

The Evolution of the Concept of the Sanctity of the Land

The Land of Israel – *ha-arets*, ‘the Land’ by pre-eminence, as it was called in the period concerned – was both the geographic context in which the majority of the Jewish people lived and worked and a utopian ideal that was shared by the Jews living in the Diaspora as well. It was not only a homeland (*patria*) in the Greek sense of the word, but also an element of the Jewish religious ethos itself, as expressed in numerous commandments, customs, ideas, and prayers. Scholarly research has devoted much thought to this topic, although the relevant material has not yet been collected and analyzed in its entirety. Furthermore, it may be assumed that at the basis of this variegated interest in the Land lay the idea of its very holiness and its concomitant exaltation. This idea is in evidence throughout, from the earliest sources onwards, but not in an equal or linear manner. A discussion of the subject must therefore be preceded by a clarification of the development of the theological concept of the sanctity of the Land.

4.1 Concern for the Land *per se*

It is obvious that the Land of Israel occupies a central position especially in rabbinic literature. There is hardly a single chapter in all its various branches without some sort of connection to the Land of Israel. The esteem for the Land and the emphasis placed upon its sanctity and importance are among the foundations of rabbinical thought. They engaged extensively in depicting the physical and spiritual qualities of the Land and in describing the great merit of its inhabitants. Their dicta express the importance of dwelling in the Land and the prohibition against emigrating from it, while withholding legitimacy from residence in the Diaspora, at times in a quite outspoken manner.¹

1 A systematic historical discussion of the sanctity of the Land of Israel and the attitude toward the Land in the period of the Mishna and Talmud has not yet been written. For collections of sources, see Guttman, ‘The Land of Israel’; idem, *Mafteah ha-Talmud*, 9–149; Zahavi, *Midrashei Erets Yisrael*; Wacksman, *Sefer Erets Yisrael*. For the scholarly literature, see below.

The question is how this remarkable interest came about. As has been noted, the concept of the sanctity of the Land was based on the world of biblical thought. A study of the various sources, however, reveals that the rabbinic concept cannot be regarded as a direct continuation of the biblical way of thinking. We can discern a number of phases of development regarding the attitude toward the Land.

Half a century ago, scholars already noted that Hellenistic Jewish literature as exemplified by Philo and Josephus does not unequivocally emphasize the sanctity of the Land, nor does it afford legitimacy to the dwelling in the Diaspora as a reality or even as a mere ideal.² Not only do these works hardly refer to the Land and to living in it as a religious value, they also obscure the place of the Land in the biblical concepts and passages in which its uniqueness and sanctity are emphasized. The praises lavished on the Land by the Bible, mainly in the books of the Tora and the early Prophets, were transferred to Jerusalem. An outstanding example of this is the exile and the ingathering of the exiles, which in the Bible are connected with the Land, but which in Second Temple literature were transferred to Jerusalem.³ In this literature, Jerusalem becomes a Temple city in the social and religious sense of the term – a phenomenon incidentally which occurred throughout the entire world.⁴

Davies went one step further by positing that until the War of Destruction (66–70 CE) the Land of Israel was perceived as an abstract concept only, not as an earthly territory. This would explain the place of the Land in Pauline Christianity as a spiritual ideal, in contrast with the simple, almost materialistic attitude toward the Land of Israel in the later rabbinic literature.⁵ This approach is replete with difficulties, some of which will be discussed below.

In two important studies, Gafni made a decisive contribution to our understanding of the place of the Land in rabbinic thought.⁶ He demonstrates in these essays that all the rabbinic dicta in praise of the Land postdate the Bar Kokhba rebellion, while the Tannaim of the Yavneh generation and those active during the time of the Temple devoted no attention to such subjects. In other words, the theoretical discussions and polemics in praise of the Land, the emphasis on residence and burial in it, as well as the condemnation of

2 Heinemann, 'Relationship'.

3 Amaru, 'Land Theology'.

4 Weinfeld, 'Inheritance'; see also Flusser, 'Jerusalem'. For the holy city in general, and especially Jerusalem, see Peters, *Jerusalem and Mecca*.

5 Davies, *The Gospel and the Land*.

6 Gafni, 'Status of Eretz Israel'; idem, 'Bringing Deceased'; idem, *Land, Center*. All this against Boyarin, *Radical Jew*, 254–257.