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## BETWEEN VALUES AND THEOLOGY: THE CASE OF SALVATION THROUGH CHILDREN IN RABBINIC THOUGHT—PART I<sup>1</sup>

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### I. Introduction

Christianity is not the only religion that professes a salvation theology, achieved through a righteous and suffering son. Judaism, although with considerably less emphasis and not as well known, does so as well. But whereas classical Christianity believes in the crucified and completely righteous child of God, Jesus, as the *exclusive* method by which every person can escape eternal damnation, rabbinic Judaism affirms the saving power of the children of *sinner*s—either through their premature death or righteous deeds—as one of *many ways* in which sinning parents can be saved from spending twelve months, if not eternity, in hell.<sup>2</sup>

This paper will attempt to explicate rabbinic child-salvation theology by answering three fundamental questions. The first revolves around its *exegetical* basis. Since all rabbinic theology, as Michael Fishbane points out, is rooted in exegesis,<sup>3</sup> how did the rabbis living between the second and tenth centuries extrapolate a salvation theology of this kind from the *Tanakh*, where there is no direct mention of the after-life? Through examining the multiple exegetical maneuvers used by different textual voices, we will discover a consistent rabbinic method: interpretive inversions. This approach allows the interpreter to affirm a theology by exploiting its textual opposite. Thus, we will see how the rabbis transform, amongst other things, punishment into salvation, this world into the next, fear of death into hope for death, and human responsibilities into divine ones—in order to build a case for child-salvation theology. Moreover,

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<sup>1</sup> I hope to publish Part II of this paper in a future volume of *Milim Havivin*. My thinking about the interplay between values and theology has been influenced by Moshe Halbertal's important work, *Mahapekhot Parshaniyot be-Hithavutan* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> For varying views on the duration of *Gehinom*, see *Eduyot* 2:10, *Shabbat* 33b, *J.T. Sanhedrin* 10:2, *Lam. Rabah* 1:40, *Seder Olam Rabah* ch. 3, *Gen. Rabah* ch. 6, and *Masekhet Semakhot (Hibut ha-Kever* 1:8).

<sup>3</sup> M. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: on Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

we will also highlight the various textual genres in which these interpretive reversals take place. These not only include biblical statements of theology, but legal passages and narratives as well<sup>4</sup>.

Second, we will investigate the *hermeneutical* justifications for these interpretive reversals. How did a particular rabbinic text defend these radical exegetical moves? In this regard, we will focus on the often decisive role that *values* play—as a criterion of interpretation—in the formation of child salvation theology. Moreover, we will expose not only *if* a rabbinic exegete draws on values, but how much *weight* he grants it. Some rabbinic texts are only prepared to use value-laden considerations to generate *new* theologies that are not embedded in biblical passages and can only be logically extrapolated from them, while other more bold rabbinic texts are prepared to grant values the power to consciously re-interpret and even supplant straightforward biblical passages. Other rabbinic texts will also be presented that either implicitly or explicitly deny the power that values play in the determination of theology, and we will attempt to show what alternatives they offer to justify these interpretive reversals as well.

The third and final critical question surrounding child-salvation theology concerns its *conceptual* justification. In short, is this theology—in both of its forms—merited or unmerited? In the Christian tradition, this issue dominates any discussion of salvation, and we can present the same dilemma concerning Jewish forms of salvation in general and rabbinic child-salvation in particular.<sup>5</sup> That is, are rabbinic forms of salvation achieved because one deserves it—either by actively performing good deeds or through personally suffering and thereby paying for the sins of one’s past—or does salvation occur essentially through events that take place outside of the self—either through the medium of others or the arbitrary grace of God? Put differently, can rabbinic salvation be rationally justified or is its efficacy beyond the confines of logic? Of course, the answer may be more complex than just a yes or no response. Each salvation theology could operate in a unique way—some more merited (and rationally based) than others. Moreover, within each salvation theology, different texts may profess different points of view. While we will give a brief conceptual overview of rabbinic salvation in general, our primary goal will be to illuminate this issue in the context of child-salvation theology.

Before we begin exploring specific texts regarding child-salvation theology and its exegetical and conceptual justifications however, we need to present an overview of how the rabbis conceived of hell in general and the myriad of

<sup>4</sup> Part 1 of this article will deal exclusively with how *Hazal* ground child salvation theology in Biblical theological texts. The other methods used to anchor rabbinic theology will be explored in Part 2.

<sup>5</sup> See Meir Soloveichik, “Redemption and the Power of Man,” *Azure* 16 (Winter 2004), 51-76. Soloveichik denies the existence of unmerited salvation in the Jewish tradition. This paper will challenge this read of the rabbinic tradition.

ways in which humans—and in particular Jews—can achieve salvation from its flames.

## II. Salvation from Hell: Overview

Although numerous Jewish apologists have tried to deny it, rabbinic literature makes thousands of references, albeit in an unsystematic fashion, to *Gehinom* (hell), a fiery place where people are tortured for sins committed during their lifetime.<sup>6</sup> Some texts vaguely state that people who live “average religious lives” receive a twelve-month sentence in *Gehinom* to cleanse them of their sins, while the truly wicked are destined for eternal damnation.<sup>7</sup> Other texts, however, are more exact and reserve *Gehinom* for those whose sins outweigh his/her merits.<sup>8</sup> There are also hundreds of rabbinic texts that cite one specific sin as sufficient cause for one to “inherit” the fires of *Gehinom*. Yet given the radical nature of these later voices, it is hard to know whether these texts should be taken literally, or whether they function as hyperbolic exhortations whose goal is to ensure compliance with a specific law.

Although the majority of rabbinic texts mentioning *Gehinom* are preoccupied with either listing those who are destined to go there, debating the duration of one’s stay, or even with supplying actual images of what *Gehinom* looks like, a fair number of rabbinic texts concentrate on presenting methods for one’s deliverance from hell. These rabbinic salvation texts can be divided into two categories.<sup>9</sup> The first group describes people solely saved through their own merit; for example: those performing certain religious rituals,<sup>10</sup> embodying proper faith,<sup>11</sup> or observing proper ethical behavior.<sup>12</sup> The second group delineates people saved from sources outside of themselves. These include: salvation through the medium of patriarchs,<sup>13</sup> family members (parents<sup>14</sup> and children), being born into a certain religious group (ex. being a Jew),<sup>15</sup> experiencing suffering,<sup>16</sup> or

<sup>6</sup> See D. Cohn-Sherbock, *Rabbinic Perspectives on the New Testament* (New York: Mellen Press, 1990), p. 1 who cites many modern Jewish apologists who attempt to deny the important role that *Gehinom* plays in the rabbinic tradition.

<sup>7</sup> *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13:3-5.

<sup>8</sup> *Masekhet Semakhot of Rabbi Hiyah* (1:6), *JT Pe’ah* 1:1.

<sup>9</sup> As just mentioned regarding what actions brings a person to hell, here too, one can question the literalness of many of these statements. Our approach in this paper will be to take them seriously.

<sup>10</sup> Such as keeping the Sabbath (*Shabbat* 118a), offering sacrifices (*Gen. Rabah* 44:2), fasting (*Bava Metzia* 85a), and maintaining the laws of family purity (*Otzar Midrashim* pg. 398).

<sup>11</sup> Through prayer (*Berakhot* 15b), repentance (*Ecc. Rabah* 7:21), and belief in God and Abraham his servant (*Otzar Midrashim* “Avraham Avinu”).

<sup>12</sup> Such as visiting the sick (*Nedarim* 40a), giving charity (*Gitin* 7a), or refraining from slander (*Midrash Tehilim* (ed. Buber, n. 52)).

<sup>13</sup> e.g. *Song of Songs Rabah Parshah* 8.

<sup>14</sup> e.g. *Sotah* 10b.

<sup>15</sup> e.g. *Num. Rabah* 2:13.

<sup>16</sup> *Bava Batra* 10a; *Song of Songs Rabah* 2:3; *Eruvin* 41b; *Yevamot* 102b; *Lev. Rabah* 32:1;

through *mitzvot* being performed on them by others such as circumcision<sup>17</sup> or burial in the Land of Israel.<sup>18</sup> While each of these categories deserves research in their own right, our focus in this article will be on explicating one of these methods from the latter group—that of child salvation.<sup>19</sup>

### III. Child-Salvation Theology

Rabbinic texts describe two types of children who “save” their parents. The first are young children who die while they are still young, and the second are righteous children who, through their good deeds, cause their parents to escape *Gebinom*. The primary rabbinic work that presents us with an anthology of voices with regard to child salvation is the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*.<sup>20</sup> In chapter five of this work, an anonymous voice draws a distinction between these two forms of salvation. Whereas salvation through the death of a child only saves that child’s parents, righteous children can retroactively save their ancestors for up to four generations:<sup>21</sup>

So too the saving of adult [righteous] children is greater than the saving of the minor children [who die young]. For the saving of the adult [righteous] children saves until three or four generations, but the saving of the minor children [who die young] only saves the actual father alone.<sup>22</sup>

In order to properly explicate these two forms of child salvation, we will

*Pesikta Zutrata*, *Shemot* 21.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. *Eruvin* 19a; *Midrash Tanhuma* section 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Pesikta Rabati Parshah* 1; *Talkut Shimoni*, Psalms 874.

<sup>19</sup> We should also note that sometimes this “saving” is depicted by rabbinic texts as a method to guard against *entering* hell, while other texts describe it as an escape *out of* hell.

<sup>20</sup> Most scholars maintain that *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* was composed during the 8<sup>th</sup> c. in Eretz Yisrael. It does, however, preserve (as in our case) precious older *Tanaitic* material that has no analogues in the rest of the rabbinic corpus. The *midrash* is most well-known for its first two chapters, in which the 32 hermeneutical principles to explicate *Agadah* are listed. Sa’adiah Gaon was first to cite this *midrash* in the 10<sup>th</sup> c. The *midrash* was first published using multiple manuscripts obtained in Yemen in 1933 by Hillel Gershom Enelow, a brilliant scholar, writer, and prominent Reform Rabbi. The *midrash* was reprinted twice in the last 5 years by different Orthodox printing presses and, while both recent editions rely heavily on Enelow’s first printing and on his capacious notes, neither of them cites Rabbi Enelow by name. For more on this *midrash* see H.G. Enelow, “The Midrash of Thirty-Two Rules of Interpretation,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 23:4 (1933), 357-367.

<sup>21</sup> Other rabbinic texts, though, that profess a righteous-child salvation theology do not make this claim.

<sup>22</sup> H.G. Enelow, *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Bloch Publishing, 1933), p. 95. This section of the *midrash* was erroneously cited as forming part of *Midrash Hashkem* in *Otzar Midrashim*, ed. JD Eisenstein (New York: Jewish Writers Guild Cooperative Press, 1915), p. 138. For more on this mistake, see Enelow, *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 95, notes to line 3.

examine the proof-texts provided by these rabbinic voices. This approach will not only isolate the various interpretive and hermeneutical justifications, but will also, at times, help us unravel the conceptual justifications as well. For in what proof-text a rabbinic interpreter chooses to anchor his theology, often influences or is reflective of a specific understanding of that theology.

As we have mentioned, although some rabbinic texts creatively anchor their afterlife theologies using re-interpretation and extrapolation from *theological* passages found in *Tanakh*—even if on the surface they have nothing to do with issues pertaining to the next world—many voices find biblical support in *non-theological* genres altogether. These include biblical legal passages and narratives, as well as early rabbinic laws and sayings. Thus, in these latter instances, the author of a specific afterlife theology not only has the challenge of linking seemingly non-afterlife subjects to the afterlife, but also of making seemingly non-theological texts somehow relevant to theology. We will start our study by looking at proof texts culled from theologically based biblical passages, and then turn our attention to the non-theologically based ones, and then finally to the rabbinic texts.

## 1. Based on Biblical Theology: The Shift From Inherited Guilt to Child-Salvation

### Inherited Guilt: Background

Four rabbinic texts extract a child-salvation theology from biblical passages that, on a simple read, maintain a theology that children will be *punished* for the sins of parents. Before embarking on an analysis of these rabbinic voices, however, we need to explicate the theology of inherited guilt as it appears in *Tanakh*. In Exodus 34:6-7, God, as a consequence of Israel's sin of the Golden Calf, articulates His attribute formulary to Moses as a method of obtaining Divine mercy. The passages state:

6) The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: “The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, 7) extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”<sup>23</sup>

In these verses, God declares His kindness and mercy with his attendant compassionate qualities that characterize his providence. The perplexing element of the attribute formulary is the notion that “[God] visits the iniquity of parents upon children” (v. 7). This theological doctrine of divine wrath and

<sup>23</sup> All biblical translations, except where otherwise noted, are taken from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 1999).

harsh punishment does not square with God's other attributes which accentuate His mercy. Yochanan Muffs, due to the aforementioned consideration, as well as from other biblical texts, argues that this passage is really an expression of God's mercy—not wrath. For him, the import of the verse is not that children *also* suffer for the sins of their parents, but that God does not punish sinners immediately. Instead, God compassionately delays punishment until the time of their children or grandchildren.<sup>24</sup>

Although Exodus 34 presents trans-generational punishment as a symbol of God's forgiving quality by delaying punishment, Exodus 20:5-6 reflects a different approach to the theology, as seen by its context:

5) You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, 6) but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.<sup>25</sup>

Here, the passage appears in the context of the Decalogue, and the doctrine of inherited guilt is used as a motivating and even threatening device to exhort Israel into complying with the prohibition of idolatry by stressing the awful consequences of sin. Not only will sinners suffer for their transgressions, but their progeny will be punished as well. The purport of “visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children” (v.5) is seen here—as opposed to Exodus 34:7—not as *delaying* punishment, but as an *extension* of guilt and responsibility. Though later prophets, most notably Ezekiel and Jeremiah, forcefully and explicitly reject the concept of inherited guilt, whether in its extended or delayed form, some remnants of this older tradition still manage to find their way into prophetic texts.<sup>26</sup>

### A. Righteous–Child Salvation Replaces Inherited Guilt

Many rabbinic texts have sought, in different ways, to solve the ethical and literary (relating to both context and consistency) problems that inhere in these passages.<sup>27</sup> The first anonymous voice in the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* solves both

<sup>24</sup> Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 16-22.

<sup>25</sup> The same formulation appears in the text of Deut. 5:9.

<sup>26</sup> One such example is Jer. 32:18 which states: “And who recompenseth the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children.”

<sup>27</sup> See *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, ed. Horowitz—Rabin (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 1998), p. 226, *Ba-Hodesh*, #7; *Midrash Tanaim*, ed. Hoffman (Berlin: Poppelier Press, 1908), p. 160; *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai*, ed. Epstein and Melamed (Jerusalem: Gates of Mercy Press, 1979), p. 148, #20; *Midrash Tanhuma*, (Jerusalem: Levin Epstein Press, 1962), p. 114, #19; *Makot* 24a; *Num. Rabah*, (Jerusalem: Vagshal Publishing, 2001), p. 479, #33. Also see S. Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 185-189.

of these challenges by re-interpreting and transforming the meaning of these passages from espousing a theology of inherited guilt into one promoting child-salvation. He writes:

And where do we know that saving adults occurs until the fourth generation? As it says ‘visiting the guilt of parents upon the children’ (*poked avon avot*) (Ex. 20:5). You cannot say that if the father was a wicked man and the children were righteous that He (God) inflicts the wickedness of the father on them because this does not comport with [God’s] attribute of Justice (*midat ha-Din*). You can also not say that he (the child) is inflicted with his [parents’] obligation because this doesn’t comport with [God’s] attribute of Mercy (*midat ha-Rahamim*). So what is [God’s] attribute of Mercy? He (God) suspends [the sins of] the father until four generations. If one of the children is found to be righteous then the father is saved. If none of the children are found to be righteous than everyone gets punished according to what he deserves. You may say that “Visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children” is a language of anger. Go and study the thirteen principles of mercy (Ex. 34): ‘Lord, Oh Lord, God of mercy etc’. So even when He says ‘*poked avon avot*’ it has language of mercy—that He suspends [the sins of] the fathers for four generations—that if one of the generations is righteous it saves [the father] from the judgment of hell. Furthermore, at the time that Moses our teacher came and requested mercy, what did he say? (Num. 14:12-18) ‘And now...’—and if (*poked*) is language of anger—he wouldn’t have said this.<sup>28</sup>

This remarkable *midrash* openly declares its re-interpretation to be driven, primarily, by moral sensibilities. The author denies a literal read of Exodus 20 since vicarious guilt is neither merciful nor just, and God, who governs the world through these values, would never command that children be punished for the sins of parents. Moreover, this *midrash* argues that the doctrine of inherited guilt would never have been listed in the context of Exodus 34, which contains a list of God’s compassionate qualities.<sup>29</sup>

The first voice of the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* text, therefore, re-interprets the passage to mean that if a person sins and is worthy of death, his meritorious children or grandchildren (up to four generations) can save him from hell. The *midrash* explicates the phrase: “visiting the guilt of the parents upon the

<sup>28</sup> *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 95.

<sup>29</sup> See Y. Muffs, *Love and Joy*, 16-22, who makes the same point. Interestingly, both Y. Muffs and the author of *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, although living hundreds of years apart, use Numbers 14 to confirm their theses.

children” to mean that the parents’ sins could be atoned for by the children, and not—the way it is usually understood—that the children will suffer for the sins of the parents. Instead of parents harming their children (according to a literal read of Exodus 20), this *midrash* declares—through its bold re-interpretation—that righteous children (and grandchildren) can rescue their parents (and grandparents) from the pains of hell.

### B. Righteous–Child Salvation Extrapolated from Inherited Guilt – Two Versions

#### *Version 1:*

Rabbi Joshua, the second voice in the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* text, also derives a theology of righteous–child salvation from Exodus 20, but accomplishes this task through a different exegetical technique:

Rabbi Joshua says: what attribute is greater – attribute of the good or attribute of punishment? And if [regarding] the attribute of punishment, which is less, the children are drawn after the fathers in the sin of the fathers, then [regarding] the attribute of goodness, which is greater, should it not be the case that fathers are drawn after the children in the world to come?<sup>30</sup>

Whereas the first anonymous voice of *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* radically re-interprets Exodus 20 and thereby replaces a theology of inherited guilt with a theology of righteous–child salvation, Rabbi Joshua maintains the straightforward read of Exodus 20, thereby adopting a theology of inherited guilt. He uses, however, this theology to build a case through an *a fortiori* argument (*kal ve-homer*) for righteous–child salvation. He argues that if God *punishes* family members for the sins of other family members (inherited guilt) then He should certainly (given that God’s attribute of “goodness” outweighs His attribute of “punishment”) *reward* family members for the righteous actions of other family members (righteous–child salvation). In short, in order to justify righteous–child salvation, the first voice of *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* re-interprets Exodus 20, while Rabbi Joshua (the second voice) merely extrapolates from it.

We should note though, that by emphasizing God’s benevolent qualities, both voices ultimately use value-laden considerations, not formal exegetical ones, as the decisive factor in their interpretations.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the key difference between them is that Rabbi Joshua’s more moderate justification, using extrapolation and not substitution, does not undermine the simple read of Exodus 20 which reflects God’s wrath. We can suggest two reasons why Rabbi Joshua adopts this less radical approach: either Rabbi Joshua does not share the assumption that inherited guilt is unjust, and therefore does not feel compelled to re-interpret,

<sup>30</sup> *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 97

<sup>31</sup> I see Rabbi Joshua’s *a fortiori* argument as based on the value of God’s goodness.

or, more plausibly, he agrees that inherited guilt is unjust and is compelled to re-interpret, but is unable to do so because he gives value-laden considerations less weight as factors of interpretation. Rabbi Joshua, according to the second possibility, may be prepared to use values as a criterion of interpretation so long as it does not supplant the logical read of the biblical verse.

Yet, putting aside this crucial hermeneutical difference, both voices share an interpretive commonality: they both exploit a theology that professes punishment and transform it into its inverse—a theology of salvation! Moreover, these two voices not only share a similar hermeneutical approach, but they both maintain an *unmerited* conceptual approach to righteous-child salvation. The *merited* approach to righteous-child salvation would argue that the parents of a righteous child are saved because they (the parents) played a critical role in educating the child. Thus, righteous-child salvation theology would be both rational and equitable, for the deeds performed by a child would be directly connected with the actions of the parents. Since the parents taught their child right from wrong, they can take credit for their child's virtuous behavior and thereby merit salvation. A medieval Jewish text, *Sefer Hasidim* (13<sup>th</sup> c. Germany), explicitly adopts this approach:

But thus said the Holy One, blessed be He: A son merits his father, for example, where the father sins and gives his child to learn Torah, and to do good deeds. Since through the father the son merited, the son merits the father, and if the father commands the children to do [good] things after their death, behold when the son does them it is as if the father does them.<sup>32</sup>

This rational explanation would not fit according to the two previous rabbinic voices due to the potential generational distance (up to four generations) between the sinner and the one who is being saved. How could the actions of someone living four generations earlier meaningfully influence the actions of later descendants? These rabbinic voices would most likely agree with the unmerited approach, which would argue that the father or grandparents are not deserving of salvation based on their own actions. This approach would either claim that the theology of righteous-child salvation is an inscrutable mystery, a gift from God to the *child* for the child's good behavior, or is based on the principle of extension, articulated below by the influential medieval Talmudist, R. Solomon Ibn Aderet, known as Rashba (Spain 14<sup>th</sup> c):

The child is a part of the father in flesh: The flesh, sinews and bones... And when a person dies, the Holy One blessed be He takes what is His, and leaves to the father and mother their portion, as it says: "*And the dust returns to the earth as it was; and the spirit returns to God who gave it*" (Ecc. 12:7). And therefore,

<sup>32</sup> *Sefer Hasidim Siman* 1171 (Margoliot)

[the] reward of this world is physical—fathers are extended to their children... And that [is]—because the son—since his body alone is part of the father’s and not his soul, as we have said, nevertheless behold he is extended (or born) from the father. And therefore, the son is obligated in the honor of his father and his fear, and the father is not commanded so like the son. For the one extended (born) is always obligated to the extender (bearer)—even though he is born automatically, involuntary [to his actions]—and not voluntary [to his will]. And therefore, when he gives birth to a righteous son, [a] worshipper of God, he [too] appears as if, from his offspring, he is worshipping God... But the father, why shall he be a merit to the soul for the son? The father is not part of the son, and is not born from him—not in body and not in soul. If so, what benefit will the father merit for the son?<sup>33</sup>

Rashba claims that children are the physical extensions of their parents and thus, when the children do righteous actions, it is as if their parents are performing those very same actions. This perspective, Rashba claims, explains why the parents’ righteous deeds do not save the child. Children are extensions of their parents since they only exist *on account of* their parents. Parents, however, do not owe their existence to their children, and therefore are not viewed as extensions of them.<sup>34</sup>

### Version 2:

Rabbi Joshua (as cited in *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*) is not the only rabbinic voice to logically deduce child-salvation theology by building an *a fortiori* argument from a theology of inherited guilt. A text from *Ecclesiastes Rabah* (4:1) does so as well, but with crucial differences:

BUT I RETURNED AND CONSIDERED ALL THE OPPRESSIONS THAT ARE DONE UNDER THE SUN (4:1)...

R. Judah says: It refers to the children who are buried early in life through the sins of their fathers in this world. In the Hereafter they will range themselves with the band of the righteous, while their fathers will be ranged with the band of the wicked. They will speak before Him (God) [saying]: ‘Lord

<sup>33</sup> Responsa of Solomon Ibn Aderet 5:49

<sup>34</sup> There are a couple of practical differences between the approach of *Sefer Hasidim* and Rashba. First, what would happen in a situation where the child was adopted? According to the *Sefer Hasidim*, this child would still save the parent, whereas according to Rashba—he would not. The second practical difference would be in a situation where the child became righteous without the influence or education of the parent. *Sefer Hasidim* would argue that the child doesn’t save the parent, but Rashba would argue that he still does.

of the Universe, did we not die early only because of the sins of our fathers? Let our fathers come over to us through our merits.’ He replies to them: ‘Your fathers sinned also after your [death], and their wrongdoings accuse them.’

R. Judah bar Ilai said in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: At that time, Elijah (may he be remembered for good) will be there to suggest a defense. He will say to the children: ‘Speak before Him (God) [thus]: “Lord of the Universe, which Attribute of Thine predominates, that of Grace or Punishment? Surely the Attribute of Grace is great and that of Punishment small, yet we died through the sins of our fathers. If then the Attribute of Grace exceeds the other, how much more so should our fathers come over to us!” Therefore He (God) says to them: ‘Well have you pleaded; let them come over to you,’ as it is written: “*And they shall live with their children, and shall return*” (Zech. 10:9), which means that they returned from the descent to *Gehinom* and were rescued through the merit of their children. Therefore every man is under the obligation to teach his son Torah that he may rescue him from *Gehinom*.

According to Rabbi Judah, when the author of Ecclesiastes speaks of “all the oppressions that are done under the sun” (4:1), he refers to children who die young because of the sins of their parents. They are “oppressed” not only because they have lost their lives due to no fault of their own, but also because they “have no comforter” (*ibid.*) since their fathers are joined with the wicked in hell and the young children (since they never sinned as adults) are counted among the righteous in heaven. Their oppression continues, argues Rabbi Judah, when the children, basing themselves on a death-of-child salvation theology, request that their parents be transferred to heaven. God refuses to grant them their wish since the death of young children only atones for sins committed before the moment of death, and not after.<sup>35</sup>

Rabbi Judah b. Ilai (in the name of Rabbi Joshua b. Levi), who is the second rabbinic voice in this text, then states that Elijah the Prophet will teach these children how to marshal a successful argument that will influence God’s seemingly obstinate attitude. Elijah suggests that the children shift their strategy: do not plead for parental salvation due to their own untimely death, but rather

<sup>35</sup> I am reading “merit” in this context as “through our deaths.” The other way to read this text is that the children were asking to be saved because of righteous-child salvation, and the “merit” refers to the fact that the children never sinned. According to this read, God “misunderstands” and responds as if the children were making a claim of death-of-child theology. The second implication of this alternate read would be that Elijah’s contribution, according to Rabbi Judah b. Ilai (second voice in the text), is more stylistic than substantive. There is a tactical shift (evoking God’s mercy) rather than a substantive one (shifting salvation theologies).

because of their “righteous” status. The specific argument for righteous–child salvation that the children make with the help of Elijah parallels the *a fortiori* argument articulated by Rabbi Joshua above in the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* text. That is, if God punishes children for the sins of parents (vicarious guilt), then certainly—since God’s good attributes surpass his attribute of punishment—God should save parents when their children are deemed “righteous” (vicarious merit). Ultimately, God, according to Rabbi Judah b. Ilai, accepts this argument and the parents are reunited with their children in heaven.

Although Rabbi Joshua in the *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* text and Rabbi Judah b. Ilai through the voice of Elijah adopt the same *exegetical* basis for righteous–child salvation theology (i.e. extrapolating from inherited guilt), they maintain radically different *hermeneutical* assumptions. For Rabbi Joshua, as we have noted, rabbinic scholars can use value-laden considerations as factors in their interpretations of specific biblical passages so long as they do not supplant the straightforward meaning of the text.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, through his depiction of the give-and-take between God and these “righteous” children, Rabbi Judah b. Ilai implicitly argues that humans *cannot* use value-based interpretations of biblical texts without the consent of God who is the author of these biblical texts. In this respect, Rabbi Joshua can be seen as more *radical* than his rabbinic counterpart, for he grants more weight to ideological or value-based interpretations and thus greater flexibility to rabbinic exegetes who no longer need to justify their interpretations through formal hermeneutical rules or divine confirmation.

Yet in two respects, Rabbi Judah b. Ilai can be seen as being even more radical than Rabbi Joshua. First, he bestows greater power to humans who can “convince” God to adopt a certain theology of salvation that He (God) was not committed to initially. Rabbi Judah b. Ilai thus sees humanity as playing critical roles in shaping the way God judges people in the next world. In short, whereas Rabbi Joshua grants humans *interpretive* strength in relation to Scripture, Rabbi Judah b. Ilai bestows upon humanity immense *persuasive* strength in relation to God.

The second radical implication for Rabbi Judah b. Ilai focuses not on humanity’s ability to affect God’s governance of the world, but rather on our understanding of the open-ended nature of *Tanakh*. Initially, according to Rabbi Judah b. Ilai, the Torah did not profess a theology of righteous–child salvation. Later however, after the logical arguments of these “oppressed children” were made, the Torah came to be interpreted as supporting righteous–child salvation theology. The implication, then, is that the Torah can be interpreted in many different ways and—more importantly—its interpretation could evolve over time.

We should also note that the *Ecclesiastes Rabah* text chooses to dramatize

<sup>36</sup> As we pointed out, the first voice of *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* went even further than this view and allowed values to even undermine the straightforward read of Exodus 20.

the persuasive power of humanity in a highly personal manner. The challenge to God does not come from a detached rabbinic scholar who confronts God's seemingly inconsistent theology, but from *actual children* who suffer for their parents' sins! The protest to God's justice system comes precisely from the very victims of that system. Thus, ironically, this text depicts "righteous" children who die young due to inherited guilt as the ones who establish, with God's ultimate consent, the very theology of righteous-child salvation!

Moreover, the uniqueness of this *Ecclesiastes Rabah* text stems not only from its hermeneutical justification—i.e. the *a fortiori* argument marshaled by suffering children, combined with God's revelatory confirmation—but also from its implied conceptual broadening of the term "righteous." The term may no longer only be limited to those children who *act* righteously, but may even be applied to those children who die *without sin*. Since these children may be viewed as having left the world without having had the opportunity to transgress the will of God (i.e. they died too young to commit a sin or even before the age of 13) they can be considered "righteous." This extension in *Ecclesiastes Rabah* implies then, that like the first voice of *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* and Rabbi Joshua, righteous-child salvation is unmerited. In this case, we cannot point to the parents' positive influence as the cause of their children's "righteous" status.

We can also speculate, therefore, that the last line of the *Ecclesiastes Rabah* text which reads: "therefore every man is under the obligation to teach his son Torah that he may rescue him from *Gehinom*," was added by another rabbinic voice. Two reasons can substantiate this theory. The first is that there is a disjunction between this line, which emphasizes the need for *actual* righteous behavior on the part of the child (Torah study), and the rest of the *Ecclesiastes Rabah* text, which, as we have just noted, only requires a formal definition of "righteousness" that would include young children who never studied Torah. The second comes from a *Yalkut Shimoni* text which parallels the *Ecclesiastes Rabah* one, but does not contain this last line.<sup>37</sup>

### C. Inherited Guilt Becomes Death-of-Child Salvation

The *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* voices and the *Ecclesiastes Rabah* text are not the only texts to anchor a theology of child-salvation in a biblical passage professing inherited guilt. Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai, as quoted by an anonymous elder in *Bavli Berakhot* 5b, does so as well:

A Tanna recited before R. Johanan the following: If a man

<sup>37</sup> See *Yalkut Shimoni, Ecclesiastes* #969. We should note that it is unclear whether this last line of *Ecc. Rabah* (4:1) maintains that teaching one's child Torah is the sole way to achieve righteous-child salvation and, thus, advocates a meritorious based view of this theology, or whether it is a statement of advice and expresses just one way for the child to achieve righteousness. If we assume that the later approach is correct, then this voice would not subscribe to a meritorious view of righteous child salvation theology.

busies himself in the study of the Torah or in acts of charity or buries his children, all his sins are forgiven him. R. Johanan said to him: I grant you Torah and acts of charity, for it is written: “*By mercy and truth iniquity is expiated.*” (Prov. 16:6) “Mercy” is acts of charity, for it is said: He that followeth after righteousness and mercy findeth life, prosperity and honour. “Truth” is Torah, for it is said: Buy the truth and sell it not. But how do you know [what you say about] the one who buries his children? A certain Elder [thereupon] recited to him in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai: It is concluded from the analogy in the use of the word “iniquity”. Here it is written: By mercy and truth iniquity is expiated. And elsewhere it is written: “*And who recompenseth the iniquity of the fathers into the bosom of their children.*” (Jer. 32:18)

The anonymous tanna of this pericope posits a view that if one studies Torah, does acts of charity, or buries his children then all of his sins will be forgiven. Thus, implicitly, being free of sin, he/she would be spared from any form of punishment in the afterlife. Rabbi Johanan assumes that the proof-text for all of these teachings is Proverbs 16:6, “By mercy and truth iniquity is expiated.” After explaining how one can derive the first two expiatory acts from this passage, Rabbi Johanan questions where the anonymous tanna adduced the last of his claims, i.e. death-of-child salvation theology. At that moment, an anonymous elder in the name of Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai resolved the difficulty by use of a “*gezeirah shaveh*” (often translated as “analogy”). This interpretive rule allows details from one context to be transferred to another context when the same word is used in both places. In our case, the elder (in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai) points out that the word “iniquity” appears in both Jeremiah 32:18 and Proverbs 16:6, and therefore some content from one passage can be transferred to the other. Jeremiah 32:18 states that sins of the fathers are “paid” onto the children. From this context alone we could only know that “recompenseth” means punishment alone, and perhaps the sins of the fathers have not completely been absolved through the death of their children. Yet, because the word “iniquity” in Proverbs 16:6 is found in the context of atonement, we can posit that the “recompenseth” in Jeremiah 32:18, where the word “iniquity” also appears, includes not only punishment, but atonement (and salvation) as well.

This rabbinic text (*Berakhot* 5b), like the last three we have explicated, anchors its interpretive justification for child salvation in an exegetical inversion! It too exploits a theology of (inherited) *punishment* to build a case for (child) *salvation*. Yet, the *Berakhot* 5b text is hermeneutically unique. For according to all of the texts we have seen up until now, values are appropriated with varying

degrees of interpretive weight as criterion of interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai, on the other hand, refrains from drawing on values to transform inherited guilt into child salvation, and instead relies on a formal hermeneutical rule of *gezeirah shaveh*. One can conjecture that Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai sought to justify this theology without relying on value-laden interpretive maneuvers.

Although *Berakhot* 5b deviates from the other texts by drawing on formal criterion and not values, in another respect it parallels the view of Rabbi Judah b. Ilai as cited in *Ecclesiastes Rabah*. Both argue that child-salvation theology doesn't derive from exegetically replacing passages that seemingly deal with inherited guilt (view of first anonymous voice in *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*), nor through building an abstract *a fortiori* argument from inherited guilt (Rabbi Joshua), but instead stems from an *actual* case of inherited guilt. Yet even given this commonality, these two texts diverge in one key respect in addition to the issues of values: whereas Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai professes a theology of *death-of-child* salvation, Rabbi Judah b. Ilai (as well as the two rabbinic voices in *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*) affirms a theology of *righteous-child* salvation.

To summarize: all of our rabbinic texts exegetically transform the biblical theology of inherited guilt to marshal a case for child-salvation theology. For the first voice in *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*, child-salvation theology *displaces* inherited punishment; for Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Judah b. Ilai (*Ecc. Rabah* 4:1), child-salvation theology *builds* upon inherited punishment; for the elder (in the name of Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai), child-salvation theology is an automatic *byproduct* of inherited punishment. Yet, as we have noted, the commonality between all of these approaches is to exegetically invert texts about punishment to profess a theology of salvation.

<sup>38</sup> Supplanting a straightforward read of Exodus 20, the first voice in *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer* grants value considerations extreme power; Rabbi Joshua (second voice in *Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer*) is less radical and only draws on values when building a new theology; and Rabbi Judah bar Ilai (*Ecc. Rabah* 4:1) imbues values with minimal power—for it requires the confirmation of God before its interpretation can be established.