SIN, REPENTANCE, ATONEMENT AND RESURRECTION
THE PERSPECTIVE OF RABBINIC THEOLOGY ON THE
VIEWS OF JAMES 1–2 AND PAUL IN ROMANS 3–4

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The comparison of systems of religious thought, whether synchronic or not, affords perspective on the systems that are compared, showing us choices facing all of them out of the preferences, out of a common agenda, of each. The enterprise works well for those that draw upon a shared Scripture as do Judaic and Christian systems. Telling the same story and appealing to the same religious truth concerning a common theological agendum establish a single plane of fact and logic. That exercise validates juxtaposing and contrasting doctrines on topics treated by all of those systems, each in its own context.

In the present case we take up three components of the process of ultimate salvation, all of them part of the answer to the question, how does Man overcome sin and attain what Christianity will call “justification” and what Rabbinic Judaism in its counterpart category will designate “the resurrection of the dead”? The three form part of a single narrative: it is Man’s nature to rebel against God and so to sin. Death comes about by reason of sin. With sin atoned for by repentance and by death, Man realizes the promise of eternal life, such as Adam was afforded from creation. So what repentance promises—restoration of the relationship with God—is realized only at the end of days. If we divide the story into its category-formations, they are five, and I devote the greater part of my exposition to establishing that reading of matters: [1] sin through rebellion, [2] repentance through an act of will confirmed by deed, [3] atonement through the compensation of such atoning media as personal suffering, the Day of Atonement, and death, and [4] the merciful outcome, resurrection from the grave and then “standing in judgment,” meaning, surviving the last accounting, followed by [5] restoration to life, now for all eternity.
An exposition of the Rabbinic theology of sin, repentance, and resurrection—a continuous and closely reasoned, coherent corpus of theological thought—in an *Auseinandersetzung* with the comparable theology of James and Paul establishes a perspective on all three systems: alike and not alike. But for my part I concentrate on the exposition of the Rabbinic system and at the end suggest a few points for the consideration of those knowledgeable, as I am not, in the comparable systems, Paul’s in Romans 3–4 and James in his Letter, chaps. 1–2. Then we gain access to the alternatives explored by heirs to a common corpus of doctrine and reflection on a single topic addressed by all three. When we consider choices system-builders might have made, we gain perspective on the selections they did execute: the category-formations and the narrative they sustain.

The Rabbinic system, which animates both the Aggadic and the Halakhic documents, defines as principal category-formations within its larger construction the matters of sin and repentance, set in the larger framework of eschatology: resurrection, judgment, and restoration to eternal life. There is no considering sin apart from its larger theological setting, or repentance outside of the systemic dynamic, or either sin or atonement out of the context of the ultimate resurrection. For the Rabbinic system, “Israel” represents all those who are destined for eternal life, and “not-Israel” encompasses those who will not rise from the grave: “All Israel has a portion in the world to come” (*m. Sanh.* 11:1) yields, “those who have a portion in the world to come are all Israel”—and no one else.

I. SIN

The Rabbinic system deals with corporate Israel and the individual Israelite. Corporate Israel comes first, because it represents a unique moral entity in humanity: the gentiles are just that, individuals; their collectivities do not constitute moral actors subject to God’s judgment or concern. Israelites for their part constitute all Israel, and Israel forms a whole that exceeds the sum of the parts. So to begin with, any theological category-formation will address corporate Israel, but it will encompass also the individual Israelite—in that order.

Sin explains the condition of Israel as much as it accounts for the death of the individual Israelite. The governing theory of Israel, that had Israel kept the Torah from the beginning, the Holy People would