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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Edward Elkin

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

The Land of Israel:
Views of Four Medieval Biblical Commentators

Edward Elkin's rabbinics thesis is entitled, "The Land of Israel: Views of Four Medieval Biblical Commentators." The initial impetus for the thesis came from Professor Harry M. Orlinsky's article, "Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel: Cornerstone of the Covenant between God and Israel." (see Eretz Israel 18 (1985). Orlinsky had demonstrated that without the land of Israel, the whole biblical notion of "Covenant" (berit) made little sense. Accordingly, reasoned Elkin, scholars would do well to examine how the great Jewish biblical commentators of the Middle Ages, for whom exile from the land was a bitter fact of life, dealt with the concept of the land of Israel.

In respect to the land of Israel, the medieval period differed from classical rabbinic times. Medieval Judaism was confronted with the claims of Islam and Christianity, each of which claimed to be God's new convental partner in place of ancient Israel. Much of the argument of Israel's rivals was based on the absence of the Jews from the promised land. Indeed, anti-Jewish polemic could point to the Bible itself in demonstration that the Lord had rejected the Jews. In his thesis, Elkin shows how Jewish biblicists, employing the genre of Bible commentary rose to the religious challenges by presenting the themes of covenant and exile in a way that 1) was faithful to the claims of tradition; 2) responded to the challenges of Judaism's rivals; 3) strengthened the attachment of their Jewish readers to the land of Israel.

The commentators studied in this thesis are Rashi, Rabbi David Kimhi, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra. After offering an introduction on the various forms of covenant outlined in the Hebrew Bible, Elkin turns to selected biblical chapters to show how these were presented in the ancient text and how they were interpreted by the medieval scholars. Chapter one studies Genesis 15, in which an unconditional covenant is presented; chapter two deals with the conditional covenant of Leviticus 26; chapter three deals with exile and return as presented in Psalm 122 and 126 and in the selected commentaries.

Elkin's study is very thorough and demonstrates the writer's fine ability for close reading. The finished product is an excellent demonstration of how medieval Jewish scholars affirmed to their

readers that the ancient traditions could continue to form the basis of Jewish hope and faith.

Respectfully submitted,
Dr. S. David Sperling
Referee

April 2, 1990

THE LAND OF ISRAEL:

VIEWS OF FOUR MEDIEVAL BIBLICAL COMMENTATORS

EDWARD G. ELKIN

Thesis submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

March 16, 1990

Referee: Dr. S. David Sperling

For my teachers,
who have given me the Torah necessary
for a rich Jewish life outside the Land,
and instilled in me the hope of our ancestors
that one day we would reach it.

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INTRODUCTION

The Jewish people have long sought to define the nature of their relationship to the Land of Israel. The ambiguity of this relationship begins with the biblical account. According to the biblical record, not only were the people of Israel not born in the Land, but no sooner did they arrive (in the person of Abraham) than they left. Formative experiences such as the Egyptian bondage, the Redemption at the Sea, and the Revelation at Sinai, all took place outside the Land. When the people of Israel did finally return to the Land, they conquered it from peoples who were acknowledged to be the Land's native inhabitants. A period of sovereignty ensued. But in the course of time, Israel's dominion over the Land was ended by greater powers -- not once, but twice. After the second time, they were not to regain sovereignty for close to two thousand years.

Yet despite the apparent flimsiness of Israel's historical connection to the Land, the bond felt by the people for the Land remained strong. Jews looked for ways to describe their relationship to the Land; they looked for models that would somehow express their feelings about a Land which for so much of their history was not theirs. One such model was Covenant; another was Exile.

The term *covenant* (ברית) as used in the Hebrew Bible can include a wide range of meanings and attitudes.[1] However, study reveals at least two different types of covenant between God and the people of Israel portrayed in the Bible, both of which involve God's gift of the Land of Israel to the people of Israel. One type of covenant is understood to be unconditional. God's gift of the Land and God's continuing allegiance to the people would remain in effect unconditionally, i.e., without any responsibilities on Israel's part. Another type of covenant portrayed in the Hebrew Bible is the conditional covenant. In exchange for God's continuing protection, Israel would have to behave in a certain way. In the event that Israel did not meet her responsibilities under the covenant, God would withdraw the promise of divine protection in the Land of Israel.

The exile model (גלות) is related to covenant, but its emphasis is somewhat different. Whereas the covenant model seeks to define the basis for Israel's claim to the Land, the exile model assumes that Israel belongs in the Land. Speaking from the perspective of outside the Land, the exile model seeks to express Israel's longing to return, to go

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[1] Harry Orlinsky has written about the central place of the Land in biblical covenant. See his "Biblical Concept of the Land of Israel: Cornerstone of the Covenant between God and Israel" in The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives, Lawrence Hoffman, ed., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp.27-64.

back to a better place and time.

Many centuries after the biblical authors completed their work, Jewish scholars of the medieval period took upon themselves a formidable twofold task -- they wanted to transmit faithfully the heritage of rabbinic Judaism to their own generation, and at the same time they wanted to redirect that learning so that it would help the Jewish people and its faith survive amidst the challenges of medieval Europe. In order to accomplish these two tasks, they created what was essentially a new literary genre -- the biblical commentary.

In this new genre, the themes of covenant and exile were both to play important roles. However, Jewish commentators who were confronted with these models faced certain challenges in interpretation. These challenges were not new; the teachers of the rabbinic period who created the literature of Midrash and Talmud also had to interpret biblical models in a way that was meaningful for Jews living outside the Land, Jews who were often oppressed by their neighbors. In the medieval period, however, Jewish scholars wrote from the perspective of communities which had lived for generations under the dominion of religions which claimed to be Judaism's successors. Not only did the succession claims of Christianity and Islam demand a

response, but the new intellectual currents coursing through medieval Europe also required some answer from Jewish leaders and teachers. In this paper, we shall examine some of their answers. We shall see how medieval scholars, using the genre of biblical commentary, tried to present the themes of covenant and exile in a way that 1) was faithful to the claims of tradition, 2) responded to the challenges of other religions and intellectual trends, and 3) served to strengthen the attachment of their Jewish readers to the Land of Israel.

Before we do so, we must understand something of the nature of the problem. Each type of biblical covenant presented its own challenges for the medieval commentators. For many in the Middle Ages, the unconditional covenant was simply disproved by the seemingly permanent presence of the Jewish people outside the Land while sovereignty over the Land passed back and forth between Moslems and Christians. In keeping with their goals, medieval commentators had to faithfully transmit those passages which speak of an unconditional covenant, while somehow making that concept meaningful to a generation of Jews which was all too aware of the empirical evidence which seemed to contradict it, and the claims of others who denied it.

The conditional covenant posed different problems for

the medieval exegetes. A medieval reader of these biblical passages might easily come to the conclusion that Israel had indeed not lived up to her responsibilities under the covenant, and that God had therefore abrogated His side of the pact as well, permanently, resulting in Israel's exile from her Land. Christians had viewed the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel in this way for generations.[2] In keeping with their goals, medieval commentators had to faithfully transmit those passages which speak of a conditional covenant, while somehow conveying the message that God's covenant with Israel had not been terminated despite evidence apparently to the contrary.

Finally, the exile model also posed certain challenges for the biblical commentators. Having lived off the Land for so many centuries, medieval Jews had to decide what they meant by the term exile. Were they in exile from the physical territory of the Land of Israel only? Or was their "home" not just the Land itself, but rather the Land transformed, the Land returned to the way it once was? If

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[2] The Church father Jerome (345? - 420?) wrote of the Jewish connection to the Land of Israel: "Now I will admit that these lands were promised to you -- although not handed over to you -- on the condition that you observe God's commandments and that you conduct yourself according to His precepts; that you not serve Baal-peor and the Baals, Beelzebub and Chemosh instead of Almighty God. Because you chose them over God, you have lost all that was promised you." Quoted by Frank Talmage, Disputation and Dialogue (New York: Ktav, 1975), pp.178-79.

the latter, how would the transformation be effected? Was the return from exile associated with the messianic era, a complete eschatological break with the past, or would the transformation take place without such a radical break? Finally, was exile perhaps to be understood not in territorial terms at all but rather in spiritual terms? The response of the biblical commentators had to be faithful to the traditional Jewish understanding of exile. But it also had to respond in some way to Christian, Moslem, and philosophical claims. And, it had to take into account the fact that in the medieval period, the exile (however defined) seemed more permanent than ever.

In this paper, I will examine medieval Jewish commentaries on a number of biblical passages which speak of covenant, exile, and return. All of the passages revolve around the Land of Israel as the crux of the covenant or the focus of the return. I will show how the medieval scholars attempt both to transmit traditional Jewish learning to their generation as well as adapt that learning to the needs of their time through the genre of Scriptural exegesis.

As might be expected, the medieval commentators did not all share identical viewpoints regarding the Land of Israel. The themes of covenant and exile which they confronted in their study of the Bible evoked different responses in each.

In this paper, I will be examining the commentaries of four men who lived in very different times and places.

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak) was a French Ashkenazi scholar who lived from 1040-1105. His commentaries on the Bible and on the Talmud became among the most popular works of Jewish scholarship ever. There has been much discussion about the reasons for Rashi's tremendous popularity, including the clarity and simplicity of his writing style, and his renowned personal piety. These attributes helped him popularize an understanding of the difference between the linguistic, literal, "simple" meaning of the biblical text (פשט) and the rabbinic, midrashic tradition on that text (דרש). We shall see that in his commentaries, Rashi sometimes cites one, sometimes the other, and sometimes he cites both levels of understanding a particular biblical verse. Rashi's work appears to have been written with a concern for reinforcing Jewish faith in an often hostile, often enticing Christian environment.[3]

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[3] Much has been written about Rashi and his exegesis. For information about Rashi in comparison with other medieval exegetes, see S.W. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews, vol.6 (Philadelphia: JPS, 1958), pp.278ff., and E.I.J. Rosenthal, "The Study of the Bible in Medieval Judaism" in Cambridge History of the Bible vol.2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U. Press, 1969), pp.260-266.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) lived most of his life in Moslem Spain, before leaving for Rome and finally, embarking on a life of travel all over Europe and the Near East. His biblical commentaries reflect the influence of Islamic rationalism and grammatical expertise, and they appear to have been addressed to an intellectual elite. Despite his overwhelming interest in linguistic matters, however, we shall see that for Ibn Ezra, language in its literal, grammatical sense does not exhaust the meaning of the biblical text. The text as Ibn Ezra reads it contains a message which, when properly understood by means of rational analysis, reinforces and confirms traditional Jewish positions.[4]

Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak) lived from 1160-1235. He was born into a family of famous grammarians and commentators whose roots were in Spain and who therefore shared Ibn Ezra's reverence for rational and linguistic analysis. However, the family had fled Moslem Spain after the invasion of the African Almohades, and settled in Narbonne, France. There, living in a Christian environment and at a geographic remove from Spain, Radak was able to devote his biblical study rather less than Ibn Ezra to grammatical

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[4] For an analysis of Ibn Ezra's method of interpretation, see E.I.J. Rosenthal, "The Study of the Bible in Medieval Judaism," pp.266-68.

categorizations of words, and more to the broader religious meaning of the biblical text, as it confirmed traditional Jewish positions. Radak's work also reflects the impact of the work of Maimonides (1135-1204) and the raging controversy in Jewish circles thereto.[5]

Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman) lived from 1194-1270, mostly in Christian Spain. He ultimately settled, however, in the Land of Israel (the only one of the four to do so). His biblical commentaries reflect little interest in the linguistic level of analysis. Instead, Ramban is very interested in the symbolic, mystical meanings which he sees hidden within the biblical text. Like Radak, however, Ramban lived in a Jewish world which had been greatly affected by the work of Maimonides. Despite his mystical predilections, Ramban's works show that he does recognize the validity of certain philosophical achievements. His commentaries reveal an attempt to integrate the many dimensions of his religious thinking.[6]

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[5] For a comprehensive study of Radak and his work, see F.E. Talmage, David Kimhi: The Man and the Commentaries (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975).

[6] For more information on Ramban's theology, see David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides" in Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity, Isadore Twersky, ed., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

These four men had very different types of experiences in their lives, and were influenced by very different historical and philosophical trends. Differences in background, style, and interests become clear when reading their biblical commentaries. Nevertheless, the fact that all wrote such commentaries shows that they shared a common desire to transmit the heritage of Scripture to the Jews of their time. Additionally, I will show that they all shared a desire to transmit that heritage of Scripture in a way which would serve to strengthen the faith and the hope of their Jewish readers that the covenant of the Jewish people with God was not a dead letter, and that they would someday return from exile to the Land of their ancestors.

CHAPTER I

THE UNCONDITIONAL COVENANT: GENESIS 15

The fifteenth chapter of Genesis contains the account of a dialogue between God and Abraham. This conversation is not their first; nor is this the first time God makes promises to Abraham. The passage does, however, include the first record of a covenant (ברית) between God and Abraham. This covenant, and the promises of land and offspring which are a part of it, drew the attention of medieval scholars. They saw in the passage an opportunity to examine the validity and meaning of these promises for Abraham's descendants, the Jewish people living in exile from its land.

The covenant, as portrayed in Gen.15, is unconditional. No particular action or behavior is specified as being required of Abraham in order for God to fulfill the promises made as part of the covenant. In their commentaries on this passage, medieval scholars faced the challenge of reconciling the idea of unconditional covenant presented in the passage with the fact of Israel's continuing exile. This tension, together with the unique form the covenant takes in the chapter, makes Gen.15 a fruitful place for the medieval commentators to discuss their view of the Land of Israel and

its proper place in Jewish life and in the relationship between the Jewish people and God.

GEN. 15:1-21[1]

1. Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, "Fear not Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great."
2. But Abram said, "O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household is Dammesek Eliezer!"
3. Abram said further, "Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir."
4. The word of the Lord came to him in reply, "That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir."
5. He took him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He added, "So shall your offspring be."
6. And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.
7. Then He said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession."
8. And he said, "O Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?"
9. He answered, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird."
10. He brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird.
11. Birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.
12. As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him.
13. And He said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years;
14. But I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.
15. As for you, You shall go to your fathers in peace; You shall be buried at a ripe old age.
16. And they shall return here in the fourth generation, for

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[1] Biblical translations in this paper are taken from the new JPS translation Tanakh (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."
17. When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces.
18. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates:
19. The Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,
20. The Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,
21. The Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

Gen.15 is not the only passage in Genesis which speaks of a covenant which is unconditional, although its length and its unique qualities make it a particularly fruitful avenue for study. In the course of this chapter, I will have occasion to refer to other places in Genesis where the comments of medieval scholars seem particularly relevant. The commentaries focused essentially on three different but related themes which I shall presently discuss: 1) the relationship between the Land promise and the offspring promise; 2) the Covenant between the Pieces and the 400 years' servitude as allusions to Israel's subsequent exiles; 3) an affirmation of the greatness and uniqueness of the Land of Israel.

Land Promise and Offspring Promise

God introduces the discussion of the covenant in ch.15 with a discussion of reward (שכר) in v.1: "Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great." It is subsequently explained that this reward is to consist of two

separate gifts -- Land and offspring. The relationship between these two gifts, and in particular the differences in the way they are spoken about in the passage, lead to much discussion by the medieval commentators.

A. Rashi

In his discussion of 15:6, Rashi offers the following comment:

> Rashi on Gen.15:6[2]
> *He put his trust in the Lord* (והאמין ביהוה):
> [Abraham] did not ask for a sign regarding [offspring], but he did ask regarding the inheritance of the Land, saying to Him, "How shall I know?"[3]
>
> *He reckoned it to his merit* (ויחשבה לו צדקה): The Holy One Blessed be He accounted it to Abraham for merit and for righteousness because of the faith with which he believed in Him.
>
> Another interpretation of "How shall I know?" is that Abraham was not asking for a sign but rather asked him, "By what merit will the promise be fulfilled for [my descendants]?" And God replied, "By the merit of the sacrifices."

Even though Rashi presents this comment as an interpretation of v.6, his real concern appears to be v.8. What is the meaning of Abraham's question, "How shall I know?" Given that God's reply to the question consists of the unusual ritual

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[2] I am using the Rashi text published by Rabbi Haim Dov Chavel, Perushei Rashi 'al HaTorah, (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5746). All translations of commentaries are my own.

[3] v.8.

known as the Covenant Between the Pieces, Rashi understands Abraham's question as a request that God accompany His promises with a sign. This request presents a problem, if the image of Abraham as man of faith is to be retained. Why would a man of such great faith need a sign?

Simply by placing his answer to this question in the context of his discussion of v.6, Rashi is saying that Abraham's faith and trust in God was not to be compromised in order to understand v.8. There had to be another explanation.

One possibility which Rashi offers is that the Abraham's request for a sign referred specifically to the promise of Land, not to the promise of offspring. An obvious objection to that explanation is that the request for a sign regarding the Land still leaves the perfection of Abraham's faith somewhat in doubt. Perhaps that is why Rashi then rushes to remind his readers of the the verse at hand, v.6, which stresses Abraham's faith and God's acknowledgment of that faith. It is as if Rashi knows there is an inconsistency in his explanation of v.8, but hopes that the power of v.6 will overcome the inconsistency through its sheer power.

Rashi does, however, offer an alternative explanation of Abraham's request for a sign, at least indirectly admitting the appearance of a problem with his first explanation. He

derives this second explanation from Meg.31b and Bereshit Rabba 44:14, which posit that Abraham did not request a sign that the Land would indeed be his, but rather he requested information about which particular merit would earn his descendants their inheritance.

This was the traditional rabbinic answer: since the Covenant between the Pieces involved the slaughter of animals, the "sign" meant that it was by dint of the sacrifices that Abraham's descendants would merit the Land. Abraham's query then casts no doubt on the perfection of his faith, for he was only asking for information, not confirmation. And the emphasis on Abraham's descendants in the second explanation helps to expand the meaning of the text beyond Abraham and his personal relationship with God. The promise made to Abraham includes his descendants. That they would inherit the Land is not questioned by either Abraham or God.

B. Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra also comments on Abraham's request for a sign regarding the Land:

Ibn Ezra on Gen.15:7 [4]
Who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans (אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים): ...Abraham believed in God, [and believed] that his son would be his heir. Regarding the inheritance of the Land, Abraham requested a sign, just as Gideon had done.[5]

Another [reason Abraham requested a sign] concerned the nature of God's oath: [Abraham wanted] the matter to be unconditional (בלא תנאי); since in general most prophecies are conditional.

So Abram did not sin in that he requested [God] to make a covenant with him.

Like Rashi's first explanation, Ibn Ezra's interpretation understands Abraham's need for assurance in light of the asymmetry between the Land promise and the offspring promise. Ibn Ezra's interpretation is consistent with Rashi's in that it maintains Abraham's acceptance of the offspring promise on faith. Regarding the promise of Land, however, Abraham wanted a sign which was comparable to the stars in heaven which symbolized the offspring promise (v.5). For Ibn Ezra, the interest in signs is not unusual: he cites the example of Gideon to prove that biblical heroes can indeed ask for signs as part of the normal course of events.

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[4] I am using the text of Ibn Ezra published by Asher Weisser, Ibn Ezra: Perushei HaTorah Le-Rabbenu Avraham Ibn Ezra (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976.

[5] Ju.6:17, 36-40.

However, like Rashi, Ibn Ezra offers an alternative explanation, presumably because he suspected that the first did not entirely satisfy. For those who still harbored some doubt about the propriety of the first Jew's request for a sign, Ibn Ezra notes that Abraham actually had a rational reason for concern. Since God's prophecies are *usually* conditioned upon human behavior, Ibn Ezra says, Abraham simply wanted to make sure that the Land promise was in fact an exception to this rule. The sign he requested would testify that this prophecy, unlike typical prophecies, would not be conditioned on proper human behavior. Abraham's descendants would receive the Land no matter what their behavior.

This strong statement about unconditionality establishes an important element of Israel's relationship to its Land. We will examine in the next chapter a passage about Israel's possession of the Land which speaks in emphatically conditional terms.

But Ibn Ezra's emphasis here is revealing: at least one strain in medieval Jewish thought conceived of the Land of Israel as belonging to Abraham's descendants, the Jewish people, unconditionally. A commentary on Gen.15 was a congenial place to propound this view because no conditions are mentioned as having been attached to the promise made to

Abraham by God in the passage. Since, according to Ibn Ezra, most prophecies are conditional, the fact that no conditions are stipulated here means that Abraham's covenant was indeed entirely unconditional.

Ibn Ezra's defense of Abraham's request for a sign is, like Rashi's, not presented as part of the interpretation of v.8, the actual locus of Abraham's question. He too apparently wants to imbue his explanation of this problem with the atmosphere of a less problematic, more reassuring verse. Whatever their context, both of Ibn Ezra's explanations leave him with the same conclusion: Abraham's request was no sin. It was perfectly acceptable, and in no way impugned his faith.

C. Radak

Radak has a different solution to the problem posed by Abraham's question in v.8, "How shall I know?" In his comment on v.8, he makes it clear that for him, the real meaning of the question may be found in Abraham's desire for reassurance that his descendants would inherit the Land *in perpetuity* (לעולם).[6] He was not satisfied to know simply

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[6] Radak text published by Moshe Kamelhar, Perushei Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak) 'al HaTorah (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1970).

that his children would inherit the Land; the element of eternality had to be there. Abraham was hoping, in Radak's vision, that God would make the promise of eternality in the same prophetic way that He had just made the offspring promise.

Radak is also interested in understanding what act of Abraham's earned him the reward of perpetual covenant. In his discussion of Gen.26:5, a verse which is part of another section which also seems to outline an unconditional Land/offspring covenant, Radak claims that the phrase "inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me" is a reference to the Binding of Isaac in Gen.22. In other words, because Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice his son, the Land would be given to his descendants. Abraham's reward, Radak says, covers both this world and the next.[7] The Land, he notes in his commentary on Gen.15:7, would be an inheritance for Abraham's descendants "just like any inheritance which a man bequeaths to his children."

Radak is much more concerned with stressing the eternality of the Land promise than its unconditionality. In fact, he is the only one of the four commentators I've studied who suggests as part of his commentary on Gen.15

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[7] See his commentary on Gen.15:1.

that in fact the Land promise might have a conditional element: In his commentary on 15:9, he suggests that "as long as [the children of Israel] sacrifice properly, they will not be exiled from the Land." This statement implies that future misbehavior (in this case; violation of the laws of the sacrificial cult) would indeed affect Israel's presence on her Land.

However, Radak claims in the same verse that the covenant between God and Israel would never collapse. In a distinction that will become important as we compare commentaries on unconditional covenant passages with conditional covenant passages, Radak hesitates identifying Israel's presence on the Land with the maintenance of the covenant. The covenant is eternal, but the gift of the Land may be withdrawn in response to future misdeeds. Exile does not mean the abrogation of the covenant.

D. Ramban

Unlike Radak, Ramban does emphasize the unconditional nature of the Land promise, but he arrives at his understanding differently from the way Ibn Ezra had:

Ramban on Gen.15:7 [8]

I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession

(אני יהוה אשר הוצאתיך מאור כשדים לתת לך את הארץ הזאת לרשתה)

I have already explained[9] that God said, "From the time when I took you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and performed a miracle for you, my intent was to give you this Land." So now, He was not decreeing that He would give [the Land] to him. Rather, He was saying that He had taken him from Ur of the Chaldeans with a mind to giving it to him.

Therefore, Abraham feared lest his inheritance of the Land would be dependent on his deeds. This is despite the fact that He had told him twice[10], "I will assign this Land to your offspring." For now the gift [of Land] was not decreed in the same way as the gift of offspring, and therefore Abraham asked, "How shall I know that I am to possess it?"[11]

This is not like the question, "What will be the sign?"[12] The Holy One Blessed be He did not make a sign for him like other signs, showing him a sign or a miracle or something wondrous. But Abraham did request some definite knowledge that he would inherit [the Land], and that neither his sin nor the sin of his offspring would be a factor (לא יגרום חטאו או חטא זרעו), witholding it from them.

[Abraham also worried that] perhaps the Canaanites would repent, in which case [the following verse]

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[8] Ramban text published by Rabbi Haim Dov Chavel, Perushei HaTorah LeRabbenu Moshe ben Nahman (Ramban) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 5720).

[9] Ramban's Commentary on Gen.11:28.

[10] Gen.12:7 and 13:15.

[11] v.8.

[12] 2 Kgs.20:8. This is a reference to the sign which King Hezekiah requests from Isaiah regarding his recovery from illness.

> would apply to them[13]: "At one moment I may decree that a nation or a kingdom will be uprooted and pulled down and destroyed; but if that nation against which I made the decree turns back..., I change My mind concerning the punishment..."
>
> So the Holy One Blessed be He made a covenant with him that he would inherit [the Land] under all circumstances.

Like both Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Ramban notices the lack of symmetry between the Land promise and the offspring promise. Unlike them, he describes the problem explicitly: in 15:5-6, he notes, the promise of offspring had been repeated when Abraham was told to count the stars. The Land promise, however, was not repeated but rather recounted in v.7 -- a recounting which, according to Ramban, was designed to tell Abraham only that God intended to give him the Land as an inheritance from the time when He first brought him out of his homeland. God simply did *not* repeat the Land promise itself at this time in the same dramatic way that He repeated the offspring promise.

This explanation gives rise to two fears in the Abraham which Ramban is portraying for his readers. Both fears are related to the issue of conditionality. First, Abraham fears that perhaps the failure to repeat the Land promise connoted a fundamental difference between the Land promise and the

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[13] Jer.18:7-8.

offspring promise -- namely, that the promise of offspring was unconditional, but the promise of Land was in fact conditioned upon good behavior. Second, Abraham fears that the failure to repeat the Land promise signifies something about the behavior of the Canaanites. Perhaps if they ceased their bad behavior, then they would be allowed to keep the Land. The promise to Abraham's descendants would be withdrawn.

For Ramban, then, Abraham's question in v.8 is a request for assurance that the fears just described would not be realized, and that the Land would be his as an inheritance under all circumstances.[14]

However, Ramban appears to be quite uncomfortable with the idea that this request for reassurance might be interpreted as a request for a sign. His concern appears to be that a "sign" might be construed as a miracle. We will have occasion to note again Ramban's interest in miracles and their place in the relationship between God and the world. In this particular case, he emphasizes that the

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[14] For yet another Jewish view which seeks to defend Abraham's question, see David Berger, The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages (Philadelphia: JPS, 1979), p.47, where the polemicist proposes that Abraham was simply concerned that his children would give up hope of redemption during their long exile -- the sign was meant to strengthen *their* faith.

promise to Abraham did not constitute an extraordinary interference in the natural world. Abraham's request for a sign was not comparable to the way that other people have asked for signs. Whereas Ibn Ezra brought the example of another biblical hero who asked for a sign in order to show that what Abraham did was all right, Ramban brings other examples only to show how different they were from Abraham.

Instead of a miraculous sign therefore, in Ramban's view Abraham asked for "definite knowledge" (ידיעה אמיתית). By this Ramban apparently means, earthly knowledge, the kind of knowledge which people want as part of the natural course of events. Abraham was not looking for a supernatural interference in earthly affairs -- such a request would not have come from a man of his faith. He simply wanted knowledge, confirmation that the Land would be his and that it would be his unconditionally.

Ramban seems to be aware that the unusual events which transpire in the Covenant Between the Pieces might be interpreted as being miraculous. Whether they are or not, for the purposes of his commentary here Ramban stresses that Abraham did not *request* a miraculous sign. The distinction between sign and knowledge is Ramban's method of solving the problem raised by Abraham's question in v.8. It allows him to retain the vision of Abraham as a man of faith which he

described in his comment on v.6. There Ramban had asked, how is it possible that a man who was ready to sacrifice his son, and who passed all the other tests which God set for him, would have anything but perfect faith when given the good tidings of his reward?

While solving the problem of Abraham's request, though, Ramban also managed to stress an important point. Like Ibn Ezra, Ramban explicitly affirms the unconditional nature of the Land promise. Neither Israel's bad behavior, nor the Canaanites' good behavior, would affect God's gift of the Land.

* * *

In sum, Gen.15:5-8 gives rise to two related questions for the medieval commentators: First, why was the Land promise not reiterated in the same dramatic way as the offspring promise, and what does the asymmetry imply? Second, if the Land is given as a reward for Abraham's faith, how could Abraham have impugned that faith by asking God for a sign?

While each of our commentators has his own way of answering these questions, it is noteworthy that none of them proposes that the asymmetry might mean a fundamental qualitative difference between the offspring promise and the Land promise. With the exception of the one Radak comment

mentioned, all the commentaries result in a preservation of the Land promise as unconditional, just as unconditional as the offspring promise.

Abraham does request a sign regarding the Land promise, and various reasons are suggested for why a man of such faith would have wanted a sign. All the proposed "reasons" seem designed to prevent any suggestion either that the Land promise was in some way a less "guaranteed" promise than the offspring promise, or that Abraham's faith was less than perfect.

Ibn Ezra and Ramban openly and emphatically address the issue of unconditionality; for them, Gen.15 proves that the Land would be the inheritance of Abraham's descendants irrespective of their deeds. Rashi implies the same position by his interpretation of Abraham's question as a query only about which particular merit would earn his descendants the Land. Radak, as we have seen, is not as committed to the notion of unconditional fulfillment of the Land promise.

But it seems that for all four, the message of this passage is that the Land was promised to the descendants of Abraham forever. The commentators equated the Land promise with the offspring promise, thus elevating the Land promise to the same level as a promise which had in the Middle Ages

(at least to a certain extent) been fulfilled. The notion that God once said that the Land promise would stand under all circumstances was a very powerful teaching, one which the commentators apparently hoped would comfort Jews accustomed both to Christian succession claims and to their own continuing exile.

The Meaning of Exile

One can readily understand why the unconditional covenant model would have been appealing to medieval Jews searching for ways to reinforce their faith in the face of Christian claims. A verse which proves that God promised the Land of Israel to Abraham's descendants as an unconditional and eternal inheritance would be a powerful weapon in the Jewish polemical arsenal.

However, there is a problem: the "facts on the ground" seemed to undermine any position which held that the Land was to be Israel's possession. By the time of Rashi, Abraham's descendants had not "possessed" the Land, nor even lived in it in any great numbers, for ten centuries. We shall encounter this problem again in our study of the conditional covenant model: the medieval commentators had to account for Israel's conspicuous absence from the Land without casting doubt on Israel's ultimate possession of it.

They did so by investing the various elements of the Covenant Between the Pieces with wide meaning. This approach is in keeping with a long midrashic tradition of seeing in the Covenant between the Pieces many allusions (רמזים) to the historical interactions of Israel with other peoples. These allusions help portray Israel's current exile as simply another part of the seamless web which is God's plan for Abraham's descendants. Return to the Land is as much a part of Jewish destiny as time spent away from it.

A. Rashi

Rashi cites midrashic traditions on the meaning of various elements of the Covenant Between the Pieces, but he prefaces these citations by insisting that the incident may be understood in its simple sense as well. Jer.34:19 proves for Rashi that one of the typical ways of entering into a covenant was to divide an animal and pass between the halves. The ceremony may be understood, therefore, apart from the midrashic tradition as simply a covenant ritual.

The midrashic tradition on this passage, however, is quite powerful and Rashi does offer it in his commentary for those not satisfied with the simple sense. Each of the elements and actions in the ceremony is held to have great symbolic meaning:

Rashi on Gen.15:10
But he did not cut up the bird (ואת הצפר לא בתר)
Because the nations are compared to bulls, heifers, and goats, as it is said,[15] "Many bulls surround Me." And it says,[16] "The two horned ram which you saw signifies the kings of Media and Persia" and "the he-goat is the king of Greece."

But Israel is compared to young doves, as it says,[17] "O my dove in the cranny of the rocks."

Therefore, when he cut up the animals, there was an allusion (רמז) that the nations would gradually perish, and when he did not cut up the bird, there was an allusion that Israel would live forever.

Essentially, the midrashic tradition which Rashi cites teaches that the Covenant Between the Pieces contains within it a prophecy of future events -- namely, the ultimate destruction of the nations in contrast to the eternality of Israel.[18]

His commentary on other verses in the passage includes similar midrashic citations. Abraham's shooing away of the bird of prey in 15:11 is seen (in line with Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, ch.28) as a hint that David son of Jesse wanted to

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[15] Ps.22:13.

[16] Dan.8:20-21.

[17] Song of Songs 2:14.

[18] See Michael Signer, "The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Literature," in The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1986), p.217: "In this moment between past and future glories, biblical narratives are viewed as prefiguring redemptive promise."

finish off the nations, but that "he will not be permitted to do so until King Messiah comes". And Rashi paraphrases Bereshit Rabba 44:17 concerning the "great dark dread" which falls on Abraham (15:12) -- it is seen as an allusion to the sorrows and darkness of the exiles.

The Covenant Between the Pieces then, read through the lens of Rashi's commentary, teaches a powerful message to Jews living in exile. Their seemingly anomalous position outside their Land was a part of God's plan which was foretold centuries ago to the first Jew. The Jewish presence in exile does not mean that the covenant between God and the Jewish people is defunct. On the contrary, the powerful nations of the world are heading toward destruction while Israel's eternality is guaranteed by God Himself.

B. Ibn Ezra

Alone among the four commentators I have studied, Ibn Ezra does not see in the Covenant Between the Pieces allusions to future events. He apparently has little use for the midrashic tradition on this passage, preferring instead the simple meaning (which Rashi had also validated). Since his comments on this passage are aimed primarily at clarifying the meaning and grammar of unusual terminology, they shed little light on his views of the Land and the

covenant.

C. Radak

In contrast to Ibn Ezra, Radak does subscribe to the midrashic tradition of seeing in Gen.15 symbols and portents of future events. In fact, he expands on the midrash, offering a much more comprehensive analysis of the meaning of the various allusions in the text than even Rashi did. I quote just a part of his commentary:

> Radak on Gen.15:9
> *He cut them in two* (ויבתר אתם בתוך):[19]
> ...The number "three" which is mentioned is an allusion (רמז) to the three exiles which [Abraham's] children are destined to experience from their Land, and about which it is also said,[20] "You made them drink great measures (שלישׁ) of tears."
>
> And when it says *heifer*, this is an allusion to the first exile in Egypt, which is called "heifer," as it says,[21] "Egypt is a handsome heifer". Because they were exiled from their Land to [Egypt], and they would have already ruled in their Land were it not for the fact that "the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete".[22]
>
> *A she-goat and a ram* (עז ואיל): This refers to the exile of Babylonia, and Rome which we are in today...

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[19] Radak includes this comment on a phrase from v.10 in his commentary on v.9.

[20] Ps.80.6.

[21] Jer.46:20.

[22] v.16.

> ...The *turtledove* and the *young bird* are compared to Israel, who are trodden under the feet of the nations for their sins in most every age until the coming of the Messiah.

In this passage, Radak skillfully weaves the experience of contemporary Jews into the meaning of the biblical text. He follows the midrashic tradition on this passage by identifying the various birds with different enemies of Israel. But he also adds his own touches to that tradition: Bereshit Rabba 44:15 compares the various actors in the Covenant Between the Pieces with nations, but neither Egypt nor Israel itself is identified with actors in the vision. Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 28 includes Israel as the "young bird," but still does not include the Egyptian experience in its list. Radak's version bows rather more to the obvious allusion in the text to 400 years in Egyptian bondage and so puts Israel's current exile in the context of a series of exiles which were predicted in the passage, which did occur, and which would ultimately end in messianic redemption.[23]

Radak does make a brief reference to Israel's sins as the cause of their (temporarily) downtrodden condition, but Israel's sins are clearly not where he wants to put his

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[23] See also Radak's commentary on 15:12, for a reference to the Egyptian experience as Israel's "first exile."

focus. Much more typical is his sermonette on the bird:

> Radak on Gen.15:9, cont'd.
> Onkelos translated [the bird] as a dove (תורא), and this is the truth, because it is fit for sacrifices, and because it is trampled, but does not itself trample. And likewise with the *turtledove*: their natures have something in common, because the female [of the species] has no desire for another male after the death of her mate. And that is just like Israel in exile, who has been like a widow from the day when her husband separated from her, he being alive and well. Israel did not worship other gods in exile, and despite the fact that the length of the exile has [meant a situation which is] hopeless, as it were, despite this [the verse may be applied], "If we forgot the name of our God and spread forth our hands to a foreign god..."[24]

The skill of the commentator is revealed in his ability to make the biblical text speak to the experience of its readers. Read with Radak's commentary, the text refers to the suffering of which Jews were ever conscious, their existential state of always being trampled on without ever "trampling." At the same time, the analogy of the faithful bird invests nobility and purpose in that suffering, teaching pride in the stubbornness with which Israel has remained loyal to her God. In his analysis of the next verse, 15:10, Radak delivers a similar paean, this time to Israel's unity in faith and Torah despite the sorrows of

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[24] Ps.44:21. Psalm 44 defends Israel as having been faithful to her God despite terrible sufferings and tribulations.

exile, while the nations which afflict her destroy each other out of hatred and competition. The Covenant Between the Pieces provides fertile ground for Radak's homiletic bent.

Another comment about exile, which also manages to combine nicely the promises of Land and offspring, is included in Radak's discussion of Gen.12:7. The verse contains God's words to Abraham when he first arrives in the Land of Israel:

> Radak on Gen.12:7
> *I will assign this land to your offspring* (לזרעך אתן את הארץ הזאת): Despite the fact that I took you out of your homeland to settle in this Land, I didn't say that I would give it to you immediately, nor that I would bequeath [the territory of] the nations to you, because it's not logical. For you are one person and you won't be able to settle the Land until your descendants will be many -- they will inherit it.
>
> But from now on, consider it a gift to you that you may go about [the Land] in its length and in its breadth with all your numerous possessions and property. And no one can say a word to you [to stop you].
>
> But to your offspring, who will be many, I will give [the Land], and I will bequeath [the territory of] the nations to them.
>
> And even for them, when they entered the Land, they had 601,730, not counting the Levite battalions. And it says [regarding them],[25] "I will drive them out from before you little by little, until you have increased and possess the Land."

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[25] Ex.23:30.

Radak's commentary on this verse is a lesson in patience. Abraham was not in a position to inherit the Land at the time God made him the original promise, so the delay in taking possession is revealed as having been logically necessary. Both the promise of offspring and the promise of Land are affirmed. Once the first is fulfilled by means of natural increase, the second will be made possible (and even then only gradually). In the meantime, certain advantages will accrue to having been named the recipient of the promise. Abraham can walk the length and breadth of the Land unmolested.

Radak himself does not explicitly apply this commentary to Israel's experience in his own time. But surely a teaching which contained within it the idea that God's promises remain valid even when contemporary conditions do not permit their immediate fulfillment would have been comforting for his readers.

D. Ramban

Like Rashi and Radak, Ramban shares with his readers the midrashic understanding of Gen.15 as containing portents

of future events.[26] For instance, when Abraham drives the birds of prey away (v.11), Ramban sees a hint that the nations would come in order to stop the sacrificial cult, but the descendants of Abraham would chase them away. Similarly, his discussion of v.12 includes allusions to four exiles which Abraham's descendants would have to endure.

But Ramban reserves his lengthiest comment on this section of Gen.15 for a discussion of the issue from a very different angle. In his commentary on v.14, Ramban considers the problem of why the nation which oppressed Israel at God's behest would itself be judged. I quote selections from Ramban's comment:

> Ramban on Gen.15:14
> *On the nation they shall serve*
> (וגם את הגוי אשר יעבדו):...The correct interpretation of וגם in my opinion is, "Even though I decreed that your offspring should be strangers in a Land not theirs, and that they would enslave them and oppress them, despite this I will judge the nation which will do the enslaving for what they will do. They will not be exempt [from punishment] just because they are carrying out My decree.
>
> And the reason is as it says in Scripture[27], "I am very jealous for Jerusalem -- for Zion -- and I am very angry with those nations that are at ease; for I was only angry a little but they overdid the punishment"...And that's how it was in Egypt when

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[26] See Amos Funkenstein, "Nahmanides' Symbolical Reading of History," in Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage, eds., (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1982) for an extensive discussion of this aspect of Ramban's thought.

[27] Zech.1:14-15.

they added to the evil in that they cast their sons into the Nile and "embittered their lives"[28] and they plotted to wipe out their names. That's the reason for *I will execute judgment* (דן אנכי) -- I'll bring them to justice [to decide] whether they did as had been decreed for them or whether they added to the evil [which they inflicted] on them...

Know and understand that the person about whom it was written and sealed on Rosh Hashanah that he would be killed -- the robbers who kill him are not [considered] innocent just because they are carrying out what was decreed for him. "He, the wicked man, shall die for his iniquity,"[29] but a reckoning for his blood will be made by the murderer.

But when the decree is uttered by a prophet, there are different laws concerning the one who carries it out, for if he heard it and wanted to do the will of his Creator as it was decreed, then there's no sin imputed to him, but rather merit...But if he heard the command but killed him for reasons of hatred, or to get booty from him, he deserves punishment because he had intent to sin. That's what Scripture says concerning Sennacherib:[30] "Ha! Assyria, rod of My anger...I send him against an ungodly nation; I charge him against a people that provokes Me..." And it says,[31] "But he has evil plans; his mind harbors evil designs. For he means to destroy," and that's why he was ultimately punished. "But when my Lord has carried out all his purpose on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, He[32] will punish the majestic pride and overbearing arrogance of the King of Assyria"[33]...

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[28] Ex.1:14.

[29] after Ezek.3:18.

[30] Is.10:5-6.

[31] Is.10:7.

[32] Lit. "I".

[33] Is.10:12.

> And it says concerning this:[34] "Israel are scattered sheep, harried by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured them and in the end King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon crushed their bones. Assuredly thus said the Lord...I will deal with the king of Babylon and his land as I dealt with the king of Assyria"...
>
> Despite [the fact that God had commanded them to destroy Jerusalem], the Chaldeans were ultimately punished, and this was for two reasons: First, he intended also to destroy the whole Land and to enlarge his realm...But for the king of Babylon there was another punishment in that he added to the decree and made things very much worse for Israel [than had been decreed], as it says about him,[35] "I was angry at My people; I defiled My heritage, I put them into your hands. But you showed them no mercy. Even upon the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy."
>
> And for this reason they received a double punishment in that their seed was destroyed entirely, and they will not have "name and remnant, kith and kin".[36] And his city was destroyed forever...

Ramban accomplishes three important goals with this commentary: 1) he explores an important theological problem raised by the text, and proposes a solution; 2) he sets up the parallel between Israel's experience in Egypt and later oppressions; 3) he acknowledges that Israel's suffering stems from her having sinned, but he does so in a way that does not undermine, but rather preserves, Israel's special relationship with God.

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[34] Jer.50:17-18.

[35] Is.47:6.

[36] Is.14:22.

Reading the text together with Ramban's commentary, one is left with the impression that the entire course of Israel's complex relationship with her God, her neighbors, and her Land is represented in the passage. The theological problem of punishment in a world controlled by God is of course an interesting one, and Ramban offers a few rather clever if ultimately unsatisfying comments on it -- most notably, his theory that the punishment was indeed decreed by God but the malevolent intentions of the perpetrators and their overzealousness in carrying out the decree provide justification for their punishment.

Ramban does not hesitate to identify the exile as Israel's punishment by God. He says it here and he says it in his commentary on 15:12. He also says it in his commentary on Gen.12:10, where he claims that the Egyptian slavery resulted from Abraham's behavior in the wife-sister episode with Pharaoh, and his rush to leave Canaan when famine hit (Gen.12:10-20). The punishment comes from God, but the instruments of the punishment are themselves punished because of their motive and method in carrying it out.

Despite the theological discussion, one gets the impression that ultimately, what's most important for Ramban is to convey to his readers the teaching that, whatever the

theological basis, Israel's oppressors would ultimately be punished. The Egyptian experience is a model for their Babylonian experience and, we may infer, for the contemporary medieval experience as well. God was justified in sending Israel to exile from her Land, because she had sinned. But God still loves her as a parent, and becomes angry when those who participated in or perpetuate her exile oppress her beyond His intention.

* * *

As we have seen, the medieval commentators (with the exception of Ibn Ezra) saw Gen.15 and other Genesis passages which speak of an unconditional Land promise as providing a vehicle for explaining the meaning of Israel's continuing exile. Their search for this meaning led them to speak not so much of the origins of that exile but of its guaranteed conclusion. Radak made a passing reference to Israel's sins, Ramban spent somewhat more time on that subject. But none used this passage as an opportunity to dwell on the details of Israel's wrongdoing.

It is as if the commentators assume Israel's sin as part of the background to the discussion, and prefer to use their space here to teach something else: namely, that the end of exile and the crushing of Israel's enemies are as

much a part of God's plan as is Israel's suffering in exile. The same vision, the Covenant Between the Pieces, encompasses both exile and redemption. As the exile which was predicted came to pass (again and again), just as surely would redemption come.

The vision of redemption as encompassing the end of exile as well as Israel's resettlement of the Land, is tied very closely to the messianic redemption in the commentaries on this passage. Rashi (on 15:11) and Radak (on 15:9) mention the Messiah explicitly. But even where the Messiah is not referred to directly, the commentaries on this biblical passage almost uniformly contain a messianic tone. Exile will end, the nations will be destroyed, and Israel will finally take possession of her inheritance -- the Land which God had promised Abraham so long ago.

Characteristics of the Land

The final category of comments on this chapter which I will examine are those which reflect something of the commentators' vision of the Land of Israel itself. What are the characteristics of this Land which had been promised Abraham and which his descendants were still waiting to claim? With the exception of Ibn Ezra, all the commentators under study reveal something of this vision in their

commentaries.

A. Rashi

The delineation of the boundaries of the Land which are specified in v.18 provides Rashi with an opportune place to discuss the characteristics of the Land:

> Rashi on Gen.15:18
> *The great river* (הנהר הגדל): Because it is in proximity to the Land of Israel, it is called "great," despite the fact that it is the last of the four rivers which went out of Eden, as it says,[37] "the fourth river, the Euphrates."
> There is a common proverb: The servant of a king is a king; stick to the skipper and everyone will kowtow to you.

This common proverb is found in variant forms in both B.T. Shevuot 47b and in Sifre Deuteronomy, Piska 6. It is an ancient tradition which Rashi apparently likes: the "greatness" of the Euphrates is due to its proximity to the Land of Israel. The Land of Israel is compared to a king, and this king is so great that some of his greatness is imparted to those around him. This notion was apparently a popular idea for the medievals: Radak cites the same proverb in his commentary on this verse. The Land which Abraham's descendants would inherit is as superior to its neighbors as

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[37] Gen.2:14.

a king is to his servant.[38]

In his commentary on the next verse, Gen.15:19, Rashi makes another claim about the borders of the Land. He notes that this verse lists the territory of ten Canaanite nations as comprising the Land. But in Dt.7:1, Moses lists the areas which the people are about to cross the Jordan and occupy as comprising only seven nations. Three of the nations, Rashi says, will become Israel's inheritance only in the future. Rashi derives this idea from Bereshit Rabba 44:23, but it is noteworthy that while in the midrash, the children of Israel take possession of the remaining three nations "in the days of the Messiah," Rashi changes the time frame to simply "the future."

Borders are not the only characteristic which occupy Rashi's attention. In his commentary on 26:2, He paraphrases Bereshit Rabba 64:3: God told Isaac not to go down to Egypt as his father had done -- because he is considered an unblemished burnt offering (עלה תמימה), and therefore

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[38] Marc Saperstein cautions us that there is a methodological problem with taking hyperbolic statements about the Land of Israel at face value: "We learn most about the role of the Land of Israel not from hyperbolic praise, but rather from discussions that reveal tension or conflict between loyalty to the Land and other values in Jewish life." See his "The Land of Israel in Pre-Modern Jewish Thought" in The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp.189-90.

leaving the Land of Israel was not befitting him. This comment testifies to the very special status which Rashi ascribed to the Land.

Another unique quality of the Land which is first mentioned in the Talmud[39] and which is quoted by Rashi is its ability to physically demonstrate the extent of the covenant. When God reiterates the Land promise to Jacob in Gen.28:13, He speaks of "the ground on which you are now lying" as being assigned to Jacob and his offspring. Lest anyone should think that the promise referred only to that little piece of ground on top of which Jacob lay, Rashi quotes the tradition that the entire Land of Israel folded itself underneath Jacob as God made the pronouncement.[40] Therefore, the Land helped make clear to any doubters that it, in its entirety, would belong to Jacob and his descendants.

B. Radak

Another characteristic of the Land which is explored in medieval commentaries is implied in many places, but stated

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[39] B.T. Hullin 91b.

[40] Radak quotes the same tradition, with the difference that he says that it was "as if" (כאילו) the entire Land folded itself under Jacob.

most forthrightly by Radak in his commentary on Gen.13:14. The Land of Israel is intended *only* for the descendants of Abraham:

> Radak on Gen.13:14
> *And the Lord said to Abram* (וי־הוה אמר אל אברם):
> [God spoke] while Lot was still with him, lest Abram think that Lot too would have a portion in the Land since he was a relative, and went out [from Haran] with him. As [Abram] said to [Lot],[41] "Is not the whole land before you?"
>
> And then, after Lot had parted from [Abram], [God] said to [Abram], "Don't think that another will have a portion in the Land. Rather to you alone and to your offspring I give it. Don't think that Lot and his offspring will have a portion in the Land with your children...I will give Lot an inheritance as well because he is your relative, but in a different place, as it says, "I have assigned [Ar] as an inheritance to the descendants of Lot".[42]

If, according to Radak's understanding, the descendants of Lot were excluded from having a portion in the Land, then all the more so would those nations which have no familial relationship to Abraham have no place in the Land. God promised the Land to Abraham's descendants and to them alone would He ultimately grant it.

C. Ramban

Ramban testifies to the uniqueness of the Land in his commentary on Gen.15:18, which contains many of the elements

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[41] Gen.13:9.

[42] Dt.2:9.

we have already seen in addition to some new ideas:

Ramban on Gen.15:18

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying (ביום ההוא כרת יהוה את אברם בריח לאמר): Behold, the Holy One Blessed be He promised Abraham the gift of the Land many times, and each one was for a particular purpose. When he came to the Land the first time, He told him,[43] "I will assign this Land to your offspring." He didn't clarify [the extent of] His gift because the significance of it applied only in those places where he walked in the Land "as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh."[44]

But afterwards, when his merits multiplied in the Land, He added to it: "Raise your eyes and look out...to the north and south, to the east and west"[45] -- He would assign him all the lands, in their totality. For the meaning of "that you see with your eyes"[46] [is not literal], because the vision of a person doesn't extend very far. Rather, it means that He would assign him [land] in every direction[47] which his eyes see. Or [it may mean] that He showed him the entire Land of Israel, as [happened with] Moses.

And He added to this second blessing by saying,[48] "to your offspring forever", and that his seed would increase "like the dust of the earth".[49]

The third time, He clarified for him the borders of the Land and mentioned for him all the peoples,

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[43] Gen.12:7.

[44] Gen.12:6.

[45] Gen.13:14.

[46] Gen.13:15.

[47] Lit., "winds". This comment may be seen as another attempt, parallel to Rashi's notion that the Land folded underneath Jacob, to explain why the borders of the Land of Israel went beyond those areas where the patriarchs (to whom it was originally promised) visited.

[48] Gen.13:15.

[49] Gen.13:16.

> ten nations, and He added to this by making a covenant with him concerning them -- that sin should not be a factor (לא יגרום החטא).
>
> And when He commanded him concerning circumcision, He said[50] "an everlasting holding", meaning that if they're ever exiled from [the Land] they would still return and inherit it.
>
> And He added,[51] "I will be their God." God in His glory would lead them; they would not be under the governance of star or constellation, nor one of the heavenly ministers, as will yet be made clear in the Torah...

In this passage, Ramban addresses some of the important themes which we have already seen, portraying God's promise as a progressive series of promises, each building on the previous one. In consonance with Abraham's ever increasing merit, the gift continues to become more and more generous. The borders increase beyond the circumscribed areas in which Abraham himself traveled. The inheritance becomes explicitly unconditional and eternal. Any future exiles would be only temporary. And God himself would rule Israel, not an angel.

It is this last point which I would like to address here. Although in his commentary on this verse, Ramban expresses this concept as being oriented to the *people* Israel, he himself refers us to a later passage in his commentary in which the idea of God's direct rule is applied

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[50] Gen.17:8.

[51] Gen.17:8.

to the Land of Israel. In his commentary on Lev.18:25, Ramban states the following:

> Ramban on Lev.18:25
> ...But the Land of Israel, which is in the middle of the inhabited earth, is the heritage of the Lord, and designated for His name. He did not assign for it one of the angels, as a "leader, officer, or ruler",[52] when He gave it as a heritage to His people who declare the unity of His name, the offspring of His beloved ones.

In addition to placing the Land of Israel at the geographic center of the world, Ramban here expands on the idea which he referred to only in passing in his comment on Gen.15:18. Every country is assigned a ministering angel[53], except for Israel. Israel -- Land and people -- are ruled by God alone.[54]

Consequently, Ramban continues, the Land of Israel has unique characteristics. Among these are an inability to contain idol-worshippers or those who engage in forbidden sexual relationships. It spits them out.[55] Ramban cites the

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[52] Pr.6:7.

[53] Ramban cites Dt.32:8-9 to prove this assertion.

[54] See Marc Saperstein, "The Land of Israel in Pre-Modern Jewish Thought", pp.198-200 for a fuller discussion of the rabbinic formulation and medieval reformulation of this notion. Shalom Rosenberg discusses Ramban's perspective in "The Link to the Land of Israel in Jewish Thought," p.154.

[55] Radak also comments on the relationship of the Land of Israel with its (temporary) Gentile inhabitants. See Frank Talmage, David Kimhi, pp.152-53.

Midrash and the Talmud to prove his assertion that the Land of Israel is unique. He quotes Sifra Kedoshim 12:14 -- "The Land of Israel is unlike other lands; it is unable to contain sinners." He quotes B.T. Ketubot 110b -- "Whoever lives outside the Land, is like one who has no God"; He quotes Sifre Ekev 43 -- we should perform the commandments outside the Land so they "won't be new to us" when we return because "the main [fulfillment] of the commandments is [to be kept] when dwelling in the Land of God." And He quotes Sifre R'eih, 80 -- "Dwelling in the Land of Israel is of equal importance to all the commandments of the Torah."

Additionally, in his commentary on Gen.26:5, Ramban claims that after Abraham learned the entire Torah from the Holy Spirit (רוח הקודש), he observed its commandments -- but only while inside the Land; Jacob, too, was able to marry two sisters only because he was residing outside the Land.

Thus Ramban makes as clear and forceful a statement as possible concerning the special character of the Land of Israel. Being under the direct tutelage of God, the Land simply cannot tolerate sinners, and vomits them out. That theory certainly explains the exile. But by combining the idea of the Land's intolerance for sinners with the Land's special place in the performance of God's commandments, Ramban signals his readers that hope of return is not lost.

As he says, if Abraham's descendants are ever exiled, they would return. Sin may lose them the Land temporarily, but it would not affect the basic covenant between God and Abraham, in which the ultimate fulfillment of the Land promise plays a major role.

* * *

The description of the characteristics of the Land of Israel which are included in medieval commentaries seem to carry two important messages. One message is that the virtues of the Land are unparalleled; it is a truly wonderful place to be. The Land is variously described as "great" and "pure", at the "center of the inhabited world" and in special, direct relationship with God.

The other essential message is that there exists a unique bond between the Land of Israel and the people of Israel. The Land is said to be the inheritance only of Abraham's actual descendants, not even the descendants of a close relative. For Jacob, the Land folds itself up so that the boundaries of the promise would be clear. And those who violate Israel's Torah are vomited out of the Land.

This vision of the Land of Israel seems designed to strengthen the Jewish reader's connection to the Land of

Israel, reinforcing the Land's position as the place where the people of Israel should ideally be, the place towards which they should direct their prayers and their hopes.

We have seen that the medieval commentators were interested in three principal areas in their discussion of Gen.15 and other "unconditional covenant" passages. They were interested in the relationship between the offspring promise and the Land promise, and the extent to which sin affected the fulfillment of each. They were interested in ascribing meaning to Israel's exile from her Land, given the unconditional nature of the promise. And they were interested in the characteristics of the Land itself, and the implications of these characteristics.

The overarching message they seem to want to communicate to their readers is, keep the faith. The Christians may say that the Jewish covenant with God has been superseded by their own, but we have it, in writing, that the Jewish covenant is eternal and unconditional. The exile is a punishment for Jewish sins, surely. But while the Jews are serving their sentence, they can take comfort in the fact that ultimate return to the Land is as much a part of God's plan for them as exile from it. This return is seen as part of the Jews' ultimate redemption. The Land which was

promised as an inheritance to the Jews because of the merit of Abraham is therefore placed in a messianic context.[56]

Abraham is of course the model of faith in the passage. All of the commentators feel some need to address the issue of why he asked for a sign that the promise would be fulfilled. Some of the commentators claim to have no problem with his request for a sign; others tried to portray it as something other than an actual request for a sign. The issue must have been an immediate one for medieval Jews. To what extent were Jews permitted to question God about the long delayed fulfillment of the promise? All "signs" in the Middle Ages must have indicated that the Jewish covenant was finished. Maintaining allegiance to that covenant in the midst of exile required faith. The commentators clearly hoped that their teaching of Torah would strengthen that faith.

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[56] We will have occasion below to examine the nature of this messianic association. The commentators discuss the extent to which Israel's return to its Land necessarily involves a complete eschatological break in history.

CHAPTER II

THE CONDITIONAL COVENANT: LEVITICUS 26

The twenty-sixth chapter of Leviticus represents an example of the covenant model which is often labelled "conditional." The fundamental message of the chapter is that if the children of Israel follow God's statutes and commandments, then God will bless them in their land -- with rain, abundant crops, security, peace, and great fertility. But, if Israel fails to observe the commandments, then at God's behest the Land would no longer sustain them, their enemies would afflict them, and they would ultimately be exiled from the Land. Under this model, then, the blessings of the Land are directly dependent upon Israel's good behavior; God's favor would be withdrawn if Israel does not obey.

The passage contains three principal themes -- reward for righteous behavior, punishment for sin, and hope despite punishment. The first two verses of ch.26 seem to belong with ch.25, which contains various injunctions which would come into effect once the children of Israel entered the Land. I

will follow the traditional Jewish division,[1] and confine my discussion to the material in vv.3-45 of ch.26.

LEV. 26:3-45

3. If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments,
4. I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit.
5. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.
6. I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land.
7. You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.
8. Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.
9. I will look with favor upon you, and make you fertile and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you.
10. You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new.
11. I will establish My abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you.
12. I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people.
13. I the Lord am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

14. But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments,
15. If you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant,
16. I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you -- consumption and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish; you shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your enemies shall eat it.

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[1] Lev.26:3 is the first verse of a new weekly Torah portion known as בחקותי. The second part of the chapter is known also as תוכחה, words of rebuke, and in the synagogue this section is traditionally chanted in an undertone.

17. I will set My face against you: you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you. You shall flee though none pursues.
18. And if, for all that, you do not obey Me, I will go on to discipline you sevenfold for your sins,
19. And I will break your proud glory. I will make your skies like iron and your earth like copper,
20. So that your strength shall be spent to no purpose. Your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit.
21. And if you remain hostile toward Me, and refuse to obey Me, I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins.
22. I will loose wild beasts against you, and they shall bereave you of your children and wipe out your cattle. They shall decimate you, and your roads shall be deserted.
23. And if these things fail to discipline you for Me, and you remain hostile to Me,
24. I too will remain hostile to you: I in turn will smite you seven fold for your sins.
25. I will bring a sword against you to wreak vengeance for the covenant; and if you withdraw into your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into enemy hands.
26. When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall break your bread in a single oven; they shall dole out your bread by weight, and though you eat, you shall not be satisfied.
27. But if, despite this, you disobey Me and remain hostile to Me,
28. I will act against you in wrathful hostility; I, for My part, will discipline you sevenfold for your sins.
29. You shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters.
30. I will destroy your cult places and cut down your incense stands, and I will heap your carcasses upon your lifeless fetishes. I will spurn you.
31. I will lay your cities in ruin and make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not savor your pleasing odors.
32. I will make the land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it.
33. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheath the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin.
34. Then shall the land make up for its sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years.
35. Throughout the time that it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your sabbath years while you were dwelling upon it.

36. As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies.
37. With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword. You shall not be able to stand your ground before your enemies,
38. But shall perish among the nations; and the land of your enemies shall consume you.
39. Those of you who survive shall be heartsick over the iniquity in the land of your enemies; more, they shall be heartsick over the iniquities of their fathers;
40. And they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, in that they trespassed against Me, yea, were hostile to Me.
41. When I, in turn, have been hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their obdurate heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity.
42. Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land.
43. For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws.
44. Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God.
45. I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the Lord.

It is clear from their commentaries that the medieval Jewish commentators saw much in this passage which they wanted to communicate to their readership. The passage elicited a discussion of certain issues which were crucial for the Jewish debate with non-Jews, and for Jewish self-understanding as well.

If any question lay at the core of the Jewish-Christian debate in the Middle Ages, it was the question of the

relationship between the Jewish people and God. In Christian thought, the Jewish people had once been God's chosen people. But because they stubbornly rejected the new reality brought about by Jesus, and indeed conspired in his crucifixion, God had rejected them and the covenant He had made with them. The exile from their Land was the surest proof of this rejection.[2]

Jews, naturally, thought somewhat differently. They acknowledged that their exile was brought about by God. But they affirmed that exile constituted a punishment, not an abrogation of the covenant between God and the Jewish people. God's intimate relationship with the Jewish people continued, and He would one day bring them back to the Land of Israel.

Given the centrality of this issue in Jewish-Christian polemic, Lev.26 proved fertile ground for the medieval commentators to present the Jewish view.[3] The passage

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[2] See Marcel Simon, Verus Israel, H. McKeating trans., (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), pp.67-68, for a discussion of the origins in the early Church of the longstanding Christian view that the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews was punishment for Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus.

[3] See E.I.J. Rosenthal, "Anti-Christian Polemic in Medieval Bible Commentaries" Journal of Jewish Studies XI (1960), pp.115-135 for a discussion of medieval Jewish commentaries as a response to Christian interpretations.

contained all the important elements -- God, Israel, reward, punishment, hope, the Land. The passage allowed the medieval commentators to explain the presence of the Jewish people in exile from their Land in a way that refuted Christian claims about the meaning of Israel's exile. And in addition, the passage provided an opportunity for the medieval commentators to arm their readers with an understanding of the exile which affirmed continued allegiance to rabbinic Judaism as the only way to bring about God's blessing, and not His curse, upon the Jewish people.

I will be examining the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban on Lev.26; Radak's commentary on Leviticus has survived only in tiny fragments.

Rewards

The first part of the passage (vv.3-13) concerns the reward which Israel would receive if she but followed God's laws. In their examination of this section, the medieval commentators set for themselves the task of clarifying the nature of the behavior which Israel must engage in for the reward to be granted, as well as understanding the exact nature of the reward which will be forthcoming once that condition is met. Lying behind their comments and clarifications in both these areas, however, seems to be

another goal -- to show that the promise of rewards outlined in the first part of בחקותי is still valid, and *still applies to the Jewish people*. Every lush description, every detailed elaboration, every clarifying interpretation which the medievals give to the rewards outlined in vv.3-13 contains within it the assumption that God's offer still stands; the rewards would still one day be Israel's; God still desires a covenant with the people, in the Land.

A. Rashi

Rashi's commentary on the first part of בחקתי expands on the condition and the reward which are outlined in the biblical text. Verse 3, for example, establishes the conditional tone of the passage. In his commentary on this verse, Rashi first quotes the Sifra, which interprets the injunction to follow God's laws:

> Rashi on Lev.26:3
> *If you follow My laws* (אם בחקותי תלכו):
> You might have thought that this refers to fulfilling the commandments [מצות], but [the verse goes on to say explicitly] *faithfully observe My commandments* and this clearly refers to observing the commandments. So what does *If you follow My laws* mean? You should labor in Torah (שתהיו עמלים בתורה).

Rashi then proceeds to elaborate on the Sifra:

> *And observe My commandments* (ואת מצותי תשמרו):
> Labor in Torah in order to observe and fulfill it, as it says,[4] "You shall study them and observe them to do them."

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[4] Dt.5:1.

First, a methodological note concerning the analysis of Rashi: virtually every Rashi comment on Lev.26 is based on the Sifra, a Midrash on the book of Leviticus. Rashi often abbreviates and simplifies long Sifra passages, citing only what he sees as their kernel. Where his paraphrases represent what I see as an important departure from the meaning or emphasis of the Sifra passage, I will note the change and attempt to explain it.

In the comment just quoted, Rashi seeks to define the "condition" which Israel must fulfill as her side of the conditional covenant. His definition succeeds in setting up that condition as something very much within the comprehension and reach of contemporary Jews -- observance of the commandments and study of Torah.

The Sifra establishes the tradition of interpreting the two halves of this verse as study and observance. But Rashi clarifies the midrash -- twice he equates the word "commandments" in the verse with "observance of the commandments" (קיום מצות), a phrase which did not appear in the Sifra. Thus Rashi makes the Sifra's distinction between performing God's commandments and studying Torah even clearer. The first obligation of the Jew is to study Torah, and observance of the Torah's precepts will follow from that study. Both elements are contained in Lev.26:3, and both

constitute conditions for the rewards which are outlined in the chapter.

Rashi does not pretend that these are easy conditions to fulfill -- the word עמל׳ם connotes hard labor. But the exhortation to study and observe the commandments was surely a familiar one to medieval Jews. Neither the תורה nor the מצות were portrayed as something which would have been impossible for medieval Jews to fulfill. Rather, in accordance with rabbinic tradition, the condition was set up as something that medieval Jews could indeed aspire to fulfill. All the rewards which God elaborates on in the ensuing verses would be Israel's, if she would only labor hard in study and observance of the commandments of the Torah. And if the condition could still be fulfilled, then clearly the offer still stood. If Israel did her part, God would restore her to her land.

After clarifying the conditions, Rashi offers his readers his vision of the reward which they would recieve once they fulfill the conditions. Following the biblical text, Rashi sees Israel returning to her Land. But the Land will have been transformed in an unprecedented way.

The promise in v.5 that "you shall eat your fill of bread" is interpreted by Rashi (following the interpretation

in Sifra) to mean that the one who eats even a little bit will be satisfied ("blessed in his bowels"). Rashi here follows the text closely: the plenty will be such that "you will be busy with the threshing until the vintage, and busy with the vintage until the sowing."

The promise of abundant food is accompanied by a promise of security for the people in the Land: "no sword shall cross your Land" (v.6) is elaborated by Rashi (again paraphrasing Sifra) -- not only would Israel's enemies not make war on her, but they would not even pass through Israel on their way to making war on others. To make his vision even clearer, Rashi evokes the image of Eden with his citation of Sifra on v.12:

> Rashi on Lev.26:12
> *I will be ever present in your midst* (והתהלכתי בתוככם): I will walk with you in the Garden of Eden as one of you, and you will not be alarmed by Me. One might have thought that this means that you will not be in awe of Me. That's why it is said,[5] "I will be your God."

Significantly, Rashi chooses to omit the specific linkage of the Garden of Eden with "the world to come" which was made in the midrash. It appears that despite Rashi's interest in portraying the reward which Israel would receive as something fantastic and entirely beyond the experience of his readers, he is reluctant to associate this first part of בחקתי with the Messiah and the world to come.

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[5] Ex.6:7.

We have seen Rashi convey to his readers his understanding of the condition which the Jewish people must fulfill in order to merit the reward. We have seen him expand on the description of the reward which is contained in the passage. In his commentary on v.9, Rashi places that reward on the Jewish historical "map." He paraphrases Sifra:

> Rashi on Lev.26:9
> *I will maintain My covenant with you* (וקמתי את בריתי אתכם): A new covenant, not like the first covenant which you violated, but rather a new covenant which you will not violate, as it is said[6], "I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah." Not like the first covenant.

Rashi here uses the very language which Christians had appropriated from Jeremiah for their Scriptures: ברית חדשה is the term for the New Testament in Hebrew.[7] Rashi is saying here that "new covenant" is Jewish language. The new covenant is not a reference to the New Testament but rather a term which will describe a new relationship between God and the Jewish people. This new relationship, unlike the old, will be characterized by faithful Jewish obedience to the terms of the covenant.

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[6] Jer.31:31.

[7] According to J. Klausner, the term for "New Testament" in Greek is a direct translation of ברית חדשה in Jer.31:31. (Encyclopedia Judaica 12:1059); See D.Berger, The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), pp.89-90 for explicit Jewish polemical refutation of the Christian interpretation of Jer.31:31.

B. Ibn Ezra

Characteristically, Ibn Ezra's commentary is much more laconic than that of Rashi. The bulk of his comments consist of grammatical explanations of various biblical terms. However, his commentary on certain verses reveals his underlying approach to the content of the passage.

Like Rashi, Ibn Ezra interprets the commandment which is set forth as the condition in v.3 as involving study and observance. He adds the element of teaching as well, a part of the package of conditions which was not mentioned (explicitly) by Rashi.

Ibn Ezra also shares Rashi's belief that the reward when it came would consist not just of a return to the Land of Israel, but to a Land of Israel transformed. He sees the Land as a place of unprecedented peace: the שלום spoken of in v.6 is construed by Ibn Ezra both as peace among Jews themselves, and as respite from beasts and enemies. Israel's enemies would fall before her.

The fertility spoken of in v.9 is amplified by Ibn Ezra. When God (re-)established His covenant with Israel, they would be in numbers as the stars of heaven and the dust of the

earth, a comment which evokes the (unconditional) covenant made between God and the patriarchs.[8]

In Ibn Ezra's vision, not only would Israel be restored to the Land, but her life in that Land would be altogether different from the one she knew in exile.

C. Ramban

Ramban's commentary does not include a discussion of v.3, perhaps a reflection of his emphasis on the rewards Israel would receive rather than on the conditions they would have to fulfill in order to merit those rewards.

Like Rashi, Ramban evokes the image of Eden in his description of the rewards. We will see, however, that because of his penchant for philosophical discourses, Ramban is able to convey more directly than Rashi his understanding of the religious status of the transformed Land of Israel which the Jewish people would inherit.

Verse 4 is already rather lush in its imagery but the original seems spare when read together with Ramban:

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[8] See above, ch.1.

Ramban on Lev.26:4
I will grant your rains in their season (ונתתי גשמיכם בעתם): The matter of rains is mentioned first because when they come at the proper time, the air is pure and good, and the wells and the rivers are good. And this will lead to bodily health, and all the fruits will multiply and be blessed by [the rains], as it is said, *the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit*. Therefore, people will never get sick, nor will any woman miscarry or be barren[9], not even among the cattle. And they will live out full life spans, because their bodies will be big and healthy just as in the days of Adam, and that is why [the rains] are the greatest of all blessings...

With this description, Ramban clearly plunges with great zest into the description of the reward which Israel would receive if she but adhered to her side of the covenant. Ramban's comment portrays the rewards in entirely other-worldly terms. It's not just that the rains will come when the farmers need them, yielding good crops and abundant fruit. Ramban says that the reward will take us back to the time of Adam, when the air and the wells and the rivers were pure, and people were big and strong and did not know sickness throughout their long lives.

Ramban manages to be faithful to the agricultural imagery of the verse, while expounding on it in such a way that even non-farmers could revel in it. The hyperbole in his descriptions ensures that no reader would make the mistake of thinking that the rewards would come in the place where he or

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[9] See Ex.23:26.

she was. The rains referred to in v.4 would fall not in Spain nor in Ashkenaz nor in North Africa, but only in the Land of Israel.[10]

Ramban makes his Eden imagery even clearer in his exposition of 26:6, when he says that at the time when Israel fulfills the commandments, the Land of Israel will become "as the world was before the sin of Adam," in that no beast or creeping thing will be able to kill a man. He continues further,

> Ramban on Lev.26:6
> When [the people of Israel achieves a state of] perfection, the beasts of the Land of Israel will cease from their harmful ways, returning to the nature which God gave them at the time of their creation.

With this comment, Ramban extends the Return to Creation theme which he presented in v.4. But here, he removes any doubt about which ארץ was being referred to -- it is the Land of Israel where the beasts will suddenly cease to be dangerous, and it is the Land of Israel where all the other promises would be fulfilled.

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[10] See Ramban's commentary on Dt.11:10 for his view that Israel's dependence on rains sent by God rather than more constant sources of fresh water like the Nile makes it spiritually superior. The understanding of agricultural imagery in its literal sense may also have been a response to Christian allegorizing. See D. Berger The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages (Philadelphia: JPS, 1979), p.70, for a Jewish refutation of a Christian view that the old and new grain mentioned in Lev.26:10 is a reference to the Old and New Testaments.

The Land of Israel for Ramban has become inextricably linked with these promises. It's not the Land alone which God promises to the people if they fulfill their part of the bargain. God promises the Land transformed into the Garden of Eden.

In a comment which perhaps evokes the offspring promise we saw in Gen.15, Ramban's discussion of v.11 speaks of Israel's reward in terms of her numbers. On v.11, Ramban states a general rule that when Israel is "complete and in great number" [בהיות ישראל שלמים והם רבים], God does not treat them in a "natural" way.[11] Neither their bodies nor their Land would be subject to the defects of the past. Individuals would be be in perfect physical health, and the Land would receive all the blessings of abundance spoken of in the chapter.

The distinction between individual blessings and blessings for the whole people is an important one for Ramban.

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[11] See D. Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides," in Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 107-28. Berger claims that in Ramban's system, God retains unrestricted right of intervention in the natural order, but that such interventions remain very much the exception in a world which otherwise functions in an entirely naturalistic way (p.128). The world that Ramban is describing in his commentary on Lev.26, however, is different from this world. We will see below how the tension in Ramban's thought between miracle and natural order is played out in his vision of the Land once Israel has returned.

In the continuation of his comment on v.11, he recalls the blessings mentioned in Ex.23:25,26 -- blessings for fertility, sustenance and health. Those blessings are for the individual, Ramban explains. But the blessings mentioned in Lev.26 are not just for the individual.

> Ramban on Lev.26:11
> But these blessings, which are in this section [Lev.26], are general for the whole people. And they will come about when the whole people is righteous (צדיק). And that's why the Land is constantly mentioned here: "The Land shall yield",[12] "[dwell] securely in your Land",[13] "peace in the Land",[14] "[give rest from vicious animals] for the Land",[15] "[a sword] shall not cross your Land."[16]

For Ramban, then, repeated mention of the Land serves as "proof" of a corporate blessing for all of Israel. The Land is the self-evident place where Israel's corporate reward would be manifested. Until all of Israel is righteous, certain individuals may receive God's blessing of health, sustenance, and progeny. But the ultimate blessing which Israel as a whole would receive once all of the individuals who comprise her attain the status of צדיק is the blessing spoken of in Lev.26, and this blessing will only be manifested in the Land of Israel.

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[12] v.4.

[13] v.5.

[14] v.6.

[15] v.6.

[16] v.6.

Ramban walks a fine line in his description of the manner in which the blessings of Lev.26 would come about. On the one hand, he notes that "all these blessings are miracles" -- e.g., that the rains should come in their due time, and that a hundred of Israel's enemies would flee before five. As noted above, he also brought up the כלל, the general rule, that when Israel is complete and constituting a large number, God does not behave with her בטבע, according to the natural order.

However, in his commentary on v.11 Ramban claims that the miracles will be "hidden miracles" [נסים נסתרים], because they are brought about by means of the natural events of the world. The fact that they are miracles is made known because of their constant and continuous occurence in the Land.

It seems apparent that Ramban is reluctant to portray the new situation which would come about once Israel behaves righteously as a complete and utter, eschatological, break with the past. Israel's blessing would be given to her by way of miracles, but these supernatural miracles would be brought about in a "natural" way.

This argument may sound rather self-contradictory, but it is apparently important for Ramban to emphasize both the uniqueness of the transformation, and its occurence in nature. In this regard, it is interesting that in the entire lengthy

discussion of the rewards Israel would receive once she behaved righteously, Ramban does not once mention the Messiah. The era of blessings/miracles which is discussed in this passage may sound a great deal like the messianic era. And yet, for reasons about which I will speculate below, Ramban resists associating the rewards mentioned in Lev.26 with the coming of the Messiah.

* * *

Reading the first part of Lev.26 together with the medieval commentaries, one is left with an understanding both of the condition which must be met for Israel to merit her reward, and of the precise nature of the reward itself. Once Israel faithfully adheres to God's commandments as outlined for her by rabbinic Judaism, then she will be brought back to a Land transformed into a place of unprecedented, miraculous peace, security, prosperity. There will be a new covenant, but it will be "new" only in the sense that, unlike the old, this covenant will be adhered to by Israel. The new covenant will be between the same two partners -- God, and the descendants of those who entered into the first covenant -- namely, the Jewish people. The wondrous rewards of Lev.26 would one day be Israel's.

Punishments

We have seen that in their discussion of the first part of בחקותי, the medieval commentators without hesitation applied the conditions stipulated and the rewards described, to the Jewish people. The subject of the rewards is the Jews, and God is simply waiting for them to demonstrate their fulfillment of the conditions for the reward to be granted.

The second part of בחקותי, however, presents a different problem for the medieval interpreters. They are reluctant to apply to contemporary Jews the terrible punishments which are described in the second part of the passage. They are reluctant to see these punishments as the end result of Israel's failure to obey her end of the covenant. Some explanation or qualification was required, both for the sake of their Jewish readership and for the non-Jewish world which might be tempted to see in the passage divine sanction for their oppression of the Jews.

A. Rashi

The opening verses of the second part of the passage are vv.14 and 15, which parallel v.3 except that they are in the negative: "But if you do *not* obey Me and do not observe all these commandments, if you reject My laws and spurn My rules,

so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant..."

We saw that Rashi explained v.3, the introduction to the rewards Israel would receive if she adhered to God's covenant, in a way that placed the condition within the familiar world of rabbinic Judaism -- study and observance of Torah. Now Rashi introduces the section describing the dire punishments Israel would receive also using the familiar language of commandment and Torah. But the explanation here is much longer and in the end, the reader is left with the impression that the target group for the punishments is very different from the target group for the rewards:

> Rashi on Lev.26:14,15
> *But if you do not obey Me* (ואם לא תשמעו לי): to be laborers in Torah, to know the teachings of the Sages. One might have thought that it referred to the performance of mitzvot, but [later on it refers to mitzvot], so here it means to be laborious in [the study of] Torah.
> *Me* (לי): This means that the reference is to one who knows his Master and yet deliberately rebels against Him. For example, Nimrod, a "mighty hunter before the Lord"[17], who knows God and yet determines to rebel against Him. Also, the people of Sodom, "very wicked sinners against the Lord"[18], who know God and yet determine to rebel against Him. *And do not observe* (ולא תעשו): Whoever does not study [Torah], does not observe [Torah].
>
> *If you reject my laws* (ואם בחקתי תמאסו): rejecting others who do [keep the covenant]. *And spurn My rules* (ואם את משפטי תגעל נפשכם): Someone who hates the Sages. *So that you do not observe* (לבלתי עשות):

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[17] Gen.10:9.

[18] Gen.13:13.

> Preventing others from doing [the commandments]. *All My commandments* (את כל מצותי): One who denies that I commanded [the mitzvot]. *And you break My covenant* (להפרכם את בריתי): One who denies God (כופר בעיקר)...

This introduction to the punishment section of בחקותי immediately undercuts those who would use this section to claim that Israel violated the covenant with God, and that the covenant is now severed. On the contrary, Rashi says, the passage is a ringing affirmation of rabbinic Judaism as the proper fulfillment of the covenant.

Rashi's paraphrasing of the Sifra passage pertaining to this verse contains a significant shift. In the midrash, the various phrases in v.15 are seen as gradations of sin -- first, someone who doesn't study Torah but who does perform mitzvot, then someone who neither studies Torah nor performs mitzvot but who still does not despise others, and so on. The worst case is someone who does not study Torah nor performs mitzvot, who despises others and hates the Sages, who doesn't allow others to perform mitzvot and who denies the validity of the Sinaitic mitzvot, ultimately denying God. The sense of the midrash is that the reference is to various types of Jews.

In Rashi's "simplification" of the verse, however, the various phrases in v.15 are not gradations, but rather separate categories of sins; the verse is not referring to

people who do various levels of good and bad. Rather, for Rashi, each phrase refers simply to that sin -- not studying Torah, despising the Sages, preventing others from observing mitzvot, etc. Thus Rashi eliminates the shades of gray which are in the midrash, instead dividing the world into white and black -- those who adhere to the rabbinic system, and those who not only do not themselves adhere to it, but try to prevent others from doing so as well.

How does Rashi's commentary arrive at this conclusion? First, Rashi lets us know immediately that Torah study is the commandment whose violation would bring on the terrible punishments described in בחקותי. What God wants is participation in the rabbinic system through the study of Torah, in accordance with the teachings of the Sages.

Second, the punishments are reserved for those who know God and yet deliberately reject Him. By intertwining this notion with the previous one, Rashi lets us know what he means by "knowing God," namely -- Torah study and observance. Anyone who knew about the rabbinic system yet deliberately rejected it would be subject to the punishments about to be described.

With this formulation, Rashi cleverly turns around the accusation which Christians would often hurl at Jews -- that they were being punished because they knew The Truth yet

deliberately and stubbornly refused to accept it. No, Rashi says, it is not we rabbinic Jews who refuse to accept the right path. Rather, it is those who know about the Torah yet intentionally refuse to observe it.

My sense is that for Rashi, the people who knew Torah yet rejected it were not Jews but rather Gentiles; specifically Christians, who retained the Bible as sacred Scripture yet claimed that many of the commandments were no longer valid. In this sense, the fact that both Nimrod and the Sodomites were non-Israelites takes on greater significance in Rashi than it did in the midrash.[19] For Rashi, the reference in the verse to "My mitzvot" is a clear indication that God wants us to understand the mitzvot as "His", an apparent response to the Christian denial of the continuing validity of biblical commandments. The target of the punishments outlined in this

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[19] Although I could find no other reference linking Nimrod with Christianity, he is in Jewish lore portrayed as an idolator who rebelled against the Almighty and who "made all the people rebel against God" (Pes.94b, Hag.13a, Av. Zar.53b). See Encyclopedia Judaica 12:1167. In Rashi's thought, Christianity is an idolatrous religion, although in practice Christians are to be treated somewhat differently from other idolators -- See J. Katz, Exclusiveness and Tolerance (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), p.24 ff. It is noteworthy that regarding the Sodomites, most of the rabbinic *aggadah* concerns their cruelty toward other people, yet the midrash and Rashi focus on their sin against the Lord, at least for the purposes of their study of Lev.26. In Christian polemics, the Jews were identified with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah -- see F. Talmage, Disputation and Dialogue (New York: Ktav, 1975), pp.17,22.

passage is therefore understood to be those who deny that the commandments are from God Himself -- namely, Christians.

If there were any doubt left about the way Rashi wanted us to understand this passage, it would be removed by his emphasis on the perfidy of those who not only did not observe the Torah themselves, but prevented others from observing it. We can assume that for this French scholar, the people who were trying to prevent others from observing God's commandments were not Jews at all but Christians.

In this way, Rashi refocuses the entire message of the passage for the medieval Jew. The rewards spoken of in the first part of תוכחה will be granted to those who participate in the rabbinic system; the punishments delineated in the second part will fall on those who challenge that system, deny its most basic principles, and oppress those who do adhere to it. Far from describing the breakdown of the covenant between God and the Jews, this passage for Rashi stirringly affirms it.

We have seen the way in which Rashi interprets the opening verses of the "punishments" section of תוכחה so that his readers will understand that the subject of these punishments is not the Jewish people but their oppressors. Now that this has been established, however, Rashi still must deal

with the body of the punishments section, which contains horrifying descriptions of the results of breaking God's covenant. Here Rashi drops his effort to apply the punishments to the Gentile world. Apparently, the force of the biblical text is so clearly directed to the Israelites that he had to reverse course and confront for himself and his readers the meaning of Israel's punishment.

He probes this meaning by making the same formal shift which characterized the transition from the introduction to the body of the "rewards" section discussed above. While his comments on the introduction verses were aimed to bring the biblical text closer to the lives of the readers by using the familiar language of rabbinic Judaism, his comments on the body of each section seem designed to do the very opposite. In the rewards section, he made the Land of Israel sound like an utterly fantastic, unworldly place. Here, in the punishments section, he takes refuge in the Land of Israel-centered agricultural imagery of the passage to distance the punishments from the lives of his contemporary Jewish readership:

> Rashi on Lev.26:16 [20]
> *You shall sow your seed to no purpose* (וזרעתם לריק זרעכם): you will sow your seed, but it won't grow, so how is it that your enemies come and eat? The verse says *for your enemies shall eat it.* How so? You sow in the first year and it doesn't

[20] This comment on the phrase from v.16 is made as part of Rashi's discussion on v.17.

> grow. In the second year, it will grow and your enemies come and take the produce during the time of siege, while those inside [the besieged city] are dying of hunger since they could not collect the produce the year before.

Rashi is not attempting in this commentary to soften the meaning of the punishment being described in the biblical verse. In fact, he elaborates on the explanation in the Sifra by adding the reference to people starving inside the besieged city. The Land here is seen as a willing, even eager, instrument of God's punishment. It witholds its produce when the Israelites have access to it, but then sprouts just in time to nourish the besieging enemy.

Similarly, in v.20, Rashi understands that the trees which don't produce fruit will be stricken "from the earth" (לקוי מן הארץ) -- somehow the Land itself would participate in afflicting the trees so that they do not yield food for the Israelites. On the same verse, Rashi brings a parable which emphasizes how pathetic the Israelites would be:

> Rashi on Lev.26:20
> *So that your strength shall be spent to no purpose* (ותם לריק כחכם): Behold, if a man does not labor and does not thresh and does not sow and does not weed and does not clear and does not hoe, if a blight afflicts him at the time of the harvest, it's not really significant. But if a man does labor and does thresh and does sow and does weed and clear and hoe, if a blight afflicts him, then he is entirely rejected.[21]

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[21] Lit., "his teeth are set on edge."

Again, Rashi does not attempt to prettify or soften the punishments which are outlined in Lev.26. All Israel's labor would be in vain. But by staying so close to the agricultural imagery of the biblical text, he appears to be subtly distancing the punishments from the experience of his contemporary Jewish readership. It may also be significant that Rashi chooses not to comment at all on v.29, which contains perhaps the most shocking of all the terrible punishments outlined -- the eating of the flesh of sons and daughters. For all his readiness to teach faithfully the Lev.26 tradition which speaks of Israel's being punished, Rashi may not have been willing or even emotionally able to dwell on this particular punishment. His only response to it, apparently, was silence.

B. Ibn Ezra

Unlike Rashi, Ibn Ezra does not dwell on the identity of those who would suffer the punishments outlined in the second part of בחקותי. He seems to assume the simple sense -- namely, the Israelites residing in their Land. Ibn Ezra does share with Rashi, however, the idea that the Land itself would play a role in God's punishment of the people. The phrase "Your strength shall be spent to no purpose" (v.20) leads Ibn Ezra to comment that the people would be "driven crazy" by their

work on the Land (שגעתם בעבודת האדמה). And concerning v.26, Ibn Ezra says:

> Ibn Ezra on Lev.26:26
> *Though you eat, you shall not be satisfied* (ואכלתם ולא תשבעו): [In general, when] there is a famine, a person manages to sustain himself on very little food. But you will not be able to sustain yourselves even on a great deal of food.

In other words, for Ibn Ezra it is not that the Land would withold its abundance from the Israelites. Rather, the Land would continue to produce but, in a departure from the natural order, that produce would fail to nourish and satisfy the people. Their work on the Land would "drive them crazy" because unlike a famine, there would seemingly be enough food, but still they would not be satisfied.

C. Ramban

Ramban first directs his attention to the issue which Rashi had addressed -- namely, the identity of those who would suffer the punishments described in the passage. In his commentary on v.15, he interprets the "rejectors" as those who reject some of the commandments while accepting others. The distinction is between those who accept only those "popular" commandments whose rationale is clear (הכל חפצים בהם), such as the commandment against killing[22], but reject those commandments such as the prohibition against mixing linen and

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[22] Ex.21:12.

wool in a garment[23] the reason for which is not understood. Ramban casts further aspersions on such people by claiming that their intent is to void the covenant entirely so that they would be free to engage publicly in forbidden sexual intercourse.

Ramban's comment echoes Rashi's. The faithful Jew who keeps all of God's commandments regardless of whether he understands them will be rewarded. The punishments are reserved for those self-serving and immoral people who pick and choose among God's laws, retaining those they understand (usually, the "ethical" commandments) and spurning those they don't understand (the "ritual" commandments).

Although it would appear that like Rashi before him, Ramban is here making an oblique reference to Christianity, another possibility must also be mentioned. Ramban was an active participant in the Maimonidean controversy. One of the attacks against Maimonides' work was that his explanations of the commandments would lead to an attenuation of practice because rationalizations would undermine those commandments which lacked a rational basis.[24] Ramban was disposed to the

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[23] Lev.19:19.

[24] D.J. Silver, Maimonidean Criticism and the Maimonidean Controversy (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), pp.171-73, 187-88.

anti-Maimonidean cause, so it is possible that a passage directed against people who undermine the commandments might refer to Jewish partisans of Maimonides.

Nevertheless, my sense is that in the case of this particular passage, Ramban's arrows were aimed, like Rashi's, at Christianity. Ramban was certainly no stranger to polemics with Christians.[25] And the thrust of his argument is directed at those who question the ritual law as a whole, something which even Ramban must have known Maimonides never did.

As for the body of the punishments section, the actual description of what will ensue if God's law is not obeyed, Ramban takes a very different approach to this section than did either Rashi or Ibn Ezra. First of all, it is of interest that for the entire section of תוכחה which describes the punishments, Ramban chooses to comment on only one verse, v.16. After v.16, Ramban's next comment concerns v.41, when the biblical text has already turned to a rather hopeful summation. His lengthy comment on v.16, may help shed some light on his choice of verses to discuss (and not discuss).

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[25] His disputation with Friar Paul before the king at Barcelona was famous. See Charles Chavel, "The Disputation at Barcelona" in Ramban (Nachmanides): Writings and Discourses, vol.II (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1978).

In his comment on v.16, Ramban does relate frankly to the punishment of Israel by God. But Ramban's focus is entirely different than that of Rashi or Ibn Ezra. Ramban is not at all interested in elaborating for his readers the details of the punishments outlined in Lev.26. Rather, he prefers to discuss the context of these punishments in the Jewish historical timeline.

First, Ramban emphasizes that all the punishments are executed by God Himself in His attribute of justice. The sevenfold punishment of Israel's sins spoken of in vv.18, 21, 24 are equivalent to the seven "sanctions of the covenant" (אלות תברית) -- the covenant in question being the one spoken of in this chapter. God "personally" made the covenant with the people of Israel, and thus the punishment for violating the covenant would come from God Himself and not by means of any messenger. Thus Israel is only getting what she knew she'd be getting when she entered into a covenant with God.

Ramban uses this idea of God's personal involvement to prove the main point of his lengthy comment on v.16, namely that the sins and punishments spoken of in Lev.26 refer to the Babylonian exile, while the sins and punishments spoken of in the parallel passage in Dt.28 refer to Israel's

current exile. His "proof" relies on differences in language between the two passages:

> Ramban on Lev.26:16
> *I in turn will do this to you* (אף אני אעשה זאת לכם):...The sanctions are the sanctions of the covenant [mentioned in Lev.26], for they were spoken by the mouth of the Almighty and in His own tongue: *I...will do*, "I will discipline you,"[26] "I will smite you."[27] And likewise it says[28]: "...which the Lord made between Himself and the Israelite people," because He with His own great name made this covenant.
>
> But in Deuteronomy it says,[29] "If you [singular] do not obey the Lord your God to observe faithfully all His commandments." There the language used is the language of cursing -- the section begins with the words[30] "Cursed shall you be", because the blessing was removed from them, and likewise[31] "The Lord will make".
>
> And this is what the sages said[32]: The curses in the book of Leviticus are in the plural, and Moses, when he said them, said them from the mouth of the Almighty. But in Deuteronomy, the singular is used, and Moses, when he said them, said them from his own mouth, saying them because the Almighty had made Moses a messenger from Himself to the people of Israel.
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> So know and understand that the sanctions mentioned here [in Leviticus] refer to the first exile.

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[26] v.28.

[27] v.24.

[28] Lev.26:46.

[29] Dt.28:15.

[30] Dt.28:16.

[31] Dt.28:24.

[32] Meg.31b.

For Ramban, the difference in language between Lev.26 and Dt.28 reveals an underlying difference in character between the two sections. Following Meg.31b, he claims that God Himself spoke the words of Lev.26, and God Himself carried out the punishments delineated there. But as for the words in Dt.28, they were spoken by Moses in his capacity as God's messenger. Thus they do not carry quite the same authority as the words spoken in the Leviticus passage, and the fact that the singular was used reflects this somewhat lesser stature. The notion that the Leviticus speech was spoken directly by God while the Deuteronomy parallel was spoken by Moses is used by Ramban to establish the major difference between the Leviticus passage and the Deuteronomy passage --namely, that Leviticus is referring to the Babylonian exile, and Deuteronomy to Israel's current exile.[33]

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[33] The understanding of Deuteronomy as a Mosaic paraphrase is not unique to Ramban. Radak claims that the version of the Decalogue in Dt.5 constitutes such a paraphrase. See F. Talmage, David Kimhi: The Man and His Commentaries (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1975), p.107. Even though Ramban applies the Deut.28 curses to Israel's current exile for the purposes of his Leviticus commentary, he minimizes the impact of the Deuteronomy curses in his commentary there. See discussion in H.H. Ben Sasson, A History of the Jewish People (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U. Press, 1976), p.532. Arnold Eisen analyzes the blessings and curses in Dt.28 as part of his study of exile. See his Galut (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986), pp.28-30.

The rest of Ramban's comment on v.16 consists of various textual supports for this claim. His methodology is to tie particular verses to "historical facts" known about the two exiles. For instance, the Leviticus passage refers to idol worship, and that was one of the sins which led to the first exile, not the second. Another "proof" for Ramban is the eagle spoken of in Dt.28:49 -- this he understands as a clear reference to Rome, Rome being identified with Israel's second, current, exile. Additionally, at the end of the Leviticus passage God promises to remember the patriarchal covenant and to remember the Land, but not to regather all the exiles -- for Ramban, this squares with the facts of the Babylonian exile when so many did not return. It did not square at all with the current exile, which would culminate in the ingathering of all the children of Israel to their Land.

The result of this discourse is as follows: the curses uttered in Dt.28 refer to Israel's current exile, but they were spoken not by God Himself but by Moses acting as God's messenger. By contrast, the punishments predicted in Lev.26 came directly from God. *But they have already taken place!* They have no connection whatever to Israel's current situation. Whereas Ramban was perfectly happy to hold out the first part of Lev.26, the rewards, as potentially still coming true for Israel, he is adamant that the punishments

mentioned in the latter part of Lev.26 are no longer relevant because they already took place. And thus his decision to refrain from commenting at all on vv.17-40 becomes much more understandable once he has established that the material in these verses has no present or future relevance for his readers.

Ramban seems to have worked out his position on this section quite thoroughly. Yet despite his understanding of the punishments of Lev.26 as having been meted out in the past, he does in one place seem to offer a response to those who might still see those punishments as applying to Israel's contemporary exile. As part of his discussion on v.11 of the blessings and the miracles which would rain down on Israel in her Land once she behaved in a righteous fashion, Ramban makes the following comment:

> Ramban on 26:11
> And the opposite will come about regarding the curses, the punishments of the Land, about which it is said:[34] "I will make your skies like iron," and the punishments of sickness, about which it is said,[35] "malignant and chronic diseases." The food shall be spoiled and will cause sickness, and the miracle will be made known because it will be constant and will affect everyone.
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> And that's why it is said,[36] "And later generations will ask -- the children who succeed you, and foreigners who come from distant lands

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[34] v.19.

[35] Dt.28:59.

[36] Dt.29:21.

> and see the plagues and diseases that the Lord has inflicted upon that Land." They will not wonder about "...that [one] man, upon whom every sanction [written in this book] comes down."[37]
>
> And so there will be many times, in accordance with the custom of the world in all the nations, that there will be cases of misfortune [falling upon] one man. But only in this Land, all the nations will wonder and ask,[38] "why did the Lord do thus to this Land?" Everyone will "see and know that the hand of the Lord did this"[39]. And they will say,"[40] [it is because] they forsook the covenant with the Lord, God of their fathers."

In this section, Ramban faces the major difficulty of the conditional covenant idea directly. Here he does not try to hide behind the idea of God speaking vs. Moses speaking, or the idea that Lev.26 refers to the punishments already inflicted as part of the Babylonian exile. Here, quoting from Lev.26 and Dt.28 and even Isaiah, Ramban openly acknowledges what the nations will say when they see such devastation come upon not just one Jew, but the entire people and the entire Land. They will say, he admits, that it is because "they forsook the covenant with the Lord, God of their fathers."

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[37] Dt.29:19.

[38] Dt.29:23.

[39] Is.41:20.

[40] Dt.29:24.

It is noteworthy that Ramban chooses to place this frank confrontation with the basic issue not in a comment on the punishments section of Lev.26, but rather in a comment on v.11, in what I have called the "rewards" section. And in fact, this section which I've just quoted comes sandwiched between a discussion of the miraculous blessings which Israel would receive, and a lengthy discussion about the role of doctors in the new world which would come about once Israel has received the blessings.[41]

The placement of this comment in the middle of the rewards section may indicate Ramban's willingness to acknowledge what the Gentiles were saying about the implications of Israel's exile (and what some Jews might have been starting to believe). But he acknowledges the degradation of the exile in such a way that it would seem but a minor part of God's plan, a plan mostly characterized by abundant blessing and reward for Israel. Yes, Ramban is saying, we know what the Gentiles think and we understand the way they interpret the Scripture. We did forsake the covenant at one time -- that's clear. But the Gentiles are

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[41] Ramban, himself a doctor, maintains that in an ideal Jewish society even individuals would be dealt with miraculously so that medical treatment would be either unnecessary or futile. Since people (regrettably) began to consult doctors, God stopped performing miracles generally, leaving people to "natural accidents." See David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order," p.118.

only seeing a small part of the story. Looked at in context, Scripture obviously means that those who maintain their allegiance to rabbinic Judaism will merit a return to the Land and the miracles which await there.

Comfort

Just as Israel's reward for adhering to the covenant and her punishment for violating it would be played out in the Land of Israel, so too would the Land play a role in the small comfort Israel would be able to take once the punishment is inflicted.

A. Rashi

Rashi finds comfort in at least two different aspects of this passage. First, the Land of Israel would help the people of Israel atone for their iniquities. He derives this idea from v.34, which says, "Then shall the land make up for its sabbath year throughout the time that it is desolate, and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years." The operative verb which needs to be defined in the verse is רצה:

> Rashi on Lev.26:34
> *Then shall the Land make up* (אז תרצה):
> [The Land] will pacify the anger of God [המקום], who was angry over the sabbatical years.

Rashi bases his comment on the traditional rabbinic notion that God was angry because Israel had neglected to observe the commandment of the sabbatical year.[42] This transgression constituted an important breach of the covenant, and was a major factor in Israel's punishment, her exile from the Land.

Neglect of a commandment concerning the Land thus becomes a reason for punishment. But the Land's role is not limited to punishment. For while Israel is in exile, the Land participates in Israel's atonement by helping to pacify God's anger through "making up" missed Sabbatical years. So in addition to serving as an instrument of Israel's punishment, the Land is also portrayed as a sympathetic source of comfort, doing its part to help Israel merit a return.

Making up for missed Sabbatical years is not the only way Rashi envisions the Land helping Israel during her exile. In his commentary on v.32, Rashi (quoting Sifra) notes the fact that God vowed to "make the land desolate," and claims that this desolation was a kindly measure for

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[42] M. Avot 5:9. See M. Signer, "The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Literature," p.219, for a discussion of why the medieval exegetes focused on the sabbatical cycle when the rabbinic tradition (inc. M.Avot 5:9) ascribed many different causes to the exile.

Israel since it meant that Israel's enemies would not find satisfaction in the Land while the Land is desolate of its [true] inhabitants -- the people of Israel. This play on the root שׂוּמם makes the point that the Land of Israel is inextricably linked with the people of Israel. As long as the Land is desolate of the People, it will be desolate for whoever comes to try and settle in it. The Land can only give "satisfaction" [נחת רוח] to its true inhabitants.

B. Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra shares Rashi's perspective on the significance of the Sabbatical cycle:

> Ibn Ezra on Lev.26:34
> *Its Sabbath years* (שבתתה):
> Sabbatical years and Jubilee years. That is why it is written[43]: "until the Land paid back its Sabbaths."
>
> *Throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies* (כל ימי השמה ואתם בארץ איביכם): [The Land] will be desolate of you, so it will rest and find ease in fulfillment of the sabbatical years.

The element of comfort is somewhat less explicit in Ibn Ezra's comment because he does not claim that the Land is pacifying God's anger while Israel is in exile. Nevertheless, Ibn Ezra does agree that the Land will play its part in fulfilling God's commandments during the period

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[43] 2 Chr.36:21.

that Israel is away, and this notion at the very least conveys a sense of the continued validity of those commandments, an important element in the Jewish polemical arsenal.

As it did for Rashi, the Land in Ibn Ezra's view also knows the identity of its true inheritors and makes life unpleasant for those who would take their place in Israel's absence:

> Ibn Ezra on Lev.26:32
> *shall be appalled by it* (ושממו עליה):
> the Land will be so desolate that even the enemies who reside in it will be made desolate -- this is the opposite of "Jerusalem, joy of all the earth" (Lam.2:15).

In the Lamentations passage which Ibn Ezra quotes, the nations who pass by Jerusalem will hiss and wag their heads, and jeer, and ask themselves, "Is this the city that was called Perfect in Beauty, Joy of all the Earth?" Even though the Leviticus passage speaks of terrible destruction for the Land of Israel, Ibn Ezra finds comfort in the fact that, contrary to the jeering of Israel's enemies in Lamentations, here we know that Israel's enemies themselves would be made desolate in the Land.

C. Ramban

Ramban's discussion of the sabbatical cycle appears in his commentary on v.42, in which God remembers the covenant with Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham, and also the Land. For Ramban, the idea of "I will remember the Land" is that God would remember that during Israel's exile, the Land "paid back" (פרעה) its missed Sabbatical years.

Since for Ramban, all the punishments outlined in Lev.26 concern Israel's first exile to Babylonia, these last few verses of comfort speak of the initial period of Israel's return from Babylonian exile, and the rebuilding of the Temple and resanctification of Jerusalem. For nineteen years after the decree of Cyrus, Ramban says, the Land was still lying desolate of its inhabitants as it made up for its lost Sabbatical years.

In addition to helping Israel pay for missed Sabbatical years, the Land also helps in another way which might have given comfort to Ramban's readership -- its treatment of Gentiles who try to settle the Land in Israel's absence:

> Ramban on Lev.26:16
> When it says in this section that *your enemies shall be desolate on [the Land]*,[44] that is a good tiding because it proclaims in all the lands of Israel's dispersion that our Land will not accept

[44] v.32.

> our enemies. And it is a great proof and a promise to us that one cannot find in the whole world a Land which was once so good and large[45] and which was always inhabited, but which is now such a ruin.
>
> Because ever since we left it, [the Land] has not accepted another nation or another people -- everyone tries to settle it but to no avail.

Here is another instance of the Land "helping" Israel during her absence. Not only will the Land make up for missed Sabbatical years, but the Land will also make sure that no other people will be able to permanently settle in the Land of Israel until the people of Israel returns. The background for Ramban's comment is surely the continual turnover in sovereignty over the Land of Israel which marked the Crusader period. In Ramban's vision, the Land is not destined to be possessed by any of the parties currently warring over her. Rather, the Land is being reserved for the Jewish people. And if the Land is being reserved for the Jewish people, then surely the covenant with God which is outlined in Scripture remains intact.

* * *

Rashi, Ramban and Ibn Ezra clearly have very different ways of communicating their perspectives on Lev.26. Rashi sometimes explains grammatical points, but of the three, he

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[45] Ex.3:8.

is the one who stays closest to the rabbinic interpretation which had been placed on this section, sometimes quoting the midrash verbatim, and sometimes paraphrasing it in order to make a somewhat different point. Ibn Ezra usually emphasizes grammar, and his comments, whether of a grammatical nature or not, are brief and to the point. Ramban, by contrast, emphasizes neither the midrashic interpretation nor the grammatical issues raised by the verse. He allows himself free reign to deliver rather long discourses on any of the verses which interest him, drawing as he sees fit upon midrash and Rashi and Jewish mysticism as well as his own perspective on the course of Jewish history.

These differences in style reveal a great deal about these three men and the way they approached the task they set for themselves. Yet despite their differences, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Ramban shared a desire to pass on the tradition in a way that would reinforce the faith of the Jews of their generation. It is possible to isolate three areas in which they as a group wanted to communicate similar teachings:

1. They wanted to discuss the extent to which Lev.26 applied to the Jews of their own time.

We saw that all of our commentators discussed the "rewards" section of this chapter with either explicit or implicit reference to the contemporary Jewish people. The blessings outlined in the Bible would one day happen to the Jewish people. The Land in all its miraculous abundance would one day be theirs again. And in fact, even now, while they are in exile, the children of Israel could take comfort from the fact that the Land was both helping them atone for their sins, and it was also making sure that no foreign people managed to settle permanently in the Land while they were in exile.

As for the punishments, various approaches were taken. This is an area where the twofold task of the medieval commentators may have been a source of conflict -- Scripture spoke of God imposing terrible punishments on Israel, but their contemporary pedagogic needs demanded an emphasis on God's continuing love for the Jewish people. Therefore, attempts had to be made to resolve this conflict -- either by interpreting the passage in a creative way so that the punishments did not appear to apply to the contemporary Jewish people, or by throwing hands up here and praying that the message got across elsewhere in the commentary.

One approach of the first type was the claim that the punishments apply not to rabbinic Jews, but to other groups who wanted to prevent Jews from fulfilling their commandments as rabbinic Jews. Another tack was to link the punishments of Lev.26 to Israel, but to claim that they happened to Israel in the past and therefore had no relevance for the situation of contemporary Jewry.

As for the second type, we saw an approach which admitted that the punishments applied to Israel, but may have tried to mitigate the effect of that idea somewhat by staying so close to the agricultural imagery of the biblical text that the punishments would have seemed very removed from the lives of medieval Jews.

For our commentators, Lev.26 as a whole proves that God wants not to punish Israel but to reward her by returning her to her Land. God really wants to punish only those who *interfere* with the rabbinic system. Any punishments which are suffered by the Torah-true Jews are merely temporary punitive measures taken because the people of Israel as a whole was not always completely faithfully to rabbinic Judaism. *The punishments in no way constitute an abrogation of the covenant by God.*

2. The commentators wanted to discuss the nature of the condition which Israel had to fulfill as her part of the covenant.

The commentators do not hesitate to communicate to the Jew what he must do in order for God to grant the rewards which He wants to grant to the people of Israel. This condition is adherence to rabbinic Judaism -- study of Torah and observance of traditional commmandments -- to be עמלים בתורה. When all of Israel becomes צדיקים in this sense, then God would grant the reward and a new covenant would be entered into between God and Israel, this one unsullied by disloyalty and unfaithfulness on the part of Israel.

This claim is a direct response to the widespread medieval Christian polemic against Judaism which claimed that there was a new covenant whose "condition" revolved around acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah. For Rashi and Ramban, who lived their lives in Christian countries, any interpretation of Scripture had to respond in some way to these Christian claims about the true meaning of the Hebrew Bible. And even Ibn Ezra, whose background was in an Islamic environment, must have been aware of Christian claims, in addition to being acutely conscious of Islam's own claims of being a successor to Judaism. So for all three of the

commmentators I have examined, the conditional covenant in Lev.26 presented an opportunity to emphasize the Jewish view of the "condition" which must be fulfilled -- Torah study, Torah observance, loyal participation in the rabbinic system. By definition, that condition could only be fulfilled by the people of Israel. God was still waiting; once they fulfilled the condition, the Eden-like Land of Israel would be theirs.

3. The commentators wanted to discuss the role of the Land of Israel in both reward and punishment, as well as in comfort.

The Land of Israel was the ultimate reward which the people of Israel would receive for her faith in and loyalty to the rabbinic system. But the Land of Israel which the Jewish people would receive was not the same as the one that then lay on the shores of the eastern Mediterranean. The real Land of Israel, the dirty, bloody, ruined backwater province, is hardly ever discussed (for reasons which I will discuss below, in ch.3). The Land of Israel which *is* discussed is the one which was going to be their reward. It is a Land of Israel transformed into a place of health and safety and peace, a new Garden of Eden. This approach clearly represents a spiritualization of the Land of Israel. For our commentators, Israel was not a place in any way like

the France or Spain in which they lived. Israel was, by contrast, an ideal place.

And yet, as made most clear in Ramban's discussion about "natural" miracles, the commentators were reluctant to take their spiritualizing bent all the way. They were reluctant to identify the rewards of Lev.26 with the eschatological coming of the Messiah, and the complete break with the natural order as they knew it. We can only guess at the reason for their reluctance. Perhaps it was important for the medievals that their readers feel that the reward, wondrous as it was, was *accessible* to them, if they but fulfilled their side of the covenant. Or perhaps after so many centuries of waiting, the commentators were reluctant to ask Jews to place all their bets on the Messiah. Hope, they taught, was a possibility even outside a drastic eschatological framework. And the Land of Israel would play an important role in their hope, not only as the physical location where the hope would be fulfilled, but by the Land's active participation in the rewards which God would bestow, as well as in the comfort Israel could take while she was in exile.

Thus did the medieval commentators teach a biblical passage which was rooted in a very particular set of historical circumstances, the ancient exile of the

Israelites from their Land. They took that passage, and transmitted it to the Jews of their generation. Through their commentaries, they hoped to help the Jewish people survive amidst the dangers and temptations of medieval Europe -- to survive long enough to accept their ultimate reward.

CHAPTER III

EXILE AND RETURN: PSALMS 122 AND 126

Although the Book of Psalms contains a very different kind of literature than the Pentateuch, the medieval commentators on Psalms 122 and 126 were faced with the same challenge that confronted them in their work on Gen.15 and Lev.26: how to present Scriptural passages concerning the Land of Israel to a Jewish readership which did not live in the Land, and saw little empirical evidence that they ever would. However, because the content of the Psalms was so different from the passages we have seen in the Pentateuch, the commentators had to use a different model for explaining the Jewish people's relationship to the Land. In Gen.15 and Lev.26, as we have seen, the model was Covenant (conditional or unconditional). In Psalms 122 and 126, the model chosen to represent the people's connection to the Land was Exile and Return. This theme was certainly present in the commentators' discussion of the Pentateuch passages, but here Exile and Return becomes their primary focus.

Both psalms offer a poetic and hopeful vision of the people Israel's connection to the Land of Israel. Ps.122 situates the children of Israel in Jerusalem, and Ps.126 places them on their way.[1] Read through the lens of the medieval commentators, these psalms speak not only of the past but of the future as well. As such, they provide an ideal place for the medievals to convey their hope and their faith that God would yet bring the Jews back to their Land. The Exile and Return model allowed the medieval commentators to present a vision of the Land consonant with their beliefs, their circumstances, and their pedagogical goals.

I will be examining the commentaries of Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Radak; Ramban did not write a commentary on Psalms.

PSALM 122

1. A song of ascents. Of David.
   I rejoiced when they said to me,
   "We are going to the house of the Lord."
2. Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem,
3. Jerusalem built up, a city knit together,
4. to which tribes would make pilgrimage,
   the tribes of the Lord,
   --as was enjoined upon Israel--
   to praise the name of the Lord.

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[1] The relationship between "Zion" or "Jerusalem" and "The Land of Israel" in the work of the medieval commentators bears further research. However, it appears that in the psalms, the poetic device of metonymy is used and references to Jerusalem therefore connote the entire Land (cf. also Ps.137). For the purposes of this chapter, I assume this to be the case in the writings of the medieval commentators as well.

5. There the thrones of judgment stood,
   thrones of the house of David.
6. Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem:
   "May those who love you be at peace.
7. May there be well-being within your ramparts,
   peace in your citadels."
8. For the sake of my kin and friends,
   I pray for your well-being;
9. for the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
   I seek your good.

The first hermeneutical challenge which the medieval commmentators on this psalm pose for themselves is the inscription in v.1. What are they to do with the explicit association of this psalm with King David? How could people have told David that they were going to the House of the Lord if the Temple wasn't even built during David's lifetime? If the psalm did not in fact arise out of a situation in David's lifetime, then what *did* it refer to? Our three commentators answered these questions in different ways, and their answers set the stage for their treatment of the psalm as a whole.

A. Rashi

Rashi is the only one of the three who insists on retaining unequivocal Davidic authorship for the psalm. He explains the chronology by quoting partially from Midrash Tehillim:

Rashi on Psalm 122:1[2]
I rejoiced when they said to me (שמחתי באמרים לי):
I heard the people saying, "When will that old man die so that Solomon his son may rule and build the Temple?" And I rejoiced.

In the midrash, David's rejoicing is explained. He rejoices because God tells him that one day in which he studies Torah is better than the thousand burnt offerings which Solomon will offer on the altar.[3] Rashi omits the explanation given in the midrash, leaving his readers unsure as to why David would rejoice when his subjects are clamoring for his death. The absence of an explanation leaves one with the impression that David rejoices simply because the people are showing affection for his son and impatience for the Temple which they know David cannot build.

Rashi's omission of the second part of the midrash may indicate that he was uncomfortable with teachings which cast a negative light on the worship in the Temple. But the first part of the midrash was invaluable for his effort to overcome the problem of chronology which v.1 presents -- with Rashi's explanation, the force of בית יהוה נלך becomes something like, "We can't wait until we *will be* able to go

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[2] I am using the text of Rashi's commentary found in Parshandatha: The Commentary of Rashi on the Prophets and Hagiographs, I. Maarsen, ed., Part III: Psalms, Jerusalem:1936.

[3] The midrash is playing on Ps.84:11 and 1 Kgs.3:4.

up to the House of the Lord," with the grammatical emphasis on the future tense of the verb נלך. This dual track will characterize Rashi's commentary on the entire psalm -- he maintains Davidic authorship, while at the same time he emphasizes the future wherever he can for the purpose of teaching a lesson for later generations.

Another example of this dual track may be seen in Rashi's comment on v.3:

> Rashi on Psalm 122:3
> *Jerusalem built up* (ירושלם הבנוי׳ה):
> When Solomon my son builds the Temple in her midst, she will be built up -- with the Divine Presence, the ark, and the altar.

Rashi begins his explication of this verse by reminding his readers that the composer of the psalm is David. Although the verse itself does not contain any first person language, Rashi refers to "Solomon my son," emphasizing Davidic authorship.

But Rashi does not allow his reader to stay in the historical setting of David's Jerusalem. He immediately associates the phrase "Jerusalem built up" with the future reign of Solomon: Jerusalem will be built up when Solomon builds the Temple. Only then, with the Divine Presence, the ark and the altar in place, could the city be properly called "built up."

The list of the three features which would characterize the built up Jerusalem contains, I believe, a subtle message. The ark and the altar were physical objects which everyone knew were part of the Temple worship. The Divine Presence, however (שכינה), was not a physical object. Its "presence" at the Temple was a matter of faith. By listing the three together in this manner, Rashi appears to be saying that the שכינה should be considered as obvious a part of Temple worship as the ark and the altar. God was there, with the Israelites, as they carried out their worship.

Rashi continues his commentary on v.3:

> *A city knit together* (כעיר שחברה לה):
> Like Shiloh[4] -- Scripture has compared one to the other, as it is written,[5] "to the rest and the inheritance". Rest is Shiloh; Inheritance is Jerusalem.
>
> And our sages have said[6], there is a built up Jerusalem in heaven and the earthly Jerusalem is destined to become like her.

Rashi here offers two alternative explanations for the ambiguous phrase, "A city knit together." Both are based on traditional rabbinic interpretations.

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[4] The Maarsen edition reads בשילה, which would mean "in Shiloh." Dr. Sperling suggested that a more likely reading is כשילה, ("like Shiloh") since both the verse and Rashi himself imply a comparison.

[5] Dt.12:9.

[6] B.T. Taanit 5a and Midrash Tehillim 122:4.

The first explanation is that the built up Jerusalem will be like Shiloh. In context, the Dt.12:9 reference distinguishes two phases of Israelite worship. When the people were outside the Land, they could offer sacrifices where and when they pleased because they had not yet arrived at their "rest and inheritance." But once they entered the Land, the Israelites would be expected to bring all their sacrifices to "the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish His name" (v.11), namely, the Jerusalem Temple.

Shiloh was one of the famous centers of Israelite sacrificial worship outside Jerusalem. In Sifre Re'eh 66, R.Simeon defends the worship at Shiloh during the period when the Israelites were in the Land, but had not yet "inherited" it. He said that "inheritance" (נחלה) refers to Shiloh, and "rest" (מנוחה) to Jerusalem, basing his argument on Ps.132:14.[7] R.Judah disagrees, saying that R.Simeon had it backwards.

Although no explanation is offered in the midrash for R.Judah's position, this is the one Rashi accepts. He associates "rest" with Shiloh and "inheritance" with Jerusalem. The reason may be that Rashi has a different

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[7] In this verse, Jerusalem is referred to as God's "eternal resting place."

agenda than the midrash. His concern here is not with justifying seemingly illicit Israelite sacrificial worship outside Jerusalem. For Rashi, the point appears to be simply that the element of comparison in the word כעיר means that there is an association between Jerusalem and Shiloh.

What is the nature of this association? Rashi may be interpreted here in two ways. He may simply mean that a built up Jerusalem will be like another built up city, and Shiloh provides a convenient example because the rabbis already associated the two. Support for this view may be found in Rashi's commentary on v.4, in which Shiloh is cited as a place where the tabernacle was established at the time when the Israelites came up out of Egypt.

Alternatively, the choice of Shiloh may have been much more deliberate than that. It may have been rooted in the long tradition of messianic associations with the name Shiloh, based on Gen.49:10. In this case, the association of Jerusalem with Shiloh contains a subtle teaching: when the Messiah does come, his arrival will be accompanied by the people of Israel entering its Land (Dt.12:9) and Jerusalem will be built up *in accordance with the Jewish messianic vision.*

Rashi also offers an entirely different explanation of

the phrase כעיר שחברה לה, one which has its own messianic overtones. He mentions the rabbinic tradition that there is a built up Jerusalem in heaven, one which is a חבר to the Jerusalem on earth.[8] One day the earthly Jerusalem (ירושלים של מטה) would become like the built up heavenly Jerusalem.

The notion of a heavenly Jerusalem is ascribed to R.Johanan in the Midrash Tehillim discussion of this verse, as well as in BT Taanit 5a. It appears that R. Johanan was reacting to a perceived rivalry between the actual Jerusalem of dust and stone and the celestial, spiritual Jerusalem.[9] Rashi's comment makes it clear that he is aware of the gap between the earthly Jerusalem and the celestial Jerusalem, but his purpose is not to stress the opposition between the two but rather the fact that the earthly Jerusalem is destined to become *like* the celestial Jerusalem. The comparative sense of the word כעיר in this understanding reflects the (future) likeness between the two Jerusalems.

We have seen Rashi's commentary on v.3 move from a

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[8] According to William Braude, the notion was that the heavenly Jerusalem was situated in heaven at a point exactly opposite the earthly Jerusalem. See his Midrash on Psalms, (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p.517, n.5.

[9] See Shalom Rosenberg, p.162, for a discussion of various approaches to R.Johanan's position. For Ramban's perspective on this tension, see H.H. Ben Sasson, p.532.

point which is emphatically grounded in the temporal reality of King David, before the Temple was built, to a place beyond time -- the celestial Jerusalem. This transition reflects the present/future tension which was seen also in his treatment of v.1.

The tension between present and future is also made clear in one other place:

> Rashi on Ps.122:5
> *There stood...* (כי שמה ישבו וכו'):
> For in Jerusalem too, the Divine Presence would dwell, and the thrones in which the nations would be judged would stand there. And the royal thrones are of the house of David.

Rashi here takes liberties with the simple grammatical meaning of the Psalms text. The Masoretic text speaks in the past tense (יָשְׁבוּ), but Rashi's comment reads the verse as if it said יֵשְׁבוּ--the thrones of judgment will, in the future, stand in Jerusalem. Rashi reminds us of David's connection to the psalm at the end of his comment on this verse when he notes the connection of the thrones with the dynasty of David. But the idea that the nations of the world would be judged clearly places the verse in a messianic context.

By moving back and forth between present and future tense, Rashi is able to have it two ways. He retains the "present tense" notion that King David is the composer of the psalm, and the meaning of the psalm must therefore

square somehow with the historical context of David's life. But he also insists on the "future tense"; David may have composed the psalm, but its meaning goes far beyond his lifetime. As a messianic figure, Rashi's David composes psalms which also present a vision of the way Jerusalem would look once the long awaited Redeemer arrived and Israel returned to its Land from Exile. Jerusalem would be the place from which the nations of the world would be judged, the upbuilt city resembling closely its companion in the heavens, a place in which the Divine Presence dwelt.

B. Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra confesses to considerably more confusion than Rashi in his discussion of the setting in which Psalm 122 was originally composed:

> Ibn Ezra on Ps.122:1[10]
> *I rejoiced when they said to me* (שמחתי באמרים לי):
> Rabbi Moses said, This is the psalm which David said he would sing together with [other] songs in the House of the Lord, at the time when the Temple would be built.
> Rabbi Isaiah said that this [psalm] was for the house which David built for himself in Zion.
> And there are those who say, [it is] for the Third Temple.
> Every Jew says, *I rejoiced when they said to me* [when they] go up [to Jerusalem] for the pilgrimage festivals.

[10] As there is no critical edition of Ibn Ezra's commentary on Psalms, I use the text found in the Mikraot Gedolot (Rabbinic Bible).

Ibn Ezra faces the same chronological difficulty which Rashi did: how could David have spoken of going to the Temple when the Temple had not yet been built in David's lifetime? Since he doesn't know the answer, he offers a number of different possibilities. Ibn Ezra knows of a tradition of Rabbi Moses[11] that the psalm was composed by David in preparation for the time when the Temple would be built. He has also heard of a tradition in the name of R.Isaiah that the "house of the Lord" referred to in the verse was not the Temple at all but rather the house which David built as his residence in Jerusalem. These two explanations preserve the connection of the psalm with David.

But the fact that Ibn Ezra offers two additional explanations indicates that he wasn't entirely satisfied with the first two. These last two explanations move away from the close connection to David which Rashi always insisted upon. Ibn Ezra has heard that some people associate the psalm with the Third Temple. And he has also heard the phrase, "We are going to the House of the Lord" interpreted as a common saying uttered by Jews participating in the three annual pilgrimage festivals which bring Jews to the

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[11] Presumably his father, Rabbi Moses ibn Ezra.

Temple in Jerusalem.[12]

Ibn Ezra is certainly aware of the tradition that associates King David with the messianic rebuilding of the Temple. Yet it appears that the association of this psalm with the Third Temple is set up as a contrast to the first two explanations, which are rooted in David's historical lifetime. The notion of the Third Temple therefore distances the psalm from Davidic authorship, placing it instead squarely within the framework of the post-70 eschatological hopes in which Ibn Ezra and his readers continued to live. The fourth explanation, which sees the quotation in v.1 as a common pilgrimage saying, implies that the first person grammar of the verse is purely figurative, taking the psalm away from King David and associating it instead with "every Jew."

Ibn Ezra's confusion as to the background of this psalm is also evident in his commentary on v.4:

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[12] It is unclear whether the last sentence of Ibn Ezra's commentary on this verse, which I am labelling a fourth interpretation, is a separate explanation or a part of the third explanation. If the latter, the sense would be that when the Jews go on their pilgrimage festivals to the Third Temple, they will say this phrase. It is also possible that this explanation refers not just to the phrase in v.1 but to the psalm as a whole; i.e., the pilgrims would recite this psalm during their pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

Ibn Ezra on Ps.122:4
to which tribes (שבטי יה):
These are the tribes of the Lord [for whom it was a] testimony and a law and a commandment to come [to Jerusalem] three times [a year]. They would acknowledge the Lord when they saw the kingdom of David established.

If this is a psalm of Solomon, then the thrones are the thrones of Solomon and his brothers. But if it is about the future, then [the thrones are for] the Messiah and his sons.

The thrones which Ibn Ezra refers to are actually mentioned in v.5, which speaks of the "thrones of judgment" and the "thrones of the house of David." Ibn Ezra isn't sure what these thrones are. But neither of the possibilities he raises leaves much room for Davidic composition. The occupants of these thrones are either Solomon and his brothers or the Messiah and his children. Like Rashi, Ibn Ezra does not want to choose between historical context and messianic context when it comes to Ps.122. But Ibn Ezra feels freer than Rashi to explore other possible historical contexts because he does not insist on Davidic authorship.

There are a number of places in his commentary on Ps.122 where Ibn Ezra uses the past tense, to emphasize the setting of the psalm in a historical time when the Jews brought sacrifices to the Temple. Nevertheless, his descriptions are so rich that they surely fed the imaginations of those of his readers who tried to picture in their minds the scene at the Third Temple:

Ibn Ezra on Ps.122:2
Stood (עמדות):
The meaning is that we stood to look at the beauty of the walls and the loveliness of the gates. The correct [interpretation] is that [Jerusalem] was ful] of people and we mixed together at the gates. We will not be able to enter because of the mass of people coming and going.

Ibn Ezra on Ps.122:3
Jerusalem (ירושלם):
At the time of the three pilgrimage festivals, she was like a country whose daughters gathered to her from all around at a time of fear.

These two comments make clear that Ibn Ezra saw in this psalm an opportunity to revel in past glories and perhaps inspire hope in the future as well. The beauty of the walls and gates of Jerusalem were such that the pilgrims could not help standing at the entrance and simply gazing up in wonder. The city was so crowded with pilgrims coming to worship that not everyone would be able to enter immediately. The city was like a mother to the pilgrims, sheltering them from the dangers outside.

In the last sentence of his comment on v.2, Ibn Ezra abruptly shifts from past tense to the future: "Jerusalem was full of people...we *will not* be able to enter." This change indicates that while the surface layer of his comments on both v.2 and v.3 consists of a description of the way Jerusalem looked in its past glory, there is another layer not too far beneath the surface which situates the descriptions in the messianic future of return from exile.

Only in two places in his commentary on Ps.122 does Ibn Ezra leave the glorious past and the messianic future, speaking instead from the vantage point of his own situation and that of his readers, in the post-70, pre-Messiah Diaspora present.

> Ibn Ezra on Ps.122:6
> *Pray for* (שאלו):
> This is a past tense verb. One always prays for the peace of Jerusalem, because then [people] will celebrate towards her and pray, saying to her, *May those who love you be at peace* (ישליו אהביך):
> These are we, or those who always dwell there.
>
> Ibn Ezra on Ps.122:8
> *For the sake of* (למען):
> [We] seek your peace for the sake of our honored brothers the priests, the levites, and the righteous of Israel who reside in Jerusalem.

In his comment on v.6, Ibn Ezra responds to the difference in tense between the two verbs in the verse -- שאלו, which he understands as a past tense and ישליו, a future with jussive force. His resolution of this problem is to see the meaning of the verse neither in the past nor in the future but in the present. One "always" prays for Jerusalem and one always celebrates festivals in her direction (describing, I assume, either a physical or an emotional orientation towards Jerusalem).

Both his comments on v.6 and v.8 set out a relationship with Jews who live in Jerusalem. In v.6, Ibn Ezra makes it clear that the people he perceive to be his readers are not residents in Jerusalem, since they are asked to pray in the

direction of Jerusalem. However, regarding the "lovers of Jerusalem", he isn't sure. They may be understood as referring either to "us" (Diaspora Jews), or to permanent residents in Jerusalem. In v.8, Ibn Ezra changes the singular of the verse ("my kin") to the plural ("our kin"), and he ascribes great honor to those who do reside in Jerusalem.

The result of reading both verses with Ibn Ezra's commentary is an understanding of the psalm very distant from King David. Instead, we are left with an understanding of how a Jew of Ibn Ezra's time is supposed to relate to Jerusalem during the long intermediate period when most of the Jewish people live in exile, waiting for the Messiah to come. The Diaspora Jew is supposed to pray for the peace of Jerusalem, maintain a strong consciousness of her, celebrate in her direction, and honor those Jews who make their homes there. While acutely conscious of Jerusalem's glorious past, and hopeful that even greater messianic glories were in store, Ibn Ezra clearly felt that his contemporaries needed to be reminded that loyalty to Jerusalem required constant expression, and that the remnant of Jews who maintained a presence in the decidedly un-messianic Jerusalem of the

present deserved support and encouragement.[13]

C. Radak

In contrast to both Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Radak states clearly at the beginning of his commentary on this psalm that the psalm is not of Davidic authorship:

> Radak on Ps.122:1 [14]
> *A song of ascents. Of David. I rejoiced when they said to me, "We are going to the house of the Lord."*
> (שיר המעלות לדוד שמחתי באמרים לי בית יהוה נלך):
> It is possible that the rest of the [Songs of] Ascent which were not ascribed to David were written by other, anonymous, poets. And those which are described as being *Of David* were written by David.
>
> But this psalm is a product of the exiles (בני הגלות), who out of their great desire for the [re-]building of the Temple call to mind the Ascents of Israel for the festivals, and speak in the language of the forefathers who lived during the period of the Temple and who said, *"I rejoiced."* Every single person says, *"I rejoiced."*

Throughout his commentary to this psalm, Radak consistently makes this point clear: the context of the psalm is not the reign of King David, but the period after the destruction of the Temple. Radak does not specify whether the בני גלות to

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[13] For a discussion of Ibn Ezra's view of exile as a state of humiliation and suffering, and a comparison of his views with those of R.Judah Halevi, see H.H. Ben Sasson, p.528.

[14] I take my text from The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms CXX-CL, ed. and trans. Joshua Baker and Ernest W. Nicholson, (Cambridge, UK: University Press, 1973).

whom he refers are the exiles from the first Temple or the second. But the chronological difficulties which faced Rashi and Ibn Ezra force Radak to take the daring step of rejecting Davidic authorship entirely. In doing so, he allows the psalm to "speak" from a point of view closer to the experiences of his exiled readership.

Setting the psalm in an exilic context, however, does not mean that Radak abandons the sense that the psalm describes events which occured in past historical time. In fact, it allows him to speak in the past more freely than Rashi and Ibn Ezra, who had to offer some "future" explanations to account for Davidic authorship:

> Radak on Ps.122:3
> *Jerusalem built up* (ירושלים הבנוייה):
> The exiles say, when Jerusalem was built up, and the Divine Presence (שכינה) was in her midst, how greatly was she renowned!
> Where can you find a city like her, in which the entire congregation of Israel was gathered tightly together three times a year? Who has seen a city like that city?

For Radak, the power of this verse lies in its description of Jerusalem in its glory, when the Divine Presence dwelt there and the whole Jewish people gathered there for the three Pilgrimage festivals. The city was renowned, and there was none other like her.

Radak goes into even more detail in his description of the Jerusalem of the past in his comment on v.4:

Radak on Ps.122:4

To which they would make pilgrimage (שמם עלו): For there the twelve tribes who were the *tribes of the Lord* and who kept His commandments would make pilgrimage. And Jerusalem contained them all. This was a *testimony to Israel*[15] (ערות לישראל) that God chose them *to praise the name of the Lord* (להודות לשם יהוה) because of the miracles which He had shown them.

And this is one of [the miracles], as it says in the Mishnah,[16] "No man ever said to his fellow, 'this place is too crowded[17] for me to lodge overnight in Jerusalem.'" And an even greater miracle is that when they were all assembled in the courtyard, they stood crowded together and yet [were able to] bow with ease.[18]

Or, the meaning of ערות לישראל may be that when the tribes went up on their pilgrimage, it was a decree for them, a commandment for Israel that they go up there *to praise the name of the Lord* (להודות לשם יהוה).

Radak conveys three important ideas in his comments on v.4. First, he describes in detail the atmosphere of great crowds and huge throngs of people which characterized Jerusalem during the pilgrimage festivals. He first alluded to this notion in his comment on v.3. Here he cites mishnaic statements about the crowding in Jerusalem to flesh out this idea.

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[15] New JPS translation: "as was enjoined upon Israel." Radak will offer an alternative explanation with this interpretation (see below).

[16] M. Avot 5:5.

[17] Lit.: "narrow". See Is.49:20.

[18] M. Avot 5:5.

Second, the Mishnah citations help Radak convey the miraculous nature of the Israelites' experience as they participated in the pilgrimage festivals. Despite the crowding, a miracle occurs and none of the pilgrims feels crowded or is deterred by the crowding from participation in the proper worship.

Finally, Radak uses the verse to discuss in two places the idea of commandment: 1) the reference to tribes *who kept God's commandments* participating in the pilgrimages, and 2) the alternative explanation of עדות לישראל as the *commandment* to the children of Israel to participate in these pilgrimages.

Radak's commentary on this verse then presents the pilgrimage festivals as a time of great unity for the faithful children of Israel. All would gather together, but their gathering would miraculously cause no discomfort for individuals. The miracle showed that they were in God's favor. And all they had to do was keep God's commandments in order to merit participation in this wondrous event.

Although Radak's commentary on v.4 may perhaps give us a glimpse of his vision of the scene at a future Temple, he himself stays at least formally in the past tense. In his comment on v.6, however, Radak moves forward explicitly to

the present and to the future:

> Radak on Ps.122:6
> *Pray* (שאלו):
> The exiles say to one another, Pray to God *for the peace of Jerusalem*. And by *peace of Jerusalem*, we mean the ingathering of the exiles, because until that time [Jerusalem] will not have peace, since the uncircumcised and the Ishmaelites are fighting one another on her account.
>
> And afterwards [the psalmist] says regarding Jerusalem, *May those who love you be at peace* (ישלי אוהביך) -- this is Israel in exile, who mourn over [Jerusalem's] destruction.

With this commentary, Radak brings the psalm directly into his own historical time period. It is a time when the Jews are spread out all over the world, and when Jerusalem is afflicted by bloody wars between Gentiles. At this time, Radak says, the Jews must pray for the peace which will only come to Jerusalem when all those who are exiled (i.e., the Israelites) are gathered together within her gates.

Radak's comment, therefore, places the Gentile wars over Jerusalem in a Jewish conceptual framework -- they are not interminable but rather constitute the prelude to the ingathering of exiles. While the Jews live in exile, they must pray that this ingathering will take place, and they must continue to mourn over the destruction of Jerusalem. In other words, the Jews must retain their emotional and religious allegiance to Jerusalem even when they are living very far away from her, and even when she is plagued by bloody Gentile wars. Those wars do not represent Jerusalem's

natural state; her natural state will be restored when Israel is once again gathered to worship God properly within her gates. Only then will Jerusalem know peace.

We have seen that the essential problem which engaged the medieval commentators in their exegesis of Ps.122 was point of view. Was the psalm composed by David himself? If so, did the psalm's meaning derive from the circumstances of David's lifetime? Or did he write the psalm with the prescient knowledge of a messianic figure, with a view toward the Israel's eventual return from exile to his city? If David did not write the psalm at all, then what was its setting, Israel or exile? And was the psalm speaking of past, present, or future?

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak each answered these questions in his own way. But reading the psalm together with the commentary of any one of the three leaves the reader with the sense that Israel belongs in her Land and any time spent outside the Land constitutes not home but "exile."

PSALM 126

1. A song of ascents.
   When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion
   --we see it as in a dream--[19]
2. our mouths shall be filled with laughter,
   our tongues, with songs of joy.
   Then shall they say among the nations,
   "The Lord has done great things for them!"
3. The Lord will do great things for us
   and we shall rejoice.
4. Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
   like watercourses in the Negeb.
5. They who sow in tears
   shall reap with songs of joy.
6. Though he goes along weeping,
   carrying the seed-bag
   he shall come back with songs of joy,
   carrying his sheaves.

Like the commentaries on Ps.122, the medieval commentators' work on Ps.126 also exhibits a concern with past, present, and future. But because the psalm is different, the form of the argument is different. Here King David is not an issue; instead, the commentators use the seemingly abrupt transition between vv.1-3 and vv.4-6 as a vehicle for bringing the message of the psalm into the lives of their readers. The end of the exile is portrayed not just as a historical moment in Israel's past, but as a momentous event in her future as well.

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[19] New JPS notes the literal meaning of this phrase: "we were veritable dreamers."

While the first half of the psalm speaks explicitly of the Return to Zion, the second half presents agricultural and topographical images whose connection to the idea of Return is not entirely clear. Reading these images metaphorically, the medievals set for themselves the task of deciphering the meaning which lay behind them. This process of interpretation and definition afforded the medieval commentators an opportunity to stress the importance of the return to Zion, while bringing the images closer to the experience of their readers.

A. Rashi

Of the psalm's six verses, Rashi offers comments on only three -- vv. 1, 4, and 6. His comment on v.1 evokes the issue of chronology to which he devoted much attention in his commentary on Ps.122. Here, however, the problem is simplified because there is no explicit association of the psalm with King David.

> Rashi on Ps.126:1
> *When the Lord restores the fortunes of Zion*
> (בשוב יהוה את שיבת ציון):
> We will be *like dreamers*.

The temporal focus of the psalm as a whole is in the future. Nevertheless, this verse does contain a verb in the past tense -- היינו. Rashi does not want any of his readers to be confused; even though the verb is grammatically in the past

tense, it is to be understood as a future tense נהיה. The return to Zion spoken about in the psalm is an event which has yet to take place.

Having established the future orientation of the psalm, Rashi proceeds in his next comment to interpret its meaning:

> Rashi on Ps.126:4
> *Like watercourses in the Negeb* (כאפיקים בנגב): Like watercourses in a dry land which give it moisture, so will we be moist when You *restore us* from our captivity, in which *those who sow*, in a dry land, [do so] *in tears*, worrying lest [the land] would not sprout -- they will reap *with songs of joy* by means of the watercourses which run throughout [the land].

The rather confused English rendering of this passage reflects the Hebrew, which itself consists of one long and complicated sentence. It appears that Rashi is trying to provide syntactical tissue[20] for many of the key phrases found in the psalm. This "tissue" gives a fuller meaning to the agricultural and topographical terms which are sprinkled throughout the verse. It connects the first half of the psalm, which speaks of Israel's return from exile, with the second half, which uses agricultural imagery. Since v.4 is the transition verse between these two sections of the psalm, containing elements of both, it provides a felicitous place for Rashi to explain the connection.

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[20] Phrase suggested by Dr. S. David Sperling.

In Rashi's rendering, watercourses in the Negeb have the same effect as the return of Israel from captivity. Both moisten: the watercourses provide water for a dry area, enabling life to sprout, and return from exile will make the children of Israel moist (presumably from tears of joy). Ibn Ezra and Radak will explain the connection more clearly, but Rashi sets the stage for seeing in the images found in the second half of the psalm allusions to the idea and the hope found in the first half of the psalm. He does so again in his comment on v.6:

> Rashi on Ps.126:6
> *Though he goes along weeping* (הלוך ילך ובכה): Thus does Israel sow righteousness (צדקה) before the Holy One Blessed be He -- with tears, in exile; *they shall reap with songs of joy* when You pay their reward in the future.

With this comment, Rashi provides another example of the way in which the agricultural imagery of the second half can have a deeper meaning, closer to the experience of his readers. The "sowing" which is spoken of in the psalm is not a purely agricultural reference, Rashi says. The Jewish people "sow" righteousness while in exile (surely a familiar rabbinic theme to his readers), even as they weep. As a reward for these righteous deeds, God (addressed in the second person) will grant them their reward -- the seeds of righteousness which the Jews planted with the tears of exile will be reaped by them with the joy of Return to Zion.

B. Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra also sees a wider religious meaning in the imagery presented in the second half of the psalm. He uses simpler language, making the metaphor even clearer than Rashi did:

> Ibn Ezra on Ps.126:5
> *They who sow* (הזרעים):
> The exile is compared to the *Negeb*, in which there is no water. Redemption is like streams of water. The exiles are like *they who sow*, meaning that they keep the Torah.

Here, Ibn Ezra sets up simple one to one identifications of various elements in the second half of the psalm. For the Jew, the lands of exile are dry places, with no water. Redemption, the return of the Jews from exile to Zion, is signified by the watercourses which bring life to arid places. And while Rashi associated the act of sowing with the practice of righteousness, Ibn Ezra makes a similar connection to the observance of the Torah:

> Ibn Ezra on Ps.126:6
> *goes along weeping* (הלך ובכה):
> The meaning is that he would weep for fear that his seed would perish. The meaning of *seed-bag* (משך) is that it is the vessel in which he carries his seed.
>
> And there are those who say that *his sheaves* also refers to the seed.[21]
>
> This is an allegory (משל) concerning the reward which those who keep the Torah and those who suffer in exile [receive].

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[21] i.e., "The sheaves of seed." This explanation of Ibn Ezra's comment was suggested by Dr. Sperling.

There are a number of rather unclear aspects to this comment by Ibn Ezra. The first concerns his explanation of the man who goes about weeping. Ibn Ezra says that he weeps because he is afraid that his seed will perish. The commentator does not say whether he reads "seed" in its literal, agricultural sense, or if he intends his readers to understand זרע as a reference to offspring. We have seen in in our discussion of the Gen.15 material[22] that the semantic range of the term זרע can include the Jewish descendants promised to Abraham by God. Might Ibn Ezra be intending for his readers to understand the "fear lest the seed perish" as the fear felt by Jews living in exile that their children might perish -- either physically from persecution, or religiously from apostasy?

It is impossible to know. On the one hand, his comment on v.5 shows that Ibn Ezra was thinking of the agricultural elements in the psalm in an allegorical way. But on the other hand, in v.5, he made the comparisons crystal clear. Why would he suddenly change to an elliptical style in the next verse? We shall never know the commentator's intent. But my guess is that on some level, Ibn Ezra must have

[22] See above, ch.1.

sensed the deeper Jewish resonances of the term זרע.[23]

The notion of "reward" was found also in Rashi's comment on this verse. The reward would be received by those who remain faithful to the Torah even while suffering in exile. Although he does not make it clear, Ibn Ezra apparently sees in the phrase "reaping with joy" the reward granted by God to those who suffered in exile for the sake of His Torah.

One other comment of Ibn Ezra's on this psalm provides an apt point of transition to the Radak material, because it contains a reference to a theme stressed by Radak:

> Ibn Ezra on Ps.126:1
> *the fortunes* (שיבת):
> [This word has] the same pattern as שבחם וקיטמם.[24] Thus will Israel say when God restores them from their captivity, "no one has ever seen a wonder (פלא) such as this while awake -- only in a dream."

In this comment, Ibn Ezra stresses the wondrous character of the return to Zion. The event is so unprecedented, so removed from the natural order, that the psalmist speaks of it in terms of a dream. That is the vision of the Return which Ibn Ezra wants to convey to his readers -- Jews who,

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[23] Dr. Sperling noted in this connection that Ibn Ezra himself experienced such a loss -- according to tradition, he saw his son become a convert to Islam.

[24] Lam.3:63.

he knows, see very little resembling a return in *their* waking hours.

C. Radak

Radak quotes Ibn Ezra's comment about dreams and wonders as one possible explanation of v.1. But he also offers an interpretation which he learned from his father:

> Radak on Ps.126:1
> *we see it as in a dream* (היינו כחולמים):
> The sorrows of exile will be in our eyes like a fleeting dream because of the great joy which we shall enjoy upon returning to our land. Thus interpreted my master my father z"l.

According to Radak's father, the "dream" spoken of in the verse is a reference to the sorrows of the exile -- their dreamlike quality being their unreality, and their quick disappearance in the light and joy of a new day and new hope. In the other explanation cited by Radak (Ibn Ezra's), the dream symbolizes a more positive part of the Jewish experience -- namely, the wondrous nature of the Return itself.

Radak does not tell his readers which of these interpretations he prefers. But he does pick up on Ibn Ezra's notion of "wonder" (פלא) in his interpretation of the next two verses:

Radak on Ps.126:2
our mouths shall be filled (אז ימלא)...
The Lord has done great things (הגדיל יהוה):
The nations will be amazed and will say, "A great wonder!" (פלא גדול).
"The Lord has done great things for them!" (הגדיל יהוה לעשות עם אלה):
That is to say, for Israel.
He has done great things (הגדיל):
So Israel says,

Radak on Ps.126:3
The Lord will do great things for us (הגדיל יהוה לעשות עמנו):
Therefore, *we shall rejoice*; that is to say, this is the greatest joy which you will see among us and which will *fill our mouths with laughter.*
Because *the Lord will do great things for us* -- a great wonder (פלא גדול) and abundant kindness.

In his comments on both these verses, Radak uses the terminology which he learned from Ibn Ezra -- the notion that the actions of the Lord in bringing Israel back to Zion from captivity constitute a פלא, a wonder. In the case of v.1, the wonder is beheld by the nations of the world and in v.2, it is Israel who acknowledges the miraculous nature of God's favors and kindnesses to them.

Like both Rashi and Ibn Ezra, Radak allegorizes some of the agricultural and topographical images of the second half of the verse, in order to bring them in line with the idea presented in the first half. Although the comparisons he makes are essentially the same as those made by his predecessors, Radak does provide somewhat more detail than they did:

Radak on Ps.126:4
like watercourses in the Negeb (כאפיקים בנגב):
Negeb means dry land, as it says[25], "You have given me away as Negeb land." [Such a land] thirsts for water, and if watercourses pass through it there would be a great revival (תרוש) and a great kindness.

So shall it be with our return from exile. The exile is compared to Negeb, and redemption to streams of water.

Radak continues his explanation of the metaphor:

Radak on Ps.126:5
They who sow (הזרעים):
Exile is compared to a dry land in which the one who sows, does so with tears because as he sows, he weeps, pleading with God to send rain down upon [the land], that he may reap with blessing what he has sown. It is farfetched to suppose that the one who sows [the land] will reap from her without the mercy of God.

So Israel in exile sows, with all their sorrows -- the "sowing" being the performance of the commandments. They perform them with tears because of the sorrow of exile, hoping that God would deliver them from exile. *They will reap with joy* what they sowed with tears -- the "reaping" representing the good reward [which they will receive].

Radak's interpretation of v.6 completes the identification of various elements of the second half of the psalm with the idea of Return to Zion:

Radak on Ps.126:6
Though he goes along (הלוך ילך)...
seed-bag (משך הזרע):
The interpretation of משך הזרע is: the most precious of seed. Likewise,[26] "a pouch (משך) of wisdom is better than rubies" -- wisdom is

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[25] Josh.15:19.

[26] Jb.28:18.

> precious. A precious thing is called משך because its reputation is widespread (נמשך למרחוק).
>
> Now, seed is precious in dry (*Negeb*) land and the poor man who carries it and goes to the field to sow it, goes along *weeping* out of fear lest the seed perish and not sprout because of the dryness of the land.
>
> But God sees his tears and has pity on him and sends rain upon the land so that at harvest time he may return home *with joy* instead of going about weeping [as he did] during sowing season, for he will carry the *sheaves* of his harvest home *with joy*.
>
> So Israel in exile suffers the yoke of the exile, carrying the burden of taxes in order to fulfill the Torah and the commandments, which correspond to the seed in the metaphor. But at the time of Redemption (that is, the harvest time) they will come to the Land of Israel *with joy*, carrying the good sheaves which God will bountifully bestow on them, and they will go forth from exile with silver and gold.

We have seen that Radak agrees with Rashi and Ibn Ezra that the second half of Ps.126 must be understood as a metaphor for the theme presented in the first half. All three identify the dry land with the exile, and the streams of water with redemption. Ibn Ezra and Radak see the sowing as corresponding to the performance of God's commandments -- in other words, loyal participation in the rabbinic system. All three acknowledge that this "sowing" is often done with tears of suffering during the exile. But God sees the suffering and has pity on His people. Once the waters of redemption start to flow, Israel will receive her "harvest,"

the just reward of a joyous and bountiful return to the Land of Israel.

This reward is seen as a great wonder, a miracle which will cause both the nations of the world and Israel to acknowledge God's special relationship with the Jewish people.

Ps.126 read by itself is certainly a poem of hope. Read together with the medieval commentators, the hope represented in the psalm becomes explicitly identified with the circumstances of the medieval Jewish exile. It was an exile which showed no signs of ending in a natural way. It was an exile whose leaders saw participation in the rabbinic system as the only way to earn God's favor and ensure Jewish survival. Those leaders knew that their people did not generally live off the land, but they wanted them to maintain some sort of relationship with *a* Land, the Land of Israel.

The medieval commentators saw in Ps.126 an important vehicle for reinforcing the hope which was necessary if their readers were to retain their Jewish allegiance in the face of all the pressures of medieval society. Taken together with their commentaries, the psalm acknowledges the suffering of living in exile. It even wallows in the

suffering, perhaps to remind comfortable Diaspora Jews that they *were* living in exile. But the psalm read through the medieval lens speaks not just of suffering but also of redemption, a miraculous redemption in which the Gentiles among whom the Jews lived would finally say: The Lord has done great things for the people Israel!

* * *

We have seen in our discussion of Psalms 122 and 126 two major tensions which occupied the medieval commentators. The first was a question of time. Was the psalm speaking of past events, current reality, or an as yet unrealized future? We saw that by their various methods, the commentators played on this tension in a way that validated all three meanings and made them a whole. The future of the Jewish people would be like its glorious past, if only the Jews of the present maintained their faith in God's promise and their allegiance to the rabbinic system.

The second tension we have seen is the one between the Land of Israel as it actually was during the medieval period, and the Land which the medieval commentators imagined it would one day become. We saw a recognition of the difference between the two in the idea of the earthly Jerusalem and the celestial Jerusalem. Clearly, the ideal

was a Jewish return to a Jerusalem which looked like the celestial Jerusalem. But we also saw in the homage paid to those who lived in the real Jerusalem, and the sadness over the Gentile wars being fought on her soil, that the medieval commentators felt that some relationship with the earthly Jerusalem "of dust and stone" was important too.

Perhaps the key lesson which the medieval commentators wanted to convey through their discussion of Psalms 122 and 126 was that Diaspora Jews were in fact in exile. After all, the description of one's presence in one land and absence from another as "exile" represents a value judgment. This is a value the medieval commentators clearly wanted to teach.

The concept of exile told the Jews that their Jewish lives were not complete and were not fulfilled *because they were not living in the Land promised the Jews by God.* But the idea of exile was always accompanied by the idea of return. Thus Jewish teachers held out for their readers the hope which was necessary for them to avoid despair. God still cared for them, and would yet make miracles for them. A future as glorious as the past awaited them in their Land.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have seen the medieval commentators explain the relationship of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel using three different models -- unconditional covenant, conditional covenant, and exile/return.

These models were not new; their roots lie in Scripture itself, as well as in rabbinic tradition. But through the method of line by line Scriptural exegesis, the medieval commentators made these concepts accessible to a generation of Jews who lived at an even further remove from Jewish sovereignty over the Land than their ancestors had, who were exposed to intellectual currents either unknown or uninfluential in the world of their ancestors, and who were subject to religious pressures peculiar to life under the dominion of people who thought of themselves as Israel's successors. By choosing to present their views in the context of biblical exegesis, the medieval commentators affirmed that even under these new conditions, Jewish life continued to be rooted in the Torah tradition and the Sinaitic Revelation continued to form the basis for Jewish self-understanding.

The meaning of the Sinaitic Revelation is of course not always self-evident. The medieval exegetes saw certain hermeneutical challenges in each of the three models, and used the freedom which their genre allowed them to explore the difficulties, and to answer them in a way which seemed to them to "make sense" in terms of the criteria of tradition and (though they may not always have admitted it) their own era. At the same time, they clearly aspired to impart a lesson about the Land of Israel which would reinforce the people Israel's faith, and allegiance to the rabbinic system.

The main challenge associated with the unconditional covenant, we saw, was the inconsistency between a statement of unconditional promise, and the fact of Israel's prolonged stay off the Land. The medieval commentators, in general, responded to this challenge with a ringing affirmation of the unconditional nature of the covenant. Time spent away from the Land was just one small part of God's grand plan, the focus of which involved Israel's return to the Land. The Jew needed to have unwavering faith, like his father Abraham, that this "plan" would ultimately be fulfilled.

The conditional covenant posed a different challenge for the medieval commentators. The conditional covenant model squared nicely with the "facts" of medieval Jewish

existence; the problem was that it squared *too* nicely. Israel did not live in her Land; therefore, it was possible to conclude that she must have violated God's rules, resulting in His abrogation of the covenant. This was the Christian approach. The medieval exegetes were unalterably opposed to seeing Israel's situation in this way, and they did not want their readership to understand it in this way either. They used the opportunities afforded them by Lev.26 to explain that the "condition" in the conditional covenant was participation in the rabbinic system. Loyal adherence to this system would bring the rewards promised in the first half; interference with the system would bring the punishments detailed in the second. The Land itself would actively take part in reward, punishment, and comfort. Temporary punishment in no way implied abrogation of the covenant between God and Israel.

The principal challenge tackled with regard to the exile and return model was convincing Jews that they were indeed in exile, and that they would in fact return. The poetry of the psalms allowed the commentators to inspire their readers with a portrayal of the way Jerusalem once was, and a vision of the way it would yet become. Their hope, apparently, was that their vivid descriptions of the messianic Jerusalem, coupled with their continual reminders about participation in the rabbinic system, would convey the

message -- that the road to a wondrous Zion runs through observance of the commandments and continued faith in God and the Jewish tradition.

Through these responses to key biblical passages, the medieval commentators hoped to ascribe meaning and significance to Israel's continuing sojourn in the Diaspora.

If the main worry of the commentators was indeed to reinforce Jewish faith and participation in the rabbinic system, then it is perhaps ironic that the commentators chose to dwell on the Land of Israel to such an extent. After all, one of the great achievements of the rabbinic system which was created in the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple was that it provided for the possibility of a meaningful Jewish life without the Temple and *outside the Land*. One might have thought that Jewish leaders in the Diaspora would have hesitated elevating the profile or the status of the Land of Israel for fear that attention to the Land of Israel would undermine their efforts to create a substantial, ongoing Jewish life in their own lands. And yet, I found no place where the medieval commentators seemed to shy away from their affirmation of the Land or their negation of Israel's presence outside the Land.

Before going further, I must state an important qualification to this statement. The scope of this paper included only passages whose focus was the Land of Israel. This restriction may provide a skewed perspective, and an expanded study would require attention to many other types of passages as well. Marc Saperstein rightly cautions that methodologically, the best way to discern the place of the Land in the system of a particular thinker is by looking at passages which reveal a tension between loyalty to the Land and other values in Jewish life.[1]

The passages I examined did not involve this kind of tension but, as I have shown, each of the three models did present challenges for the medieval commentators, and these challenges could have been handled in different ways. For instance, the commentators might have explained the unconditional covenant by emphasizing that God's promise to the Jewish people is maintained no matter where they live. The Land promise could have been completely spiritualized, presented as symbolizing Israel's highest goals (or something like that). But none of them took that route. We saw that some even hesitated associating Israel's return to the Land with the Messiah. Even when the Land was portrayed

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[1] Marc Saperstein, "The Land of Israel in Pre-Modern Jewish Thought: A History of Two Rabbinic Statements," pp.189-90.

in messianic terms, the physical territory of the Land of Israel remained the messianic destination. Even Ramban, the mystic among the four I studied, shied away from spiritualizing the Land, and maintained his allegiance to the territorial Land of Israel. Ramban was in fact the only one of the four who actually moved to the Land of Israel.[2]

Ramban's decision to make *aliyah*, and the others' decision to stay in the Diaspora, lead me to some concluding personal reflections about this topic. My choice of subject for this thesis reflected a convergence of two interests. The genre of medieval commentaries has always intrigued me because I see in the medievals' struggle to come to terms with text, tradition, and the demands of the contemporary world a reflection of my own Jewish struggles. I too want to be a loyal Jew. I too want to instill in others the love of

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[2] Many Kabbalists did view the Land in an entirely spiritual way. Some saw the exile as a "divine cosmic catastrophe, the flaws and defects in the position of Israel reflecting the flawed and defective state of the universe as a whole" -- H.H. Ben Sasson, p.533. For a comprehensive discussion, see Moshe Idel, "The Land of Israel in Medieval Kabbalah." Idel quotes Kabbalists who conceive of the Land as symbolizing the feminine aspect of the Divine Presence, and others who see it as corresponding to the human body. R. Abraham Abulafia (1240-after 1291): "The body of any person who is worthy to receive a prophetic inspiration may be considered a Land of Israel" (p.179). The tension between literal and allegorical understandings of Jerusalem was also present in the church: see Encyclopedia Judaica 9:1569 ("Jerusalem"). The vision of the Land in utterly spiritual terms never caught on in mainstream Judaism.

Judaism which I feel. I too see the study of the Jewish textual tradition as the richest and most effective way of achieving these goals for myself and others.

My other interest of course is the Land of Israel. I am privileged to live in a time which has seen the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel. Yet that return is clearly not the kind of Redemption which the rabbis envisioned. I have long wondered, how do I relate to this pre-Redemption Land of Israel? All four of the medieval teachers I studied enthused about the Land of Israel; all four wanted their Jewish readers to love the Land, to pray for the Land, to identify with the Land. Only one out of the four actually went on *aliyah* to the decidedly un-messianic Jerusalem of his own time.

We can't know exactly why he went; we can't know for sure why the others didn't. Perhaps personal circumstances were deciding factors. Ramban, after all, went to the Land of Israel shortly after he was chased out of Barcelona in the wake of his controversial disputation there. However, he presumably could have fled to any number of countries. He chose the Land of Israel; the others chose to make their lives in the Diaspora countries where they were born.

The lesson I draw from their respective decisions is

that a rich and fruitful Jewish life can be constructed in the Diaspora. People like the medieval commentators made that possible, even as they extolled the Land of Israel. They ensured the continuity of Diaspora Jewish life by making the Jewish textual tradition accessible to the Jews of their own generation, by reinforcing the notion of covenant, by instilling hope and faith in ultimate messianic Redemption, and, ironically, by strengthening the identification of Diaspora Jews with the Land of Israel.

Even as they contributed to Jewish life in the Diaspora, however, the medieval commentators also kept alive a yearning for the Land which led some Jews (a minority, to be sure) away from the Diaspora. If the struggle to construct a Jewish life in the Diaspora is ultimately a dead end (that is, if God's plan is to bring us to our final Redemption in the Land of Israel) then, they ask, why bother engaging in that struggle in the Diaspora? If our home is indeed supposed to be in the Land of Israel, then that's where we belong, even during this waiting period before Redemption comes. Such people conclude that the primary locus of human activity to bring about Redemption is, logically, the Land of Israel.

If this was true for some Jews in the Middle Ages -- Judah Halevi is another example of the few who took this

route[3] -- then it is surely true in a time when Jewish sovereignty has been restored in the Land of Israel and Jews have the power and the (relative) security to work towards that Redemption corporately. The Jews in Israel today have of course varied notions of what "working towards Redemption" entails. For some, it means settling in Efrat; for others, it means marching in Peace Now demonstrations; for still others, it means working the Land; there are even those for whom it means opposing the entire existence of a political Zionist state before God sends the Messiah.

The one idea which all these groups share is that the Land of Israel is the place where the struggle is to be undergone. Their goal is not to strengthen a Diaspora Jewish life which they are convinced will ultimately wither away anyway. While they wouldn't all use this language, they all share the goal of turning the earthly Jerusalem into the celestial Jerusalem (as each envisions it). And as frustrating as it is for them to be acutely conscious, every

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[3] No study of medieval Jewish attitudes toward the Land of Israel would be complete without mention of Halevi (before 1075-1141). Halevi was a great friend of Ibn Ezra, and his writings about the Land of Israel, both prose and poetry, had a great influence on his and subsequent generations. Unlike the Kabbalists, he had a deep emotional attachment to the physical, earthly Land of Israel, to which he eventually decided to move. For Halevi, the Divine Presence was to be found among the people when it is on its own Land; outside the Land, the Divine Presence may still be found but only among the pious and only <u>in potentia</u> -- Shalom Rosenberg, p.159.

day, of how far short the earthly Jerusalem is measuring up against the celestial Jerusalem, they choose to engage in the struggle in the earthly Jerusalem itself, in the Israel "of dust and stones."

The concepts of Covenant and Return from Exile were two among the package of ideas which were presented to medieval Jews by their tradition and by the leaders who interpreted that tradition for them. While many Jews did abandon Judaism during the Middle Ages, most did not. Despite all the pressures on Jewish life, medieval Jewry (almost entirely in the Diaspora) succeeded in "catching the ball" of Jewish tradition and "passing it off" to the Jews of the modern era. I believe that through the efforts of medieval Jews like the four men I've studied, the ball was "advanced" considerably during the Middle Ages. Jews learned from the new circumstances in which they lived, and learned from the Gentiles around them, and the result was a richer Judaism which managed to retain the allegiance of most Jews because it expressed the hopes, the yearnings, and the beliefs of most Jews.

The modern era has, I believe, also seen new challenges as well as important advances. Time will tell whether modern Jews can as successfully as their medieval forebears meet their challenges in a way which retains the allegiance of

most Jews. It also remains to be seen whether Jewish life in Israel or the Diaspora better fosters the kind of deep Jewish loyalty which will bring the Jewish people into the future.

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