahok) to see what would happen to the infant Moses, so God had stood (va-yityaṣav) to call out to Samuel when he was serving Eli, and had appeared to Jeremiah from afar (meirahok).[6] Thus the Shekhinah was with all these righteous people wherever they were.

According to R. Isaac, God's presence in the form of the Shekhinah was only one way in which He manifested Himself to the Jews. He was present also in Nature, controlling the forces that brought either blessing or curse to humankind. As a mainly agricultural society, Jews in third century Palestine had reason to be concerned about rain for their crops. Yet, even when rain was needed it would be a curse if it fell on the eve of Shabbat, because it would hinder people who were preparing for Shabbat:

> R. Isaac said, "Even in years like the years of Elijah [when there was draught], when rain fell on the eves of Shabbat it was a sign of a curse."
>
> [B.T. Ta'anit 8b]

Except for this case of the eve of Shabbat, however, rain was crucial for the survival of the Jews. It was regarded as a sign of God's pleasure, an indication that He was accepting of the Jews as He had been accepting of their sacrifices in Temple days.[7]

R. Isaac's belief that rain was a sign of God's pleasure, and his belief in the Shekhinah as a more direct manifestation of God's presence, reflected a vivid theology. The rabbinic tradition portrayed God as an active, not a passive, force. God stood ready to redeem the Jews and to give them of His mercy. He required only that they reach for Him. One of the most moving of R. Isaac's aggadot showed God encouraging them to do whatever they must do to receive His mercy:

> "..., for our iniquities are overwhelming...." (Ezra 9:6). R. Isaac said, "[This may be compared to] a man who was crossing a river, and his feet sank in the water due to a burden on his head. They said to him, 'Lift the burden from upon [your head], and you will release your feet.' So said God to Israel, 'Why do you say:
>
> For my iniquities have overwhelmed me;
> they are like a heavy burden, more than
> I can bear?
>
> (Psalm 38:5)
>
> [It is written], 'Let the wicked give up his ways' (Isaiah 55:7). Lift the evil from upon you, and I will have mercy on you, as it is said,

Let him turn back to the Lord,
And He will pardon him.'"
(Psalm 38:5)
[Midrash Tehillim 38:2]

What was it that the Jew must do? How could he lift the iniquities from upon him so he could receive God's mercy? R. Isaac's exploration of these means led to the traditional rabbinic path to God.

B. Path to God

The essence of the Jews' relationship to God was the brit, the covenant between God and Israel. There was nothing mysterious about the path to God: He Himself told the Jews that if they observed the misvot, they would receive God's blessing. The misvot covered the entire range of human behavior and their observance established a way of life that was pleasing to God. R. Isaac pointed out in B.T. Eruvin 54a that the time when the words of Torah were pleasant was when they were close enough to Jews that they did them.

Living in a primarily agricultural society, R. Isaac knew he could make his strongest stand on misvot in relation to the land and its harvest. The farmer must not neglect the observance of tithing at the proper times or the land would not bring forth the needed crops:

> For the earth was defiled
> Under its inhabitants
> (Isaiah 24:5)
> R. Isaac said, "If you are deceitful to her [the Land], then she will be deceitful to you. She will show you standing grain but not harvested sheaf; she will show you harvested sheaf but not threshed grain; she will show you threshed grain but not winnowed heap. Why? 'Because they transgressed teachings' (Ibid.) -- they transgressed the two torahs, the written and the oral torahs. '[They] violated laws' (Ibid.) -- they violated the laws of tithing. [They] broke the ancient covenant' (Ibid.) -- they broke the covenant of the Fathers. Therefore Moses advises Israel and says to them, '"You shall set aside...a tenth part"'" (Deuteronomy 14:22).
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 10:5]

But in R. Isaac's world there were many Jews also who lived in towns. Palestine was under the rule of Rome, so that every town in Palestine was subject to Roman edicts. Reaching out to these urban Jews, R. Isaac encouraged them to observe misvot such as circumcision, pointing out that observance could free the Jew from a foreign ruler's evil decrees:

> R. Isaac said, "There was a city in the land of Israel which acted according to [the words of] R. Eliezer and circumcized at the proper time. Not only that, but one time the Evil Kingdom issued a decree upon Israel regarding [prohibition of] circumcision, but to that city they did not issue the decree."
> [B.T. Shabbat 130a]

The reward for observing misvot clearly was receiving goodness from God. In order to do so, however, it was

necessary to know the misvot. This required study, and R. Isaac placed a high priority on study as a necessary step along the path to God. He even went so far as to state that it was good for a man to forget what he has learned in Torah, so that he will not be able to say he has learned it all, and stop studying. The man who forgets must study continuously and that was what was desirable.[8]

Study was more than just a means of learning what the misvot were. Study indicated man's desire to please God in that it led him to observance of the misvot. As a symbol of man's commitment to God and the brit, study in itself took on value, and carried the promise of God's good will. R. Isaac claimed that the yoke of Sennacherib upon the Jews was to be destroyed because Hezekiah:

> ....planted a sword in the doorway of the schoolhouse and said, "Anyone who does not study Torah will be pierced by this sword."
> [B.T. Sanhedrin 94b]

In fact, study came to be considered a replacement for the actual performance of certain misvot. Once the Temple had been destroyed, it was impossible for Jews to keep many misvot, particularly those having to do with sacrifice. The biblical path to God had centered around sacrifice, and it was crucial to fill this vacuum or the Jew could never reach God. One way to fill the vacuum was through study of the laws of sacrifice, which R. Isaac said was equivalent to performing the sacrificial act itself.[9]

Another way, indeed the primary way, to fill the vacuum left by the destruction of the Temple, was to engage in prayer. R. Isaac knew that this was the only direct way the Jews had left to reach toward God, and therefore he actually pleaded with God to hear and accept their prayers:

> R. Isaac said, "Now, since the Temple was destroyed, we have neither prophet, nor priest, nor sacrifice, nor Temple, nor altar, to atone for us. We have nothing left but prayer. Therefore, 'O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive!'" (Daniel 9:19).
>
> [Tanḥuma ha-Nidpas, Vayishlah 9][10]

R. Isaac believed God did accept the prayers of Jews. He even told the Jews that prayer was greater than sacrifice, because God placed the word le-hishtaḥavot (to worship) before the word lizboaḥ (to sacrifice) in I Samuel 1:3.

Not only did God accept prayer, He loved it and yearned for it. In the early patriarchal period, long before the First Temple had been built, God wanted prayers. He even went so far as to make our ancestors barren in order to hear their prayers for children.[11] One might almost think God destroyed the Temple in order to hear their prayers, since R. Isaac said God promised to rebuild the Temple in answer to them.[12]

But whatever the cause of the Jews' prayers, the point was that God loved them and would answer them. Just as God had promised reward for observance of misvot as part of the covenant, so He promised reward for prayer. The reward came

in various ways and at various times, but it was always there. It was only through the merit of worship, said R. Isaac, that Abraham returned from the akedah in peace, that Israel was redeemed, that the Torah was given to the Jews, that Hannah was remembered, that the exiles were reassembled, that the Temple was built, and that the dead will be resurrected.[13] All of these events showed God's mercy. Perhaps the greatest power of prayer was that it could bring about God's mercy. R. Isaac said that just as a pitchfork turns a sheaf of grain in its place, so prayer turns God's anger to mercy.[14]

In most of the midrashim attributed to R. Isaac on prayer, he was careful to indicate that it was the prayer of the righteous which God loved and accepted. Empty prayer, or prayers made by evil people, meant nothing. The quality of righteousness was the key to the power of prayer, and even one's lineage counted. R. Isaac said that Isaac pleaded on behalf of his barren wife because as the son of a righteous man, his prayer would be more acceptable than hers, she being the daughter of a wicked man.[15]

The righteous person seeking God through prayer needed a model on which to base his worship. The rabbis taught that prayer replaced Temple sacrifice, but people living in the third century had no direct knowledge of the sacrificial cult. While there was not a need for extensive teaching about the cult as long as the worship vacuum was filled by prayer, R. Isaac was aware that the cult must be acknowledged

and remembered.

The model of the cult was personified in the role of the priest. The priest officiated at the sacrifice and was sustained by his portion of the meat from the sacrifice. Without these priestly dues, as they were called, the priest could not survive. Thus, as R. Isaac taught in B.T. Megillah 28a, people were forbidden to eat until they had given these priestly dues. The role of priest was filled by more than one person. The main cult figure was the High Priest, designated in the Torah as Aaron. But it was not necessary that he be the only priest. Indeed, we learn from R. Isaac that Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons, were priests while he was still alive, thus they officiated along with him.[16]

The sacrifices were done at an altar, a mizbeiah. People living in the third century did not know exactly where this altar had been situated in the Temple, but R. Isaac understood it was important to give significance to that site. He said, therefore, that it was located at the spot where Isaac's ashes from the akedah lay.[17] Abraham, who had been willing to sacrifice Isaac to God, also circumcized himself for God. That act of circumcision was seen as even more important than the akedah. R. Isaac used the concept of the sanctity of the altar to stress the relative significance of circumcision, thereby connecting the importance of the extinct cultic ritual with that of the extant system of misvot:

> R. Isaac began, "'Make for Me an altar of earth'" (Exodus 20:21). R. Isaac said, "[God said] 'Just as I reveal Myself to bless this man who built an altar for My name, how much the more so [shall I reveal Myself to bless] Abraham, who circumcized himself for My name.' [As it is written] 'The Lord appeared to him'" (Genesis 18:1).
>
> [Bereishit Rabbah 48:4][18]

Beyond the role of the priest and the place of the altar, there was little known about the sacred cult. The mystery of the cult had existed even when the rites were being carried out. R. Isaac said that Solomon himself wanted to understand the power of the ashes of the Red Heifer, but God revealed those powers only to Moses, who initiated the rite.[19]

Regardless of the rites themselves, the cult had been established as a step in the path to God, a step that facilitated atonement. But there were many ways of achieving atonement, so Jews in R. Isaac's time were not hindered by the absence of the Temple cult. Atonement could be done through <u>teshuvah</u>, for example. In Pesikta Rabbati 40:5, R. Isaac taught that the <u>teshuvah</u> Jews did during the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur led God to create the world anew on Yom Kippur. Atonement thus had great power. Not only could it bring Jews a clean slate, it could affect their very existence. R. Isaac said of the time when the angel of destruction was about to destroy Jerusalem in David's day, that the angel stopped because he saw the atonement of the Jews.[20]

Everyone must atone, no matter how righteous. The most pure of men needed cleansing. Noah was chosen by God as the only man pure enough to be kept on earth through the Flood, but R. Isaac said even he needed cleansing.[21] Without atonement, the Jew could not proceed along the path to God.

The journey along that path was not an easy one. The awareness of all the steps - observance of misvot, study, prayer, and atonement - was not enough to enable the Jew to proceed properly. Essential to progress was intent. R. Isaac taught that without kavanah the Jew could go nowhere, no matter how much he actually did. When the Temple stood, he could have sacrificed at all the proper times, but if the sacrifices were not accompanied by the right intent, they were useless:

> "The Lord has rejected His altar" (Lamentations 2:7). R. Haggai said in the name of R. Isaac, "It is like the people of a state who arranged tables [feasts] for the king. They made him angry, but he was patient. The king said to them, 'You make me angry because of the tables you arrange for me. Here, they are yours, thrown in your face!' So God said to Israel, 'You make Me angry because of the [empty] sacrifices you make to Me. Here, they are yours, thrown in your face!' Thus it is written, 'The Lord has rejected His altar'" (Ibid.).
>
> [Eikhah Rabbah 2:6:11]

R. Isaac pointed out that throughout the Torah narrative there were times when the Jews suffered because they lacked proper kavanah. In Proem 11 of Eikhah Rabbah, he indicated that the reason for the destruction of the Temple was

Israel's unworthiness, using Deuteronomy 28:47-48 as his petihta verses:

> Because you would not serve the Lord your God
> in joy and gladness over the abundance of
> everything,
> You shall have to serve...[your enemies]....

The responsibility to adhere to the brit with kavanah was a heavy one. But at least the path to God was clear cut. The Jew who wanted to reach the merciful redeemer had to take the right steps. While travelling this difficult path, however, the Jew still had to live his daily life and deal with the people and events in his surroundings. The values on which he based his way of life were considered just as seriously by the rabbinic tradition as was the path to God.

C. Values in Daily Life

Part of the basis for Jewish values was the conviction that man had free will. Without free will, and the choices that implied, there would have been no point in having a value system. With free will came the responsibility to choose the good in order to adhere to the covenant. The assumption that Jews must choose correctly underlay R. Isaac's teachings of values in Jewish life. Since each person had a unique personality, each person had his or her own responsibility to maintain these values:

> R. Isaac said, "Even a fig or a sheaf of wheat is not like its fellow [fig or sheaf of wheat]."
>
> [P.T. Sanhedrin 4:9]

In a society where women held a lower position than men and where parents held considerable sway over their children, R. Isaac underscored the notion of freewill when he portrayed Rebekah as being determined to go with Abraham's servant to Isaac, whether her family wanted her to or not.[22]

Free will may sound desirable, but the result of it in the rabbinic mind was that actions had serious consequences. Since Jews could choose what they did, they had to be aware that they had to bear the consequences. R. Isaac dealt with two types of consequences, in both cases emphasizing the value of good acts over evil ones. The first type of consequences was obvious: when one sinned or acted wrongly, one would suffer bad consequences, and vice-versa. In the broadest terms, we learn from R. Isaac that the actions of our youth will blacken our old age.[23] A bit more specifically, those who justify the actions of the wicked for a reward will suffer: Isaac, who justified Esau's actions, grew blind in his old age; whereas Moses never justified the actions of the wicked, and was in good health at the time of his death.[24] R. Isaac considered each individual's actions so important that they could bring about a consequence not only for the individual, but for his entire community:

> It is written,
> Roam the streets of Jerusalem.
> (Jeremiah 5:1)
> And it is written,
> ....item by item in my search for the reason of things.
> (Ecclesiastes 7:29)
> R. Isaac said, "How far can an account be extended [for a city]? As far as one man."
> [Bereishit Rabbah 49:13]

The second type of consequence was particular to each action, reflecting a concept of payment in kind. The person who sinned would be punished by means corresponding to the sin. The Gemara which declared that a woman would die in childbirth because she had not been observant of niddah reads:

> Why niddah? R. Isaac said, "She transgressed through the chambers of her womb, therefore she will be punished through the chambers of her womb."
> [B.T. Shabbat 31b]

Similarly, R. Isaac declared that Amalek's mother was to be childless because he had cut off the reproductive organs of Israelites.[25] On the other hand, the person who did good would receive goodness in kind. R. Isaac told of Obadiah, who helped prophets survive Jezebel's decree by hiding them in a cave. For this deed, Obadiah himself had the honor of becoming a prophet.[26]

From the consequences discussed here, it is logical to assume that the lines between acts of goodness and acts of evil were clearly drawn in the rabbinic tradition. Acts of

goodness were performed by the righteous person, and R. Isaac emphasized that the righteous pleased God. In fact, he said God actively took care of them and protected them.[27] Further, since God gave every righteous man a dwelling befitting his honor, He assured them a place in the world to come.[28]

R. Isaac's beliefs about the righteous as opposed to the wicked are well represented in Bereishit Rabbah 49:1:

> "Now the Lord had said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham'" (Genesis 18:17). R. Isaac began,
>
> The name of the righteous is invoked in blessing.
>
> (Proverbs 10:7)
>
> R. Isaac said, "Anyone who mentions the righteous and does not bless him, violates a positive commandment. Why?
>
> The name of the righteous is invoked in blessing.
>
> (Ibid.)
>
> And anyone who mentions the wicked and does not curse him, violates a positive commandment. Why?
>
> But the fame of the wicked rots."
>
> (Ibid.)[29]

One example of wicked people given by R. Isaac was the women whose immoral, lewd dancing brought about the destruction of the First Temple.[30] But his emphasis was more on the dangerous power of evil than on specific evil acts. There was a sense in the rabbinic tradition that the worst aspect of sin was its growing power over the sinner. R. Isaac reflected that concept in the following passage:

> R. Isaac said, "The evil inclination of man increases in strength over him every day, as is said, '....nothing but evil all the time'" (Genesis 6:5).
>
> [B.T. Sukkah 52a-b]

Earlier in this chapter we learned that Rebekah was affected by the wickedness of her brother, Laban. Because of his evil actions, her prayers were not as acceptable to God as were the prayers of Isaac. Thus we know that family was considered very important in rabbinic tradition. Husband and wife were bound together by a child, and the child's reward for honoring father and mother was long life.[31] Given the fact that there was much sibling rivalry in Torah, R. Isaac knew it was important to emphasize the good family relationships. Twice he pointed out that Joseph, who had been treated badly by his brothers, nevertheless treated Simeon very well, even though he made it appear to his other brothers that Simeon was his prisoner.[32]

The value of a strong and loving family was only a part of the value of the Jew's entire lineage. The line of descent was maintained and recorded with care. R. Isaac told us that even though he sinned, Reuben received his birthright as the eldest son.[33] David was found as far back as Sodom, for that was where his righteous ancestor, Lot, was saved.[34] The line of righteousness from Lot to David was maintained because it emphasized the blessing of good offspring. The best blessing a father could have, particularly when he had all other blessings, was that his

offspring would be like him:

> When [R. Naḥman and R. Isaac] were about to part, [R. Naḥman] said to him, "Master, bless me." [R. Isaac] said to him, "I will tell you a story. To what may this be compared? To a man who was walking in the desert, and he was hungry and tired and thirsty. He found a tree whose fruits were sweet, and whose shade was pleasant, and a stream of water passed beneath it. He ate of its fruits, and he drank of its waters, and he sat in its shade. When he was ready to leave, he said, 'Tree, O Tree, with what shall I bless you? Shall I say to you that your fruits shall be sweet? They are sweet. [Shall I say] that your shade shall be pleasant? Your shade is pleasant. [Shall I say] that waters shall pass beneath you? Waters pass beneath you. Then let it be [God's] will that all the shoots taken from you shall be like you.' So it is with you [R. Naḥman]. With what shall I bless you? With Torah? [You have] Torah. With riches? [You have] wealth. With children? [You have] children. Then let it be [God's] will that your offspring shall be like you."
>
> [B.T. Ta'anit 5b-6a]

This emphasis on family and lineage was universal as well as particular. Not only was each individual's line important, but his membership in the Jewish community as a whole had value. All Jews, everywhere, were as if one large family. Regardless of how much free will each individual had, and regardless of the accepted value of uniqueness in personality, every Jew was expected to be an integral part of the Jewish community. In Mishnah Avot 2:4, Hillel told the Jew not to separate himself from the community. R. Isaac reminded his master, R. Naḥman, of this precept, telling him that his prayer would be most acceptable to God if it were

done with the community.[35]

When the Jew prayed with the community, and when he studied with the community, he even caused the Shekhinah to be present. This tradition of the high value of prayer and study in a community setting was handed on by R. Isaac to those who followed him. In Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 28:8, both R. Ḥaggai and R. Yudan cited R. Isaac as saying that whenever Jews assemble or gather in houses of study and worship, the presence of the Shekhinah is with them.[36]

All of the values discussed by R. Isaac were part of the world view of the Jew in the third century. But these values were not merely guides to daily living. They served a higher purpose, for abiding by them could insure the Jew a place in the world to come.

D. After Life

Death has been a problem for humanity since the beginning of time. As the great unknown, it has been the focus of man's deepest fears; so the necessity to offer answers to what happens after death has been felt by every generation. The third generation of amoraim, including R. Isaac, dealt with the problem in ways which carried on the rabbinic tradition. They conveyed their ideas by means of two related concepts: olam ha-ba, or the world to come, and resurrection.

Olam ha-ba was a place where life continued after death. There, the righteous lived on after their sojourns

on earth. While no one knew for certain what it was like, the assumption was that it was a good and peaceful place, where the Law remained perfect and unchangeable.[37] In Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 24:2 we learned that R. Haggai understood R. Isaac to say that the awesome works in the world to come make up for the Jews' afflictions in this world. Since olam ha-ba was a place of God's awesome works, people wanted to go there.

But only the righteous were assured a place there, as we learned in B.T. Shabbat 152a.[38] Certainly those who observed misvot would live on there. In fact, R. Isaac said that if one ate only kosher food in this world, one would be able to eat any food in the world to come.[39] Even those who assisted others in being righteous were considered candidates for the world to come. For example, scholars were able to study full time only if their wives worked to help support the family. These wives also earned their own place in olam ha-ba:

> In vain do you rise early
> and stay up late,
> you who toil for the bread you eat;
> He provides as much for His loved ones
> while they sleep.
> (Psalm 127:2)
>
> R. Isaac said, "These are the wives of scholars, who go without sleep in this world, and earn the world to come."
> [B.T. Yoma 77a][40]

In addition to living on in olam ha-ba, Jews wanted to be assured of resurrection when the Messiah would come. While R. Isaac dealt very little with this concept, he did point out that resurrection was possible because of the way people were created:

> "[You shall] shatter [the nations] like potter's ware" (Psalm 2:9)....R. Isaac said, "'Like earthen vessels' is not written [here], rather 'like potter's ware,' meaning they have not been baked [and so] may be put back [together].
>
> [Bereishit Rabbah 14:7]

More important to R. Isaac than resurrection itself was the idea that the Messiah would come. What the third century Jew needed was hope that life on earth would improve. He wanted, in theory, to look forward to olam ha-ba and resurrection; but in practical terms, he yearned for a better life during his lifetime. R. Isaac sought to give hope to this Jew; to hold out the promise of that better life.

E. A Message of Hope

In the beginning of this chapter, R. Isaac's concept of God as a compassionate and merciful redeemer was presented. This image gave the Jews a sense of faith and trust that conditions would be better for them, that this compassionate God would bless their lives. But there was a need in the third century for something more. As we shall see in the

following chapters, conditions were extremely difficult at the time and Jews cried out for consolation and hope of a specific and immediate nature. No one could provide a guarantee, but R. Isaac delivered a clear message that the Messiah would come and life would improve.

He said the second redeemer would be like the first, thus indicating the second would come. Moses was considered the first redeemer, and R. Isaac declared that as he set his wife and sons on an ass, so the second redeemer would come on an ass; as God brought down Manna through Moses, so the second redeemer would bring an abundance of food.[41]

Since R. Isaac could not say when the Messiah would come, he stressed the importance of patience. In Bereishit Rabbah 98:14, he pointed out that suffering is tied with waiting, but that grace comes through hope. Despite past errors, and regardless of how hopeless conditions may have seemed at the moment, the Jew who heard R. Isaac's words would be uplifted. He could take courage from the fact that God gave Abraham hope when the Temple was destroyed:

> R. Isaac said, "At the time that the Temple was destroyed, God found Abraham standing in the Temple. He said to him,
>
> Why should My beloved be in My House?
> (Jeremiah 11:15)
>
> [Abraham] said to Him, 'I came about the fate of my children.' [God] said to him, 'Your children sinned, and have gone into exile.' [Abraham] said to Him, 'Perhaps they sinned in error.' [God] said to him,
>
> Who executes so many vile designs.
> (Ibid.)

> [Abraham] said to Him, 'Perhaps only a few sinned.' [God] said to him, '"So many"' (Ibid.). [Abraham said to Him,] 'You should remember the covenant of circumcision.' [God] said to him,
>
> The sacral flesh will pass away from you.
>
> (Ibid.)
>
> [Abraham] said to Him, 'Perhaps if You had waited for them, they would have returned in repentance.' [God] said to him,
>
> For you exult while performing your evil deeds.
>
> (Ibid.)
>
> Immediately [Abraham] placed his hands on his head, and cried out and wept, and said to Him, 'Perhaps, heaven forbid, they have no hope?' A bat kol came forth and said to him,
>
> The Lord named you
> "Verdant olive tree,
> Fair, with choice fruit."
>
> (Jeremiah 11:16)
>
> 'As this olive tree produces its best at its end, so Israel will flourish best at its end.'"
>
> [B.T. Menahot 53b]

The God who would help Israel to flourish was the same God who had appeared at Sinai. The validity of the hope, indeed of the whole rabbinic tradition, grew out of the unbroken chain which characterized the tradition. As an integral link, R. Isaac took seriously his responsibility to maintain the strength of the chain, and to pass on the tradition to those who would follow.

F. Attitude Regarding Tradition

Part of the Jewish tradition from biblical times was prophecy. One of the examples used in the discussion about payment in kind indicated that Obadiah's reward for hiding the prophets from Jezebel was that he himself became a

prophet.[42] Clearly, then, R. Isaac saw prophecy as an honored way of life, a gift from God. Indeed, since the erection of the Tabernacle, he said, there were only Jewish prophets, with the exception of Balaam, who prophesied for the good of Israel.[43]

All prophets were given the same task by God: to bring His message to the people. But each prophet, as a human being, retained his individuality. Therefore, while the message was the same, no two prophets used the same phraseology to deliver the message.[44] Also, though every prophet was given permission to deliver his message in his own time, R. Isaac said it was important to remember that all prophets received the messages at Sinai:

> "God spoke all these words, saying" (Exodus 20:1). R. Isaac said, "Just as the future prophets who would prophecy in every generation received [the prophecy] from Mount Sinai, so Moses said to Israel, '"....but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day"'" (Deuteronomy 29:14).
> [Shemot Rabbah 28:6]

The significance of prophecy having originated at Sinai must not be underestimated. The entire rabbinic tradition stemmed from Sinai:

> R. Isaac said, "The Scripture [transmitted by] the soferim, and the embellishments of the soferim, and what was read but not written, and what was written but not read, [all of this] is halakhah [given] to Moses at Sinai."
> [B.T. Nedarim 37b]

Any law given at Sinai was considered valid law, such as the straps of tefillin having to be black.[45]

The validity of Sinai applied not only to the Written Law, but to the Oral Law as well. In fact, R. Isaac encouraged the Jew to look further than the Torah to determine what was forbidden to him; to search in devarim aherim.[46] The importance of Oral Law had been carried so far by the third century that R. Isaac stated that blessing was possible only in hidden things.[47] While this statement may not be pointed directly at Oral Law, it is reasonable to conclude that R. Isaac had it in mind as the hidden thing which held a blessing for Israel. Since it had not been written down until during R. Isaac's lifetime, he knew of the belief that it maintained the Jews' distinction as the elect of God, as long as the Christians could not read it and claim it as their own.

The Jews needed to believe that they were God's elect. Without that belief, they could have no hope for His help in improving the conditions under which they lived. R. Isaac's response to this need, and to the many other problems facing the Jews in his day, was conveyed through his midrashim. By using the process of midrash as established by the rabbinic tradition before him, he was able to speak most effectively.

G. Methodology

In addition to conveying his message through discussions and parables, R. Isaac used certain grammatical techniques in his polemic. These techniques were as much a part of the rabbinic tradition as were the discussions and parables. One method was a close exegesis of the text, examining every single letter to determine meanings and attach significances to them. For example, he used the simple difference between a kaf and a bet to point out that the nations have no permanent place in the world:

> "When King [Aḥasuerus] occupied [the throne]" (Esther 1:2). R. Isaac said, "The nations have no seat." They objected, [saying] "It is written, 'When King [Aḥasuerus] occupied [the throne].'" He said to them, "'Be-shevet ha-melekh' [while the King occupied] is not written here, rather 'Ke-shevet ha-melekh' [as if the King occupied]. [This is] sitting that is not sitting. But the seat of Israel is sitting, as is said (Judges 11:26), '[Be-shevet] While Israel has been occupying Ḥeshbon and its dependencies.'"
> [Esther Rabbah 1:11]

R. Isaac used reason as well as grammar and syntax in his interpretation of the biblical text. Genesis 11:32 records Teraḥ's death, before Abraham is told to leave in Genesis 12:1. But calculations indicated that Teraḥ did not die for another sixty-five years. R. Isaac explained the discrepancy in Bereishit Rabbah 39:7, where he said that God exempted Abraham from the commandment to honor father and mother. Further, He placed Teraḥ's death before

Abraham's departure in the text to make sure that others would not assume they were exempt.

In the course of his exegesis, R. Isaac focussed at times on the apparent inconsistencies of singulars and plurals in Scripture.[48] For example, Genesis 28:11 reads, "Taking one of the stones [plural] of that place," and Genesis 28:18 reads, "[Jacob] took the stone [singular]." The latter verse referred to the same stones which Jacob had placed under his head the night before. Dealing with this problem, R. Isaac said that all the stones gathered into one place, and each one wanted Jacob to rest his head on it.[49]

R. Isaac's exegetic method reflected the tradition of the rabbis. Their approach to Scripture enabled them to confront accusations by opponents about the very nature of their existence. In the third century there were pressures in many areas of the Jews' lives, and the tradition was given test after test as the rabbis tried to cope with the Jews' concerns. R. Isaac upheld that tradition, demonstrating consistently that it was effective in helping them live through troubled times.

NOTES

CHAPTER TWO

1. See above, page 3.

2. See also Kohelet Rabbah 7:27 in this regard.

3. P.T. Berakhot 9:1; see also Esther Rabbah 1:19.

4. B.T. Ḥagiga 16a, Kiddushin 31a.

5. See also Bereishit Rabbah 19:7; Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 1:1; Bamidbar Rabbah 13:2 in this regard.

6. I Samuel 3:10; Jeremiah 31:2.

7. Bereishit Rabbah 13:5.

8. Kohelet Rabbah 1:13 and 3:10.

9. B.T. Menaḥot 110a.

10. In addition, see Vayikra Rabbah 30:3; Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 27:3; Pesikta Rabbati 51:5.

11. B.T. Yebamot 64a.

12. Kohelet Rabbah 9:7.

13. Bereishit Rabbah 56:2.

14. B.T. Yebamot 64a.

15. Ibid.

16. Vayikra Rabbah 20:11; Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 26:10.

17. B.T. Zebaḥim 62a.

18. See also Tanḥuma Buber, Vayera 4.

19. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 4:3 and 4:7; Pesikta Rabbati 14:13.

20. B.T. Berakhot 62b.

21. Bereishit Rabbah 31:9.

22. Ibid., 60:12.

23. B.T. Shabbat 152a.

24. Bereishit Rabbah 65:5 and 65:7; Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 113 and 114, Isaiah 404; Yalkut Makhiri, Isaiah 5:23.

25. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 3:6; Pesikta Rabbati 12:13.

26. B.T. Sanhedrin 39b.

27. Pesikta Rabbati 2:3.

28. B.T. Shabbat 152a.

29. See also Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 18; Yalkut Shimoni, Proverbs 946.

30. B.T. Yoma 9b.

31. Bereishit Rabbah 22:2; Pesikta Rabbati 23/24:2.

32. Bereishit Rabbah 91:8 and 92:4.

33. Ibid., 82:11.

34. Ibid., 41:4.

35. B.T. Berakhot 7b-8a.

36. In addition, see Pesikta Rabbati 52:6.

37. Midrash Tehillim 49:1.

38. See above, page 33.

39. Vayikra Rabbah 13:3.

40. See also B.T. Ketubot 62a in this regard.

41. Kohelet Rabbah 1:9:1.

42. B.T. Sanhedrin 39b.

43. Vayikra Rabbah 1:12; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:3:5.

44. B.T. Sanhedrin 89a.

45. B.T. Menahot 35a.

46. P.T. Nedarim 9:1.

47. B.T. Ta'anit 8b, Bava Mesia 42a.

48. This was a necessary methodology for his anti-dualist polemic which will be discussed later, see below, page 98.

49. B.T. Hullin 91b.

CHAPTER THREE

REACTIONS TO THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The troubles the Jews of Palestine endured throughout most of the third century resulted, in large measure, from the oppressive rule of Rome. The unsuccessful Bar Kokhba revolt against Rome in 135 CE had been the Jews' last stand. After that failure, they had to settle into an existence which accepted Rome's oppressive rule as inevitable for the present. Most of the Jewish population in the southern areas of Palestine had been wiped out as a result of the Bar Kokhba war, leaving the Galilee as the center of Jewish activity. There the rabbis developed a stronghold of learning, in which the tradition of study and worship was permitted by Rome to flourish.[1]

By the time Emperor Severan came to power in 193 CE, the Roman attitude toward the Jews was one of cautious acceptance. As a pagan nation, Rome was tolerant of a people who followed a national religion and had no objection to Judaism per se.[2] The only concern was over attempts to spread Judaism and influence Romans, so there was legislation prohibiting proselytization.[3] Also, Rome did not forget that the Jewish people had been rebellious and kept track of their activities through the Patriarchs. By dealing directly with the Patriarchate, Rome did not have to encounter and perhaps stir up the general population.[4]

It was in 225, when the first barbarians invaded from the provinces and overturned the Severan dynasty, that the situation became considerably worse for the Jews. From 225 to

284 the Roman government was in a state of anarchy, ruler after ruler being toppled by a new barbarian invasion. Jewish farmlands, the mainstay of the Jews' economy, were overrun by these marauders, and the Roman government demanded billeting of its armies there as well. Further, taxation of the Jews for the upkeep of the Roman army rose to prohibitive heights.[5]

Starvation and poverty became immediate threats. Suddenly the Jew had little food because crops failed, as armies trampled the countryside. He had hardly any money, as what few crops were harvested were very highly taxed. The blame for these serious conditions fell on Rome. Not only could she not stop the constant invasions, but she had no respect for Jewish life. It did not matter to her that they lost their food and income. The concern of each reigning Roman Emperor was only with his survival.

It was natural, then, that the rabbis looked on Rome as an 'evil kingdom.' Despite the fact that she permitted Jews freedom to worship and study, she was selfish and threatened their actual survival. The rabbis spoke out with fervor against the pagan population who lived by values so contrary to justice and righteousness. Even converts were accepted reluctantly, so the Roman prohibition against proselytization was easily observed. The only reason the rabbis did accept some converts, after determining their good character and honest intent, was because there was a need for a strong Jewish population in Palestine.[6]

Thus R. Isaac lived in a country ruled by an evil Roman kingdom, in a time of intolerable economic conditions and surrounded by an ever-present pagan population threatening to influence the Jews. Historians have claimed that there was religious persecution of the Jews by Rome during this time. But we have no evidence of this, either in the Midrash or the Talmuds, between the Hadrianic persecutions at the time of Bar Kokhba, and those of Constantius in the mid-fourth century.[7] The evidence points only to great economic hardship for the Jews resulting from Rome's political turmoil. However, the Jews' anger at Rome became all-encompassing, developing from the particular concern over poverty to the universal declaration of Rome's wickedness as a kingdom.

A. Rome: the Evil Oppressor

When R. Isaac lived, the rabbinic view of Rome was one of inherent evil. Naturally the Jew could not have spoken out directly against such a strong ruler as Rome. But the effectiveness of rabbinic aggadot as polemical vehicles rested in the Jew's ability to hear them and understand their underlying significance. At a time when Rome's rule was all-powerful and created great difficulties for Jews, it was not unreasonable to interpret aggadic references to an evil kingdom as signifying Rome. So, for example, the evil kingdom which decreed against circumcision in the towns in Palestine in B.T. Shabbat 130a must have been Rome.[8]

In the earlier reference to several midrashim which told us that the righteous cause the Shekhinah to dwell on earth, there was in each case a question about the wicked:

> R. Isaac said, "Thus it is written,
> The righteous shall inherit the Land,
> and abide forever in it.
> (Psalm 37:29)
> What will the wicked do? They will hang in the air, because they do not allow the Shekhinah to dwell on earth. But the righteous cause the Shekhinah to dwell on the earth. Why?
> The righteous shall inherit the Land,
> and abide forever in it.
> They cause the Shekhinah to dwell on it.
> [God] forever dwells, whose name is holy."
> (Isaiah 57:15)
> [Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 5:1:1]

R. Isaac had to question what the wicked would do because he knew they did abide in the land. He could not ignore the fact that Romans inhabited Israel, but he could point out that their presence was evil. It prohibited the Shekhinah's presence. The righteous Jews, however, did cause the Shekhinah to dwell on earth, and they were the ones who would inherit the Land. Although the wicked "owned" the Land of Israel in the third century, their presence was only temporary. The inheritance belonged to the Jews.

If there were any doubts that this message referred to Rome, they could be dispelled by aggadot which clearly defined who the wicked were. As we learned in Chapter Two,[10] Jews understood the value of the brit and the miṣvot, so they knew in a general sense who was righteous and who was

evil. R. Isaac pointed his attack directly against the evil of Rome when he defined a wicked person in the following passage:

> "The wicked man borrows and does not repay" (Psalm 37:21). R. Isaac said, "There are three [types of people] who are called wicked, and these are they: one who raises his hand against his fellow, and one who borrows and does not repay, and one who makes strife. From whence [do we know] the one who raises his hand against his fellow? '....so he [Moses] said to the offender [the Egyptian], "Why do you strike your fellow"' (Exodus 2:13)? ...And from whence the one who borrows and does not repay? 'The wicked man borrows and does not repay' (Psalm 37:21). And from whence the one who makes strife? It is said about the community of Korah, '"Move away from the tents of these wicked men"' (Numbers 16:26).
>
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 28:2][11]

Rome fit this description in every respect. Just as Egypt raised its hand against the Jews by forcing them to work as slaves, so Rome was raising its hand against the Jews by forcing them to billet, and deliver supplies to, its soldiers. Rome raised taxes higher and higher, taking the very food from the Jews' mouths, yet never provided any funding for Jewish farmlands in return. And just as Jew had fought Jew in Korah's rebellion, Roman was fighting Roman in a constant struggle for power in the Empire.

This wicked kingdom was not just an evil presence. Rome was an oppressor, an active force affecting the lives of all Jews in Palestine. R. Isaac responded to hearing

about joyous Festive celebrations in Babylonia by saying that there was no Festival during which troops did not come to Sepphoris in Palestine.[12] There was no proof that the troops came for the purpose of religious persecution, but the presence of troops would certainly mar any celebration. Sepphoris was a major town in the Galilee, a center for Festival observance, and the appearance of Roman troops there was a definite form of oppression.

Jews were used to oppression, having experienced it throughout their history. That did not make it any easier to withstand, however, and R. Isaac lamented this continuous state, indicating that it was a reality in his time:

> And you live all day in constant dread
> Because of the rage of an oppressor.
> (Isaiah 51:13)
> R. Isaac said, "That [is because] one
> oppression comes fast upon another.
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 19:5]

This reality had to be dealt with and the Jew had to feel it would change, or life would seem hopeless. The message that the rabbis delivered to them, therefore, was that this evil oppressor actually was weak, and inevitably would fall. R. Isaac made it clear that Rome had to be weak, for it was the very nature of nations other than Israel to lack strength:

> R. Isaac said, "It is written, 'All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number' (Genesis 49:28). These were [descended from] the mistress [Sarah]. And Ishmael, did he not produce twelve tribes? [Yes,] but these were the [nesi'im] princes, as was said,
>
> Like [nesi'im] clouds, wind - but no rain - (Proverbs 25:14)
>
> But these [of Sarah] are [matot] rods, as was said,
>
> Sworn are the [matot] rods of the word. Selah."
>
> (Habakkuk 3:9)
> [Bereishit Rabbah 47:5]

Sarah's progeny, the Jews descended through Isaac, were strong rods. The nations, descended through Ishmael, were mere passing clouds.

The reason Israel was strong and the nations were weak was because God supported only Israel; He would not support the nations of the world.[13] As one of the nations, then, Rome could not receive God's support, and was in its very nature lacking in strength. Further, we learned from Esther Rabbah 1:11 that the nations, symbolized by King Ahasuerus, had no permanent seat in the world.[14]

The seat of Rome was quite impermanent, in fact, during the period of anarchy described earlier in this chapter. Even if Rome had not been inherently weak as one of the nations, it was weakened in the third century by events which occurred. Any nation ruled by a rapid succession of barbaric conquerors from different parts of the world could not be strong. R. Isaac likened Edom, the biblical country traditionally understood to be symbolic of Rome, to a ship.

One thinks of a ship as unstable on land and subject to being tossed about on the sea. This uncertain vessel is composed of parts from many places, such as a wooden mast from one country and an iron anchor from another. So Edom (Rome) was shaky; being ruled by conquerors from different places in sudden succession.[15]

The upheaval in Rome had been inevitable, R. Isaac claimed. As one of the nations of the world, she could not have a permanent seat, and so must fall. Weakened by constant invasions and turmoil for the better part of a century, she was soon to face her downfall. No nation but Israel would endure forever, so Rome too would not endure.[16] R. Isaac reminded us in this regard of Obadiah's prophecy specifically against Edom.[17] More important than the prophesies <u>against</u> Rome, however, was God's promise <u>for</u> Israel:

> "....the ground on which you [Jacob] are lying [I will give] to you" (Genesis 28:13). What is the greatness of this? R. Isaac said, "It teaches that God rolled up the whole land of Israel and placed it under our father Jacob, so [he would know] that it would be easy to conquer for his children."
> [B.T. <u>Hullin</u> 91b]

The land in which the Jews lived would be free from oppressive rule. The Jews would inherit it as God had promised.

This was the message R. Isaac gave to the Jews, and it fortified them in their suffering. The knowledge that Roman

rule would end and that the Land would be theirs, gave the Jews the courage to face whatever effects that rule had upon their lives. The most severe effect was the unstable economy. Faced with the constant threat of having no food to eat, the Jews had to survive in the most basic sense. With R. Isaac's words of hope and encouragement, even the financial pressures brought by Roman oppression could be overcome.

B. Intolerable Economic Conditions

The major problem facing the Jews during the war-filled years of anarchy in the third century was how to maintain their crops in the face of the destructive Roman and invading armies. Not only did the armies trample farmlands as they marched across the country, they also camped in the fields of the Jews, taking produce for their own food. Those Jews who were fortunate enough to salvage their crops had to send them as supplies to troops stationed elsewhere, severely limiting their own food supply.

R. Isaac told a poignant story of a woman caught in this position of having no food:

> "When she [Achsah] came [to him, Othniel], she induced him to ask her father [Caleb] for some property. She dismounted from her donkey" (Joshua 15:18). Raba said, "R. Isaac said, 'She said to him, "As this donkey, when it has no food in its trough, cries out immediately, so a woman,

> when she had no wheat in her house, cries out immediately."'"
>
> [B.T. Temurah 16a]

This story proved that R. Isaac understood the plight of the Jews. Even though he was a blacksmith and a scholar, he realized that most Jews were farmers and were suffering.

The economic conditions actually led R. Isaac to speak to the Jews through aggadot rather than halakhot (although he was known for his halakhot as well). He knew that the times called for consolation and practical advice, not the strict and impersonal language of legal requirements:

> "For I am faint with love" (Song of Songs 2:5). R. Isaac said, "Formerly there was enough money [so] people yearned for words of the Mishnah and words of the Talmud. But now that there is not enough money, and further that we are ill from [famine caused by] the kingdoms, people yearn for words of Scripture and words of aggadah."
>
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 12:3]

His practical advice to the Jews was to hold on to their crops, and to eat them themselves no matter what. That meant eating came first, even before friendly or scholarly discussion.[18] It might even mean eating the food right in the field where it was harvested.[19]

Eating the food before bringing it to tne house, and particularly before bringing it to market, would help with the other economic problem: taxation. A reaped harvest was so heavily taxed by Rome that it lost money for the farmer

in the long run. That did not mean the Jew should not maintain an investment in land. Indeed, R. Isaac's advice to the Jew was:

> "A man should always divide his wealth into three parts: one third [should be invested] in land, one third in merchandise, and one third [should be kept] under his hand [available]."
> [B.T. Bava Mesia 42a]

R. Isaac placed particular emphasis on the last third, as if to say Jews must hold on to what money they had in the face of rising taxation. More than once he warned them to watch their money carefully, never letting it out of their sight.[20]

The danger in stressing the importance of money was that it could become an end in itself. Realizing this danger, R. Isaac made it clear that money was evil, and had no good value beyond its necessity for survival. He seemed to contradict himself when he said that people who held on to their wealth would suffer, just as the tribes of Reuben and Gad suffered exile because they held on to the material wealth they saw before entering the land of Canaan.[21] But this was not a contradiction. The tribes of Reuben and Gad would have survived had they gone into Canaan. The need for money for survival was never in question; it was only the use of money for a person's own gain to which R. Isaac objected.

The logical outcome of this objection was his repeated admonition against lending money on interest.[22] If a Jew

had enough money to be able to lend some of it out, then it should be lent without interest. A Jew should consider himself fortunate to have sufficient funds to support himself and his family, and not take advantage of another person's need to increase his own gain.

This Jew was doubly fortunate if he could help the poor, for God considered them righteous:

> R. Isaac said, "Why is the meal offering distinguished [by the appearance of the word] 'soul' in it? The Holy One, Blessed is He, said, 'Whose custom is it to bring a meal offering? A poor person. I think of him as if he sacrificed his [very] soul to Me.'"
> [B.T. Menahot 104b]

While it was true that all who brought offerings to God were righteous, poor people may have had to give up their last bit of food to present a meal offering. They could not afford to bring a lamb or a sheep, as some Jews could, but they were willing to do whatever they had to in order to fulfil the misvot related to sacrifices.

God blessed and helped these people who gave Him so much. Using the word sedakah to convey both meanings of righteousness and charity, R. Isaac showed how God provided for the poor:

> R. Isaac said, "Why is it written:
> He who strives to do good and kind deeds
> Attains life, success, and honor?
> (Proverbs 21:21)

> Because one strives to do good and kind deeds [sedakah] he will attain success [sedakah]? Rather this [verse] tells you that for all who seek to give charity [sedakah], the Holy One, Blessed is He, will provide money, and will give them righteousness [sedakah]. [B.T. Bava Batra 9b]

Thus God saw to it that those who wanted to help the poor had enough money to do so.

But providing for the poor was not up to God alone. R. Isaac taught that people were just as responsible on their own:

> R. Elazar said, "R. Isaac said, 'Every fast day on which [the distribution of] charity is postponed overnight, it is as if one sheds blood, as is said,
>
> [The faithful city]
> That was filled with justice,
> Where righteousness [dwelt -
> But now murderers].
>
> (Isaiah 1:21)
> [B.T. Sanhedrin 35a]

Every Jew had to make sure the righteous poor were treated well, even if it meant letting them eat on a fast day. Their hunger took precedence over the Law.

The Jew who did help the poor received special blessings. R. Isaac said that when a Jew gave material things, such as money or clothing, to the poor, then he received six blessings from God. When he gave words of comfort, he received eleven blessings.[23] This promise of blessing accomplished two purposes: it encouraged the Jew to tend to the needs of the poor and it placed a higher value on giving comfort than on giving money, thus stressing the

fact that money in itself could be evil.

The Jewish population of Palestine lived in poverty because of the burdens placed upon them by Rome. Roman wars had caused tax increases and losses of crops. It was natural for the Jews to come to hate Rome, not just as an impersonal government, but as a nation of people. When one's very life is being destroyed, one develops a hatred for the person who is responsible for the suffering. The people of Rome were pagans, heathens against whom Jews had been warned since biblical times. By the third century, this warning had become severe.

C. The Jewish Attitude Toward the Pagans

The population of Rome, from simple citizen to the Emperor himself, consisted of idol-worshipping heathens. Centuries-old disdain of such pagans was renewed in the third century, as the Jews' hatred of Rome rose to a peak. R. Isaac depicted the pagans as stupid and vain, destined for destruction:

> R. Nahman said to R. Isaac, "Why is it written,
> But they are both dull and foolish;
> [Their] doctrine is but delusion;
> It is a piece of wood."
> (Jeremiah 10:8)
> [R. Isaac] said to him, "Thus said R. Yohanan, 'There is one thing that sends the wicked to Gehenna. What is it? Idol worship. It is written here,
> It is a piece of wood,
> (Ibid.)

and it is written there,
They are delusion, a work of mockery.'"
(Jeremiah 10:15)
[B.T. Ta'anit 5a]

These pagans were not worthy of association with Jews. But their pervasive presence in Palestine led R. Isaac to realize he must point out to the Jews that they would suffer the consequences if they interacted with them. Partaking of pagan feasts would lead Jews into exile, and anyone acting like a heathen would be cursed.[24] R. Isaac knew that the righteous had no rest beside the wicked, and warned the Jews that they would be tempted to sin if they travelled in the company of pagans.[25]

Most important, we must not partake of anything that might lead to marriage with a heathen:

Why is the drink of idol-worshippers forbidden? Rami bar Ḥama said, "R. Isaac [said], 'Because [it might lead to] marriages.'"
[B.T. Avodah Zarah 31b]

Preservation of the Jewish People was a necessity, at all costs. Surely intermarriage was one of the greatest dangers of being surrounded by heathens. R. Isaac stressed that the terrible consequences that would result from intermarriage must be avoided. As we learn from him in B.T. Sanhedrin 21b:

R. Isaac said, "When Solomon married the daughter of Pharaoh, Gabriel came down and stuck a reed in the sea [from which] a sand

> bank rose up. And on [that sand bank] was built the great city of Rome."

Solomon's marriage to a heathen led to the birth of the nation which was threatening the survival of the Jewish people in the third century. There could be no more serious danger, and it had arisen out of an intermarriage.

Yet not all intermarriages led to disaster. Naomi's son's marriage to Orpah led to the fall of Goliath, but her other son's marriage to Ruth led to the rise of King David.[26] The reason this latter marriage was good, according to R. Isaac, was because Ruth converted to Judaism, forsaking her pagan ways.

Living in a world full of heathens, the Jew had to develop an attitude regarding conversion. Rome had forbidden proselytization, but that did not mean the Jews could not accept non-Jews who came to them wanting to convert. Ruth was the supreme example of the convert who was good for the Jews. She was considered wholly righteous, as R. Isaac showed by saying that the reason she needed little food was because there was blessing in her stomach, not in the hand of Boaz, who fed her.[27]

The Jewish attitude toward converts had been favorable for some time, and missionary activity had taken place in Palestine in the first two centuries CE. By the second century, Christian missionaries had become active, however, and the ensuing competition for converts led to conflicts

and tensions. As a result, by the third century, the rabbis were not favorably disposed towards conversion. Yet the missionary activity of the Christians threatened to raise their population to dangerous numbers, and the rabbis knew they had to encourage their own population increase. The attitude which they developed out of this dilemma was one of cautious encouragement. For example:

> R. Isaac said,
> No sojourner spent the night in the open.
> (Job 31:32)
> "Always a man should push [the convert away] with the left [hand] and draw [him] near with the right [hand]."
> [Ruth Rabbah 2:16]

This newly hesitant approach to converts was caused by the rise of Christianity in Palestine. The oppressive presence of the evil Roman kingdom was not the only problem facing the Jews in the third century. That problem was a political and economic one. They were confronted with a theological challenge as well. The influence of the various Christian sects was felt deeply by them, and they needed assurance in the face of what they sensed was a growing spiritual threat.

NOTES

CHAPTER THREE

1. Michael Avi-Yonah, The Jews of Palestine: A Political History from the Bar Kokhba War to the Arab Conquest (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 18.

2. Ben-Sasson, A History of the Jewish People, p. 349.

3. Avi-Yonah, The Jews of Palestine, p. 45.

4. Salo Wittmayer Baron, Ancient Times: Christian Era: The First Five Centuries (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 2:193.

5. Ben-Sasson, A History of the Jewish People, pp. 343-344.

6. Avi-Yonah, The Jews of Palestine, pp 82-83.

7. Saul Lieberman, "Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries," Jewish Quarterly Review 4 (1946): 330-331.

8. See above, page 23.

9. See also Bereishit Rabbah 19:7; Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 1:1; Bamidbar Rabbah 13:2.

10. See above, pages 22-24.

11. See also Pesikta Rabbati 52:2 in this regard.

12. B.T. Shabbat 145b.

13. Vayikra Rabbah 5:7; Kohelet Rabbah 1:4:4; Midrash Tehillim 36:8.

14. See above, page 43.

15. Bereishit Rabbah 83:1; Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 36.

16. Vayikra Rabbah 5:7; Kohelet Rabbah 1:4:4; Midrash Tehillim 36:8.

17. B.T. Sanhedrin 39b.

18. B.T. Ta'anit 5b.

19. Bereishit Rabbah 20:10.

20. P.T. Berakhot 2:5; B.T. Bava Mesia 21b, 42a.

21. Bereishit Rabbah 50:11.

22. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 10:1; Tanhuma Buber, Re'eh 6; Shemot Rabbah 31:17.

23. B.T. Bava Batra 9b.

24. B.T. Pesahim 49a; B.T. Sotah 46b.

25. Bereishit Rabbah 87:2.

26. B.T. Sotah 42b.

27. Vayikra Rabbah 34:8; Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 6:2; Pesikta Rabbati 16:6.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANTI-CHRISTIAN POLEMIC

The conflict between Jews and Christians regarding the conversion of pagans was a symbol of more serious problems. Until the Bar Kokhba war, the Jewish and Christian communities had been slow to divide from each other, with relatively uncertain lines of demarcation. This changed in 135 CE, when the Christians would not consider Bar Kokhba a messianic figure because they believed Jesus to have been the Messiah.[1] By the third century, the Jews considered themselves totally separate from the various Christian sects in Palestine.

There were four major Christian groups,[2] all of which believed Jesus was the Messiah. Two sects were referred to as Ebionites, one of which believed Jesus was only a man. This sect observed all the misvot and were a bit ascetic in their way of life. The second Ebionite sect, called Judaeo-Christians by some, believed Jesus was the son of God from the virgin birth, and were inconsistent in their observance of misvot. The Nazarenes also believed Jesus was the son of God. At the outset, they observed the misvot themselves, though they did not request observance by converts, but they eventually followed Paul's antinomian attitude. Finally, the Jewish Christian Gnostics rejected all sacrifice, and believed in dualism and exaltation of the natural elements.

Although each sect varied in regard to the attitude towards observance of misvot, the belief in Jesus as the

Messiah was universal.[3] This was not an acceptable belief to the Jews, and challenged basic concepts of Judaism. First, there could be no duality or trinity. The concept of the unity of God was an essential part of Judaism and could not be challenged. The Messiah could not be viewed as an aspect of the deity no matter when he arrived. Second, if God's promise to send a Messiah had been fulfilled already, but life was no better than it had been, then God had reneged on His promise. This could not be true, so the Jews held firmly to the belief that the Messiah had not yet come. Third, Jesus was not the son of God because Israel was the son of God. That term was viewed as being figurative by Jews and not meant to indicate the union of God with a human being. God was not a person, capable of impregnating a woman. The Messiah, when he came, would be of human origin but empowered by God to redeem the Jews and bring peace to the world. This concept explains how the Jews believed Moses played a 'messianic role' and why they considered Bar Kokhba to have been the Messiah.

These challenges were not the only ones the Jews had to meet. The Christians claimed that the Jews were not the true elect of God. They had been given Torah as guardians until Jesus came. When they did not accept him as the Messiah, God destroyed their Temple, and the Christians became heir to the biblical blessings.[4] While the Jews agreed that the Temple had been destroyed because they had sinned, they did not accept that their sin had been the

rejection of Jesus, and they did not believe that God had rejected them. They met this challenge both with serious searching for the reason for the destruction and with repeated proofs that God had not deserted them.

The Christians traced their claim to be the true elect back to the Old Testament.[5] Therefore, the rabbis condemned Christian study of the Old Testament, saying it led to incorrect use of proof-texts.[6] But they could not stop Christian Old Testament study, and had to concentrate more on the Oral Tradition as proof that the Jews were the true elect. God gave them Torah, both Written and Oral, and He gave them the Land of Israel. These gifts were intended for His chosen people, the Jews, not the Christians. Jews knew this because God remained with them even after the Temple destruction, continuing to sustain them.

Their task was to follow the proper path to God, as described in Chapter Two. The emphasis in the anti-Christian polemic was that observance of misvot was a crucial step along the path and included observance of all misvot. Partial or inconsistent observance, as characterized by the various Christian sects, was unacceptable to God. Of all the misvot, circumcision was most essential to the maintenance of the covenant. The Christian assertion that circumcision was to be taken metaphorically aroused a strong response from the rabbis, who placed observance of this misvah even above observance of Shabbat.[7]

Since God was still with the Jews and since the

Jewish path to God was the only sure one, they could face the growing challenge presented by Christianity in the third century. The rabbis, as we will see through R. Isaac's aggadot, strengthened the Jews' spirituality, refusing to let it be shaken by the rising influence of Christianity. Their God was one, and He would send the true Messiah to them as His elect.

A. God Concept: Polemic Against Pluralism and Jesus as the Messiah

The unity of God, as emphasized in the Shema, had been a basic concept of Judaism since biblical times. Any claim to the contrary had to be refuted or the entire Jewish God concept would have been shaken. The early Christian claim was that Jesus, as the son of God, was equivalent to God, thus making God two entities rather than one.[8] Christians pointed to repetitions of words or ideas within a single verse in Torah as symbolic proofs of dualism. The rabbis responded that such repetitions did not imply two of any one thing, rather that each word or idea held a different meaning. Indeed, the rabbinic polemic strongly stated that there was no repetition anywhere in Torah that did not have significance.

In the case of the same word being found twice in a verse, R. Isaac followed the rabbinic dictum that one could derive two ideas from one verse:[9]

> It is written, "When a man opens a pit [bor], or digs a pit [bor]" (Exodus 21:33)...R. Isaac said, "One is a pit of death, and one is a pit for damages. The two of them are included in one verse."
>
> [P.T. Bava Kama 5:6]

The word bor appeared in this verse two times, but that meant only that there were different kinds of pits, not that a pit was dual in concept. The verse itself remained a single unit, regardless of the fact that two types of pits were discussed within it.

So it was with God, the rabbis claimed. Christian scholars pointed to this kind of word repetition to symbolize the fact that there was a theological dualism of God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son. Just as the two pits were included in the same verse, so Jesus was included in the Christian God concept as an equal deity. The same two pits represented the same two Gods. But the rabbis' claim, as R. Isaac demonstrated, was that each pit was different, and they could not be considered equal. The one verse, Exodus 21:33, contained two distinct parts, a pit of death and a pit for damages, but it remained a single verse. So God had many aspects, but remained a single deity.

Word repetition was one exegetical challenge to the concept of one God. The other was repetition of ideas. Sometimes a person was described in a seemingly redundant way, as Rebekah was in Genesis 25:20. There, she was identified both as Bethuel, the Aramean's, daughter and Laban,

the Aramean's, sister. The question was asked, why include Laban, since the reader knew her to be Aramean as soon as he knew her father was Bethuel. The reason given by R. Isaac was that both descriptions were needed to show her righteousness among the rammaim, the deceivers who bore her and who surrounded her.[10]

The rabbis did more than defensively refute Christian claims of duality in the Torah. Whether dealing with individual words or with ideas, they treated repetition positively, as a device used by God for refinement rather than as a proof of duality:

> R. Isaac began,
> Your [God's] word is exceedingly pure.
> (Psalm 119:140)
> As the refiner puts gold into a crucible two and three times until he refines it, so this portion [regarding bringing pure olive oil beaten for the eternal light] is said [in Exodus 28:20], and a second time [here, in Leviticus 24:2], and a third time [in Numbers 8:2].
> [Vayikra Rabbah 31:2]

The polemic against duality had to be refined itself by the latter part of the third century, when the concept of the trinity had developed. R. Isaac lived when this change was in process, as can be seen by the following midrash, in which he discussed both the dual aspect of a word, dodi, and the presence of the same one God in three different places:

> "My beloved is like a gazelle or a young hart" (Song of Songs 2:9). [Regarding] "my beloved [dodi] is like a gazelle," R. Isaac said, "You [God] say to us, 'Deui [Greek for 'come hither']. Deui, come,' [You say] to us. [We say to You] 'Dy [Greek for God], You come to us first.'" R. Isaac said, "As a gazelle leaps and skips from tree to tree, from thicket to thicket, from grove to grove, so God leaps from Egypt to the Sea, and from the Sea to Sinai. [The children of Israel] saw Him in Egypt: 'I will pass through the land of Egypt this night' (Exodus 12:12). They saw Him at the Sea: 'Israel saw the great hand [of God]' (Exodus 14:31). They saw Him at Sinai: 'And he said, "God came from Sinai and rose up from Seir to them"'" (Deuteronomy 33:2).
>
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 5:8][11]

We also find some instances of a clearly anti-trinitarian polemic by R. Isaac. He explained that God said "eh'yeh" to Moses three times to show that He was in the past, He is in the present, and He will be in the future.[12] In another midrash, R. Isaac stressed that the Torah, in its general sense of Jewish Law, was one. The tractates of Mishnah, the various sections of Law in Leviticus, and the additional halakhot, were only parts of the single Torah, and all were based on one principle.[13]

The Christian trinity consisted of God, the Father, Jesus, the Son, and the risen Jesus as the Holy Spirit. This trinity depended on the belief that Jesus was the son of God and that he was the Messiah. R. Isaac disputed this belief.

It was not possible that Jesus had been the Messiah

because the Jews knew that the Messiah had not yet come. According to R. Isaac, the Messiah would come only when the whole world had become heretics.[14] We have already discussed R. Isaac's midrash in B.T. Sanhedrin 96b-97a, which spoke of when Bar Nafle, interpreted to be the Messiah, would come.[15] Knowing it would be dangerous to predict that his coming was imminent, but needing to provide hope in the present, R. Isaac was careful with his words. The world was not yet completely full of heretics, although there were many in Palestine in the third century. Bar Nafle would come when there was a suffering generation, which could be the current one, but it could be a different one.

Regardless of how imminent R. Isaac's messianism was, there was no question that the Messiah had not yet come, and thus could not have been Jesus. Even those Christians who claimed there would be a second coming of Jesus which would fulfill all the messianic promises could not change the belief of the Jews. The rabbis considered Moses to have been the first Messiah, and, as we saw in Kohelet Rabbah 1:9:1, R. Isaac said the second Messiah would be just like him.[16]

As the one who brought the Jews from Egypt to the Land of Canaan, Moses was a messiah because he was the instrument of their redemption. According to R. Isaac, he knew even at the Red Sea that he would not be able to enter the Land, yet he continued to lead the Jews to the very boundary of the Land, thus fulfilling God's instruction: "You will bring

them and plant them" (Exodus 15:17).[17] Unfortunately Moses did not bring world peace or permanent redemption for the Jews:

> R. Isaac said, "....after the first redemption, you had sorrow and enslavement by a kingdom [Rome]. But after the last redemption, you will not have sorrow and enslavement by a kingdom."
>
> [Pesikta Rabbati 36:2]

The Messiah who would bring them permanent redemption would perhaps appear human, like Moses, but he would be endowed with the power of God. Jesus did not have this power. He was a mere human, as it turned out Moses had been. By pointing out a human's limitations, R. Isaac brought attention to the fact that Jesus had those limitations, and thus could not have been the Messiah.

God needed no food, for example, yet Jesus had to eat. If God's presence nourished His ministering angels, surely He needed neither food nor drink.[18] But it was at a meal, the Last Supper, that Jesus had been betrayed. Further, R. Isaac said if man's rod could bring life to a nation, how much the more so could God's rod. Micah requested God to shepherd the Jews with His staff, for he knew only God's staff would sustain them.[19] Jesus may have brought comfort to some people temporarily, but only God could bring permanent well-being.

All that Jesus could have been was a mediator between

God and the Christian people. The rabbis did not say he had been such a mediator, but in their polemic against him they claimed that even if he had been, Jews have had their own mediators. R. Isaac said when the Jews murmured against Moses after the spies returned from scouting the Land of Canaan, God became angry. But Moses interceded on behalf of the people and God did not punish them.[20]

What distinguished Jewish mediation from Christian mediation, indeed what made it better, was the fact that there was not just one mediator. R. Isaac said a parasha spoken by God through two people was better than a parasha spoken through one. Many times God spoke just to Moses, but the better times were when He spoke to Moses and Aaron, such as when He instructed them regarding the Passover night in Egypt.[21] Certainly in terms of protection, R. Isaac considered it better to have both Moses and Aaron as mediators. For example, they were both told to remain near the Tent of Meeting, when all the other people were to keep a distance from it, so as to protect the people if God should become angry.[22]

The Jewish people were blessed with mediators to help them in their relationship with God because they were God's children. R. Isaac knew Jesus could not have been the son of God because the people, Israel, were the son of God:

> "....so they named him Esau" (Genesis 25:25). R. Isaac said, "You gave your swine [Esau] a name, so I [God] gave My firstborn a name,

> as is said, 'Israel is My first-born son'" (Exodus 4:22).
>
> [Bereishit Rabbah 63:8][23]

When the rabbis used parables to illustrate the roles of God and Israel, they used the terms father for God and son for Israel. For example, God gave Israel the reckoning of calendrical time in Exodus 12:2. R. Isaac likened this to a king who gave his son the keys to his treasury.[24] Significantly, God's mercy was said to emerge from His fatherly love. R. Isaac described Jeremiah telling God that the people feared they had sinned too seriously for repentance to cleanse them. God replied that they should not fear because they were repenting before their father in heaven, who would surely forgive them.[25]

Since the Jews believed God was their father, it followed that they were special to Him. It was impossible for them to accept the Christian claim to be the true elect. The polemic against this claim was as vehement as was that against the plurality of God and Jesus as the Messiah.

B. Election: Israel Was the True Elect of God

The Christian charge that Israel had been a mere temporary guardian of the Torah threatened to remove the very foundation of the Jews' faith. If they no longer had the blessings of the Torah, they had been deserted by God. But R. Isaac averred that this could not be true, because God

had given the Torah to them at Sinai:

> R. Abba said, in the name of R. Isaac, "The community of Israel said, 'The Holy One, Blessed is He, brought me to a great cellar of wine. This was Sinai. And He gave me the Torah there, which speaks of forty-nine aspects of purity and forty-nine aspects of impurity. [From] whence [do we know forty-nine? The word] vediglo [and his banner, equals forty-nine in gematria]. And out of great love I accepted it, as is said,
>
> And his banner of love was over me.'"
>
> (Song of Songs 2:4)
> [Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 2:4:1]

The Torah was not given to the Jews temporarily; it was given to them for all time. In fact, when they sinned and thus appeared to abandon the very scroll of the Torah by not observing the Laws written in it, R. Isaac said God asked what iniquity in Him had caused them to abandon Him.[26] The Torah represented God to them, and they must never leave it because it had been written specifically for them:

> Let us delight and rejoice in [You].
>
> (Song of Songs 1:4)
>
> R. Isaac said, "Bekha [in You], in the twenty-two letters You wrote for us in the Torah. Bet is two, khaf is twenty [in gematria]." [Emphasis mine]
>
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 22:2][27]

Knowing that the Torah had been given to the Jews as God's elect, the rabbis stressed that only the Jews could properly interpret it. Indeed the Jews understood the entire Old Testament better than the Christians did.

Christians' exegesis had led to the notion that they were the true elect, so the Jews had to prove the Christians were incapable of correct understanding of the text.

For example, one could interpret Genesis 30:1 ("When Rachel saw that she had borne Jacob no children, she became envious of her sister") to mean that Rachel was jealous that Leah had children with Jacob. But R. Isaac knew that Rachel envied only Leah's righteousness, since Proverbs 23:17 says not to envy sinners.[28] The Jews' ability to understand the Genesis verse in light of the Proverbs verse enabled them to be correct in their exegesis, whereas the Christians would have jumped to the wrong conclusion.

This use of the entire Tanakh in exegesis was the proper methodology. R. Isaac emphasized this at times when he stated openly that he 'had searched the entire Tanakh and had not found a proof-text.' When this happened, the rabbis looked to the Oral Tradition for help, something the Christians could not do. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 1:3 exemplifies this problem and a solution of it:

> [....King Solomon]
> Wearing the crown that his mother
> Gave him on his wedding day.
> (Song of Songs 3:11)
>
> R. Isaac said, "We searched through the entire Scripture and did not find that Bathsheba made a crown for her son, Solomon. Rather, this is the Tent of Meeting, which is crowned with blue and purple and scarlet."

The Jews read Song of Songs as representing the love relationship between God and Israel. Solomon, seen as symbolic of God in this relationship, wore a crown made by his mother. R. Isaac's assumption that the crown was the Tent of Meeting was reasonable, as God was crowned by it on earth. However, the resulting question was: who was God's mother? The Christians claimed she was Mary, mother of Jesus, so the rabbis had to dispute that. But according to R. Isaac's midrash, His mother would have been Israel, as maker of the Tent of Meeting. This seemed impossible, so the midrash continues with a search through Oral Tradition, led by contemporaries of R. Isaac, which reveals a parable about a king who loved his daughter so much that he used these terms of endearment for her: "my sister," and "my mother." So God called Israel by the same endearments out of His great love, showing that R. Isaac had been correct in identifying Israel as God's "mother."

The ability of the Jews to extend their search beyond the Written Torah to the Oral Law served to accentuate the Christians' incompetence in exegesis. Until the third century, that was the only claim Christians could make to the Law, because the Mishnah had not yet been written down. In fact, one of the rabbinic reasons for not recording it had been to make it impossible for the nations of the world to learn it and say God had given it to them.[29] When R. Isaac lived, the Mishnah was written down, but he felt the need to continue the tradition of considering it 'the

Oral Law,' to stress the idea that it had been God's gift to the Jews and must not be open for others to take. This sense of the secret things being good only for the Jews was reflected in midrashim where R. Isaac said blessing was possible only in hidden things.[30]

In Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 10:5, which was used in Chapter Two to demonstrate the importance of tithing, we learned from R. Isaac that the land would not be harvested properly if Jews transgressed the two Torahs, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.[31] Both Torahs were important for the Jews because both had been given to them by God. The Oral Torah was not written down until the beginning of the third century, but the tradition was that it had been given along with the Written Torah at Sinai.[32]

As both Torahs had been given to the Jews as God's elect, so the Land of Israel had been given to them. Christians, as well as pagans, may have been living in Palestine, but Jews knew the Land was their heritage. We have seen already in B.T. Hullin 91b that the land had been promised to Jacob.[33] Jews were so attached to the Land of Israel that only events which had happened there were deserving of special celebration. Thus, they did not say Hallel on Purim because it was a holiday celebrating an event which had happened outside of the Land.[34]

If there were any possible doubt that God had elected Israel to inherit the Land, R. Isaac combatted it directly with this midrash:

> R. Isaac said, "It was necessary to write the Torah only from 'This month shall mark for you' (Exodus 12:1). Then why was it written from '<u>Bereishit</u>' (Genesis 1:1)? To inform [the nations of the world of] the strength of His works, as is said,
>
> He revealed to His people His powerful works,
> in giving them the heritage of nations."
> (Psalm 111:6)
> [Tanhuma Buber, <u>Bereishit</u> 11][35]

Rashi's comment on Genesis 1:1 refers to this <u>midrash</u>, showing that the heritage of nations is the Land of Israel:

> For if the nations of the world would say to Israel, 'You are robbers, who took the lands of the seven nations by force,' [Israel] could say to them, 'The whole land belongs to the Holy One, Blessed is He. He created it and gave it willingly to those who were right in His eyes. And He willingly took it from them and gave it to us.'

Thus God gave the Land to the Jews when they entered it. It may have belonged to the Canaanites at first, but as soon as the Jews became a people, when God brought them out of Egypt, the Land of Israel became their heritage.

The Jews, then, and not the Christians, were the elect, chosen to receive and understand Written Torah and Oral Torah, and to dwell in the Land of Israel. The God who gave them these blessings, who chose them as His people, could not desert them.

C. God's Presence Always Felt

Christianity's most challenging attack against the Jews was that God had deserted them when the Temple had been destroyed because He was angry that they had refused to accept His son, Jesus. At a time when they had no Temple and faced oppression from all sides, Jews desperately needed to know the opposite; that God had not deserted them and never would desert them. In this regard, R. Isaac depicted God as caretaker of the world:

> "God said to Abram, 'Go forth'" (Genesis 12:1).
> R. Isaac began,
> Take heed, lass, and note,
> incline your ear:
> forget your people and your father's house.
> (Psalm 45:11)
> R. Isaac said, "[This is similar] to someone who was travelling from place to place and saw a building burning. He said, 'You say this building has no caretaker?' The owner of the building looked out and said to him, 'I am the owner of the building.' So when Abraham our father said, 'You say the world is without a caretaker?' God looked out and said to him, "I am the caretaker.'"
> [Bereishit Rabbah 39:1][36]

God had not forgotten His people, the Jews, and remained caretaker of the whole world, including the Jews.

God was with them everywhere, at all times. No place or event could be without God's presence. R. Isaac said God was with Jacob when he died, in the form of the Shekhinah, at the head of his bed.[37] He was with the Jews, counting them so as to know their exact number, when they

went into Egypt, when they left Egypt, and when they were in the wilderness.[38] And God will be with them always, as R. Isaac told them in B.T. Hagiga 16a, when he said that sinning in secret would push aside God's feet, which rested on earth.[39]

R. Isaac stressed that God's presence was felt particularly in synagogues and houses of study, thus proving God was with the Jews, who prayed and studied, specifically. The Shekhinah was present whenever Jews assembled in batei kenisiot and in batei midrashot.[40] In fact, God, like the gazelle in Song of Songs 2:9, leaped from synagogue to synagogue and from school to school.[41] Not only was God present in these places in Palestine, He was present there in Babylonia as well, where the Jews had lived in exile:

> "....and I [God] have become to them a diminished sanctity [in the countries whither they have gone]" (Ezekiel 11:16). R. Isaac said these [diminished sanctities] are the synagogues and schools in Bavel.
> [B.T. Megillah 29a]

Since God was with the Jews even in exile, the destruction of the Temple, which forced their dispersion from Jerusalem, could not have been a sign of His departure from them. The destruction was a sign only of His displeasure. The Jews did admit to having sinned and caused the destruction, but they did not see the sin as their rejection of Jesus, and they did not see the destruction as a

sign of God's desertion of them.

To answer the Christian accusations, the rabbis searched for specific reasons for the destruction. R. Isaac used the words of prophets, who foretold the first destruction, as proof-texts for reasons for the second destruction. For example, the following midrash includes Isaiah's words:

> R. Isaac said, "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they equated the small with the great, as is said,
> Layman and priest shall fare alike.
> (Isaiah 24:2)
> And it is written in [verse] three,
> The earth shall be bare, bare.
> (Isaiah 24:3)
> [B.T. Shabbat 119b]

In addition to not distinguishing between layman and priest, the Jews scoffed and murmured against God, which was seen as another reason for the destructions of the Temple. R. Isaac spoke of these scoffers in Eikhah Rabbah, Proem 12, using the words of Ezekiel, who prophesied destruction, to indicate the force of the consequences of such behavior:

> "....in your days, O rebellious breed, I will fulfill every word I speak---declares the Lord God" (Ezekiel 12:25).

The Jews in 70 CE were just as sinful as the Jews in 586 BCE had been. Therefore, there were enough sins and sinners in the first century to bring about the destruction

by their own merit or lack thereof, without the need for any other cause, such as the rejection of Jesus as Messiah and son of God.

The problem was that the Jews had strayed from their proper path to God. This path differed from the Christian path, and it was crucial for their spiritual survival that they distinguish between the two and follow the right one.

D. Path to God: Full Observance of Misvot

The Jewish path, as discussed in Chapter Two, included observance of all misvot. As we saw earlier in this chapter, one of the differences between each of the various Christian sects was the attitude toward misvot. Only one group, the first Ebionite group, observed all the misvot. This coincided with the Jewish path to God, as we are told in P.T. Pe'ah 1:1:

> R. Aḥa [said] in the name of R. Isaac,
> "It is written,
> More than all that you guard, guard your mind,
> for it is the source of life.
> (Proverbs 4:23)
> Observe all that was said to you in the Torah,
> for you do not know out of which [of the misvot]
> emerges your life."[42]

One of the misvot not observed by the Christians was kashrut. Origen claimed that observance of kashrut was impossible, saying the list of animals given by Moses included mythical animals and was to be taken allegorically, not literally.[43] But R. Isaac claimed that the Jews were

rewarded for observing kashrut in this world by being able to eat anything in the world to come.[44]

The rabbinic tradition was that one could not progress along the path to God without observing all of the miṣvot, as they were of equal importance. Within the anti-Christian polemic, however, certain miṣvot took on added importance. One of these was Shabbat, which Origen also said was impossible to observe literally.[45] Yet, Jews knew Shabbat to be their special gift from God:

> "Mark that the Lord has given you the sabbath" (Exodus 16:29). What did they mark? R. Isaac said, "They marked how you may answer the nations of the world. That if they should say to you, 'Why do you observe Shabbat, what miracle was done for you?' 'Mark that the Lord has given you the sabbath' [may be your answer]."
>
> [Tanḥuma Buber, Beshallah 24]

Observance of Shabbat was proof to the nations that God had done miracles for the Jews. Yet one miṣvah was more important even than Shabbat, and that was circumcision.[46] Observance of circumcision was better even than bringing a sacrifice, or building an altar.[47] This was a significant statement now that there was no more Temple. Jews knew circumcision to symbolize their covenant with God, and would never consider not observing it. Christians, who did not observe it, would suffer the consequences. In this regard, R. Isaac said that Adam's sin, which led to his expulsion from Eden, was that he had covered up his circumcision, thus

transgressing the brit.[48]

The only right path to God, the Jewish one, demanded observance of all misvot, whether one was Jewish, Christian or pagan. If God was caretaker of the world, then all peoples could reach Him through the misvot. Christians and pagans chose different paths and would not reach Him. Neither would another heretical group, the Gnostics, who understood God in an entirely different way than did any of the people discussed so far.

NOTES

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Avi-Yonah, The Jews of Palestine, p. 143.

2. Ibid., pp. 140-142; Gedaliah Alon, The Jews in their land in the Talmudic Age, ed. and trans. Gershon Levi (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1980), 1:298-302.

3. Observance of the misvot will be discussed later in this chapter.

4. N[icholas] R. M. De Lange, Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian relations in third-century Palestine (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 63.

5. Ibid., pp. 96-98.

6. Kimelman, "Rabbi Yoḥanan of Tiberias," p. 254.

7. De Lange, Origen and the Jews, pp. 90-92.

8. Alan F. Segal, Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism (Leiden, 1977), p. 7.

9. B.T. Sanhedrin 34a.

10. Vayikra Rabbah 23:1.

11. See also Pesikta Rabbati 15:8; Bamidbar Rabbah 11:2.

12. Shemot Rabbah 3:6.

13. Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 6:9:2.

14. B.T. Sanhedrin 97a.

15. B.T. Sanhedrin 96b-97a; see above, page 11.

16. See above, page 39.

17. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 5:4; Pesikta Rabbati 15:4.

18. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 6:1 and 6:2; Pesikta Rabbati 16:2 and 48:3.

19. Micah 7:14 as quoted in Midrash Tehillim 22:27.

20. B.T. Berakhot 32a.

21. Kohelet Rabbah 4:9.

22. Tanḥuma Buber, Bamidbar 16.

23. See also Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 25 in this regard.

24. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 5:13; Pesikta Rabbati 15:18.

25. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 24:16.

26. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 14:5.

27. In addition, see Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 28:9; Pesikta Rabbati 52:7; Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:4:3.

28. Bereishit Rabbah 71:6.

29. Pesikta Rabbati 5:1.

30. B.T. Ta'anit 8b and Bava Mesia 42a.

31. See above, page 23.

32. B.T. Nedarim 37b.

33. See above, page 55.

34. B.T. Arakhin 10b.

35. In addition, see Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 2.

36. See also Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 12; Yalkut Makhiri, Psalms 45:20.

37. Bereishit Rabbah 96MSV.

38. Pesikta Rabbati 10:4.

39. See above, page 19.

40. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 28:8; Pesikta Rabbati 52:6.

41. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 5:8; Pesikta Rabbati 15:8 and 15:9.

42. See also P.T. Kiddushin 1:7; Pesikta Rabbati 23/24:2 in this regard.

43. De Lange, Origen and the Jews, p. 95.

44. Vayikra Rabbah 13:3.

45. De Lange, Origen and the Jews, p. 92.

46. B.T. Shabbat 132a.

47. Bereishit Rabbah 48:4; Tanhuma Buber, Vayera 4.

48. B.T. Sanhedrin 38b.

CHAPTER FIVE

REACTION TO THE GNOSTIC CHALLENGE

Gnosticism was prevalent in Palestine from the first through the third centuries CE. There were more sects of Gnostics than of Christians, with a wide disparity of beliefs amongst them.[1] In fact, with the exception of a few basic concepts, there was little unity at all among these sects, and with the rise of Christianity, the Gnostics gradually disappeared. But when R. Isaac lived, they were a definite presence, and a strong polemic was needed to counter their challenge to Judaism.

The principal concept in Gnosticism was theological dualism. A supreme diety of pure light reigned over a secondary deity who was the Old Testament creator God.[2] The creator God was considered inferior, evil, and dark, while the Gnostics strove toward knowledge of the supreme God of light. The word "gnosis," which means "knowledge" in Greek, connotes an immediate vision of truth rather than an active seeking after knowledge.[3] Thus the Gnostics' striving was toward a revelation of this supreme God. Both deities together were referred to as the shtei reshuyot, the two powers.[4] All Gnostic sects believed in them, regardless of when and where they lived.

Naturally this posed a threat to Judaism's notion of one God, who was the good creator of the universe. R. Isaac's anti-Gnostic polemic against theological dualism needed to be even stronger than his anti-Christian polemic was, for the

Jews had to assert that their God was not only the sole power in the world, but that He, Himself, was goodness and light. There could be no other God above Him, and as creator of light, He was light.

The Old Testament creator God also gave the Torah to the Jews, which was the foundation of the Jewish faith. The Gnostic challenge in this area was just as threatening as its belief in dualism, for the principle of the Old Testament creator God being evil led to the concept that all He did was evil. Since He gave the Torah to the Jews, that Torah, with its entire system of misvot, was evil according to the Gnostics.[5] Again, R. Isaac's polemic had to be stronger than that directed against the Christians. Most Christians still observed some misvot in R. Isaac's day, and any non-observance was based on the belief that the misvot were no longer necessary. But the Gnostic libertine attitude was based on the belief that they were evil, a belief that the Jews could not accept.

Those Gnostics who were not libertine in their behavior were totally ascetic. They believed the only way to become one of the elect who would receive revelation from the supreme God was to disassociate themselves entirely from the material world.[6] In response, the rabbis reiterated their belief in the goodness and strength of community.

The ascetic Gnostics were in the minority, however. The libertine Gnostics sought a more worldly path to God. Although they believed knowledge of God to be revelatory,

they believed any Gnostic could become one of the elect who would receive this revelation. Study was important to them in the sense that one must question in order to receive gnosis. Indeed, what separated people from God according to the Gnostics was ignorance, not sin, as the Church claimed.[7] Judaism believed that ignorance and sin both kept people apart from God. Judaism's focus on study was based on the need to learn and understand God's commandments, though, not on questioning anything about God or His word. The polemic in this area, then, dealt with knowledge being important but not being the only way to reach God.

In their questioning, the Gnostics focussed on the first few chapters of Genesis, since it told the story of creation.[8] There they challenged the unity of God and the goodness of the creation of earth. The Jewish response was to stress the value of studying not only Genesis, but the entire Torah and even the entire Tanakh. By using all of Tanakh as a source for proof-texts, R. Isaac proved God's unity and goodness at all times.

From stressing study of Tanakh to insistence on the unity and goodness of God, the rabbinic response to Gnosticism was strong and determined. The God whom we have learned was the compassionate redeemer of the Jews could not be challenged. The Old Testament creator God was the only God, and was good, and the only path to Him was the Jewish one.

A. God Concept: Polemic Against Shtei Reshuyot

The basic concept to be challenged in Gnosticism was that of two deities existing in the universe. This concept did more than threaten the Jewish belief in one God; it threatened to shake the Jewish belief in the goodness of that God. If there were two powers, one good and one evil, then the Gnostics might have been correct in claiming that the Old Testament creator God was the evil one. Thus the emphasis in R. Isaac's polemic was on the creator God being the only God, and on His being the God of truth and goodness:

> R. Isaac began,
> Truth is the essence of Your word.
> (Psalm 119:160)
> R. Isaac said, "From the beginning of the creation of the world, 'truth is the essence of Your word.' 'When God began to create' (Genesis 1:1) and 'But the Lord is truly God' (Jeremiah 10:10) [prove the creator God is the true God]. Therefore,
> Your just rules are eternal.
> (Psalm 119:160)
> For every decree which You decree in relation to Your creatures, they [the creatures] affirm the righteousness of Your Judgment and accept it with faith. And no creature considers that two powers gave the Torah or two powers created the world. 'Gods [plural] spoke' is not written, rather 'God [singular] spoke' (Exodus 20:1). 'When Gods [plural] began to create' is not written, rather 'When God [singular] began to create.'"
> [Bereishit Rabbah 1:7][9]

The implications this midrash carried for the value of the misvah system will be discussed later,[10] but what is

clear for now is R. Isaac's insistence that the true God and the creator God were one. There were no shtei reshuyot, and he could prove it by using grammatical exegesis of the very first verse in Genesis. This was a direct response to the Gnostic claim that the Genesis creation story proved there were two powers. The God of the Jews was the only creator, and He was the same God as the Gnostic supreme deity.

R. Isaac spoke out against the notion of God's duality many times. His basic approach was that any apparent duality the Gnostics might claim in actuality merely reflected aspects of the one God. For example, Joshua 24:19 reads:

....Ki Elohim kedoshim [plural] hu.
(....For He is a holy God.)

R. Isaac explained that the plural referred to all the aspects of holiness, not to more than one God.[11]

Other apparent dualities appeared in content as well as in grammar. There were times when God was mentioned twice in a single verse, and the Gnostics may have pointed to that as proof of two Gods. In this regard, R. Isaac related instances where average people mentioned themselves twice in a verse, such as Lamech in Genesis 4:23 and some kings in I Kings 1:33 and Esther 8:8, thus showing that repetitive mention in a verse did not mean duality.[12]

Having proven that there was only one God, R. Isaac had to identify Him as the Old Testament creator God. In comparison to Christianity, whose duality and trinity never denied the goodness of God, the Father, Gnosticism said the creator God was evil, a God of darkness. There was no use in proving only one God existed for the Jews if there was any chance He could be considered evil. It could not be the case that the Jews accepted only their God, but the Gnostics claimed there still was a better God who was not recognized by them. The case must be that the Jews' God was that better God; that the Old Testament creator God and the supreme God of light were one and the same.

R. Isaac's answer to this problem was that the Jews' God created both earth and heaven. In fact, He created the heaven of heavens, above which there existed no other God.[13] The supreme God and the creator of earth were therefore the same, and as R. Isaac said of Him, quoting Isaiah 44:6:

> I am the first and I am the last.[14]

There was no God before the creator God, no superior deity who preceded Him or reigned over Him.

As creator of heaven, this God must be goodness and light. Indeed, He was the actual creator of light:

> "God said, 'Let there be light'" (Genesis 1:3).
> R. Isaac began,
> The words You inscribed give light.
> (Psalm 119:130)
> [Bereishit Rabbah 3:1]

R. Isaac also said that this light which God created from heaven had emanated from the direction of God's sanctuary on earth, the Temple in Jerusalem.[15] The God who commanded the Jews to build the Temple for Him, therefore, was the same God who created the heavens and connected the light between heaven and earth. This God sent that light to the world to come as well. R. Isaac told the Jews they would see the light of the world to come if they did good deeds in this world.[16]

It was not enough even to prove the Jews' God to be the same as the supreme God of light, and therefore not inferior to any other divinity. R. Isaac set out to prove also that the Jews' God was the God of goodness. The Gnostics claimed the creation of earth was evil, but R. Isaac pointed out that it was the goodness of the creator God that stopped creation at the proper time, or the earth would have grown too large. That is why God was called Eil Shaddai, for dai means "enough."[17] Indeed, when God saw that evil was developing too much on earth, He decided to send the Flood to wipe it out (Genesis 6:5-8). R. Isaac commented on what God saw that led Him to this decision:

> R. Isaac said, "Man's evil inclination renews itself every day, as is said, '....nothing but evil all the time'" (Genesis 6:5).
> [B.T. Kiddushin 30b]

R. Isaac's polemic against the Gnostic claims that the creator God was an evil God, inferior to the supreme God of light, was strong and determined. He sensed the threat to the Jewish faith and he responded to it. The God of the Torah, who had created heaven and earth, was inferior to none. It was toward this God the Jew reached, along a path which has been delineated in Chapter Two. This path differed from that followed by the Gnostics and had to be affirmed for the Jews who fell under their influence.

B. Path to God: Knowledge Plus Observance of Miṣvot, Prayer, and Atonement

The key difference between the Jewish path to God and the Gnostic one was that Gnostics were passive, looking for a revelation to connect them to God, whereas Jews were active, taking every possible step to reach out towards God.[18] The only action the Gnostics did take was questioning, which they considered a step towards knowledge. But the Jews knew knowledge was not questioning. It was learning the laws of the Bible in order to draw closer to God, for He was considered a God of knowledge, to be found through knowledge.[19] Even laws which were not explained were to be learned without question, and followed. For example, Solomon questioned the law against having more than one wife, and married many women. But, according to R. Isaac, his heart then was turned by his wives toward idolatry and away from God.[20] The only valid knowledge came from

obedient study of the Torah. We learned from R. Isaac earlier, when we examined B.T. Yoma 77a, that even wives of scholars earned a place in the world to come.[21] Those who studied were respected, and even had a pleasing appearance because they were so learned:

> R. Isaac said, "'[David was] handsome' (I Samuel 16:12) [because he knew] halakhah. Everyone who saw him mentioned his learning."
> [Vayikra Rabbah 20:1]

But knowledge was not the only key to reaching God. The rabbis disagreed with the Gnostic claim that it was only ignorance which separated people from God. Knowledge for the Jew was intended to help him understand and properly observe the misvot, so he would not sin. Sin was a barrier between people and God as well. As R. Isaac said in Bereishit Rabbah 1:7, which was cited at the beginning of section A of this Chapter, the God of truth gave righteous judgments which would endure forever. Jews accepted God's every decree, given in truth and love, as a positive sign of His covenant with them. Observance of these decrees and abiding by God's judgments would keep the Jew from sin and bring him closer to God.

The Gnostics had no laws to observe. Within their varied sects they followed different rituals, but there was no unity of proper observance.[22] R. Isaac's response to their irresponsibly free behavior was to point out that too

easy a life can lead to problems:

> R. Isaac said, "Who caused them [the people of Noah's day] to rebel against Me? Was it not because they sowed and did not [have to] reap?" R. Isaac said, "They would sow once in forty years, and go from one end of the world to the other in a brief time, and cut down the cedars of Lebanon on their way, and considered lions and leopards as vermin in their skin."
>
> [Bereishit Rabbah 34:11]

Those who had no responsibilities, walking through life with no discipline, would become sinful as Noah's contemporaries had. Then they would suffer, as did all those wiped out in the Flood. But the Jews had the benefit of the misvot, God's gift, to guide them through life.

All Jews needed this guidance, both those who lived in Noah's day and those who lived in the third century. R. Isaac knew this and was aware that the Gnostic focus on Genesis was too narrow for a true understanding of misvot. In order to teach about them to his contemporaries, then, R. Isaac used the entire Torah, pointing out places where the same law was repeated to teach different purposes for it. The commandment to not seethe a kid in its mother's milk is found three times, for example. R. Isaac said once was to state the law itself (Exodus 23:19), once was to connect it to the giving of the Torah (Exodus 34:26), and once was to connect it to paying tithes (Deuteronomy 14:21).[23] Thus by studying the Torah, the Jew could learn a misvah, could

learn how God gave it to him in love, and could learn how it related to other actions in his life.

Observance of each misvah was an essential step along the path to God. But if one slipped, and did not observe, one could atone for the sin. Gnostics, having no set laws to observe, had no sense of sin and atonement. Their free religious life-style could have influenced Jews to abandon atonement because it was unnecessary. But, as R. Isaac taught in Bereishit Rabbah 31:9, even Noah needed cleansing.[24] If Jews did not cleanse themselves in order to atone for their sins, they would be afflicted by such people as Nebuchadnezzar and Esau.[25]

God would protect the Jews only if they either did not ever sin, which was impossible, or if they atoned when they did sin. Otherwise, the sin, and not ignorance as claimed by the Gnostics, would separate the Jews from God:

> R. Isaac said, "This is like a mighty man who lived in a town, and the people of the town were confident that if hostile troops came there he would go out to meet them and immediately they would flee. When hostile troops came there, he said to them, 'My right hand is weak.' But God was not like this, rather,
>
> No, the Lord's arm is not too short to save.
> (Isaiah 59:1)
> But your iniquities have been a barrier
> Between you and your God."
> (Isaiah 59:2)
> [Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 17:2]

Atonement was a step along the Jewish path to God, as was study. A third, and essential step, was prayer.

Gnostic prayer practices varied among the different sects, but in general the prayer was directed towards receiving the revelation of the supreme God. All that mattered to Gnostics was becoming one of the elect who would connect to the God of light through revelation. There was no set time or place for prayer, and no understanding of God's attitude towards it. Jews who fell under the influence of Gnostics might lose the sense of the value of prayer.

In contrast, for the rabbis prayer had value as something God loved. R. Isaac said that God decreed the Temple would be rebuilt because He heard Daniel's prayer, which He loved.[26] God even arranged to hear prayers because He loved them so much:

> R. Isaac said, "Why were our ancestors barren? Because the Holy One, Blessed is He, desires the prayers of the righteous."
> [B.T. Yebamot 64a]

In keeping with the anti-Gnostic polemic that the creator God was the only true God, and therefore the only one deserving of worship, R. Isaac stated that everything was created through the merit of worship.[27] Not only did creation itself grow out of prayer, but wisdom, which Gnostics sought for knowledge of God, also came as a result of prayer:

> R. Isaac said, "He who wants to be wise should turn south [when praying], and he who wants to be rich should turn north. The symbol [for wealth] is the table in the north [of the Tabernacle], and the symbol [for knowledge] is the menorah in the south."
> [B.T. Bava Batra 25b]

Prayer for Gnostics, to the extent that they carried it out, was loosely observed. There were no permanent leaders, and what worship services they had were led by someone picked by lot. They believed God directed the drawing of the lots, and each meeting was conducted by someone else.[28] There was no sense of a congregation, rather just a group of individuals who happened to come together at a meeting.

R. Isaac knew that for the Jews it was important to pray at proper times and in a congregation, with a true sense of community, because prayer was most acceptable to God when a congregation prayed.[29] Those who led prayer were not selected randomly by lot. Since there was no longer a hereditary priest to function as a religious leader, the Jews had to feel confident in their leaders of worship. One way to assure this confidence was to have the community's approval of a leader. R. Isaac said God Himself demanded this when He made Moses ask the community to approve the selection of Bezalel as builder of the Tabernacle.[30] While Bezalel was not a leader of worship per se, he was to be responsible to the community for their holiest place. Any leader connected with spiritual pursuits must be one in which

the entire community had confidence. We may logically assume from R. Isaac's attitude that the sheliah sibbur also had to be approved by the community.

By approving the choice of their sheliah sibbur, the Jews maintained an active voice in their community worship experience. In response to the ascetic Gnostics, R. Isaac stressed the value of this communal religious life. In response to the libertine Gnostics, he stressed the value of the structured misvah system. In each case, his response was appropriate to the threat posed by Gnostic behavior.

In fact, the success of R. Isaac's polemic was that his response always was appropriate. He strengthened the Jews' faith by proving the unity and goodness of the Old Testament creator God in the face of Gnostic dualistic theology. He maintained the validity of the Jewish path to God by verifying the importance of study, observance of misvot, atonement, and prayer. He gave the Jews what they needed to survive the threat of Gnosticism as he gave them what they needed to survive the threats and pressures of Christianity and Roman rule.

NOTES

CHAPTER FIVE

1. E. F. Scott, "Gnosticism," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), 6:237.

2. Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 42.

3. Scott, "Gnosticism," 6:231.

4. Segal, Two Powers in Heaven, pp. 3 and 8.

5. Scott, "Gnosticism," 6:237.

6. Ibid.

7. Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1981), pp. 136, 148-149.

8. Segal, Two Powers in Heaven, p. 252.

9. See also Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 1, Yitro 285; Yalkut Makhiri, Psalms 119:87.

10. See below, page 102.

11. P.T. Berakhot 9:1.

12. Bereishit Rabbah 51:2.

13. Pesikta Rabbati 16:2.

14. Bereishit Rabbah 63:8; Yalkut Shimoni, Jeremiah 298; Yalkut Makhiri, Isaiah 41:27.

15. Bereishit Rabbah 3:4; Vayikra Rabbah 31:7; Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 21:5; Yalkut Shimoni, Psalms 862.

16. Midrash Tehillim 49:1.

17. Bereishit Rabbah 5:8 and 46:3.

18. Pesikta Rabbati 1:2.

19. P.T. Berakhot 4:4.

20. B.T. Sanhedrin 21b.

21. See above, page 37.

22. Scott, "Gnosticism," 6:235.

23. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 10:9; Pesikta Rabbati 25:3; Tanḥuma Buber, Re'eh 16.

24. See above, page 29.

25. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 5:18; Pesikta Rabbati 15:25.

26. Kohelet Rabbah 9:7.

27. Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 31.

28. Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels, p. 49.

29. B.T. Berakhot 7b-8a.

30. B.T. Berakhot 55a.

CONCLUSION

Having examined R. Isaac's response to the difficult conditions surrounding the Jews in third century Palestine, I emerge with an uplifted sense of hope. He taught the Jews of his day that they need not despair, for God was with them, and in His compassion He would redeem them. More importantly, his words reached beyond his time. He kept alive the tradition which had sustained Jews for centuries, and he enabled his students to pass on the same tradition so that it would sustain Jews in all times and places.

He knew in his day they needed the consolation of Bible and aggadah.[1] Though, as a rabbi and a scholar, he studied the Law and was known for his halachic midrashim, it was through his aggadic midrashim that he transmitted a message of hope to a suffering generation. He spoke out against the challenges and threats facing the Jews with a forceful and effective polemic.

Yet, this polemical response was applicable to more than just the conditions of his day. Specific circumstances would change over the years, but his response to those of third century Palestine could be understood in universal terms. The concept of one ever-present God, who was compassionate and who would redeem Israel always, is the basis of an appropriate response to any religion or people who would challenge God's unity, mercy, or strength. R. Isaac taught that God chose the Jews out of love, giving them the Torah

and the Land of Israel. The election of the Jews has been challenged in every century, and R. Isaac's polemic has been the basis of a valid response each time. Also, each generation brings with it new understandings of the way to reach God, yet R. Isaac's steps of study, prayer, atonement, and observance of misvot have proven to be an eternal path.

The fact that my research involved midrashim attributed to R. Isaac in the Yalkutim, which were compiled in the Middle Ages, proves the universality of his polemic. Even today his words speak to us with meaning. Whether we are trying to deal with the Holocaust or a personal tragedy, we encounter things which may make us doubt God. But we can be sure God has not deserted us when we read R. Isaac's derashot. Not only will Israel flourish at the end of time, no matter what appears to indicate the contrary, but when God seems most hidden may be the very time when He will look out, as does a landlord from a burning building, and tell us He is our guide.[2]

We find ourselves in a world full of conflicts and pressures, as did the Jews of third century Palestine. We, too, react with a particularly Jewish response. If we listen to R. Isaac, we will study, pray, atone, and observe misvot. His belief that God was with Jews who assembled in houses of study and synagogues is valid today, as those who seriously study and pray know.[3] When we read a midrash which tells us that atonement can remove our burdens from upon our heads, and our feet will be released to ford the

rivers which threaten to drown us, we can be uplifted, just as the Jews of R. Isaac's day were.[4] The modern Reform Jew may not observe all the misvot, but what he does observe gives him a sense of structure in an unstable world. R. Isaac affirmed the value of that structure. Modern society claims individuality and freedom are crucial, yet people feel insecure without community. R. Isaac gave us the motivation to seek out and become an active part of the Jewish community wherever we live, and to be proud to give of ourselves to it unselfishly.

I began this thesis with a desire to color the fabric of my personality and my life with my uniquely Jewish heritage. I looked to R. Isaac as a rabbi who would show me the eternal Jewish essence I sought to identify. Wanting a total picture, I attempted the method of drawing a rabbinic biography, and it has worked well. It does not matter that I cannot determine the name of R. Isaac's daughter or what his home was like. What matters is that I came to know his theology, and that I can use his midrashic responses in my own life. Regardless of the arguments of Jacob Neusner and others, the method of rabbinic biography can uncover a tradition that is supported by rabbinic texts, which can teach us many things.

The impact of the study of a theme or a symbol across the centuries of Midrash is limited. It can teach only one

aspect of the Jewish tradition. Rabbinic biography, on the other hand, gives us a panoramic view of the entire tradition. And, as I noted earlier, this view is not limited to the time in which it was first shaped.

Of course, there have been limitations to this method as well. Were this a larger and more open project, I might have widened the process to include other types of research to support my findings. It would have been helpful, for example, to study parallel Christian and Gnostic texts to see the objects of R. Isaac's polemic more clearly. While I did study some rabbinic biographies briefly to help me learn this method, I could also have examined those of R. Isaac's contemporaries with more care if I had had the time.[5] The fuller the impression of the third century amoraim, the better I could have understood R. Isaac and his role as a teacher at that time.

There always is room for further investigation and analysis. But the work I have done has fulfilled my purpose. I take away from this thesis a fabric richer in color than the one I had before. My Jewish essence is fuller and more clear, as I am now better connected to my roots, to the tradition of my forebears. And I carry this tradition with me, hoping to hand it on to others for their use.

NOTES

CONCLUSION

1. See, for example, Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 12:3.

2. B.T. Menaḥot 53b; Bereishit Rabbah 39:1.

3. Pesikta de-Rab Kahana 28:8; Pesikta Rabbati 52:6.

4. Midrash Tehillim 38:2.

5. Such studies that already exist include Robert Goldenberg, "The Deposition of Rabban Gamaliel II: An Examination of the Sources," in Persons and Institutions In Early Rabbinic Judaism, ed. William S. Green (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press for Brown University, 1977), pp. 9-47; Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbi Yoḥanan of Tiberias: Aspects of the Social and Religious History of Third Century Palestine;" Diane Levine, "Eleazar Ḥisma," in Persons and Institutions In Early Rabbinic Judaism, pp. 149-204; Lee I. Levine, "R. Abbahu of Caesarea;" Jack Nathan Lightstone, "Ṣadoq The Yavnean," in Persons and Institutions In Early Rabbinic Judaism, pp. 51-147; Jacob Neusner, Development of A Legend: Studies on the Traditions Concerning Yohanan ben Zakkai; Gary G. Porton, The Traditions of Rabbi Ishmael (Leiden, 1976-1979).

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