

# Inheriting and Buying a Homeland: The Land of Israel and the Patriarchs

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## Abstract

After 70 CE, when Israel was no longer an independent nation in the land of Israel and their cultic center was no longer physically present there, the rabbis of the Palestinian and Babylonian diaspora reflect from different perspectives on the beginning of the story of the land, on what can be called the “homeland myth” of the patriarchal narratives of Scripture. In doing so, they create their own ancestral homeland myth. In this article, two sets of rabbinic texts are examined in order to illustrate how the rabbis refashioned the scriptural myth and produced two versions of a rabbinic ancestral homeland myth. The first group of texts are related to the promise of the land and its fulfilment, the second to the establishment of the first Jewish grave in the promised land.

## Keywords

land of Israel – homeland – diaspora – patriarchal narratives – rabbinic literature

The twinned terms “diaspora” and “homeland” may be used to refer to different historical and contemporary phenomena.<sup>1</sup> Influenced by the Jewish diaspora, which was and continues to be regarded as the classical historical case

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1 See Weingrod and Levy, “Homelands and Diasporas,” 11.

of diaspora,<sup>2</sup> William Safran's seminal article "Diasporas in Modern Societies" describes the vital terms in which the homeland defines what a diasporic community is—the extent to which a diaspora needs a homeland in order to exist as such.<sup>3</sup> However, as Weingrod and Levy have recently pointed out, research on homelands and diasporas tends to focus on the latter.<sup>4</sup> This is also true when we consider the Jewish case, although we might expect that the Jewish homeland would be regarded just as paradigmatic as the Jewish diaspora.<sup>5</sup>

Taking Safran's rather undifferentiated use of "homeland" as a point of departure, Robin Cohen describes the different uses of the term in diaspora studies, proposing a threefold distinction of a) solid, b) ductile, and c) liquid or virtual homelands.<sup>6</sup> He argues that, whereas myths of common origins deal with a *territorialized*, solid homeland, liquid homelands are *detrterritorialized* and constructed exclusively by cultural links.<sup>7</sup> Whether a homeland once existed as such or still exists as a national territory, narratives or myths about it tell us how this space is or was perceived by a given community (be it diasporic or not).<sup>8</sup>

In the case of diasporic communities, as Safran points out, these narratives or homeland myths suggest that the homeland is the place from which these communities think of themselves as coming and to which they wish to return at some point in the future. Those narratives that account for how a given community came to be especially related to a certain space, or how a homeland came into being, are a type of founding myth that we can refer to as *ancestral homeland myths*.

2 Brubaker observes: "Most early discussions of diaspora were firmly rooted in a conceptual 'homeland'; they were concerned with a paradigmatic case, or a small number of core cases. The paradigmatic case was, of course, the Jewish diaspora" ("Diaspora," 2).

3 According to Safran, five of the six defining features of diaspora are related to the memory of, wish to return to, and maintenance or restoration of a homeland ("Diasporas," 83–84).

4 See Weingrod and Levy, "Homelands and Diasporas," 14.

5 Even Daniel Boyarin in his recent book *A Traveling Homeland* is more concerned with discussing diaspora than a single, original, territorial homeland from which those several diasporas emerged.

6 Cohen, "Solid, Ductile and Liquid."

7 Cohen, 130–31, observes that the liquid home is also manifest "in the connections between religion and diaspora," such as the heavenly Jerusalem of Christianity, but also the physical religious epicentres of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

8 Boyarin argues *contra* Safran that not even the myth of an original homeland is necessary to a diaspora as a group of people with an often plurilingual, double culture—that is, synchronically and trans-locally related to another group (*Traveling Homeland*, 19).

The patriarchal narratives in the Hebrew scriptures preserve one such ancestral homeland myth. The promise of the land to Abraham is a motif that binds the whole narrative of the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>9</sup> In the book of Genesis, God promises the land to Abraham and his seed, and he confirms this promise to both Isaac and Jacob. Moses and the Israelites are repeatedly reminded of the promise in the rest of the books of the Pentateuch. The land promised in these verses is referred to as “the land” and also as “the land of Canaan.” On one occasion, God speaks to Jacob of “the land of your ancestors” and the land where Jacob’s relatives reside (Gen 31:3). As becomes clear in the narratives in the book of Genesis, this land does not belong to the patriarchs (and it will never belong to anyone other than God). They are only residents there, and they are surrounded by other peoples, each of whom assumes they are entitled to the land because they have been residents there for a longer time.

In numerous rabbinic texts, the more or less linear scriptural homeland myth of the patriarchs is reworked to the point that a new myth can be said to emerge. The textual skeleton of this new myth is provided by segments from the Genesis accounts concerning the lives of the patriarchs in relation to the promised land. The rabbis put these texts under the magnifying glass of midrash and thereby related them to other parts of the Pentateuch and, at times, more clearly to mishnaic law. The resulting “narrative” can be understood as a *rabbinic ancestral homeland myth*.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the apparent univocality and coherence of its scriptural counterpart, this rabbinic myth of the ancestral homeland is not a coherent whole, but consists of a plurality of statements that differ in scope and length. These statements, which are uttered by ostensibly different voices and transmitted in documents from different genres, periods, and geographies, focus on different aspects of the received scriptural myth. The collection of texts that I have examined—only some of which will be explicitly discussed in what follows—comprises examples found in exegetical halakic and haggadic midrashim, in

9 See Wilken, *Land*, 4-7.

10 It must be noted that, even though the meaning of the land of Israel in rabbinic literature has been addressed in a number of studies, the specificities of the rabbinic contribution to a Jewish ancestral homeland myth do not appear to have received close scholarly attention. The meaning of the land of Israel in rabbinic literature has been studied in several publications. For comprehensive overviews, see Stemberger, “Bedeutung”; Davies, *Dimension*, 34-45; and Capelli, “Diaspora perenne,” 305-22; on the Palestinian discourse of commitment to the land and the Babylonian response to it, see Gafni, *Land*; and Rubenstein, “Addressing the Attributes.” The relation of the patriarchs to the land as depicted in rabbinic literature are briefly addressed in Gradwohl, “Das Land,” 53-54; and Wolff, *Geh in das Land*, 90-91.

the Talmudim, and in the narrative midrash Pirke Rabbi Eliezer. Almost all the authorities quoted therein are of Palestinian origin.<sup>11</sup>

This article consists of two parts, which are concerned with what can be regarded as *two versions* of the rabbinic ancestral homeland myth. The first examines mainly Tannaitic and Amoraic sources pertaining to the land of the patriarchs as a whole. A crucial question in this part—with which anonymous voices and, in the case of attributed statements, almost exclusively Tannaitic authorities are concerned—is whether the patriarchs were only promised the land, or whether they came to possess it and, if so, how this happened and what the implications of a possession prior to the conquest would be (1.1).

Section 1.2 discusses the notion that the patriarchs were *halakically related to the land*, found in statements attributed primarily to Palestinian Amoraim. Section 1.3 examines how the rabbis represented the patriarchs' affective bond to the land, in *haggadic attachments*. Then in 1.4 and 1.5, I turn to sources that address the problem of Abraham and Jacob having not just one homeland, but two.

The second part focuses on Amoraic and especially post-Amoraic sources concerned with one space within the land of patriarchal times—the Cave of Machpelah, a place whose purchase stands in conflict with the notion that the patriarchs possessed the entire land promised to them. In these texts, which narrow the focus down to a piece of land with a cave, the earlier, territorially vague notion of a land possessed by the patriarchs appears to be replaced by a less ambitious but more precise, concrete territory. Hand in hand with the new focalisation goes a more detailed narrative style and a firm emphasis on the affective bond of the patriarchs with the land, which contrasts with most of the texts examined in the first part.

The rabbinic myth of an ancestral homeland studied in these pages developed over a period that reaches from the third to the eighth centuries, at a time marked by the absence of the temple as a cultic centre and by Roman and later Muslim rule over the Jews in the former territory of the land of Israel. In this sense, it can be argued that—even if at times with different

11 Here and in what follows, I provide a redaction date for the entire document on which scholarship more or less agrees. See Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*; and Samely, *Forms*, 12. In the case of attributed statements, I provide a conventional notation between parentheses to indicate the provenance: Palestinian (= p) or Babylonian (= b) and generation of a Tannaitic (= T) or Amoraic (= A) authority. Generations of tannaim: 1 (60–90 CE), 2 (90–130 CE), T3 (130–160 CE), T4 (160–200 CE), T5 (200–220 CE); generations of amoraim: A1 (220–250 CE), A2 (250–280 CE), A3 (280–320 CE), A4 (320–360 CE), A5 (360–400 CE).

perspectives—both the Babylonian texts and also those of Palestinian origin participate in the *diasporic* making of an ancestral homeland myth.

Even though the latter seldom instrumentalise the ancestral myth as propaganda for the land of Israel, I will argue that the Babylonian sources do at times relativise the primordial character and superiority of, or even the attachment of the patriarchs to the land of Israel as their ancestral homeland. In these texts, the notion that Jews are supposed to live in their ancestral homeland is neither explicitly formulated nor contested.

## 1 The Patriarchs and the Homeland They Were Given

Even if the main focus of the rabbinic statements on the land generally rests on its holiness and the implications thereof,<sup>12</sup> numerous rabbinic sources focus on the character of the link between the people and the land of Israel as *ancestral*—that is, as originating in the lives of the Israelites' forefathers and in the promise made to them. The name *Erets Israel* is one of the possible equivalents of the Greek expression for homeland, *patris* (fatherland), insofar as it contains the name given to the patriarch Jacob.<sup>13</sup>

### 1.1 *Who Inherits the Land Promised to the Patriarchs?*

When does the rabbinic story of the land of Israel begin? According to an anonymous tradition in Sipra<sup>14</sup> (late third or fourth century) the land is Israel's land even before it is promised to the patriarchs. Noah is said to have divided the earth among his sons and to have given the land to Shem, from whom Israel descends. The inhabitants of the land from the patriarchs' times to the conquest under Joshua—the descendants of Ham—are there only to take care of it until the children of Israel enter it. More characteristic, and in accordance with the view presented in the scriptural account, is the notion that the link between the land and Israel begins with the promise made to Abraham. But then, is the land merely promised to the patriarchs, as suggested in a tradition preserved in another halakic midrash, Mekilta de Rabbi Yishmael (late third or fourth century)?<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Stemberger, "Bedeutung," 178.

<sup>13</sup> A less frequent Hebrew equivalent of *patris*, which is found exclusively in Palestinian sources, is "land of your fathers."

<sup>14</sup> Sipra Qedoshim parashah 4, pereq 9:6-7 (Weiss = 93c).

<sup>15</sup> See Mek. Y. Pisha 17.

Certain texts are especially concerned with the question of the moment when the land promised to Abraham and his seed was actually given to them—that is to say, first possessed by them—and what this implied.<sup>16</sup> The halakic midrash *Sipre Deuteronomium* (late third or fourth century) suggests that it was because title to the land had already been given to their ancestors that Moses could tell the Israelites that they would not need weapons once they entered the land, but only a compass to assist them with the division. Thus, the entry into the land is imagined not as a conquest, but as free of any violence.<sup>17</sup> Yet the same document argues elsewhere that the patriarchs receive only a promise, the fulfilment of which comes about when the immigrants from Egypt enter the land.<sup>18</sup>

The same tension between the idea that the land was only promised to the patriarchs and the idea that it was also possessed by them can be perceived in an haggadic document of the Amoraic period. The exegetical midrash *Genesis Rabbah* (fifth century) argues, on the one hand, that upon his return to Canaan

16 In the context of the promise of the land the Hebrew scriptures primarily make use of word-forms of the root ירש. On the different connotations of “to possess/inherit the land,” see Wilken, *Land*, 7–8 and 261–62 n. 15. A synonym for ירש is נחל, as in Isa 58:14, where the land is referred to as “Jacob’s heritage.” In several Palestinian midrashim, Jacob’s heritage is interpreted as a metaphor for the spiritual reward to be given to those who keep the Sabbath and occupy themselves with Torah study. A Babylonian text depicts R. Johanan (pA2) interpreting the expression in a territorial sense in b. Šabb. 118b. He compares Jacob with his grandfather and father, and argues that the verses with which God addresses Abraham and Isaac referring deictically to their heritage—“Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land” (Gen 13:17), “Reside in this land” (Gen 26:3)—suggest a heritage which is limited in scope, that is, the land(s) visible to them. Conversely, when Jacob is told, “and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south” (Gen 28:14), he is given a heritage without boundaries (נחלה בלי מצרים). This idea of the expanded limits of the land of Israel attributed to the Palestinian sage implies, according to R. Naḥman b. Isaac (bA4), that Jacob—and by extension, his descendants, among whom the fourth-century Babylonian Amora counts himself and the rest of the Jews of Babylonia—are spared the punishment of dispersion. With such a cancellation of boundaries, the land promised to the patriarchs could not be imagined to be possessed once and for all in biblical times.

17 *Sipre Deut* 7.

18 Other passages that provide evidence that there was no consensus among the rabbis as to when the possession of the land began include: *Sipre Deut* 8 (inheritance of the land is a recurrent event that continues into messianic times); t. Soṭah 6:9 (both Abraham and his descendants into the rabbinic present inherit the land); Mek. Y. Pisha 18 (not the patriarchs, but rather Moses inherits the land); b. Ber. 18b (neither the patriarchs nor Moses, but the Israelites who actually enter the land and inherit it).

from Egypt, Abraham has no right to the land; it is only when the seven nations that inhabit the land have been uprooted that the children of Israel can take possession of the land (Gen. Rab. 41:5).<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, reflecting on whether or not to take counsel with Abraham concerning his plans to destroy five towns in Canaan, God states that although the land *has already been given to Abraham* and he will not contradict God, it is only right for God to inform him (Gen. Rab. 49:2).

In the context of a discussion of the principle of acquiring land by walking on a certain field, both Talmudim depict the rabbis explaining how Abraham took possession of the land, having set a precedent when he followed God's call in Gen 13:17.

Whereby does the public acquire possession [of the path, according to] R. Eliezer?—By walking; for it has been taught: If he walked in it through the length of it and through the breadth of it, he has acquired the place where he walked, the words of R. Eliezer. And the sages say: Walking is of no avail unless he has taken possession. R. Eleazar said: What is the reason of R. Eliezer? For it is written, *Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you* (Gen 13:17). And the rabbis? There, He said to him thus only because of [His] love for Abraham, that his children may easily conquer [the land].

B. B. BAT. 100A

The passage quoted above is part of a talmudic discussion of how people may establish a path, without being perceived as trying to steal the land. Even though the collective voice of the sages, both here and in the Yerushalmi parallel, claims that walking is to be distinguished from possessing and that walking generally does *not* imply acquiring, in Abraham's case, they argue in support of R. Eliezer's interpretation: Abraham's primordial walking on the land was an exceptional case which meant possessing it, and it is here explicitly linked to an easy conquest for his descendants. According to this view, the land cannot be perceived as having been stolen or violently conquered, but peacefully acquired, namely by walking on it.

Whereas the Talmud texts construe Abraham's response to God's call in Gen 13:17 as the first chapter of the story of the land and God's people there (the land was promised *and* possessed by the patriarchs), the midrashim examined above also transmit an understanding of the impact of the patriarchs'

19 Elsewhere, it is argued that the entire territory of the land promised to Abraham will only be in their hands in messianic times; see Gen. Rab. 64:3.



lives on the land as a prologue to the main narrative of the actual possession by the Israelites.<sup>20</sup> According to this other view, the land was only promised to them. Whereas in the first case the rabbinic homeland myth can be read as meaning that the conquest narrative was problematic in the eyes of the rabbis, in the second case, it appears that the story of the origins of the land did not require major adjustments to the description of the patriarchs' role therein.

### 1.2 *Halakic Attachments*

The notion that the land was in the possession of the patriarchs—that they were somehow related to the land by a *halakic* bond—leads the rabbis to ponder the moment when the land-commandments<sup>21</sup> first came into force.<sup>22</sup> Although these are generally understood as having been imposed at the conquest, a number of sources reveal that the rabbis understood some of them as having come into force prior to the entry into the land in the time of Joshua—namely, from the moment the land was first promised to Abraham.

The Mishnah (third century) already contains the notion that even though the land had not been conquered, that which was planted by the patriarchs was subject to the law of the fruit of young trees, or *ʿorlah* (m. 'Or. 1:2). Another commandment which, for the same reason, is understood as valid even before the conquest is *ḥallah*, the separation of dough. In a Yerushalmi passage, for example, R. Eliezer and R. Aqiba disagree on whether foreign produce imported into the land is subject to *ḥallah*. R. Aqiba claims that foreign produce brought into the land is liable to *ḥallah*, just as the flour used by the Israelites upon their entry into the land was, even though it was made from cereal that grew during a time when the land was not subject to *ḥallah*. To justify Aqiba's view R. Jose (T2) introduces the concept of the retroactive inheritance: The land had been subject to the land-commandments ever since it was given to Abraham. The Amoraim Samuel b. Nahman (pA3) and Huna (pA4) assume that this occurred the moment the promise was spoken to Abraham using the perfect form נתתי (y. Hal. 2:1 [58b]).<sup>23</sup>

20 Of eleven sources examined with respect to this tension, five depict the patriarchs as taking possession of the land, and six as just receiving the promise.

21 On the ambiguity of the expression מצוות התלויות בארץ based on the polysemy of ארץ ("earth," "ground," "any land," and the "land of Israel"), see David, "Nachmanides," 186.

22 This question is related to that of the intrinsic sanctity of the land of Israel, which, as de Vos points out, is a notion attested in the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua (*Heiliges Land*, 70).

23 See also Gen. Rab. 44:22 on the use of the perfect form as denoting a deed. Several other midrashic and talmudic contexts suggest that because the land had been possessed since the times of the patriarchs, the halakah has been in force there ever since. E.g., b. Roš.



Evidence that Abraham himself observed land-commandments is also provided in Palestinian midrashim: He is said to have observed the precept of the *omer* of barley (Pesiq. Rab Kah. 8:4) and to have tithed (Pirke R. El. 27).<sup>24</sup> It is not only in connection with these specific precepts that the patriarchs and matriarchs are themselves depicted as related to the land, but it is also due to their having led halakically oriented lives *avant la lettre*. The fact that Abraham was sterile for ten years in the land of Canaan before conceiving a child with Hagar is seen as evidence that the years he spent married to Sarah outside the land do not count in an evaluation of his observation of the halakah. This tradition by R. Ammi (pA3) in Gen. Rab. 45:3 is expanded upon anonymously in b. Yebam. 64a, where this notion is the basis of the idea that being outside the land is comparable to being deprived of one's freedom; for example, when one is ill or in jail: "Hence, if the man or the woman were ill, or if both were in prison, [these years] are not included in the number."

### 1.3 *Haggadic Attachments*

It is not only in halakic terms that the patriarchs are imagined as related to the land promised to them. In the context of a midrash that seeks to explain the threefold mention of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob following the clause "[the land] which the Lord swore to your ancestors" in Deut 1:8, the following *mashal* is told in Sipre Deuteronomy:

A king gave a servant a certain field as a gift, gave it to him as it was. The servant went to work and improved it, saying, What I have is only that which was given to me as it was. And he planted a vineyard in it, saying again, What I have is only that which was given to me as it was. So also when the Holy One, blessed be He, gave Abraham the land, He gave it to him only as it was, for it is said, *Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you* (Gen 13:17). Abraham then went to work to improve it, for it is said, *And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba* (Gen 21:33). Isaac likewise went to work to improve it, for it is said, *And Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold* (Gen 26:12). Jacob too went to work to improve it, for it

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Haš. 13a (on the *omer*); b. 'Abod. Zar. 53b (the trees with which *ašerim* are made belong to the patriarchs); m. B. Bat. 8:3, b. B. Bat. 119a-b, Num. Rab. 21:12, and Tanḥ. Buber Pinḥas 9 (on the question of whether the land is divided among those who left Egypt, in which case the land is already in the possession of Abraham's seed, or among those who entered the land, in which case the land is only taken into possession after the conquest).

24 In statements by R. Joḥanan (pA2) and by R. Joshua b. Qorḥa (T3), respectively.

is said, *And he bought the plot of land [on which he had pitched his tent]* (Gen 33:19).

SIPRE DEUT. 8

The Israelites addressed in Deut 1:8 are entitled to the land, including the traces left there by the patriarchs' improvements. The midrash argues that each of the fathers was worthy of the promise of the land because of the improvements they made to it. Though these improvements were of a different nature, they all demonstrate an attachment on the part of the patriarchs to the place where they reside: Abraham plants a tree, Isaac cultivates the land, and Jacob buys a piece of land near the city of Shechem.<sup>25</sup> It is probably these types of actions that, in the view of those rabbis who claim that the land was already in the possession of the patriarchs, might have been understood as demonstrating possession.

According to the scriptural account, during Abraham's lifetime, the land promised to him and his offspring is not a land he possesses, but a land he only dwells in. This is implied in the expression *אֶרֶץ מְגוּרִיךְ* (Gen 17:8) and also in *אֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵי אַבְיִי* (Gen 37:1), where *אַבְיִי* refers to Isaac. The sages saw the need to clarify *מְגוּרִים* as an attribute of the land. In Gen. Rab. 84:4, for example, they opt to improve upon the meaning of the *qal* form of *גֹּר* ("be a stranger, sojourn, dwell," i.e., temporarily reside somewhere) by reading the expression in the sense of its *piel* form, *גִּיר* ("proselitise"). Such an interpretation counters the notion that the patriarchs were strangers in the land, styling them (including the matriarch Sarah) instead as having actively shaped this land as a Jewish one.

Even if the hermeneutics applied in these examples from halakic and haggadic midrashim are differently motivated, both documents show that, because of the traces they left there while they lived in the land, the patriarchs were perceived as belonging there.

The patriarchs are imagined as related to the land by an affective bond. Thus, upon seeing the land for the first time, Abraham expresses a sort of *Sehnsucht*

25 This is understood in Gen. Rab. 79:7 as the place where Joseph was buried, which, together with the field surrounding the Cave of Machpelah, are the only two places the Israelites' ancestors are said to have acquired by buying; the temple site is assumed to have been acquired by David. In the scriptural narrative out of which the prooftext for Jacob is taken, he is also said to have built an altar in Shechem (Gen 33:20), so that the establishment of sacred sites might have counted for the sages as additions to the land which also belong to Israel. Here, homeland and holy land appear to be coterminous. See also Gen. Rab. 39:16 on the altars built by Abraham.

for this land, which is why God is inclined to fulfil his wish to belong there, blessing him with the promise:

R. Levi said: When Abraham was travelling through Aram Naharaim and Aram Nahor, he saw its inhabitants eating and drinking and revelling. He said, May my portion not be in this country! But when he reached the promontory of Tyre and saw them engaged in weeding and hoeing at the proper seasons, he said, Would that my portion be in this country. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him, *To your descendants I gave this land* (Gen 15:18).

GEN. RAB. 39:8

While he depicts Abraham as exalting the land, the Palestinian R. Levi (pA3) also lets him criticise the lands of Aram Naharaim and Aram Nahor. According to the midrash, it is in reaction to Abraham's reasonable wish, based on a sort of foreknowledge of the intrinsic superiority of the land he is heading for, that he is given the promise in Gen 15:18. Similarly, the late midrash Tanḥuma (eighth century) interprets the characterisation of the land as "a pleasant (חמדה) land" (Jer 3:19) as meaning that "the fathers of the world coveted it (שחמדוה)" (Tanḥ. Re'eh 8).

Affection between the patriarchs and the land is also present in a tradition of R. Simeon b. Laqish (pA2) transmitted in the homiletical midrash Leviticus Rabbah (fifth century) in an interpretation of the mention of Jacob and the land in Lev 26:42:

Why does Scripture mention the land with the merit of the patriarchs and couple the merit of the land with them? R. Simeon b. Laqish answered: It is like the case of a king who had three sons whom one of his maids brought up. Whenever the king inquired after the welfare of his sons, he would say, Inquire for me also after the welfare of the governess. Similarly, whenever the Holy One, blessed be He, mentions the patriarchs, He mentions the land with them. Hence it is written, *Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob ... and I will remember the land* (Lev 26:42).

LEV. RAB. 36:5

The parable compares the land with a governess in charge of a king's children, for whose well-being the king himself is concerned. This personification of the land of the patriarchs in the application of the parable may be understood as a way of illustrating the initial, formative character of the people's land in primordial times.

In contrast with the sources examined in 1.1, which contained statements attributed almost exclusively to Tannaim, these few texts focusing on the manifestations of an affective bond between the patriarchs and the land are attributed only to Palestinian Amoraim.

#### 1.4 *Changing Places: Abraham's Two Homelands*

Strictly speaking, the scriptural patriarchal homeland myth does not have its beginnings in the land that would be called land of Israel. Abraham's origins in Ur of the Chaldees are addressed, problematised, and sometimes exploited in some rabbinic texts more explicitly than in others. Following Scripture, they thereby distinguish between the first patriarch's *native land* and the land chosen for him and his descendants as a new and better homeland, one that would evolve into the Jewish ancestral homeland and holy land.

The first time the land is promised to Abraham in Gen 12:1, he is told to leave his Mesopotamian homeland to go to an unnamed, unknown land.<sup>26</sup>

R. Johanan said: *Go from your country* (Gen 12:1): from your province; *and your kindred* (ומולדתך) (ibid.): from the place where you are settled (שכונתך); *and your father's house* (ibid.): [literally,] your father's house; *to the land that I will show you* (ibid.): Why did He not reveal it to him [there and then]? In order to make it more beloved in his eyes and to reward him for every step he took.

GEN. RAB. 39:9

After R. Johanan's atomising reading of the first part of the verse, the midrash goes on to provide a reason for God not being more specific as to the characteristics of the land at that moment. It is clear that this Palestinian midrash focuses not on the homeland Abraham is expected to leave, but rather on the one he is to go to and be shown. The scriptural expression מולדתך, translated as "your kindred,"<sup>27</sup> is of significance in this context. Even though it is extremely rare in the rabbinic corpora in the modern sense of "native land,"<sup>28</sup> it can be

26 This verse is interpreted in a tradition by the Palestinian R. Isaac (T4) in b. Roš. Haš. 16b as evidence that changing places is one of the things which cancel a person's judgement. In Abraham's case, it is because he moved to the land of Israel specifically that his nation became a great one. The merit lies with the land rather than with the patriarch.

27 Koehler and Baumgartner, *Lexikon*, s.v. מוֹלֶדֶת: "Nachkommenschaft, Verwandtschaft, d. Verwandten, Abstammung" (= offspring, kindred, relatives, lineage). Jastrow, *Dictionary*, does not have an entry for מוֹלֶדֶת, only for the related term מוֹלֵד, "issue, descendant."

28 Wilken, *Land*, 268-69 n. 26, argues that the ambiguity of the term, e.g., in Ezek 16:3, might have been the reason why rabbinic tradition did not adopt it to mean homeland, native land, or fatherland, preferring "Erets Israel."

assumed that the sages were acquainted with passages of Scripture in which this appears to be its meaning, as their interpretation in terms of “place of residence” appears to indicate.<sup>29</sup>

The notion that Abraham has a first homeland and then another (and even both simultaneously, e.g., in that it is in the land of *his* ancestors that the patriarch searches for a wife for his son Isaac<sup>30</sup>) is not perceived as a problem in Genesis Rabbah—neither in the passage just quoted, nor when R. Isaac (T4) interprets Abraham’s request to Eliezer in Gen 24:4 (“Go to my country and to my kindred [אֶל אֶרְצִי וְאֶל מוֹלַדְתִּי] and get a wife for my son Isaac”) as a reasonable one (Gen. Rab. 59:8).

In one sense, however, Genesis Rabbah does find fault with Abraham for changing his homeland—namely, with the fact that he leaves his old father, Terah. It is argued that God had Terah’s death be narrated in Gen 11:32 before Abraham’s departure, even though Terah would go on to live for further sixty-five years after his son’s migration, because God exempted *only* Abraham from the commandment to honour one’s father (Gen. Rab. 39:7).<sup>31</sup>

In the late midrash Pirque Rabbi Eliezer (eighth century), an anonymous statement reveals that Abraham’s migration to the west was perceived as a momentous deed not just for the birth of a homeland, but for the man Abraham. His leaving of land and kindred following the call in Gen 12:1 is read as the third of Abraham’s ten trials, given that “migration is the hardest thing for man” (Pirque R. El. 26).

An important hermeneutic context in which Abraham’s *original homeland* in the east plays a significant role is the explanation of Babylonia as the land to which Israel is exiled. The question of why Israel was exiled to Babylonia of all possible countries is addressed in a Tannaitic text in a tradition of Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai (T1):<sup>32</sup> “Because the House of Abraham our patriarch is from there. To what might this be likened? To a woman who has misbehaved towards her husband. Where does he send her to? To her father’s home!” (t. B. Qam. 7:3).

This argument finds an echo in the Babylonian Talmud, where this answer is one of three. Presupposing Abraham’s origins in the east, though

29 Gen 11:28; 12:1; 24:4-7; 31:13; 46:16; Jer 22:10; Ezek 16:3; 23:15; and Ruth 2:11.

30 Rebecca and Isaac also want Jacob to look for a wife in Mesopotamia; see Gen 27:46-28:2.

31 On the problematic implications of the scriptural narrative’s chronology, see Stemmerger, “Gen 15,” 454.

32 Gafni, *Land*, 63, suggests that this statement might even embrace the Hellenistic idea that Israel has a dual homeland. His main argument, however, is that statements attributed to early Tannaitic sages do not address the centrality of the land of Israel or a required commitment to it on the part of the Jews.

without resorting to the explicit mention of the patriarch, b. Pesah. 87b lets second- and third-generation Palestinian Amoraim construe Babylonia (and its community) as Israel's "first" *ancestral homeland*:<sup>33</sup> as a land whose geographical characteristics foreshadow that Babylonia will be the locus of salvation; as a land where the language is only superficially different; as a land that can be identified with Israel's maternal house. For the latter explanation, R. Johanan uses the image of a wife whose displeased husband sends her back to her mother's home.<sup>34</sup>

### 1.5 "The Land on Which You Lie": The Land of Jacob's Ancestors

With Jacob, who, like his father Isaac, is born in the land of Canaan, matters are slightly different. In Gen 31:3, God addresses Jacob while he lives in Haran with his wives and children, telling him, "Return to the land of your fathers (ארץ אבותיך) and your kindred (למולדתך), and I will be with you." Even if there is no mention of the land of Canaan, the interpretations of this verse provided in Gen. Rab. 74:1 identify Jacob's ancestral land with the land where his *immediate* ancestors dwell. This land is first described in the light of "the land of the living" (Ps 142:6) and identified in a literal reading of the psalm as Tyre, a liveable city where nothing is scarce, but also metaphorically as the land where the resurrection will first take place. The text proceeds to state that God persuades Jacob to return on the grounds that this is the land where his family and God himself wait for him. The Palestinian R. Simeon b. Laqish (pA2) then paraphrases God's argument: The wealth of a life abroad is not a source of blessing. Here as well, homeland and holy land appear to be coterminous; though rare in the corpus under examination, this is also an example of pro-land of Israel discourse in a text concerned with Jacob's return to the land.<sup>35</sup>

33 It should be noted that it is probably not a coincidence that just as the Babylonian Talmud emphasises the notion that the first patriarch's original homeland is not located in the promised land, so too with respect to the original land of the rabbinic movement, it is argued that it is likewise Babylonia whence Hillel the Elder is said to have immigrated into the land. There he was appointed patriarch over the children of Bathyra, who incidentally were also of Babylonian origins. See b. Pesah. 66a.

34 The idea that Israel's roots are in Babylonia is even more clear in R. Alexandri's statement at the close of this passage, the wording of which connotes origins by means of the botanical image of a "plantation." On b. Pesah. 87a, see Gafni, *Land*, 53-54, who suggests it is evidence of a discursive strategy to manifest a form of Jewish Babylonian local patriotism.

35 In Pirke R. El. 36, Gen 31:3 is interpreted as meaning that God wants Jacob to return to the land of his ancestors because God himself is not willing to have his Shekhinah dwell abroad. In the second part of this midrash segment, life in the land of Israel is praised on account of the fact that both Jacob's father and mother, as well as God himself, await him there.

The wording of the promise to Jacob in “the land on which you lie” (Gen 28:13) is the focus of Gen. Rab. 69:4 and is explained by R. Simeon b. Laqish as a symbolic action on God’s part. If the land is folded up “as if into a pinax (כפִיִּנְקֶס)” and placed under Jacob’s head, it is a way of indicating that the entire land belongs to him, as attested with what reads as a popular saying: “Whatever is under your head is yours.” Without the pinax motif, which hints at the Graeco-Roman context of the midrash, when the same verse is read in the Babylonian Talmud, the problematic character of the wording of the promise is made explicit:

*The land on which you lie [I will give to you and to your offspring] (Gen 28:13). What is the greatness of this? Said R. Isaac: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, rolled up the whole of the land of Israel and put it under our father Jacob, [to indicate to him] that it would be very easily conquered by his descendants.*

B. HUL. 91B

Even if R. Isaac’s (T4) answer attributes to God the best of intentions in shrinking the land to the size of the surface covered by Jacob’s head, the hermeneutic step of having the anonymous layer of the Babylonian Talmud explicitly pose such a provocative question—paraphrased, “what are the qualities of a land described as being the size of a man’s body?”—appears to suggest that the Babylonian Talmud takes some distance from a discourse that univocally exalts the land of the fathers.

## 2 The Cave of Machpelah: Purchased Property

Among the scriptural narratives that explicitly connect the patriarchs with the land of Israel those related to the acquisition of the Cave of Machpelah and the burial of Jacob there provide the rabbis with material upon which to expand on and argue for a *physical*, more concrete ancestral link, that given by the first Jewish grave in the promised land.

A first narrative in Gen 23 relates the acquisition of the cave. With the approval of the Hittites, the residents in the region of the land of Canaan where Sarah dies, Abraham buys a burial plot from the Hittite Ephron. He pays four hundred shekels of silver and buries his wife in the Cave of Machpelah.<sup>36</sup>

36 The fact that this article focusses on the patriarchs does not mean that the ancestral homeland myth does not attach importance to the matriarchs. After all, it is Sarah who is first buried in what—though at times designated as the grave of the patriarchs—is a



Before dying in Egypt, Jacob gives his sons instructions to bury him with his ancestors in the cave in the field bought by Abraham (Gen 49). There, he tells his sons, Sarah, Abraham, Rebekah, Isaac, and his own wife Leah are buried. Joseph is depicted as the one in charge of fulfilling his father's request. After the burial, he returns to Egypt (Gen 50). The field with the cave is, apart from the piece of land bought by Jacob before the city of Shechem in Gen 33:19, the only piece of property within the land of Canaan which is bought by the Israelites' ancestors. Therefore it comes as no surprise that its special status drew the attention of the rabbis.

### 2.1 *The Relocation of Machpelah*

The first question<sup>37</sup> that presents itself is related to the choice—barely explained in Scripture—of Machpelah of all possible places. The late midrash *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* provides an answer in a tradition by R. Judah (T<sub>3</sub>). When Abraham received the visit from the angels, he regarded them as travellers and showed them hospitality. He went into the Cave of Machpelah looking for the calf he wanted to offer, which had fled from him. Upon entering the cave, Abraham recognised the sweet-smelling, intact bodies of Adam and Eve. It is for this reason that he wished to acquire the place as a burial site for Sarah (*Pirke R. El.* 36). Now in the rabbinic text, the cave does not belong to the Hittite Ephron, but to the sons of Jebus. What motivates the change of the name of the original owner of the field and what are the implications of this change?

The field with the cave is sold by the Jebusites, a people named after the city of Jebus, where they lived, which is an alternative place name for Jerusalem. Thus the rabbinic narrative of Abraham's acquisition of Machpelah in *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* operates as a sort of *relocation of the grave of the patriarchs* to a place understood as belonging to the territory of Jerusalem.<sup>38</sup> Even more

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family grave where another matriarch, Rebekah, as well as Eva and Leah, are also buried. For reasons of scope, the matriarchs' primordial connection to the homeland must be treated in a future study.

- 37 Equally elementary is the question pertaining to Abraham's need to purchase a small piece of land within a land he has been promised, as well as to his description in terms of a resident alien (גֵּרִי וְתוֹשֵׁב) and as God's prince in Canaan (Gen 23:4, 6). Evidence of the difficulties these notions presented for the rabbis is found, for example, in *Gen. Rab.* 58:6.
- 38 In this context, *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* expands on 2 Sam 5, which is an account of how, after having reigned first in Hebron, David conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites and ruled over the kingdoms of Judah and Israel from there. The relocation of the cave appears to have been motivated by the broader agenda of the passage in the rabbinic document. This seeks to explain that it is on account of a covenant between Abraham and the Jebusites

explicit with respect to a relocated Machpelah is another passage in the same document: In Pirqe R. El. 20, Adam is said to have built a tomb for himself near Mount Moriah, the place whence he was taken.<sup>39</sup> A few lines further on, this tomb is said to be in the Cave of Machpelah. Considering that Mount Moriah is identified in 2 Chr 3 and elsewhere in rabbinic literature with the Temple Mount,<sup>40</sup> this passage may also be seen as evidence of a wish to relocate Machpelah to Jerusalem.

Burying Adam in the Cave of Machpelah, according to a rabbinic tradition found as early as the fifth century in Gen. Rab. 58:4, was one possible strategy the rabbis could pursue in order to reclaim him as father of the nation, contesting the Christian appropriation of Adam as the prefiguration of Christ.<sup>41</sup> This removal of Adam from Jerusalem, the literary exhumation of his body from where it was traditionally buried, and its reburial in Hebron, Isaiah Gafni argues, would have achieved two things in the eyes of the rabbis: The site of Adam's grave and the link between Adam and Jesus would have been rendered meaningless for Christians, and Adam would be restored to "the Jewish fold."<sup>42</sup>

In the eighth century, Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer<sup>43</sup>—probably influenced by later Christian texts such as the Cave of Treasures (sixth century), which located Adam's burial at the place of Christ's death in Golgotha<sup>44</sup>—opts for a more audacious strategy than the earlier rabbinic traditions. It merges the Cave of Machpelah, Mount Moriah, and Jebus/Jerusalem in a mental landscape, and moves Adam back to Jerusalem *with* the Machpelah, thereby correcting Christian claims to both Adam and to Jerusalem. It also more subtly reacts to the contemporary historical context in which the work is assumed to have been composed—namely, in a land of Israel under Muslim rule,<sup>45</sup> where the

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that these were still the inhabitants of Jerusalem in David's time, and that this covenant had to be undone before David could conquer the city.

39 This idea is also present in Pirqe R. El. 12. On this tradition in the Jewish Hellenistic literature, see Gafni, "Pre-Histories," 12.

40 This identification is already implied in Gen 22:2, 14.

41 Already in the third century, Origen claims to be familiar with a tradition according to which "the body of Adam, the first human being, was buried where Christ was crucified" (Comm. ser. Matt. 27:32-33); see Wilken, *Land*, 94-95. The tradition is also recorded by Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, and others; see Gafni, "Pre-Histories," 13.

42 Gafni, "Pre-Histories," 14; see also Gafni, *Land*, 25.

43 There is no trace of a relocation of the Machpelah in earlier rabbinic literature.

44 See Spurling and Grypeou, "Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer," 243.

45 In Gen. Rab. 79:7, the Cave of Machpelah is also associated with the temple site, as well as with Joseph's grave in Shechem. According to R. Judan bar Simon, these are the three places for which scriptural evidence is unambiguous as to the fact that Israelites bought

grave of the patriarchs had become not only a Christian, but also a Muslim sanctuary.<sup>46</sup>

## 2.2 *The Cave's Cost, Worth, and Character*

The character of the Cave of Machpelah as a purchased property and the extraordinary price Abraham paid for it are addressed in a passage of Genesis Rabbah as a tradition of certain fourth-century sages (Gen. Rab. 57:7). Usually, they argue, one would understand that Abraham paid four hundred *sela'im*, but this is not the case with the Machpelah. Taking advantage of Abraham, Ephron demands and receives four hundred *centenaria*. The midrash sees the punishment for such greed in the fact that Scripture spells Ephron's name defectively the second time he is named, which implies a diminution of his person and divine disapproval. In the Babylonian Talmud, the Palestinian R. Eleazar (pA3) may be seen as relativising the exorbitant price Abraham paid, claiming there are places where shekels "are called *centenaria*" (b. B. Meš. 87b).

The tradition reappears in a text whose main thrust is the importance of burial in the land—in a late midrash, Pesiqta Rabbati (eighth century), in combination with a new motif: a second purchase of the Machpelah by Jacob.

R. Abba bar Judan said in the name of R. Judah bar Simon: There is one exception, however. The shekels Abraham paid to Ephron for the burial ground which he bought from him—these were none other than *centenaria*: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver (Gen 23:15). Just consider: Four hundred centenaries of silver he gave for a burial plot! Likewise, Jacob. All the gold he had laid by throughout his life and all the money he possessed, he heaped up, setting it before Esau to buy off Esau's right to burial [in the family plot], so that Esau should not be brought into it for burial.

PESIQ. RAB. 1:4 [FRIEDMANN]

The cave is therefore bought twice in the time of the patriarchs. The enormous price Abraham and Jacob are willing to pay for this small piece of land in the land they have been promised is evidence in the eyes of the rabbis of the

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them. See Avi-Yonah, *Jews*, 165; and Stemberger, *Jews and Christians*, 42-43, who argue that this passage is evidence of a Jewish response to the Christianisation of Palestine during Constantine's reign. See also Adelman, *Return*, 16, according to whom, even though *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* was composed after the rise of Islam, several passages can be seen as evidence of an ongoing polemic attitude towards Christianity.

46 See Keel and Küchler, *Orte und Landschaften*, 2: 683.

importance that not only the first patriarch but also his immediate descendants placed on possessing a burial plot in the land of Israel. For Jacob, as the passage emphasises, this burial site is worth all of his riches, with which he pays off his brother so as to exclude him from the family grave.<sup>47</sup>

On a few occasions, rabbinic authorities delve into the physical characteristics of the place. It is described as having two parts or chambers, a double structure which is reflected in its very name. The burial site is also referred to by the name Kiriath-arba (Gen 23:2), which the Palestinian R. Isaac (T4) explains as meaning that it has room for four couples.<sup>48</sup> The chambers are understood either as lying next to or on top of each other. Another question related to how the rabbis imagined the cave is whether they conceived of it as outwardly discernible in later, rabbinic times. An answer is given in the Babylonian Talmud: R. Bana'ah (T5), a Palestinian sage of the first half of the third century, is reported to have marked out graves, including that of the patriarchs, so that people could avoid stepping on them.<sup>49</sup> From this anecdote it would follow that, at least from a Babylonian perspective, the cave, over which Herod the Great had built a magnificent rectangular enclosure,<sup>50</sup> was not distinguished by any outward sign.<sup>51</sup>

### 2.3 *Esau and the Cave of Machpelah: Fraternal Negotiations*

Apart from Pesiq. Rab. 1:4, several other sources are concerned with explaining how it came to be that Esau was excluded from his right to be buried in the Machpelah. In some it becomes clear that it is in this context that he also renounces the land of Israel.

According to Gen. Rab. 100:5, Esau renounces his right to the cave, opting for riches instead. The notion that Jacob prepared for himself a grave by digging it (Gen 50:5) is interpreted as his having paid a significant amount of money

47 Jacob pays Esau also in Tanḥ. Buber Va-yislaḥ 11 with his own riches. According to other sources, e.g., Pirqe R. El. 38, they divide what Isaac leaves them as inheritance into movables and land. More on this below; see 2.4.

48 See b. B. Bat. 58a, b. 'Erub. 53a, b. Soṭah 13a, and Pirqe R. El. 20.

49 See b. B. Bat. 58a.

50 See Keel and Kückler, *Orte und Landschaften*, 2: 680–81.

51 With respect to the second half of the fifth century, Avi-Yonah observes: "We know also that at this period Jews visited Hebron, and prayed at the Machpelah cave and at the Oaks of Mamre" (*Roman and Byzantine Rule*, 241). This knowledge is based not on rabbinic sources, but on the travelogue of the pilgrim Antonius Piacentinus (sixth century), therefore the grave was also for Christians a pilgrimage site. The Pilgrim of Bordeaux and Egeria (fifth century) also describe the building above the grave of the patriarchs. See Keel and Kückler, *Orte und Landschaften*, 2: 682; and Stemberger, *Jews and Christians*, 107.

to his brother in order to obtain for himself and his descendants the exclusive right to the burial site.<sup>52</sup>

Later midrashim expanded on this motif of the second purchase by Jacob in greater narrative detail. In the following passage of the exegetical midrash Tanḥuma, we read:

Another interpretation: [*Now Jacob came whole* (Gen 33:18).] He had thought and said, Possessions from outside the land have no blessing in them. He was therefore squandering them. R. Hoshā'ya said: A certain old man said to me, I tell you something the form of midrash; so, whenever you expound it, tell it in my name. Esau is going to restore to Jacob all that he received from Jacob, for it is said, *The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall return tribute* (Ps 72:10). "Shall bring tribute" is not written here, but *shall return tribute*. I told him, This is a good saying. I will expound it in your name. He said to me, Surely if what he [Jacob] had knowingly given and pressed upon him [Esau], that which he [Esau] did not wish to receive—for it is said, *Then Esau said: I have enough* (Gen 33:9)—he [Esau] would return, then how much the more would they [the children of Esau] do so, in the case of things which they had taken from Israel by force. In that hour I thanked him. Esau said, How long will I trouble my brother? He arose and went away, for it is said, *Then Esau took his wives[, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle, all his livestock, and all the property he had acquired in the land of Israel; and he moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob]* (Gen 36:6). What did Jacob do? When his children and his flocks had crossed over into the land of Israel, he arose and sold all that he had brought with him from outside the land. Then he made it into piles of gold (כְּרִיתֵי שֶׁל זָהָב). He said to Esau, You have a share with me in the Cave of Machpelah. Now what do you want, to receive these piles of gold or to share [the cave] with me? Esau began by saying, What do I want with [a share of] this cave? This gold is what I want. Now where is it shown that Jacob sold all that he had brought from outside of the land and that Esau took it? Where Joseph said so, *My father made me swear an oath; he said, I am about to die. In the grave that I dug [for myself in the land of Canaan, there you shall bury me]*

52 This interpretation is based on the assumed polysemy of the verbal form כְּרִיתֵי, which is read as meaning "to heap." Three verbs of the root כָּרָה can be distinguished in Scripture, one of them with the meaning "to dig" and another with that of "to purchase"; see b. Soṭah 13a. In rabbinic Hebrew, the verbs approximated semantically: the hiphil form used in Genesis Rabbah with the meaning "to pile, heap" is used as a synonym for "to purchase."

(Gen 50:5). R. Huna b. R. Abbin the Priest (pA4) said: When Jacob wanted to come to the land of Israel, what is written? *And he drove away all his livestock[, all the property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-aram]* (Gen 31:18). Now, when he wanted to go down into Egypt, what is written? *They also took their livestock and the goods that they had acquired in the land of Canaan* (Gen 46:6). Now, in regard to what he had brought from the land of Aram Naharaim, where was that? You simply learn from here that Jacob had sold it and given it to Esau. Would you then say that something was lacking? The Holy One, blessed be He, simply filled his loss and restored everything to him immediately, for it is said, *Now Jacob came whole* (Gen 33:18).

TANḤ. BUBER VA-YISHLAḤ 11

This text's hermeneutic goal is to reject the notion insinuated in the lemma, "Jacob came whole," that Jacob is at some point in time, in some way or other, lacking. For this purpose, the rabbis expand upon the narrative of his return to the land after his long stay in Haran. Jacob is depicted as especially keen on getting rid of all the riches he has acquired abroad, and the forthcoming reconciliation with Esau (Gen 32-33) provides him with a timely opportunity. The tradition quoted in the name of the third-century Palestinian Amora R. Hosha'ya (pA1) claims that both what Esau was given—the gifts of Gen 33 and the gold in exchange for the right to the Machpelah, as in the rabbinic traditions—and what he and his descendants are said to have taken by force from Israel will be returned to Israel. In view of the fact that Esau is one of the names used in rabbinic literature to refer to Rome, this midrash can be read and was probably intended as a message of comfort for the Jews, whom the Romans had deprived of their sovereignty in the land of Israel and who continued to be under foreign rule after the Arab conquest in the seventh century. Even if Jacob/Israel might appear not to be whole when this message was originally given—that is, deprived of land, Israel's former religious centre, and of the cave—in the future Esau will return everything, and Israel will be *whole* again.

Another rich narrative account of how Jacob secured the cave for himself and his descendants is found in Pirke Rabbi Eliezer, in a tradition of R. Levi (pA3) that depicts Jacob negotiating not just with his brother, but also indirectly with his uncle Ishmael:

R. Levi said: In the hour of the ingathering [i.e., death] of Isaac, he left his cattle and his possessions, and all that he had, to his two sons. Therefore they both rendered loving-kindness (to him), for it is said, *And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him* (Gen 35:29). Esau said to Jacob, Divide all that

my father has left into two portions, and I will choose (first), because I am the firstborn. Jacob said, This wicked man has not satisfied his eye with wealth, for it is said, *neither his eye is ever satisfied with riches* (Eccl 4:8). What did Jacob do? He divided [what his father had left] into two parts: all that his father had left as the one part, and the land of Israel as the second part. What did Esau do? He went to Ishmael in the wilderness in order to take counsel with him, for it is said, *Esau went to Ishmael* (Gen 28:9). Ishmael said to Esau, The Amorite and the Canaanite are in the land, and Jacob trusts [in God] that he will inherit the land, therefore take all that your father has left, and Jacob will have nothing. And Esau took all that his father had left, and he gave to Jacob the land of Israel, and the Cave of Machpelah, and they wrote a perpetual deed between them. Jacob said to Esau, Go from the land of my possession (אֶרֶץ אֲחֻזָּתִי), from the land of Canaan. Esau took his wives and all that he had, for it is said, *[Then Esau took his wives, his sons, his daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle, all his livestock, and all the property he had acquired in the land of Canaan;] and he moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob* (Gen 36:6). And as a reward because he removed all his belongings on account of Jacob his brother, He gave him one hundred provinces from Seir unto Magdiel, for it is said, *Magdiel, and Iram; these are the clans of Edom (that is, Esau, the father of Edom), according to their settlements in the land that they held]* (Gen 36:43), that is Rome. Then Jacob dwelt safely and in peace in the land of Canaan, and in the land of his birth (בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹלַדְתּוֹ), and in the land of the sojournings of his father (וּבְאֶרֶץ מְגוּרֵי אָבִיו), for it is said, *Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived* (Gen 37:1).

PIRQE R. EL. 38

In this passage of rabbinic retold Bible, which expands on Gen 35-36, after Isaac's death, and following Esau's suggestion, Jacob divides what their father has left them into two parts: movable property on the one hand and land on the other. Even though the narrative context is the negotiation of the right to the Machpelah, there is no mention of the cave in the first place, but rather of the land of Israel. Following Ishmael's advice, the firstborn Esau chooses the movables, leaving the land—which still has to be possessed—for Jacob, together with the burial site. Whereas Esau's motivation for choosing the money in Genesis Rabbah appeared to be pure greed, here it is explained as based on Ishmael's assumption that the Amorites and Canaanites will not permit Jacob to see the promise of the land fulfilled. After coming to an agreement on the division of their inheritance, claims the midrash, Jacob can legitimately expel



his brother from the land of his possession—the field and the cave. Esau and his family leave for his ersatz homeland, one of the provinces of which is said to be Rome.

It is Ishmael's lack of faith in the fulfilment of God's promise of the land that ultimately determines Esau's choice. Pirke Rabbi Eliezer resorts to the alliance between the paradigmatic scriptural villains Ishmael and Esau—as metonyms for Islam and Christian Rome—to explain why the two do not deserve a portion of the land.<sup>53</sup> Even if, at the assumed time of composition of this midrash in the eighth century, such interpretations of Ishmael's and Esau's exiles as voluntary can only be regarded as rabbinic wishful thinking, the text nonetheless claims that Jacob's descendants are the sole legitimate heirs to the land that contains the cave—Jacob's native land.

The story of the separation of Esau's and Jacob's inheritance transmitted in Gen. Rab. 100:5 and Pirke R. El. 38 has a sort of sequel in a Palestinian version of the narrative of Jacob's burial, preserved in another passage of Pirke Rabbi Eliezer.<sup>54</sup> In the immediately preceding co-text, the midrash focuses on Jacob's last will expanding upon his wish to be taken up to the burial place of his fathers, to the Cave of Machpelah (Pirke R. El. 39). Joseph swears to fulfil his father's wish by the covenant of circumcision, which, as the midrash explains, was usual before the Torah was given. A hyperbolically great company, "the whole land,"<sup>55</sup> goes up from Egypt to bury Jacob. The encounter with Esau is described as follows:

When they came to the Cave of Machpelah, Esau came against them from Mount Seir<sup>56</sup> to stir up strife, saying, The Cave of Machpelah is mine. What did Joseph do? He sent Naphtali to subdue the constellations, and to go down to Egypt to bring up the perpetual deed which was between them, therefore it is said, *Naphtali is a doe let loose* (Gen 49:21). Hushim, the son of Dan, had defective hearing and speech, and he said to them, Why are we sitting here? They pointed to him (Esau) with the finger. They said to him, Because this man will not let us bury our father Jacob. What did he do? He drew his sword and cut off his head, and took the head into the Cave of Machpelah. And they sent his body to the land of his possession, to Mount Seir. What did Isaac do? He grasped the head of

53 On the rabbinic afterlife of the link between Ishmael and Esau, see Bakhos, *Ishmael*, 54–63.

54 This has a parallel in b. Soṭah 13a.

55 According to the Warsaw edition, MS Parma 1240 reads 45,000 people; the MS used by Friedlander listed the number as 5,040.

56 MS Parma 1240 also reads Seir; MS New York JTS 10484 reads Horeb.

Esau and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, Sovereign of the universe! Let mercy be shown to this wicked one, for he did not learn all the precepts of the Torah, for it is said, *If favour is shown to the wicked, they do not learn righteousness* (Isa 26:10). He was speaking in iniquity (בעור) concerning the land of Israel and the Cave of Machpelah, for it is said, *in the land of uprightness they deal perversely* (יעור) (ibid.). The spirit of holiness answered him, saying, As I live! He will not see the majesty of the Lord, for it is said, *he shall not see the majesty of the Lord* (ibid.).

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Unlike Jacob and his children, Esau has not gone down to Egypt, which is why he makes his way to the burial site from Mount Seir—his standard dwelling place in rabbinic sources. After Esau has briefly expressed his claim, the impatient Hushim decapitates him.<sup>57</sup> Whether Esau reclaims the entire site of the Cave of Machpelah, or just the free place where Jacob is supposed to be buried, is left unexplained. That he no longer has a right to it is implied by the fact that Naphtali is sent to fetch the document with the evidence of the transaction. This document will not be necessary, for Esau is dead even before Naphtali returns. In fact, this return is not part of the narrative.

There is no doubt as to the possibility, left open in the parallel in b. Soṭah 13a, that Esau could have been buried somewhere in the vicinity of the patriarchs' grave; in this version, his body is explicitly removed from the cave.<sup>58</sup> The passage closes with Isaac's prayer, although according to the scriptural narrative, Isaac has been dead for some time at this point. Quoting Isa 26:10, he laments the life rather than the death of his executed son. Esau's transgression, the ultimate reason for his execution, consists in his having spoken ill of the land of Israel and the Cave of Machpelah. This transgression, according to Isaac, is alluded to in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "in the land of uprightness they deal perversely" (Isa 26:10).

### 3 The Rabbinic Land of the Fathers in *Erets Israel*

The sources discussed above, transmitted in documents redacted between the third and the second half of the eighth centuries, were selected in order to

57 The gruesome (or comic?) motif of the parallel in b. Soṭah 13a in which Esau's eyes fly to Jacob's feet and Jacob enjoys *Schadenfreude* are left out.

58 The text does not reveal what happens with the head, so we may assume that it does remain near the cave.

illustrate two approaches the rabbis chose to give shape to their myth of an ancestral homeland. It should be noted that neither approach specifies that the Jews of the rabbinic present are supposed to live in the ancestral homeland. Seldom do we find that these rabbinic texts transmit propaganda for the land of Israel as the place of residence for Jews in the rabbinic present,<sup>59</sup> or the notion that the ancestral homeland and the holy land are coterminous, as part of their agenda.<sup>60</sup>

In the Hebrew scriptures, this land is never referred to as the “promised land”<sup>61</sup> and seldom as the “holy land” or “homeland.” The meaning of these expressions appears to be covered in rabbinic sources by “land of Israel” (*Erets Israel*)—a genitive construction that, because it contains the name of a patriarch, is a Jewish Hebrew synonym for Greek *patris*—or by “the land” (*ha-arets*). However, few of the sources examined actually use the expression *Erets Israel*. It appears in quotations of the book of Ezekiel, in three texts of the Babylonian Talmud, and in late midrashim. The rest of the sources, including all the Tannaitic and Amoraic midrashim, refer to the land of Israel with the expression “the land” either by quoting scriptural texts or as part of rabbinic wording.

Rather than constituting a coherent narrative, the rabbinic ancestral homeland myth consists of plenty of statements, only some of which could be discussed in this study as representative of one of two broad areas of reflection. These can be understood as two versions of the rabbinic myth of an ancestral homeland: (1) the land promised to the patriarchs and the evidence of the fulfilment (or lack thereof) of the promise during the lives of the patriarchs; and (2) the purchase of a plot of land for the establishment of the grave of the ancestors. A corollary of the different character of the sources examined in parts 1 and 2 is that the version of the myth examined in the first presents itself as more evidently multi-vocal and fragmented than the more elaborated narratives discussed in the second part.

The first part discussed texts concerned with the question of whether and how the rabbis perceived the land of Israel as the homeland of the patriarchs. An upshot of the examination of selected Tannaitic and Amoraic sources in 1.1 is that there is a tension between two conceptions of the role the patriarchs

59 Among the rare examples, we can mention Gen. Rab. 74:1 and Tanḥ. Buber Va-yishlah 11, where it is claimed that there is no blessing in a life outside the land or in possessions from outside the land.

60 See Gen. Rab. 39:16 and 74:1.

61 On “promised land,” or rather “land of promise,” as a Christian concept, see Wilken, *Land*, 52–53 and 126–28.

played in getting the story of the land started. According to half of the texts examined, the land was only promised to the patriarchs,<sup>62</sup> so that their attachment to the land is understood as a prologue to the main narrative of its actual possession by the Israelites. In the other half, it is suggested that it was not just promised, but also taken into possession by them as well,<sup>63</sup> so that their actions there are viewed as having a foundational character. The story of the land therefore begins with them. Whereas in the first case, the conquest narrative is not found to be so problematic as to justify major adjustments to the scriptural account, in the second, the texts suggest that the conquest of the land promised to Abraham was either embarrassing or simply contradictory, and this called for rabbinic clarification.<sup>64</sup>

It is in connection with the view that the land was in the possession of the patriarchs that we may understand the few sources which go as far as to claim that the patriarchs sanctified the land by leading halakically oriented lives.<sup>65</sup> This notion is in conflict with the more generally accepted idea that the halakah was made known to Moses at Sinai, and the land-commandments came into force with the conquest. The legal possession and sanctification of the land by the patriarchs is a discursive strategy with which the relation between the patriarchs and the land is depicted as stronger than those explanations of a merely affective bond, which are based on haggadic arguments.<sup>66</sup>

However, all of these explanations—no matter whether they are concerned with the legal implications of the patriarchs' possession of the land or with the patriarchs' affective attachment to the land, and even if several are transmitted in halakic midrashim—are of an *haggadic* character. The few texts which do argue using *halakic* categories, claiming that at its very origins the ancestral homeland followed the halakah, operate with an haggadic notion as well—that is, the notion that the patriarchs intuitively lived halakically, sanctifying the land with their lives even before the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai.

Although most of the texts examined in this part are transmitted in Palestinian midrashim, certain passages of the Babylonian Talmud also reveal

62 E.g., Mek.Y. Pisha 17, 18; Sipre Deut 8, 357; Gen. Rab. 41:5, 64:3.

63 E.g., Sipre Deut 7, 8, 31; Gen. Rab. 49:2; y. Qidd. 1:3 (59d); b. B. Bat. 100a; b. Šabb. 118b.

64 b. Šabb. 118b appears to address this question differently suggesting that a land without boundaries cannot be possessed at a single point in history, neither by the patriarchs nor by the Israelites, but is rather an ongoing task.

65 Examined in 1.2, i.e., m. 'Or. 1:2; y. Hal. 2:1 (58b); Pesiq. Rab Kah. 8:4; Pirke R. El. 27; Gen. Rab. 45:3; b. Yebam. 64a.

66 Such as those discussed in 1.3: Sipre Deut 8, Gen. Rab. 84:4, 39:8; Tanḥ. Re'eh 8; Lev. Rab. 36:5.

a keen interest in discussing the ancestral character of the land of Israel, most frequently with the aid of Palestinian voices.<sup>67</sup> In some cases, a Babylonian perspective, which very probably contrasted with a Palestinian one, may be ascertained: for example, in the review of a Palestinian perspective on the land's territoriality (b. Šabb. 118b), on the absolute superiority of the ancestral homeland in the land of Israel (b. Hul. 91b), or on its primordial character as the land of the fathers (b. Pesah. 87a). The latter was examined as part of a small group of texts which address Abraham's origins and the problem posed by the fact that Abraham has a native land other than that which he is expected to establish as his and his descendants' homeland. Both b. Pesah. 87a and b. Šabb. 118b stand out in hinting at the opposition between the land of Israel and the Diaspora—an aspect that remains conspicuously untouched in the other sources.

The land of the patriarchs in the texts examined in part 1—construed both by anonymous voices and by Tannaitic and Amoraic authorities<sup>68</sup>—is a *vaguely territorially imagined* one. Unlike some of the sources examined in part 2, these texts on the attachment of the fathers to the entire promised land do not address the characteristics of a concrete land where the patriarchs were imagined to have established themselves. They are not concerned with its real geography (e.g., its borders, its climate, or its other inhabitants). They are texts about an idealised historical space, a mythical text-scape rather than a realistic space. This inclination towards a vague territoriality is especially emphasised in b. Šabb. 118b, where Jacob's heritage is identified by a Palestinian and a Babylonian sage with a *borderless* heritage—one which rejects the idea of diaspora as a negative form of existence.

The second part was concerned with rabbinic views of the establishment of the first Jewish grave in the land of Canaan, the patriarchal grave, at the close of the patriarchal narratives. The Amoraic and especially the post-Amoraic sources that were examined—sources that focus on the acquisition of the Cave of Machpelah first from the Jebusites and then from Esau; on the extraordinary price paid for this piece of land; and on the conflict between Esau's and Jacob's descendants at Jacob's burial—attest to the symbolic importance of this *purchased* space as Jewish patrimony in rabbinic thought, in both a Palestinian and a Babylonian context.

67 Only four of twenty attributed statements in the Babylonian sources examined in this part are attributed to Babylonians. As far as the second part is concerned, two of nine attributed statements in sources of the Babylonian Talmud are attributed to Babylonians.

68 Two generations stand out: out of fifty attributed statements, twelve are attributed to Tannaim of the second generation and twelve to Amoraim of the third generation.

The more detailed narratives of the post-Amoraic texts are particularly illustrative of an emphasis on the affective attachment of the patriarchs—not to a vague territory, but to a concrete piece of land, a land where they had lived and died, and where they sought to be buried at all costs.

In their rewriting of this episode of the patriarchal narrative, the rabbinic sources claim a plot of land for the Jews as if this were a foreshadowing metonymy of the land that was promised to their ancestors, but which had to be conquered before it could be possessed.<sup>69</sup> This version of the myth therefore appears to stand in contrast with that of the earlier sources examined in part 1, which tried to do away with the conquest by asserting that the patriarchs possessed the land.

Relocating the Cave of Machpelah to Mount Moriah or Jebus/Jerusalem; depicting Jacob's burial there with his ancestors, including Adam; and portraying Esau's death there at Jacob's burial constitute major modifications of the scriptural account, which are not only found in Palestinian sources, though these issues do appear to have been of special concern to the author of *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*. It is probable that such adjustments to the scriptural account were motivated by the fact that, while at the time when some of these traditions first emerged Palestine was just a province of the Roman Empire, which had declared Christianity as its official religion, by the time *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer* was composed, Palestine had been incorporated into the Arab Empire and had also started to be claimed as a *Christian holy landscape*.

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69 This is also the interpretation of modern exegetes. Janzen sees in the purchase of a burial plot in Gen 23 a "proleptic sign of the fulfilment of God's promise" ("Land" A.3.a).

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