

**PROMISE AND COVENANT,
SOME COMMENTS ON PROF. A. ROFÉ'S PAPER**

J. Loza

Professor Rofé's intention has been a critical one: for him the "post-exilic statements" on the "promises" [to the Patriarchs] are applied to the present situation [of the writers of the passage]. That is to say that the texts are not a simple way of recalling to mind a fact concerning the national past, even if it be a very significant one; the divine promises function as a means to strengthen faith and confidence when the odds seem to be against the survival of the "remnant" of Judea as a little province of the Persian Empire. It is only natural to seek a solid rock on which one can stand when the national Davidic monarchy, for hundreds of years the basis of the national unity, has disappeared and a restoration is not possible (even if one may dream of it) under the circumstances.

Dr. Rofé wanted to present a view of the intention(s) of the post-exilic texts. The date or epoch of origin is the basis for taking a series of biblical texts into consideration; those that can not be regarded as post-exilic, that one can not critically consider as a part of "Late Biblical Literature," are not taken into consideration, at least directly. Now, it is not an easy matter to establish a clear-cut border-line between "early" and "late" in Biblical Literature. One only needs to think of the enormous divergences existing in the scholarly world regarding the narrative of the Pentateuch¹ and the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic Literature. As a rule, Prof. Rofé does not consider these (maybe early) texts, but some texts (Gen. 24:6-8 and 26:2-5, besides the P texts) are certainly not the only ones in the Pentateuch and the oldest narrative books, Joshua through 2 Kings, that could be labeled as late. I am aware of the fact that there is no agreement about them in recent critical literature, but it is clear for me that divine promises, and especially descent and land promises, tend to be more elaborate as time goes on.²

Of course, I should not say that all the texts, or almost all the texts, of the Genesis narratives containing a promise, be it a descent or a land

¹. Cf. A. de Pury - Th. Römer, "Le Pentateuque en question: Position du problème et brève histoire de la recherche," in: Pury 1989, 9-80; Briend 1992, 9-32.

². Cf. Westermann 1976, 9-91, and especially "Die Verheissungen an die Väter," 92-150.

promise, are late as it is nowadays almost a fashion among the scholarly world to affirm.³ Divine promises in the texts of the Patriarchal narratives of Genesis were multiplied at a late date, but they were not invented. One can not so easily, as Hoftijzer did, label all non-P texts as additions to the narrative context in which they were transmitted. The situation is probably far more complex than Hoftijzer was ready to admit: we find there promises that were added to a previous context, but also others, besides the P texts, that are an integral part of the text from the outset. In this case we can be dealing with ancient or relatively ancient texts, but also with narratives of a relatively late date.

But you may think that my comments go astray: my remarks - at least as far as Rofé's résumé is indicative of most of the texts with which he deals - consider precisely the texts that Prof. Rofé left aside rather than those he studied. What can I say on the latter?

One may think differently than him about some details, or even more important aspects; one may hold other views than that which he expressed in his paper. But, in the main, the remarks he made are accurate, and, probably more important, the perspective he has taken to consider the texts is perfectly sound. We can not deal with the biblical texts as if they were timeless. The texts have a life setting; they do reflect the problems of people living in a particular situation, even if it is a little unknown to us. They try to give a response to the hazards and conflicts embedded in it. We may be unable to reconstruct this situation in all detail, especially because the evidence inside or outside the texts is not always sufficient to draw clear-cut conclusions, such ones that could be deemed more than probable, about the precise local and temporal (not to say a word about the personal) situation which expresses itself in each text. Prof. Rofé, to whom we are grateful for this, tried in the best possible manner to take into consideration this life setting that was the dynamic force out of which the late biblical texts of promise arose.

The promise made to the fathers, we may conclude, was a vital force in post-exilic times. In a time when the Judaeans could be prone to despair, the promises to the fathers were a reminder to the community that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob stood by them. If God does not fail, the

³. J. Hoftijzer was among the first to consider the texts embodying promises, especially in Genesis as late additions to the narratives: see Hoftijzer 1956, 30, etc. With Westermann, I think that the situation is more complex.

promises and utterances made in the past are the divine guarantee that he assists his people and even that he will act, sooner or later, to change the actual situation in favor of his people.

ROFÉ'S ANSWER

By and large, it seems to me that our views do not diverge greatly. There are promises that clearly look secondary. I will take one instance which I deem very significant. The promise made in Bethel, of posterity and land (Gen. 28), sounds as if it does not belong to the original story. The primary core seems to tell that Jacob now undertakes to worship the Lord, provided He will guard him on his way. Then – he says – “the Lord will be my God,” *wěhaya ’ādonai lî le’ēlōhîm* (Gen. 28:21). Contrariwise, at the beginning, in v.13, the Lord presents Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac, namely a God Jacob has known from childhood. The conflict we sense here was probably caused by the superposition of the concept of the God of the three patriarchs upon a very ancient tradition which described Jacob as discovering the Lord then and there.

On the other hand, the promise to Abraham in Chap. 12 and 13 strikes one as inherent to the narrative, since Abraham is described as wandering about the land. As Ehrlich already noted, some 90 years ago, it was by this walking that Abraham took symbolic possession of the land, and thus the promise “I will give this land to your offspring” – *lězar’āka ’etten ’et-ha’areš hazzot* (Gen. 12:7) – appears to be an integral part of the story. This is just one instance of a local tradition that was later expanded to be introduced when and wherever possible. The altar and the promise belong to the original story of Abraham; later the promise was introduced into the revelation to Jacob (Gen. 28:13-14). I do not dare dating the core of the tradition concerning Abraham, but would tend to the Monarchical period. Though more material could be adduced, I believe this would do for the moment.