

‘WHEN YOU ENTER THE LAND’: A TANNAITIC CONTROVERSY
AND ITS REALISTIC MEANING

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The Tannaitic midrashim reflect a consistent disagreement between the school of R. Akiva, who argued that the commandments of which it is said, ‘when you enter the land’, were already to be accepted, or observed, in the wilderness, as opposed to the school of R. Ishmael, who maintained that these commandments were to be fulfilled only ‘after taking possession and settling down’ – fourteen years after the Israelites entered the land, according to the Tannaim. This article offers a new explanation of this disagreement, and its relationship to the religio-political question that reverberated in the post-Destruction world of the Tannaim.

One of the consequences of this disagreement is explicit in the dictum of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai in *Mekhilta* on Deuteronomy. He states that just as the Israelites were not obligated to observe the commandment of eradicating idolatry immediately upon their entry to the Land of Israel, so too, in the present, the Jews are commanded to destroy the pagan altars only when they are powerful enough to do so. Thus, the controversy does not focus on the historical question of when these commandments were observed at the time of Joshua, but rather on political questions of the late Second Temple period and the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt, and possibly even later, until the time of R. Judah ha-Nasi.

Sifrei on Deuteronomy, which was redacted by the students of R. Akiva, advocated taking concrete steps for the redemption of Israel as speedily as possible following the destruction of the Second Temple, by the immediate observance of the commandments that the Israelites were to observe upon their entry to the land. That is, the appointment of a king, taking possession of the Land from its non-Jewish rulers, the construction of the Temple, the offering of sacrifices, the destruction of the pagan idols, and the establishment of the cities of refuge. Their opinion was based on their unshakable belief that by the merit of the observance of these commandments in the present, Israel would, with God’s help, succeed in freeing their land from the yoke of the Roman empire. This approach was consistent with the position of their teacher, R. Akiva, who supported the Bar Kokhba uprising.

In contrast, R. Ishmael and the sages of his school, whose views are reflected especially in *Mekhilta* on Deuteronomy, followed the political path of Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai. In their opinion, the observance of these commandments in the time of Bar Kokhba, and in later periods in which the Romans ruled the Land of Israel would produce disastrous results. They therefore thought that the observance of all the national commandments connected with ‘when you enter the land’ was to be postponed until the Jewish people would once again rule its land, in a political reality resembling that of ‘after taking possession and settling down’ at the end of Joshua’s life.