

A JEWISH COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT: A SAMPLE VERSE

by R. MENAHEM

The work-in-progress, a sample of which is presented here – a Jewish commentary on the New Testament – began some two and one-half years ago, following an earlier period of thinking and germination of the basic ideas and methods. The overall aim of the commentary is to illustrate the connection between the text of the New Testament and Jewish texts of the period of the Second Temple and thereafter: the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Apocrypha and Apocalyptic literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Midrash, etc. For each verse of the New Testament, the commentary contains the following sections:

- a. *the verse itself;*
- b. *variant readings of the Greek text of the verse;*
- c. *“Commentary” – a discussion of the verse within the context of New Testament literature per se;*
- d. *“Sources” – the meeting, and confrontation, between the Jewish sources and the New Testament texts.*

This structure enables us to examine a broad range of topics and problems, through which we hope to demonstrate the central thesis: that everything appearing in the texts, both the Jewish ones and the New Testament, originates in the same school. The problematics considered here include: the difficulties in interpretation of the written texts; religious-valuational questions; theology; usage of symbols; the dialectic-interpretive method characteristic of midrashic and halakhic literature; and the frame of reference in which events occur, including archeological, geographical, zoological, and botanic dimensions of the authors’ world, tools, legal and linguistic terms, etc.

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The interpretation of the intellectual world of the New Testament within this broad context will also reveal to us the dynamic interaction in the meeting between the early Jewish-Christian church and the Rabbinical-Jewish community, the degree of pluralism in their meeting, and the conflict between them.

We will likewise attempt to link the prophetic religious-conceptual source in the Judean Desert – the Essenes and the Dead Sea Sect – with Pharasaic-Rabbinic legal conceptions, and to provide an understanding of its situation between an eschatological reality and the eschatological conception of a future Utopia. All this must be seen, in turn, within the geopolitical context of the relationship between Rome, on the one hand, and Palestine and its inhabitants, on the other; between a flesh and blood kingdom, and the Messianic expectations of a kingdom of Heaven. This period was also marked by the loss of the ritual center, the Temple, and the creation of spiritual alternatives, such as “the heavenly Jerusalem.” These deliberations take on added significance in light of the discovery of the sectarian writings from the Judean Desert, through which we may better understand the background of the early Jewish-Christian church and its dealings with Rabbinic-Pharasaic Jewish society.

The commentary will present the reader with a wide, diverse range of sources: midrashic, halakhic, chronographic, the Dead Sea Scrolls apochryphal literature, liturgical poetry, and others. It will likewise encompass up-to-date, comprehensive bibliographical information on the subjects mentioned, pertinent to the verse under discussion. The challenge posed by this project is to revive the pluralism within the Jewish-Christian encounter and, simultaneously, to examine the sources of the two religious communities which now encounter one another.

Those interested in the project may send responses, criticism, and suggestions to R. Menahem, c/o Immanuel, P.O.B. 249, 91002 Jerusalem, Israel.

Text

Matthew 3:9

And think not to say within your hearts, Abraham is our father, for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Commentary

John the Baptist's criticism of the Pharisees and the Saducees, articulated in this verse, must be understood within the context of the latter's *Weltanschauung* concerning the concept of “Merit of the Fathers,” in “thinking... with [their] hearts [that] Abraham is our father.” In the parallel in Luke 3:8, the author uses

the words, “and do not imagine in your souls to say...,” the parallelism of imagine / think and souls / heart appearing there within the context of “viper’s children.” By way of contrast, we find there the genealogical listing of “Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham,” concluding, “so all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations” (Matthew 1:1,17; Luke 3:23-38, esp. 34. It should be noted that, while here the genealogical listing is from Abraham to Jesus, in Luke it is from Jesus to Abraham). This concept is also reflected in the motif of “merit of the fathers,” as in Luke 1:55: “As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed for ever.” Particular prominence is given to the reference to the “covenant” regarding the “oath” (Luke 1:72-73; cf. Acts. 3:25, in the context of the verse, “And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached to you... Unto you first God, having raised up His servant Jesus” [ibid., v. 20,26]), which is interpreted as a continuous “covenant” from Abraham. The reference to Abraham together with “the kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 8:11: “...and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of Heaven”; cf. Luke 13:28) is likewise connected to the concept of “the resurrection of the dead,” as in the verse, “and as touching the dead, that they rise... I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Mark 12:26; this is parallel to Luke 20:37-38). Cf. Luke 16:22: “And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom,” and Luke 16:23,25,29-31.

The repeated mentions of “Abraham” also refer to the man-woman connection and its national-religious cultural connection to “Abraham’s seed” (John 8:33), in relation to those identified in verse 31 as “Jews,” in connection with the meaning of “freedom” in relation to “bondage,” as regarding “Whosoever commits sin is the servant of sin” (John 8:34). This is connected to the motif in our verse of the performance of repentance without the genealogical connection of “our father Abraham.” However, in Galatians 4:22-23, a distinction is drawn between the two sons of Abraham, one of whom is from “the bondwoman,” while the other is from “the freewoman.” The son of the bondwoman is connected with “the flesh,” while the son of the freewoman is linked to “the promise.” These are linked with the distinction between “Sinai” and “Jerusalem,” for Sinai “is gendered to bondage,” but “Jerusalem which is above is free”; “being a daughter of Abraham” (Luke 13:16, in Jesus’ act of healing on the Sabbath the woman who had been sick for eighteen years) is placed in contrast to “...whom Satan has bound” (ibid.). In Jesus’ disputations, we find the statement, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do as the works of Abraham” (John 8:39). We also learn here that “Abraham” is the antithesis of “Satan”; moreover, Jesus identifies his teachings with “Abraham” (John 8:31-59). Cf. Romans 4:1-4: “What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he has whereof to glory; but not before God... Now to him that works is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.” Indeed, in the same passage (v. 9) it is stressed that “faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.” This also presents the attitude towards the act of circumcision, namely, that faith was “reckoned” to the Patriarch Abraham when he was still uncircumcised (Romans 4:1-12); the promise to him and his seed was given him “through the righteousness of the faith”

(op. cit, v. 13), and there is now a split between “the seed of the law of Abraham” and “the seed of the faith of Abraham” (op. cit, v. 16). Cf. Galatians 3:6-14, which concludes “that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (op. cit, v. 14; see also Hebrews 11:13-18; James 2:21-23). The question is raised, “Are you greater than our father Abraham?” (John 8:53), to which Jesus answers, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad... Before Abraham was, I am” (v. 56-58). Thus, Jesus apparently ascribes to himself the same unique status enjoyed by Abraham in the history of the Jewish nation. See Acts 3:13: “The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His son Jesus.” In Galatians 3:16, the only seed of Abraham is identified with “the Christ,” and “if you be Christ’s, then are you Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (op. cit, v. 29).

One should mention here the intimate, family aspect of the relationship between the people and Abraham, as “our father,” or the direct address: “And he said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me” (Luke 16:24), and, “But Abraham said, My son...” (v. 25), or the collective address: “Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whoever among you fears God...” (Acts 13:26).

The wording in our verse, “I say unto you,” possibly reveals its relation to the beginning of our verse, “And think not to say within your hearts,” and further connects with “O generation of vipers” (Matthew 3:7), relating to their honesty and direct / indirect thought, in contrast with “said,” with the special emphasis of “to you.” This wording points to “I” as against “to you,” signifying division and severance. His saying “that [Heb. *ki*] God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham,” which begins with *ki*, concludes the clause “for [Heb. *ki*] I say unto you.” The two uses of the preposition *ki*¹ point to the sharpness of the relationship between John and his audience, the “Pharisees” and “Saducees,” and his “threats” regarding the possibility that he could “raise up children to Abraham of these stones.” We may also note the play among the words “Abraham” (*Av-raham*), “our father (*avinu*), “stones” (*avanim*), and “children” (*banim*). The word “*avanim*” should in turn be read as *ovnayim*, the birthstool upon which the mother gives birth to children (“When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy...” [Ex. 1:16]). The link between raising children and Abraham is more profound when placed within the context of “immersion” and “repentance,” which were understood within the halakhic-Pharasaic conception as renewal and rebirth. The convert is compared to “an infant,” and constitutes a new covenant with a new identity (“A person who converts is like a new-born infant” [BT Yev. 24b]). John the Baptist specifically links this process with Abraham’s role as “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:4). By using the introductory wording, “is able,” meaning, “He has the capability of cancelling this covenant in order to ‘raise up children to Abraham,’ ” this verse raises the possibility of transferring the covenant made with Abraham to other “children,” who are also from the seed of Abraham.

This verse, however, seems out of place, as it breaks the continuity between verses 8 and 10 in our chapter, which speak of “bringing forth fruit” and “the roots of the trees... which bring not forth good fruit.” We may assume, however, that our verse completes the atmosphere of the debate in v. 7. Thus, this chapter is constructed on a series of literary circles: verse 7 being completed by verse 9, verse 8 by verses 10 and 12, and verse 6 completed by verse 11. These three circles correspond, in turn, to the three points of the triangle which the people of Israel confront in the crisis of sectarianism within itself – repentance; the kingdom of heaven; the fire to come.

Sources

1. The Merits of the Fathers

The concept of “merits of the fathers” is a major one in Rabbinic literature, mentioned specifically in the following passage: “When will you mention before Me the merits of the fathers and be acquitted in law? On Rosh Hashanah (the New Year), in the seventh month” (Lev. Rabbah 23:24, ed. Margolioth, p. 677), in exegesis of the phrase “a sacred convocation” (Lev. 23:24). Cf. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 205:7, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 340: “Thus said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Israel: ‘My children, if you will mention the merits of your fathers, then you will be acquitted before Me by the law of “one” – this refers to our father Abraham: ‘Abraham was one’ (Ezek. 33:24).” Cf. *Sifra: Aharei Mot* 9:7, ed. Weiss, 85b; Gen. Rabbah 14:6, ed. Theodor – Albeck, p. 130; Ex. Rabbah 28:1; Num. Rabbah 13:3; Eccl. Rabbah 3:11; Midrash Ps. 22:19; JT Shab. 16:1 (15:3); Tractate *Soferim* 16:8; *Yalkut ha-Makhiri* on Ps. 62:4. In *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Rosh ha-Shanah*, 9, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 342, we read the exegesis of R. Berechiah, who refers to the month of Tishrei as “the month of the oath [*de-shavu'ah*]” – i.e., the month in which the oath was made to Abraham at the time of the binding of Isaac; cf. Lev.

Rabbah 29:9, ed. Margolioth, p. 682; *Yalkut Shim'oni, Emor*, 645, op. cit., *Pinhas*, 782. It is stressed that Israel has ‘merit’ – *Tanhumta Tisa* (Buber) 4; *Yalkut Shim'oni, Tisa*, 386; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Ki Tisa*, 7, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 26. “‘Watching from the windows’ – because of the merit of the fathers, ‘he watches from the peepholes’ – because of the merit of the mothers, to teach you that just as there is a difference between a window and a peephole, there is a difference between the merits of the fathers and the merits of the mothers’: op. cit., *Ha-Hodesh ha-Zeh*, p. 92.

Hillel’s saying – “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” – was expanded and interpreted in relation to the belief in “merits of the fathers,” as follows: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me; if I do not attain merit for myself in this world, whose merit will attain for me the World to Come; I have no father, I have no mother, I have no brother; our father Abraham cannot

redeem Ishmael, our father Isaac cannot redeem Esau" (*Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version B, 27, ed. Schechter, p. 27b, on Mishnah Avot 1:14; cf. BT Sanh. 104a; Midrash Ps. 46:1, ed. Buber, p. 136b). In *Sifrei*, Deut. section 329, ed. Finkelstein, p. 380: "There is no one to save, the fathers did not save the children, Abraham does not save Ishmael, and Isaac does not save Esau, there are only fathers who do not save the children, brothers [who do not save] the brothers..."; cf. *Yalkut ha-Makhiri* on Ps. 49:12, ed. Buber, 134b. This same idea is reflected in the rabbinic debate regarding the contrast between Israel and the foreign nations, and in Paul's exegesis of Gen. 21:12 in Romans 9:7-18: " 'but in Isaac shall your seed be called'... They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted for the seed." It is as if he intended to counter the statement in the Mishnah: "One who swears, 'I do not derive any benefit from the seed of Abraham,' is prohibited from an Israelite, and permitted from the peoples of the world" (Ned. 3:121; JT Ned. 4:12 (38b); Gen. Rabbah 53:12; BT Ned. 31a; BT Sanh. 59b; E. Urbach, *Hazal* pp. 583-584; Y. Heinemann, *Aggadot ve-Toldoteihen: 'Yunim be-hishtalshalutan shel Mesorot* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 186-191. There is no need to mention the echoes in aggadic literature of the dispute between Ishmael and Eliezer at the time of the binding of Isaac concerning the inheritance and the rightful successor of Abraham: see *Perkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 31 (cf. the article by D.B. Heller, "Abraham in the Legend of the Moslems," *Enzyclopedia Eshkol*, pp. 341ff.; M. Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde* (1893), pp. 113ff.; Y. Heinemann, "Adaptations of Early Aggadot according to the Spirit of the Times in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*" [Heb.], in *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Shai Halkin*, ed. B. Shakhbitz, M. Perri (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 328ff.; Gen. Rabbah 55:4; BT Sanh. 89b; Gen. Rabbah 53:11; *Tanhuma*, Buber *Va-Yera* 42; *Targum Yonatan* on Gen. 22:1; *Tosefta*, Sotah 6:6, ed. Lieberman, pp. 184-186.

Rabbi Akiva places the value of "merits of the fathers" in proper perspective with his statement: "Happy is the person whose fathers provided him with merit, happy is

the person who has a peg on which to base himself" (JT Ber. 4:1 [7d], BT Ber. 27b). The Sages attributed the parting of the Red Sea to the merit of "the belief of our forefather Abraham, that I would part for them the sea, as it is written, 'And because he put his trust in the Lord, he reckoned it to his merit' (Gen. 15:6)." Cf. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael: Va-Yehi be-Shalah*, 3, ed. Horovitz - Rabin, p. 99 (and editor's note, op. cit); *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai: Be-Shalah*, 14:15, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 58; *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Ex. 14:15, ed. Margolioth, p. 267. In *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai*, p. 57: "R. Benaiah says, For the merit of the commandment which Abraham performed, I parted for you the sea: 'He split the wood for the burnt offering' (Gen. 22:3). What did He say, 'And the waters parted.'" See L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. III, p. 16, and n. 26; cf. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai: Mishpatim*, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 159; E. Urbach, *Hazal*, p. 440, and n. 24, p. 444 and n. 42; *Mekhilta: Va-Yisa*, 82, p. 160; op. cit: *'Amalek*, p. 179, p. 180; *Aggadot Bereshit*, ed. Jellenik, 26; A. Marmorstein, *The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinical Literature* (1920), pp. 34ff.; E. Urbach, *Hazal*, p. 230 and n. 16; D. Flusser, *Yahadut u-Mekorot ha-Nazrut*, pp. 182-183; Strack-Billerbeck (1922), I, p. 874; W. Bacher, *Palastinische Amoraer*, II, p. 452, n. 1, p. 487, n. 4.

In the discussion in *Sifrei Deut. sec. 312*, ed. Finkelstein, p. 353, we read: "... Thus when our forefather Abraham came into the world, there went out from him all the refuse of Ishmael and all the children of Keturah; [when] Isaac came into the world, there went out from him all the refuse..." Cf. op. cit, sec. 343, ed. Finkelstein, p. 49; *Targum Yonatan* on Gen. 35:22; *Targum Yerushalmi* on Gen. 49:72. A similar statement appears in *Pesikta Rabati* 20:39, ed. M. Ish-Shalom, 165b; cf. Y. Heinemann, *Darkei ha-Aggadah*, second ed. (Jerusalem, 1954), p. 89 and n. 89ff.; A. Margolioth, *Ha-Hiyuvim ba-Mikra ve-Zaka'im ba-Talmud*, pp. 9ff. For the principle of "for His great name and for the merits of the fathers," see *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai: Va-Ere*, 6:2, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 5; op. cit, p. 38 and p. 42, and other passages. All this

is with an awareness of, and sense for, "the decline of the generations," which required the reinforcement of the "current" aspect with the aspect of the "past," on behalf of the "future": JT Taan. 3:8 (66d); Lam. Rabbah, intro. 30; op. cit. 4:12; which established the figure of the "righteous person." An additional example appears in the *Targumim* in the interpretation of Abraham, and the salvation of the people by his merit, as in the *Targum* on Gen. 15:11: "Birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away" (cited in *Targum Yerushalmi, Targum Neophiti, Targum Yerushalmi*, ed. Kaufmann). The *Targumim* metaphorically compare the foreign nations to impure birds of prey, who counsel evil against Israel, while the people is saved "by the merit of Abram our father." See A. Shinan, "*Aggadatan shel Meturgemanim*," Doctoral Dissertation (Jerusalem: 1969), p. 317, and n. 113. The idea that God saved Lot from Sodom because of the merit of Abraham appears in the *Targum* on Gen. 19:29. The idea may possibly be concealed within the verse itself: "God was mindful of Abraham and removed Lot." *Targum Yonatan*, however, explicitly stresses the subject of Abraham's merit. See A. Shinan, op. cit. pp. 322-326, and his "The Theoretical Doctrine of the *Meturgemanim*" [Heb.], in *Mehkarei Yerushalayim be-Mahshevet Yisrael* 2/1 (1983), pp. 22-23, p. 29 and n. 72; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana: Ve-tomer Zion 'Azvani Hashem*, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 287: "... David said to the Holy One, 'Master of the Universe! so long as Israel possesses merit, act on their behalf for Your friend [s] Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'" Ibid., *Sos Asis* 4, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 328, p. 329: "Thus Israel has merit from Abraham, and they have from our father Jacob." Cf. *Yalkut Shimoni* on Isa., 505 and Y. Heine-mann, *Darkei ha-Aggadah*, p. 69 and n. 99, on their lives and deaths, and their never-ending influence and merits, both during their lifetimes and following their deaths. Cf. BT, M.K. 28a, which expounds the proximity between the death of Miriam and the red heifer.

On the atonement brought about by the death of the righteous, see JT Yoma 1:1 (38b); Lev. Rabbah 20:12, ed. Margolioth, p. 471; and parallel passages — *ibid.*. See BT

Hullin 7b, in the statement by R. Hama b. Hanina: "they are greater in their deaths than in their lives"; BT Sanh. 47a, and in *Dikdukei Sofrim*, *ibid.*, p. 140. In another exegesis, the Holy One, blessed be He, promises Abraham that he will bring forth from him righteous people who will defend his children from transgressions and evil deeds. Gen. Rabbah 44:5, ed. Albeck, p. 49 (see the textual variation op. cit); Cant. Rabbah 1:14, and Urbach, op. cit. p. 442 and n. 30. The making of miracles and salvation is dependent upon the acts of Israel (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Pasha*, ed. Horovitz, p. 14; op. cit. 16, p. 62, p. 98), which undoubtedly sprang from the fear of excessive dependence upon the "merits of the fathers," and from the weakening of the feeling of obligation and commandment. See *Midrash Tanna'im* on Deut. 31:9, ed. Hoffman, p. 62: "This is an inference *a minori ad majus*; if non-Jews, who are idolators, live by the merit of Noah, should not we live by the merit of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? We therefore learn from the verse, "If you faithfully observe all this Instruction which I enjoin upon you" (Deut. 19:9); i.e., "you live by the payment for observing the commandments, and you do not live by merit of the fathers." Cf. *Sifrei* on Deut., sec. 184, ed. Finkelstein, p. 225; BT Shab. 55a: "by the merit of the good deeds which he possessed..."; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Ha-Hodesh ha-Zeh* 3, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 82; Num. Rabbah 11:3; Midrash Ps. on Ps. 7:2; see also BT Yoma 22b; *Tosefta* Ber. 4:18, ed. Lieberman, p. 23; op. cit. p. 22; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, et korbani lahmi*, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 118: "R. Huna said, All these dispersions will be gathered together only by the merit of Mishnayot." All this is connected with Hos. 8:6; BT B.B. 8a; *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah*, Ch. 5, ed. Ish-Shalom, p. 22. R. Joshua of Sakhnin cites R. Levi: "By the merit of two things Israel is purified before the Omnipresent: by merit of the Sabbath and by merit of the *ma'aserot* (tithes)." Cf. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana: Eser Ta'aser* 2, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 163; *Yalkut Shimoni: Re'eh*, sec. 892; op. cit. *Tavo*, sec. 938. Cf. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana: u-Lekahtem* 6, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 412: "Thus a person takes a *lulav* [i.e., the Four Species of Sukkot] to attain merit through it..." Op. cit. 6, pp. 416-417: "R.

Berechiah, in the name of R. Abba b. Kahana, by merit of 'On the first day you shall take,' I shall be revealed to you first." Cf. Lev. Rabbah 30:16, ed. Margolioth, p. 713; *Yalkut Shimoni, Emor* 751; op. cit., *Toledot* 106; op. cit., Isa., 450; op. cit., Jer., 298; Ex. Rabbah 15:1; BT Pes. 5a. The same concept is transferred to the commandments of circumcision and to the commandment of the Sabbath; see *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Ba-Yom ha-Shemini Azeret* 4, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 428. See also A.A. Halevi, *Erkhei ha-Aggadah ve-ha-Halakhah* (Tel Aviv, 1979), p. 246, sec. 10, and Halevi, *Parshiyot ba-Aggadah*, pp. 201-203, discussing the question, by what merit was Israel redeemed from Egypt. See Urbach, p. 441, esp. n. 28. See, however, BT Kidd. 37b: "A student of the school of R. Ishmael taught: 'Perform this commandment, for which you will enter the land'"; cf. *Sifrei Deut.*, sec. 55, ed. Finkelstein p. 122; D. Hoffman, *Zur Einleitung in die hal Midraschim* (Berlin, 1888), p. 66; cf. *Mekhilta de-Rav Shim'on bar Yoḥai, Bo* 13:5, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 38; H. Albeck, *Untersuchungen über die halachischen Midraschim* (Berlin: 1927), p. 16. Moses is already cited as mentioning "the merits of the fathers" after the Golden Calf: Ex. Rabbah 44:7; Deut. Rabbah 3:15; *Tanḥuma, Tisa* 34. Because of the merits of the fathers, the people was not punished by destruction for the sin of the Golden Calf: see the *Targumim* on Deut. 1:1 (*Targum Yerushalmi, Targum Neophiti, Targum Yerushalmi*, ed. Kaufmann); Deut. 9:19 (*Targum Yerushalmi*); Ginzberg, *Legends*, III, pp. 124-125, and n. 274; Shinan, *Aggadatam shel Meturgamanim*, p. 323. Certain passages in Rabbinic teachings make the patriarchs dependent upon the promises and great deeds of the future: *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el, Va-Yehi be-Shalah*, 3, ed. Horowitz, p. 97. The word *be-zekhut* has the meaning here of "for the sake of" (e.g., as in "and the world was created only 'for the sake of the righteous,'"; cf. *Targum*, Gen. 14, 19, 22. A Marmorstein, op. cit., p. 11, holds that the term *be-sekhar* (by payment) was used in the school of Rabbi Yishmael, in place of the term *be-zekhut* (by merit). This opinion is rejected by Urbach, op. cit., p. 442, and n. 31.

2. Martyrology

In later generations, the righteous are also capable of providing merit for their fathers. The merits of the sons substitute for the merits of the fathers, so that it is stated, for example, that Israel went out of Egypt thanks to the merits of the generation of Isaiah, or to the merits of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Cant. Rabbah 7:8; JT Ber. 7:2 (11b); JT Naz. 5:5 (54b); Gen. Rabbah 91:4, ed. Theodor — Albeck, p. 1116; Eccl. Rabbah 7:11; cf. op. cit., 5, ed. Albeck, p. 35. In Genesis Rabbah 34, ed. Albeck, p. 319, we read: "The Lord smelled the pleasing odor" — the odor of our father Abraham, ascends from the burning furnace. He smelled the odor of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah ascending from the burning furnace, for the love of the King whom they honored with a fitting gift. He smelled the odor of the Generation of Destruction" (cf. editor's note, *ibid.*; *Kit'ei Bereshit Rabah min ha-Genizah*, pub. M. Sokolov (Jerusalem: 1982), p. 123; op. cit., 39, p. 367, which makes the connection with Abraham's being taken down from the burning furnace; *Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahana, Ba-Hodesh ha-Shelishi* 3, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 205). The statement of Rabbi Yitzhak on the verse, "Sustain me with raisin cakes" (*samkhuni ba'ashishot*: Cant. 2:5) — with two fires (*ishot*): with the fire of Abraham, and with the fire of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Another interpretation: 'Sustain me with raisin cakes' — with two fires, with the fire of Moriah, and with the fire of the (burning) bush" (Cf. Cant. Rabbah 2:5; *Yalkut Shim'oni* on Cant., 986; Gen. Rabbah 44, ed. Albeck, p. 435, which deals with the rescue of Abraham and of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah by God; op. cit., 56, ed. Albeck, pp. 611-612). In Genesis Rabbah 97, ed. Albeck, p. 1208: "The Holy One, blessed be He, therefore saved four from his seed, one from the pit, and three from the fire: Daniel paralleling Joseph, and Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah paralleling Perez, Zerah, and Tamar..." We need not add that Abraham's being cast into the furnace was not added to this list. In Gen. Rabbah 97, ed. Albeck, p. 1211: "and miracles and wonders were performed for them in Babylon" (cf. op. cit,

99, p. 1274). In Lev. Rabbah 22:27, ed. Margolioth, p. 730?: “When you walk through fire, you shall not be scorched” (Isa. 43:2) – this had already been done by Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, ‘through flame it shall not burn you’ (*ibid.*)” (op. cit. 25:14, ed. Margolioth, p. 764, p. 765, and notes; Ex. Rabbah 9:1, ed. Shinan, p. 207, p. 208, and notes; Ex. Rabbah 18:5; BT Pes. 118a; Ex. Rabbah, ed. Shinan, p. 229, and on the comparison of their actions to the act of the sacrifice. See also *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana: Parah Adumah* 10, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 76; op. cit. *Aser Ta’aser*, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 170; BT Sanh. 106b; *Sifrei Deut.*, sec. 306, ed. Finkelstein, pp. 342-343; *Midrash Tehilim* 114, ed. Buber, p. 473; *Yalkut ha-Makhiri* on Ps. 47:31, ed. Buber, p. 195; Gen. Rabbah 56:7, ed. Albeck, p. 860; cf. BT Meg. 13b). Rabbi Jose the Galilean attributes the parting of the Red Sea to the binding of Isaac; see *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael: Va-Yehi* 3, p. 100; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim’on bar Yoḥai: Be-Shalah* 14:15, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 59.

While in the Biblical narrative the hero of the binding of Isaac is Abraham, and the concluding section of the supplicatory fast day prayer mentioned in Mishnah Taan. 2:4 begins, “May the One who answered Abraham at Mount Moriah answer you...”, in the tradition of the generation of the Hadrianic Persecutions and thereafter, Abraham plays a secondary role to the “sacrifice” itself – i.e., Isaac. See *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana: Shor o kesev* 9, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 157, and the editors note there; Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (Philadelphia, 1967). There are expositions which incorporate both: “This one will bind, and this one will be bound, this one will slaughter and this one will be slaughtered” (Gen. Rabbah 56:3, ed. Albeck, p. 598; *ibid.*, p. 603). The overall emphasis, however, was definitely shifted to “the blood of his binding” or “the dust of Isaac.” See *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael: Pasha* 6, p. 42; *ibid.*, 11, p. 38; Gen. Rabbah 56:7; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim’on bar Yoḥai*, Ex. 3:8, ed. Epstein-Melamed, p. 4; *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Ex. 6:2, ed. Margolioth, p. 91; Spiegel, (p. 493); cf. *Tanḥuma: Va-yera* 23; *Gen. Rabbati* 22:7-8, ed. Albeck, p. 90; Y. Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached*, p. 10 (Hebrew section); H. Albeck, appendices

to Zunz’s *Ha-Derashot be-Yisrael*, p. 400 and n. 48, which discuss the “*revi’it* [a liquid measure] of blood” which gushed forth from Isaac as atonement for Israel. On the ashes heaped up on the altar, see *Sifra: be-Hukotai* 8:7, ed. Weiss, 107c; Lev. Rabbah 36:5, ed. Margolioth, p. 849. Regarding its incorporation in the prayers recited on fast days, see JT Taan. 2:1 (65a); Gen. Rabbah 49:11, ed. Albeck, p. 513; BT Taan. 16a; ed. Malter, p. 54; Urbach, op. cit., pp. 446-447. The Midrash compares the smiting of the firstborn in Egypt to the blood of the sacrifice of Isaac; see BT Ber. 62b; BT.Zev. 62a; Gen. Rabbah 56:9, ed. Albeck, p. 606; *Tanḥuma: Shelah*, 14; *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen. 22:19, ed. Margolioth, p. 360; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli’ezer* 31; *Midrash Lekah Tov* on Gen. 31:42, ed. Buber, p. 161; *Tanḥuma, Va-yera* 23; *Tanḥuma: Toledot* 7; *Bet ha-Midrash* 5, ed. Jellenik, p. 157.

In principle, the “merits of the fathers” also serve to defend his future children and people. See JT Taan. 2:4 (65d); L. Ginzberg, *Seridei Yerushalmi*, p. 176. The motif receives additional force in the prayer for fast days and for the “Day of Judgement,” i.e., Rosh Hashanah: see Lev. Rabbah 29:6, ed. Margolioth, p. 676; *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Rosh ha-Shanah*, ed. Mandelbaum, pp. 339-340 and note by S. Lieberman, *ibid.*, p. 475; “Remnants of She’iltot” (Heb.), *Tashbitz* 10, p. 303; *Menorat ha-Meor, el-nekavah* 2, p. 361. Aaron was commanded to offer a ram as a burnt-offering in order to remind the Lord, so to speak, of the binding of Isaac, as by merit of the binding, God would forgive him for the sin of the Golden Calf (*Targum Yerushalmi* on Lev. 9:2). By the merit of the binding, the people was forgiven for the sin of selling Joseph: *ibid.* 3 (*Targum Yerushalmi*); A. Shinan, *Ba-Aggadatam shel Murgemanim*, p. 324 and n. 141; G. Verus, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaismism* (Leiden, 1973), pp. 211-218, who discusses the references to the binding in midrash and piyyutim. Some sources expand the “binding” from Isaac to Abraham himself – “With all your soul” – even if he takes your soul: for our father Abraham himself” (JT Ber. 9 (14b); BT Ber. 61b; *Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber: *Shalah* 14; Num. Rabbah 17:2; *Sifrei Deut.*, 313, ed. Finkelstein, pp. 354-355;

The midrashic expansion which includes Abraham as sacrificing himself for the Lord's sake in the burning furnace is to be found in: Gen. Rabbah 44:13, ed. Albeck, p. 435; cf. E. Urbach, "Asceticism and Tribulations in Rabbinic Teaching" (Heb.), in *Sefer ha-Yovel le-Yizhak Baer*, p. 59. Cant. Rabbah 1:13: "... Abraham's deeds were not known until he was cast into the burning furnace, and just as the hands of anyone who collects this myrrh (*mor*) become bitter (*mitmar-marot*), so did Abraham make life bitter for himself and afflict himself with mortifications": Urbach, *Hazal*, p. 393 and n. 83. R. Samuel ben Nahman said that Abraham was saved from the burning furnace only by the merit of the Patriarch Jacob. Therefore, "assuredly, thus said the Lord to the House of Jacob, who redeemed Jacob" (Isa. 29:22) — Jacob redeemed Abraham" (Gen. Rabbah 63:2, ed. Albeck, p. 679, in the name of R. Samuel b. Isaac; cf. *Aggadat Bereshit* 5, ed. Buber, p. 130; loc. cit.: "If it were not for Jacob, who is destined to come forth from you, you would not have emerged from here"). A similar *derashah* was taught in Babylonia in the name of Rav: BT Sanh. 19b; *Dikdukei Soferim*, op. cit., p. 40 and n. 60. We find that R. Akiva said that "the father merits his son in beauty, and in strength, and in years" (Mishnah Eduyot 2:9), for whoever works on behalf of the public altruistically, "the merit of their fathers aid them, and their righteousness endures forever" (Mishnah Avot 2:2).

The Sages viewed "the merits of the fathers" as one of the components of "Divine grace": *Kit'ei Bereshit min ha-Genizah*, ed. M. Sokolov (Jerusalem: 1982) on Gen. Rabbah 41, p. 121. Regarding the tendency to cling to "grace," and not only to "the commandments," see: JT Sanh. 10:1 (27d); Lev. Rabbah 36:6, ed. Margolioth, pp. 852-853: "Go adhere to deeds of loving-kindness." The abandonment of grace by humans leads to the collapse of the merits of the fathers. Similarly: *Targum Onkelos* on Ex. 38:8; Y. Kolmosh, *Ha-Mikra be-Or ha-Targum* (Tel Aviv, 1973), p. 197; Tosafot on Ex. 38:8; Y. Kolmosh, *Ha-Mikra be-Or R. Eleazar ben Azariah's* remark on his being a 10th-generation descendent of Ezra,

see JT Ber. 4:1 (7d); BT Ber. 27b; L. Ginzberg, *Perushim ve-Hidushim ba-Yerushalmi*, 3, p. 185.

3. Supports, Pillars — The Righteous

We are familiar with the perception of the Patriarchs at the beginning of the Amoraic period as "the three great supports (*yetedot*) of the world" (Gen. Rabbah 43:8, ed. Albeck, p. 422; Cant. Rabbah 7:8). On the use of the term "three pillars (*amudim*)," see *Midrash Tehilim* 1:15, ed. Buber, p. 15; BT Hag. 12b; D. Flusser, *Yahadut u-Mekorot ha-Nazrut*, p. 291 and n. 19. The motif of "pillars" also appears in the New Testament literature: "And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace..." (Galatians 2:9). We have already mentioned the metaphor of the "building," common among the Dead Sea Sect and the early Christians: see Revelation 3:12; 21:14; Ephesians 2:20. Cf. Matthew 7:24: "Therefore whosoever hears these things of mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man, who built his house upon a rock." Verse 7 there tells us of its strength, "for it was founded upon a rock (parallel in Luke 6:48-49; see also Matthew 16:18, regarding the motif of building the community "upon this rock": Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (N.Y., 1942), 106-108 and n. 84. R. Johanan ben Zakkai is called by his pupils "the fight pillar" — BT Ber. 28b; cf. Num. Rabbah 3:1; *Midrash Tedshe*, chap. 21, ed. A. Epstein, p. 41 (in *Kitvei A. Epstein*, 2, p. 168). Cf. the concept in Rav's exposition, BT Hullin 92a, on "three proud princes (*sarim*)"; Gen. Rabbah 68:12, ed. Albeck, p. 786; *ibid.*, 69:3, ed. Albeck, p. 793. In the Song by the Well (Num. 21:18), Onkelos translates *sarim* as *ravraya* ("great men"). We may assume that the Aggadah hints that the well was given by the merits of the Patriarchs, who were called *sarim*: see *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Hukat* 21; *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, p. 127; Numbers Rabbah 19:15. This concept is found in *Targum Yerushalmi A*: "the fathers of the world, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [*ravrayanya*]" and, in a changed version, in *Targum Yerushalmi B*: *bimehokek* ("with the lawgiver") is translated as *safraya* ("scribe"); see Y. Kolmosh, *Ha-Mikra be-Or ha-Targum*, p. 201. The seven lamps on the lampstand correspond to the

righteous ones, and the world benefits from the light due to their merits: *Targum Yerushalmi* on Ex. 9:4; see also M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (Rome, 1966), p. 192; R. Kasher, "The Targum Additions to the Haftarah for the Sabbath of Hannukah" [Heb.], *Tarbiz* 45 (1976), pp. 35-36; Y.Z. Gottlieb, "Targum Yonatan ben Uziel on the Torah" [Heb.], *Melilah* 1 (1944), p. 33 and n. 30; Y. Baer, "Towards an Interpretation of the Teaching of the End of Days during the Second Temple Period" [Heb.], *Zion* 23 (1958/9), p. 31; E. Urbach, p. 444 and n. 41.

Regarding the question as to whether "the merits of the fathers" exists during the period of "the day of judgement," see IV Ezra 5:102, ed. Kahana, p. 731; cf. *Targum Onkelos* to Gen. 4:7: "But if you do not do right, sin crouches at the door." But if you do not do right, the sin waits for the day of judgement," without any relation to "the merits of the fathers." There is also a concept of "guarding the sin" on the day of judgement: see D. Rappel, *Targum Onkelos ke-Perush la-Torah* (1985), p. 46 and n. 31. This is also connected with the verses, "And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father" (Matthew 3:9), and "who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (v. 7). The criticism in Matthew evidently derives from the verse in Isaiah, "Surely You are our Father: though Abraham regard us not, and Israel recognize us not, You, O Lord, are our Father from of old, Your name is Our Redeemer" (Isa. 63:16). This is also reflected in the *derashah*: "The Holy One, blessed is He, said to Abraham, 'Your children have sinned against Me.' He replied, 'Master of the Universe, Let them be wiped out for the sanctification of Your name.' ...He said to Isaac, 'Your children have sinned against Me.' He replied, 'Master of the Universe, my children, and not Your children... If you will suffer all, it is well, if not...' They said, 'For You are our Father'" - BT Shab. 89b; *Dikdukei Soferim*, *ibid.*, p. 192, n. 3.

See, however the motif of the merit of circumcision in relation to merit of the fathers: "In the future Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehinnom, and will not

permit any man from Israel to descend into it. What does he do with those who have excessively sinned? He transfers the foreskin from infants that died before they were circumcized and puts it on them, and brings them down into Gehinnom" (Gen. Rabbah 48:8, ed. Albeck, p. 483). Cf. BT Eruv. 19b: "Abraham brings up every Israelite from Gehinnom, except those with a drawn foreskin." In the other parallel sources, however, no role was assigned Abraham regarding this matter; the authors of the Gospels and Luke 16:21-25 disputed the concept that the uncircumcized must descend to Gehinnom, not the concept of the merits of the fathers, as argued by A. Marmostein in *Merits*, p. 169. Regarding the expression, "Abraham's bosom," see Strack-Billerbeck, III, s. 226; S. Lieberman, *The Martyrs of Ceasare*, p. 390, 443, n. 73; E. Urbach, *Hazal*, p. 450 and n. 69. The links between the orientation towards the generation of destruction and the preaching for the observing of the commandment of circumcision are indicated in Ex. Rabbah 19:4; S. Lieberman, "Some Aspects of After Life in Early Rabbinic Literature," in *Wolfson Jubilee Volume* (1965), pp. 525ff.

The existence of the concept of "the merits of the fathers" is indicated in the New Testament literature by the term "the covenant with the ancients," which is reflected in the literature of the Dead Sea sect: ***1:4-5; 6:2-3, which is inspired by Lev. 26:45: "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." Cf. Hebrews 9:15, which uses the term "the covenant with the ancients" (or "first testament"), in relation to the term "new testament" made in Covenant of Damascus 6:19; 8:21; 20:12; Peshet Habakkuk 2:4; the source of the term is Jer. 31:30-31. See L. Goppelt, *Christentum und Judentum* (1954), p. 26; D. Flusser, *Yahadut ve-Mekorot ha-Nazrut*, pp. 332-335. "The covenant of the ancients" is "the covenant of the fathers." The Manual of Discipline contains the term, "those holding fast to the fathers" (Manual of Discipline 2:9, ed. Licht, p. 70 and note, which makes note of Akkadian links; similarly P. Wernberg Moller, *VT* (1953), pp. 196-197; Moller, *The Manual of Discipline* (Leiden: 1957), p. 53; S.

Sharbit, "In the Wake of the Introductions by Y.N. Epstein," in *Ha-Milon He-Ḥadash le-Sifrut Ḥazal*, II, ed. M.Z. Kadari (Ramat Gan: 1974), p. 118 and n. 4, who points to

"those holding fast to the fathers" as a borrowed translation; Y. Kutscher, *Tarbiẓ* 33 (1964), p. 125.

Due to limitations of space, we are unable to print the entire commentary on the verse, for which our apologies to the author and to our readers. In addition to the material brought here, the full text of the "Sources" includes the following sections: Merit of the Fathers and the Commandments; Rock, Stones – the Messiah; Stones and Sons (*Avanim u-banim*); Abraham and his Faith.

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