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THE BINDING OF ISAAC IN
RABBINIC LITERATURE AND
THOUGHT**

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THE BINDING OF ISAAC IN RABBINIC LITERATURE
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The fascinating biblical story of the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham (traditionally, *Aqedah*; Gen. 22:1–19) is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of the ancient Israelites’ literary heritage. It is a breathtaking example of a short story (fourteen to nineteen verses altogether),¹ rich in content, from which arises numerous demanding questions.² Moreover, though the story seems simple, it is very complicated. It is subject to several possible interpretations and perspectives spanning all times and cultures.³ It engenders genuine

¹ The current Masoretic version of the story consists of nineteen verses (Gen. 22:1–19). However, the original story was even shorter, containing only the vv. 1–14a+19a; see in detail I. Kalimi, “The Land/Mount Moriah, and the Site of the Jerusalem Temple in Biblical Historical Writing,” in *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy: Studies in Scriptures in the Shadow of Internal and External Controversies* (Assen, 2002), pp. 9–32, esp. 9–11, and nn. 1 and 5.

² For parallel stories in the Greek world, see the examples listed by S. Spiegel, “From the *Aqedah* Legends: A Piyyut on the Slaughtering of Isaac and his Resurrection by Rab Ephraim of Buna,” in *The Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (New York, 1950), pp. 471–547, esp. 474–475 (Hebrew section; for English version, see idem, *The Last Trial* (New York, 1967)); J.S. Licht, “Isaac’s *Aqedah*,” in *Encyclopedia Biblica* (Jerusalem, 1971), vol. 6, pp. 336–338, esp. 336 (Hebrew); D. Flusser and S. Safrai, “Who Sanctified the Well-Beloved in (lit.: from) the Womb,” in Y. Avishur and J. Blau, eds., *Studies in Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 329–336, esp. 329–330 (Hebrew).

³ In addition to the targumic and midrashic interpretation of the *Aqedah* discussed in this article, see, for example, the interpretations of Philo of Alexandria, *De Abrahamo*, xxxiii 172–175 (C.D. Yonge [translator], *The Works of Philo* [Peabody, 1993], pp. 426–428); Josephus Flavius, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.222–236 (and see L.H. Feldman, “Josephus as a Biblical Interpreter: The *Aqedah*,” in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 [1985], pp. 212–252);

emotions⁴ and exposes key theological issues, such as the relationship between God and mankind and the limits of divine demands and duties. Additionally, the story deals with the crucial problem of making choices: between religious belief and fundamental moral obligation and between faithfulness to God and faithfulness to one's own flesh and blood. It deals also with several inter-human relationships, such as the minimal obligation of a father towards his child and of a husband towards his wife and his son's mother. Therefore, there is no wonder that the story has an important place in all branches of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Samaritanism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as their various denominations, ancient and modern. In fact, the story had an enormous impact on these religions' beliefs, thoughts, liturgies, literature, and arts.⁵ To be sure, the issues raised here troubled not only the Talmudic rabbis but also many generations of earlier and later Jewish (and non-Jewish) thinkers: theologians and philosophers, writers, poets and exegetes, artists and composers. All struggled and still are struggling to comprehend and reinterpret this astonishing and horrifying narrative.

The history of the interpretation of the *Aqedah* is almost as old as the story itself: it starts in the early stages of the transformation of the

and later on by Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (Germany), Maimonides, Sefer Hazohar, Don Isaac Abarbanel, Rabbi Levi Isaac of Bardichev, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hacoen Cook, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. All are collected and discussed by A. Evan Chen, *The Binding of Isaac: Mystical and Philosophical Interpretation of the Bible* (Tel Aviv, 2006; Hebrew). See also Y. Elbaum, "From Sermon to Story: The Transformation of the Akedah," in *Prooftexts—A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 6 (1986), pp. 97–116; R.M. Jensen, "The Biding or Sacrifice of Isaac: How Jews and Christians See Differently," in *Bible Review* (October 1993), pp. 42–52; M.M. Caspi and S.B. Cohen, *The Binding (Aqedah) and Its Transformations in Judaism and Islam: The Lambs of God* (Lewiston, 1995); L.A. Berman, *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Northvale, 1997 [important particularly for its anthology of Yiddish authors' and various modern writers' and thinkers' views]); E. Noort and E.J.C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations* (Leiden, 2002); and L.H. Kant, "Restorative Thoughts on an Agonizing Text: Abraham's Binding of Isaac and the Horror of Mount Moriah (Genesis 22)," in *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 38 (2003), pp. 77–109, 161–194.

⁴ Compare E. Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 31. For a detailed review by this author, see I. Kalimi, "Bound by the Bible?—A Review Essay on Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christian and the Sacrifice of Isaac*," in *Review of Biblical Literature* 9 (04/2005): http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4501_4561.pdf (for a shorter version of the essay, see *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 [2005], pp. 371–376).

⁵ There are numerous examples in Jewish and Christian art. From ancient and medieval times, it is worth mentioning the fresco of the Dura Europos synagogue and the mosaic floors of the synagogues in Beit Alpha and Sepphoris. From Christian art, noteworthy are the woodcuts in *Biblia pauperum*-blockbook (ca. 1460), Dresden.

biblical narrative (e.g., Gen. 22:14b; 2 Chr. 3:1).⁶ The current study suggests some perspectives on the place, interpretation, and impact of the *Aqedah* in the conglomerate of Rabbinic literature and thought. It attempts to uncover the rabbis' position towards God, who demanded from his loyal servant such an extraordinary act; towards Abraham, who puts his love and faithfulness in God above those of himself, his son, wife, family and friends; towards Isaac, who seemingly was ready to be sacrificed and cooperated with his father; and towards Sarah, who is not mentioned in the story whatsoever.

1. *The Rabbis and the Theological-Ethical Merits of the Aqedah*

The biblical narrator does not criticize any of the figures mentioned in the *Aqedah* story. However, several theological and ethical questions emerge from the story, and these are related particularly to God, on one hand, and to Abraham, on the other. Let us turn our attention to these questions and examine how the rabbis handle them.

(a) *God Tests Abraham*

Chapter 22 is the only place in the book of Genesis that God demands a sacrifice from a human and points out exactly what, how, and where He wants it, without leaving the one who is to perform the sacrifice any option.⁷ He asks Abraham to sacrifice his long-awaited and beloved son, Isaac, as a burned offering on one of the mountains of the land of Moriah (22:2). This request sounds very strange, if not totally absurd: the mighty King of the universe who has large flocks and herds is "hungry" for the only little lamb of the aged parents. How could the merciful God be so cruel towards His own loyal servant and unconditionally demand that he murder his beloved son? How could God request something that completely contradicts his own commandments, such as "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed..." (Gen. 9:6; which appear in the biblical end-text prior to

⁶ See Kalimi, "The Land/Mount Moriah," pp. 9–15. For a list of additional secondary literature and a brief survey, see C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, 1981), vol. 2, pp. 351–354.

⁷ Leviticus and Numbers also point out exactly "what, how, and where" to sacrifice. However, most of the animal and vegetarian sacrifices are conditional to a person's free wish, transgression, and economic situation (e.g., Lev. 1–3).

the *Aqedah*) and “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13 // Deut. 5:17; appears as subsequent to the *Aqedah*):⁸

Furthermore, the *Aqedah* is the only episode among the biblical stories of Abraham that opens with the words: “God did *test* Abraham” (Gen. 22:1).⁹ This opening indeed softens readers’ criticism regarding God’s cruelty,¹⁰ on the theory that God in fact did not request a human sacrifice but only a demonstration of Abraham’s unconditional belief. To be sure, the end of the story proves its original intention (Gen. 22:11–12). The rabbis followed the biblical text and consider the whole story a test. God tests Abraham’s absolute faithfulness: is he ready to give his most precious, beloved son to God?

But why should God test Abraham at all? If He knows the test’s result, why does He test him? If He does not know the result (an idea that emerges from the words at the end of the story, “*for now I know that you fear God...*” Gen. 22:12b), then the story puts in question God’s completeness. The harmonistic interpretation of the Rabbinic sources (e.g., Genesis Rabbah 56:7; ca. 400–500 C.E.)¹¹ and their medieval followers¹² does not make the problem disappear. The view that God himself knew the result but that He just wanted to show Abraham’s righteousness to people is unacceptable because no one was on the mount at the time of the *Aqedah* (unless we say that God knew that this story would be told to following generations). Moreover, as the Jewish German philosopher Hans Blumenberg states: “What the philosophers cannot accept from God is the obedience He demands from Abraham—obedience that stands against all the nature—to offer

⁸ In 1798 Immanuel Kant cited Genesis 22 as an example in which God could not have really commanded Abraham to slaughter Isaac, because it would have violated the moral law; see Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 354.

⁹ On the “test/trial” in general, see J. Licht, *Testing in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Post-Biblical Judaism* (Jerusalem, 1973; Hebrew).

¹⁰ Similarly, the story in Job 1–2 provides the background that God only tests Job in order to reveal his loyalty to God in bad as well as in good times.

¹¹ This article quotes from a wide variety of Rabbinic (and other) sources. It is not always easy to establish their exact dating. I note the relative or accepted dates of the sources in order to furnish some sense of chronological sequence and development. Regarding the Midrashim, I usually follow M.D. Herr, “Midrash,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), cols. 1511–1512. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the late editing of a work does not necessarily exclude the possibility of its containing much earlier material.

¹² See, for example, Saadia Gaon and Abraham ibn Ezra in their commentaries on the site; and Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:24.

his only son, and just at the last moment to cancel it via a messenger's voice from heaven."¹³

The rabbis do not criticize God's request as was later done by the medieval Jewish commentator and philosopher Rabbi Joseph ibn Caspi (Provence, southeastern France; 1280–1332), who asks, "How could the Lord command such an abomination to be done?"¹⁴ They hold that God never intended Isaac to be a burned offering. Thus, the verse "that was no command of mine, nor did it ever enter my thought" (Jer. 7:31), which originally was said about a child sacrifice at Topheth/the Valley of Ben-hinnom, is associated with the *Aqedah* (B. Ta. 4a [ca. 500 C.E.]). Moreover, in order to soften God's problematic test, the rabbis took another direction in Genesis Rabbah 56:8: "לא אמרתי לך 'שחטהו' אלא 'העלהו'" "I did not tell you 'slaughter him,' rather 'take him up' (upon one of the mountains)." According to this source, God never intended that Abraham sacrifice his son; Abraham misunderstood God's request.¹⁵ The Rabbinic concept that "Abraham's ram was created at twilight [at the end of God's acts of creation]" (אילו של אברהם נברא בין השמשות; Tanhuma [Buber] 17:2; ca. late 8th–9th century)¹⁶ promotes this idea: God prepared the ram on the first Sabbath-eve of the week of Creation, and since then it was waiting to replace Isaac.¹⁷ This means that God always knew that Isaac would not be sacrificed. In fact, the rabbis regard the *Aqedah* as the ultimate and most climatic of God's ten tests of Abraham.¹⁸ God gave Abraham

¹³ "Was die Philosophen an diesem Gott nicht ertragen konnten, war der Gehorsam wider alle Natur, den er von Abraham forderte, als er ihm das Opfer des einzigen Shones auferlegte und erst im letzten Augenblick durch eine Botenstimme vom Himmel verhinderte." See H. Blumenberg, *Matthäuspasion* (Frankfurt a.M., 1988), p. 111.

¹⁴ See Ch. Kasher, "'How Could the Lord Command Such an Abomination to Be Done?'"—Rabbi Joseph ibn Caspi's Critics on the Binding of Isaac," in *Et-Hadaat 1* (1997), pp. 38–46 (Hebrew). Kasher also discusses in detail ibn Caspi's various responses to this problematic theological issue. Generally, the responses are characterized by a philosophical and philological effort to soften or even detach the order from God. According to ibn Caspi, the greatness of Abraham is expressed at the end of the story: "Lay not your hand upon the lad" (Gen. 22:12), that is, listening to God not to slaughter Isaac, rather than from the beginning of the story: "Take now your son... and offer him there for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2).

¹⁵ Rashi (1040–1105) follows this interpretation in his commentary on Gen. 22:12.

¹⁶ Compare M. Ab. 5:9 (probably a late addition to M. Abot).

¹⁷ Seemingly this tradition is reflected also in the last panel of the mosaic floor of the synagogue at Beth Alpha (6th century C.E.). The panel presents the ram not as it described in the biblical text, that is, "a ram caught by its horns in a thicket," but rather as one waiting on the side, tied up with a rope to a bush.

¹⁸ See M. Ab. 5:3; Perkei deRabbi Eliezer 26. The "ten tests/trials" start with God's

freedom of choice, but at the same time he requested him to make “the right” choice so that everyone acknowledged Abraham’s righteous and unconditional belief. Thus, B. San. 89b recounts:

R. Simeon ben Abba said, “*Na* (נא) can only denote entreaty. This may be compared to a king of flesh and blood who was confronted by many wars, which he won by the aid of a great warrior. Subsequently he was faced with a severe battle. Thereupon he said to him, ‘I pray you, assist me in battle that people may not say, “There was no reality in the earlier ones.”’ So also did the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham, ‘I have tested you with many trials and you were withstanding all. Now, be firm for my sake in this trial, that men may not say there was no reality in the earlier ones.’”

Though the rabbis did not criticize God on particular points, apparently they questioned the *Aqedah* story as a whole. In other words, even if the *Aqedah* is just a “test” of Abraham’s belief, and in fact testing of a human by God plays an important role in the biblical thought,¹⁹ still it is too cruel. Is there any justification for such a cruel test? Why did God suddenly ask Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son?

In order to solve this difficulty, the rabbis searched the immediate opening phrase of the story: *ויהי אחר הדברים האלה* (Gen. 22:1a). This phrase is well known particularly from narrative and historical sections of the Hebrew Bible²⁰ and generally means “sometime afterward.”²¹ It is a technical, even fossilized, phrase that connects stories or determines the relative position of a story within a chain of stories. From time to time, it replaces a precise date found in the earlier text.²² Nonetheless, in early Jewish exegesis the phrase was grasped as the definition of a chronological sequence of a story and related with story/ies recounted previously. The term *דברים* (plural, derived from *דבר*) is interpreted: either as a “word” (e.g., Gen. 39:17; 44:4–7; Deut. 1:1; 4:12) or as

command to Abraham “Go to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1) and end with the same words: “Go to . . . one of the mountains that I will tell you” (Gen. 22:2). For a detailed discussion of this literary feature in the Abraham cycle, see Kalimi, “The Land/Mount Moriah,” pp. 9–10. For the characteristic reaction of Abraham in the “first” and “last” trial, see below, n. 33.

¹⁹ See, for example, Exod. 15:25; 16:4; Deut. 8:2, 16; 13:4; Judg. 2:22; Job 1–2.

²⁰ Among its many appearances (e.g., Gen. 15:1; 39:7; 48:1), it is noteworthy to mention the immediate one in the following paragraph of the chapter under review, Gen. 22:20a.

²¹ Compare the translation in the *Jewish Study Bible* of Gen. 22:1: “Some time afterward.”

²² Compare, for instance, 2 Chr. 32:1 with 2 Kgs. 18:13//Is. 36:1; and see I. Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles* (Winona Lake, 2005), pp. 23–24.

an “act, thing” (e.g., Gen. 18:25; 39:19; 2 Chr. 32:1).²³ Accordingly, *ויהי אחר הדברים האלה* is understood either as “After these *words*” or “After these *acts/things*”:

(1) *דברים* = “words:” B. San. 89b reads:

“And it came to pass *after* these *words*, that God did test Abraham” (Gen. 22:1): What is meant by “after”? R. Yohanan said on the authority of R. Jose ben Zimra: “*After the words of Satan*, as it is written, ‘And the child grew, and was weaned: [and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned]’ (Gen. 21:8). Thereupon Satan said to the Almighty: ‘Sovereign of the universe! To this old man You would graciously vouchsafe the fruit of the womb at the age of a hundred, yet of all that banquet which he prepared, he did not have one turtle-dove or pigeon to sacrifice before you! Has he done aught but in honor of his son!’ Replied He (= God), ‘Yet were I to say to him, “Sacrifice your son before me,” he would do so without hesitation.’ Straightway, ‘God did test Abraham... And He said, “Take, I pray (אנ), your son”’ (Gen. 22:1).”

The Midrash connects the story of the *Aqedah* with the story concerning the long awaited birth of Isaac (Gen. 21:5; cf. 17:17) and the aged parents’ celebration of the occasion, as it appears in the opening verses of the previous chapter (Gen. 21:1–8). By doing so, it emphasizes even more the cruelty of the divine command to slaughter Isaac! Moreover, while the biblical story reports that the *Aqedah* stems from the decision of God to test Abraham, the origin of the midrashic interpretation stems from Abraham’s unworthy behavior and Satan’s malicious words. The rabbis’ intention is clear: justification of God (theodicy) while blaming Abraham and Satan. But this approach opens a new theological front: How did it happen that a wicked power, Satan, has such a decisive influence on God’s decisions? This problem was ignored altogether by the rabbis.

Nevertheless, it deserves mention that the roots of this theological tendency are familiar already from the late biblical literature, namely the books of Chronicles and Job:

(1) The opening story of the book of Job states that *Satan* was the one who pushed God to test Job (1:6–2:8 esp. 2:3),²⁴ though the latter fears God (1:1, 8–9; likewise Abraham, Gen. 22:12).

²³ Compare, for example, *Revised Standard Version (RSV)* and *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*: “After these things.” Similarly the phrase is translated by *Jewish Publication Society*: “And it came to pass after these things.” *Luther-Bibel* translates: „Nach diesen Geschichten;“ and *Die Bibel—Einheitsübersetzung*: „Nach diesen Ereignissen.”

²⁴ Although the word “test” does not appear there, the context of the story leaves no doubt that testing Job is the central theme of the book.

(2) 1 Chr. 21:1 recounts: “And *Satan* stood up against Israel and *provoked David* to make a census of Israel,” while the earlier parallel text recounts: “Again the anger of *the Lord* was kindled against Israel, and *he incited David* against them, saying, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah’” (2 Sam. 24:1).²⁵

The very midrashic feature concerning the *Aqedah* was already developed in the pre-Rabbinic era. The book of *Jubilees* (ca. 161–140 B.C.E.) states that “Prince Mastema” (a parallel term to Satan, devil, persecuting demon)²⁶ pushed God to test Abraham, although he did not doubt the capacity of Abraham to pass the test as did the Satan in the case of Job (Job 1:9–11):

...words came in heaven concerning Abraham that he was faithful in everything which was told him and he loved the Lord and was faithful in all afflictions. And *Prince Mastema* came and he said before God, “Behold, Abraham loves Isaac, his son. And he is more pleased with him than everything. Tell him to offer him (as) a burnt offering upon the altar. And you will see whether he will do this thing. And you will know whether he is faithful in everything in which you test him” (Jub. 17:15–16).²⁷

Similarly, Pseudo-Philo, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 32:1–4,²⁸ asserts that the one who “pushed” God to command Abraham to sacrifice his son was not a single heavenly figure, Satan/*Prince Mastema*, but all the jealous angels. Thus, also according to this source the initiative was not of the Lord himself:

²⁵ It seems that by the word *Satan* the Chronicler did not mean a human Satan as in 1 Kgs. 11:14, 23 (Hadad the Edomite and Razon the Aramite), but a metaphysical devil such as in the case of Job (Job 1:6–12). Indeed, the Greek translators wrote in Job and Chronicles διάβολος (“devil”) but in 1 Kgs. 11:14 (vv. 23–25 of MT 1 Kgs. 11 do not appear in LXX) the translator(s) simply transliterated the Hebrew word: σαταν (“Satan”).

²⁶ In Jub. 49:2, the words “the forces of *Mastema*” replace המושחית “the destroyer” that appears in Exod. 12:23. The term appears frequently in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g., IQM 13:11 and IQS 3:23; 4Q390 1:11). Moreover, “The root of *mastema* is very similar to the root of *satan* both in form (*stm* vs. *stn*) and in meaning (‘to be hostile towards’ vs. ‘to accuse, act as adversary’); so S.M. Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands Served Him: Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen, 1993), pp. 66–67, esp. 67.

²⁷ The author of *Jubilees* states that after Abraham successfully passed the test, the “*Prince Mastema* was shamed” for his evil initiative (Jub. 18:11–12).

²⁸ Generally, the book is dated from the time *before* the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.), or “around the time of Jesus.” See D.J. Harrington, “*Pseudo-Philo: A New Translation and Introduction*,” in J.H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 297–377, esp. 299. Flusser holds that the book was composed during the first two decades *after* the destruction of the Temple; see D. Flusser, “A New Commentary on Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,” in *Tarbiz* 67 (1997/98), pp. 135–138, esp. 136 (Hebrew).

And all the angels were jealous of him (= Isaac), God said to him, “Kill the fruit of your body for me, and offer for me as a sacrifice what has been given to you by me.” And *Abraham did not argue, but set out immediately* (ibid., 1–2).²⁹

A different legend appears in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (ca. 7th–8th centuries C.E.) on Gen. 22:1. The term דברים was understood also here as “words.” However, it is not attributed to Satan/Prince Mastema but to the dispute between Isaac and Ishmael. The *Aqedah* is related to a more immediate story that appears in the middle of the previous chapter and tells about Isaac and Ishmael (Gen. 21:9–21). According to this legend, God took Isaac at his words:

“And it came to pass *after these words*” that Isaac and Ishmael were in dispute. Ishmael said: “It is right for me to be the heir of my father, since I am his first-born son.” But Isaac said: “It is right for me to be the heir of my father, since I am the son of Sarah his wife, but you are the son of Hagar, the handmaid of my mother.” Ishmael answered and said: “I am more righteous than you, because I was circumcised when thirteen years old; and if it had been my wish to refuse, I would not have handed myself over to be circumcised.” Isaac answered and said: “Am I not now thirty-seven years old? If the Holy One, blessed be He, demanded all my members I would not hesitate.” Immediately, these words were heard before the Lord of the universe, and immediately, the word of the Lord tested Abraham, and said unto him, “Abraham,” and he said, “Here I am.”³⁰

(2) דברים = “acts/things” (of God and Abraham): this understanding of the biblical term does not appear in the Rabbinic literature but in the historical writings of Josephus Flavius, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.223–224 (ca. 93–94 C.E.):

This object (= the *Aqedah*) he indeed attained by the will of God, who, however, desiring to make trial of his piety towards Himself, appeared to him (= Abraham) and after enumerating all the benefits that He (= God) had bestowed upon him (= Abraham)—how He had made him stronger than his enemies, and how it was benevolence to which he owed his present felicity and his son Isaac—required him to offer up that son by his own hand as a sacrifice and victim to Himself.

²⁹ Interestingly, *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 18:5; 40:2 states that Abraham fulfilled this command “gladly.”

³⁰ In his commentary on Gen. 22:1, Rashi suggests both rabbinic exegetical traditions—the one stated in *Sanhedrin* 89b as well as that of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan—as equal alternative interpretations of the Scripture.

Josephus relates the *Aqedah* not to any particular story or several stories³¹ that appear in the previous chapter but rather to all the *actions* of God and Abraham related in Genesis 12–21. As a historian, he particularly mentions the political-military advantages that the Lord granted Abraham (Genesis 14). Whether this tradition stems from a Rabbinic source, it is hard to say. Interestingly, the medieval commentator, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam; 1080–1160 C.E.), relates the *Aqedah* to the *act* of the covenant that Abraham made with the Philistines, as recounted at the very end of the previous chapter (Gen. 21:22–32):

God said to Abraham: you became proud of your son that I gave you and made a covenant with them (= Philistines), now go and make him a burned-offer, and let's see what will happen with the covenant!

(b) *Abraham the “Knight of Faith”*

The biblical stories of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–25:10) demonstrate that he did not hesitate to question God when necessary. Thus, Gen. 15:7–8 relates: “And he said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it. And he said, Lord God, *how shall I know that I shall inherit it?*” Likewise, when God declared that Sarah “shall be the mother of nations; the kings of many people shall spring from her;” Abraham laughed and said to himself, “Can a son be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah bear a son when she is ninety? He said to God, ‘If only Ishmael might live under Your special care!’” (Gen. 17:15–17). Abraham demonstrated himself also as one who is concerned about innocent human life. He persistently argued with God concerning the destruction of the wicked cities, Sodom and Gomorra (Gen. 18:16–33): “Far be it from you to do such a thing. . . Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?” (Gen. 18:25). Such a report is wanting in the biblical narrative of the *Aqedah*. Did Abraham question God’s justification for the *Aqedah*? Did he challenge God concerning the promises that his descendants will inherit the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 15:7–21), and that through Isaac shall Abraham’s descendants be named (Gen. 17:19,

³¹ See, for instance, A.B. Ehrlich, *Mikrâ ki-Pheschutô: Volume I—Divre Tora* (Berlin, 1899; reprinted: New York, 1969), pp. 59–60 (Hebrew). Ehrlich holds that “after these things” refers to the first two stories in the previous chapter (Gen. 21:1–8 and 9–21), because then Isaac was the only child at home and thus the test to take him away and sacrifice him was much more difficult.

21; 21:12)? It seems that Abraham does not ask questions as did Job.³² He even does not approach God as Jeremiah: “Righteous are you, O Lord, when I complain to you; yet I will plead these points of justice with you...” (Jer. 12:1). Nevertheless, the story in Genesis 22 does not reveal if and what were the questions that Abraham may have asked, nor the answers he received.³³ Moreover, astonishingly Abraham did not even pray to God to cancel the command to kill his son (though he had ample time to do so during the same night and later during the three-day journey to the sacred mount in the land of Moriah). Abraham definitely could pray to God and contrast the harsh divine command to sacrifice Isaac with the divine promises that God made to him, as Jacob did later on. The latter contrasts the potential annihilation of him and his descendents by Esau in contrast to divine promises to him (Gen. 32:10–13). Nevertheless, as one who was motivated by his belief in God, Abraham is ready to perform immediately the immoral act, to kill his son, without any question. Has he prioritized his religious belief (בין אדם למקום) over his moral principles (בין אדם לחבירו). Is Abraham also “testing” God to see how far He would manipulate His loyal worshiper?

The biblical narrator stresses the general love of Abraham to Isaac (Gen. 22:2, and see also vs. 7–9 where the word בני “my son,” “בנו his son” repeats three times). However, he does not describe the immediate feelings of Abraham when he was asked to slaughter his son. Lack of such a description is remarkable when one recalls another, much less severe situation: when Sarah demanded that Abraham send out Ishmael and Hagar, “the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son” (Gen. 21:9–14, esp. 11). Is such a description in the case of the *Aqedah* impossible because of the great range of emotions that are involved? Or did Abraham completely lessen his human and fatherly love and mercy (“as a father who pities his children,” Ps. 103:13) in order to fulfill the divine request? Was there any conflict between Abraham’s

³² It is worth mentioning that at the end of the book of Job, God praises Job (despite, or even because of, his questions) and rebukes Job’s friends and demands that they offer sacrifices to atone for their sin, that is, their justification (theodicy) of God and blaming of Job (Job 42:7–9).

³³ In fact, this situation is similar to what we have in the “first trial” of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–7). The childless 75 year old Abraham and barren 65 years old Sarah (Gen. 11:30; 12:4) were asked to go to a foreign land “that I (= God) shall show you” (12:1). God promises Abraham the land although it is still inhabited by Canaanites (12:6)! Abraham accepts the promise with thanks, however, without raising any questions (12:7). See also above n. 18.

love of God and his love of Isaac, between listening to religious commandment and keeping the moral value of not killing a human? How could he justify such a divine's request?

The biblical narrator also does not relate whether Abraham discussed the divine command with Isaac, Sarah, or any close member of the family (e.g., Ishmael and Eliezer). There is not even a clue if Abraham considered the potentially disastrous impact of his action on close members of his family. All that the story tells is that suddenly, apparently at night, Abraham received an order to take his son and sacrifice him "upon a mountain" that God will show him. He did not refuse to murder his innocent son; rather, he "woke up early in the morning," took Isaac (and two of his servants), and walked three days to fulfill the divine commandment: to slaughter his son! To cite Pseudo-Philo: "Abraham did not argue, but set out immediately" (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 32:1–2).

Since the rabbis did not compose any systematic study on the *Aqedah* (and, in fact, except for tractate *Abot* none of the other tractates systematically deals with ethical topics),³⁴ one can mistakenly conclude that the ethical and humanistic issues were simply beyond the horizons of the rabbis. However, a careful evaluation of the various scattered Midrashim reveals that the rabbis were aware of some of the *questions*. Thus, Genesis Rabbah 56:10 accounts:³⁵

R. Bibi Rabbah said in R. Yohanan's name: He said to Him: "Sovereign of the universe! When You did order me, 'Take your son, your only son' (Gen. 22:2), I could have answered, 'Yesterday you promised me: "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named" (Gen. 21:12), and now You say: "offer him there for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2)?' But, God forbid, I *did not handle it* so, but *suppressed my feelings* of compassion in order to do your will. Therefore, may it be your will, O Lord our God, that when Isaac's children are in trouble, you will remember that binding in their favor and be filled with compassion for them."

Thus, some rabbis were aware that Abraham did not struggle with God; rather he suppressed his feelings and completely controlled his thoughts. Similar to Pseudo-Philo, they did not question the instantaneous and blind obedience of Abraham to God. They say nothing about the fact that Abraham did not even pray to cancel the harsh divine command. It seems that the rabbis were not interested in rebuking Abraham but

³⁴ Notably, only one Mishnaic tractate, *Abot*, is dedicated to the ethical issues.

³⁵ Cf. Y., Ta. 2:4 ([65d]; ca. 400 C.E.).

rather interested in understanding, justifying, and praising him for his behavior.³⁶ Does this position put in question the rabbis' own ethical values? Several reasons join to explain the rabbis' position:

(1) The rabbis mainly follow the biblical judgment that Abraham was tested and found completely faithful (Gen. 22:12). Therefore, he was praised and rewarded with blessings for his faithfulness, obedience, and extraordinary act, as is detailed in Gen. 22:16–18: “By myself have I sworn, said the Lord, *for because you have done this thing, and have not withhold your son*, your only son; that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; *because you have obeyed my voice.*”

(2) Usually, the rabbis avoided criticizing the patriarchs, the core founders of the Israelite people. Such a tendency is apparent already in the book of Chronicles: the Chronicler does not criticize the core kings of Israel, David and Solomon. He even omits all the negative stories about them (e.g., 2 Sam. 11–12; 1 Kgs. 11) as well as the slightest hints regarding anything that potentially could be understood as sin or inappropriate behavior of them.³⁷ This feature became a norm of the classical Rabbinic literature, almost to all Jewish exegesis in pre-modern times, and the vast majority of the Jewish liturgy.³⁸ Only from the seventh century onward, some silky criticisms were expressed in some *piyyutim* concerning Abraham's readiness to offer his son so easily.³⁹

(3) Apparently, the rabbis held that Abraham fully trusted God in such a way that he believed that somehow God would save Isaac and fulfill His promises. Perhaps, their opinion was similar to the one expressed in another Jewish literary heritage, Hebrews 11:17–19 (ca. 60–69 C.E.):

³⁶ Indeed, Abraham was and is considered so by the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

³⁷ See, for instance, Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles*, pp. 40–42, 94, 140–149. However, Nehemiah refers to Solomon's transgression (Neh. 13:26).

³⁸ Another example: the Midrash justifies the love of Isaac over Essau (Pesiqta deRav Kahana 32, 68 (though some other Midrashim criticize him; see Tanhuma [Buber] *Toldoth* 8; Midrash Psalms *Shocheh Tov* 7:6; B. Meg. 28a).

³⁹ See S. Elizur, “Did Abraham Our Father Transgress by Binding of Isaac?” in I. Rosenson and B. Lau, eds., *The Binding of Isaac for His Descendants: The Aqedah from an Israeli Perspective* (Tel Aviv, 2003), pp. 215–223 (Hebrew).

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your descendants be named” [Gen. 21:12]. He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Indeed, there is no hint in the biblical text concerning whether Abraham believed in resurrection. Moreover, the source under review from the Epistle to the Hebrews attempts to identify in Abraham the idea of resurrection as believed in the case of Jesus.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, a comparable idea of resurrection was already part of Jewish religion at that time.⁴¹ The rabbis surely knew the statement in Gen. 18:14a: “Is anything impossible for the Lord?”

(4) Did the rabbis consider the *Aqedah* an act of *Qiddush Hashem* (that is, the sanctification of God’s name, martyrdom)? In other words, by the act of the *Aqedah* Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son and consequently his own life and future in order to fulfill God’s commandment. This perspective seemingly is reinforced from the legend in Midrash *Lamentations Rabbah* 1:50 (ca. 400–500 C.E.). The legend tells about a Jewish mother, Miriam the daughter of Tanhum (or Nahum)⁴² and her seven sons who were killed by the Caesar, and compares her act with that of Abraham. After Caesar killed six sons for refusing to bow to a statue, which is forbidden in the Torah, he wished to kill the seventh as well. Then “the mother threw herself upon her child and embraced and kissed him. She said to him, ‘my son, go to the patriarch Abraham and tell him, “Thus said my mother, Do not preen yourself [on your righteousness], saying I built an altar and offered up my son, Isaac. Behold, our mother built seven altars and offered up seven sons in one day. Yours was only a test, but mine was in earnest.”’”⁴³

⁴⁰ Cf. Rom. 4:17, where Paul states that Abraham believed in God and that Abraham’s God “gives life to the dead.”

⁴¹ See, for instance, Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6; 2 Kgs. 4:32–37; Ezek. 37:1–14; M. San. 10:1. The second of the Eighteen/Nineteen Benedictions ends: “Blessed are You, God, who raises the dead.”

⁴² However, probably the name was not “Nahtum,” as appears in the printed texts.

⁴³ There is a parallel story in 2 Macc. 7:1–42 (ca. 143 B.C.E.; for this date, see D.R. Schwartz, *The Second Book of Maccabees: Introduction, Hebrew Translation, and Commentary* [Jerusalem, 2004], pp. 16–19; Hebrew) and B. Git. 57b. These parallels do not mention the name of the woman. In the late Jewish tradition she is “Hannah.” For the origin of the story, its possible historical context in the persecutions of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), and in Hadrian’s ban, see Spiegel, “From the *Aqedah* Legends,” pp. 476–477. In Antioch, Jews erected a holy place for the mother and her seven sons, which later was respected also by Christians; see Y. Guttman, “The Mother and Her Seven Sons,” in M. Schwabe and Y. Guttman, eds., *Studies in Jewish Hellenism:*

It seems that the rabbis of the legend consider the *Aqedah* the earliest act of *Qiddush Hashem* that is documented in the Hebrew Bible. It was prior to the death of Nadab and Abihu, sons of Ahron (Lev. 10:1–3; 16:1), whose death in the Tabernacle was considered by the sages as *Qiddush Hashem*.⁴⁴ The *Aqedah* is certainly much earlier than the martyrdom stories told in the book of Daniel.⁴⁵ In the latter we read about Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah who refused to worship an idol, the golden statute erected by the king, and preferred to be thrown into the fiery furnace (Daniel 3).⁴⁶ Daniel himself preferred to keep God's commandment even because of this he had been thrown to the lions' den (Daniel 6).⁴⁷ Nonetheless, this view of the binding of Isaac is well developed in medieval times, as we will see below.

All in all, the rabbis consider Abraham's silence a sign of nobility. They admire Abraham's control of his fatherly love and mercy in order to implement God's command. They illustrate his portrait as a paradigm of the highest expression of unconditional adoration of and obedience to God. Subsequently Abraham became "the father of believers," or to cite the term coined later by the Danish philosopher Søren A. Kierkegaard (1813–1855), "the knight of faith."⁴⁸ This feature of Abraham became his main characteristic for the next generations

Festschrift Yochanan Levi (Jerusalem, 1949), pp. 36–37 (Hebrew). For examination of texts and materials from eastern Mediterranean and northwestern Europe related to the Maccabean martyrs, see D. Joslyn-Siematowski, *Christian Memories of the Maccabean Martyrs* (New York, 2009).

⁴⁴ See Lev. Rabbah 12:2; B. Zeb. 115b; Midrash Safra, *Shemini* 36; and see D. Flusser and S. Safrai, "Nadab and Abihu in Midrash and Philo," in D. Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Sages and Literature* (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 278–283 (Hebrew).

⁴⁵ For *Qiddush Hashem* in the tannaitic literature generally, see S. Safrai, "Martyrdom in the Teaching of the Tannaim," in T.C. de Kruijff and H. van der Sandt, eds., *Sjaloom: Ter nagedachtenis van Mgr. Dr. A.C. Ramselaar* (Arnhem, 1983), pp. 145–164. For the idea of *Qiddush Hashem* in Second Temple Judaism and Christianity, see D. Flusser, "Qiddush Hashem in the Second Temple Period and in Early Christianity," in *Judaism of the Second Temple Period: Sages and Literature*, pp. 238–245 (Hebrew).

⁴⁶ That the acts of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were considered by the rabbis acts of *Qiddush Hashem*; see Sifra, *Aharei Mot* 13 (86b). However, other rabbinic sources (e.g., B. Pes. 53b; Y. Ber. chapter 9) reflect that *Qiddush Hashem* occurs through the miracle performed on behalf of these three righteous men, rather than through their offering of their lives (see Safrai, "Martyrdom in the Teaching of the Tannaim," pp. 147–149). In any case, Midrash Lam. Rabbah 1:50 is one of the clear cut Rabbinic texts that talks of martyrdom (though without using the term *Qiddush Hashem*) in order to avoid transgressing Torah's commandment. For an additional examples, see Y. San. 3:2 (1b); B. Ber. 61b; B. San. 74a (see also the discussion of Safrai, *ibid.*, pp. 155–161).

⁴⁷ The historical context of both stories is also the persecutions of Antiochus IV (Epiphanes), just before the Maccabean revolt in 166 B.C.E.

⁴⁸ S.A. Kierkegaard, "The Knight of Faith and the Knight of Infinite Resignation," in R. Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton, 1947), pp. 118–134.

and the eternal merit for Israel (see Neh. 9:7–8; Ben Sira 44:19–21 [ca. 200–180 B.C.E.]; 1 Macc. 2:51–52 [ca. 130–100 B.C.E.]; Jub. 17:17–18; 19:2–3, 8 [ten tests]; M. Ab. 5:3; Pirque deRabbi Eliezer 31 [ca. 640–900 C.E.]).⁴⁹

(c) *The Aqedah and Afterwards*

After the *Aqedah*, there is no more direct divine revelation to Abraham and, *vice versa*, no contact of Abraham with God in the rest of Abraham's stories in the book of Genesis. Furthermore, while God directly ordered Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son, later on He did not appear himself, but sent an angel to prevent the sacrifice (Gen. 22:11). Do these points indicate a disconnection between the God and Abraham, with each regretting the *Aqedah*? Did God regret the cruel test of his loyal worshiper? Was Abraham upset by God's merciless test? The rabbis did not deal with these questions. However, here one recalls the words of Kierkegaard on what the *Aqedah* (presumably) did to Abraham: "From that day Abraham grew old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac prospered as before, but Abraham's eyes were darkened and he knew no more joy."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Generally speaking, Christianity grasps the *Aqedah* as a proto-type and allusion to Jesus's crucifixion. Similar to Rabbinic exegesis, it has a positive attitude towards Abraham (see, for example, D. Lerch, *Isaaks Opferung christlich gedeutet. Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* [Tübingen, 1950]). However, the attitude of the rabbis towards Abraham and the *Aqedah* was sharply criticized by Hegesippus (ca. 370–375 C.E.; probably the name is a corruption of *Iosippus*, the spelling of Josephus in many manuscripts. In order to distinguish this Hegesippus from the second century author (mentioned by Eusebius), some prefer to call him "Pseudo-Hegesippus"). Hegesippus' Latin composition, which exist in medieval manuscripts under the title of *On the Ruin of the City of Jerusalem History* (*De excidio urbis Hierosolymitanæ Historiæ*), is mainly a Christian free translation of Josephus's *Jewish War*. Occasionally, the translator integrates remarks into the work. Thus, in book 5, paragraph 41:2, he writes:

Since of Abraham himself, whom they (= the Jews, I.K.) call father and the originator of the teaching and the first man of this form of worship, in him especially they proclaim faith, because he thought his son should not be spared and brought him to the altars as a victim and did not hesitate to offer him as a sacrifice. I do not condemn his devotion but I question his piety. . . . Of what kind is that people, who consider the killing of a human being as a religious act, and a murder of a family member as a sacrifice offer? What God can exact this or what sort is the priest, who is able to do this (*Qualis ista gens, quæ religioni tribuat hominis necem et sacrificium putet esse paricidium*)?

See V. Ussani, ed., *Hegesipi qui dicitur historiæ libri V* (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 66.1; Vienna and Leipzig: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1932), p. 387.

⁵⁰ See S.A. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 7.

2. *Did God Test Isaac?*

According to the *Aqedah* story in the Hebrew Bible, Abraham refers to Isaac as נֶעָר (Gen. 22:5). The same term is also used by the angel (Gen. 22:12). The term נֶעָר appears also in Gen. 21:12 and 17–20 as a parallel to the word יָלֵד, “a child, young boy” (Gen. 21:14, 15). The small boy Samuel, who was just weaned and could take care of himself in basic ways, he called נֶעָר (1 Sam. 1:23–27; see also 2:11, 21, 26; 3:1, 8). Thus, seemingly, Isaac was a young boy, a lad, when he marched with his father to land of Moriah. Although it is hard to say what exactly was Isaac’s age at that time,⁵¹ he was old enough to carry enough wood for a single burned-offering and to walk some distance until the mount (Gen. 22:6).

Yet the biblical story states that Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90 when Isaac was born (Gen. 17:17; 21:5). It reports that Sarah passed away at the age of 127 (Gen. 23:1). Based on the literary proximity between the *Aqedah* (Gen. 22) and Sarah’s death (Gen. 23), the rabbis conclude that the latter was caused by the former (see below, §4). Hence, when Abraham took Isaac to the land of Moriah he was 137 years old, while Isaac was 37 years old (Genesis Rabbah 56:8).⁵²

The introductory words of the *Aqedah* story state: “God did test Abraham.” But isn’t the test of Abraham a test of Isaac as well? Did Isaac know the intention of the journey to the land of Moriah? Could Abraham cover from him the journey’s aim? The biblical story represents Isaac as a passive figure in general, and in the *Aqedah* story in particular. The only dialogue between the father and son (Gen. 22:6b-8b) emerges from Isaac’s question: “Behold the fire and the woods; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham’s reply, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering,” does not reveal his real intention. How did Isaac react when Abraham placed him on the woods on the altar, with the fire ready at the side, and the

⁵¹ Josephus states that at the time of the *Aqedah* Isaac was 25 years old and Abraham, 125 (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.227). Based on some verses in the book of Jubilees, Rösch claimed that Isaac was 21 years old and Abraham, 121. Based on the same source, Nestle came to the conclusion that Isaac was 15 years old and Abraham, 115. He also claimed that the number “25” of Josephus is mistaken from “15;” see E. Nestle, “Miscellaneous: 13. Wie alt war Isaak bei der Opferung?” in *ZAW* 26 (1906), pp. 281–282 (Rösch is cited by Nestle, *ibid.*, p. 292). Nonetheless, all these (and other) speculations have no basis in the biblical text.

⁵² Compare *Seder Olam Rabbah* 1: “When Isaac was bound on the altar, he was 37 years old.” See also Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 22:1.

knife in Abraham's hand nearing his neck? Did Isaac willingly follow his father's instructions, or did he struggle with him? Could the aged Abraham really impose his will upon, in the rabbis' count, a 37 years old young-man?

Some rabbis consider the *Aqedah* not only a test of Abraham but also of Isaac, who equally passed this test:⁵³ he was aware that his father was leading him to death, yet willingly followed and obeyed him. This is the intention of the repeated phrase, "and they went both of them together" (Gen. 22:6b, 8b):⁵⁴ that both knew where and for what mission they were marching (e.g., Lamentations Rabbah, Petichta 24).⁵⁵ A clear expression of this view appears in *Genesis Rabbah* 56:4:

בא לו סמאל אצל יצחק ואמר לו, ברא דעלובתא, הלא הולך הוא לשוחטך!
אמר ליה על מנת כן!

(The wicked angel) Samael approached Isaac and said: "Son of an unhappy mother! He goes to slay you!" "I accept my fate," he (= Isaac) replied.

A more detailed legend appears in *Genesis Rabbah* 56:8:⁵⁶

אמר רבי יצחק בשעה שביקש אברהם לעקד יצחק בנו, אמר לו: "אבא בחור אני, וחוששני שמא יזדעזע גופי מפחדה של סכין ואצערך ושמא תפסל השחיטה ולא תעלה לך לקרבן, אלא כפתני יפה יפה!"⁵⁷ מיד "ויעקד את יצחק." כלום יכול אדם לכפות בן שלשים ושבע... שנה? אלא לדעתו!

R. Isaac said: When Abraham wished to sacrifice his son Isaac, he said to him: "Father, I am a young man and am afraid that my body may tremble through fear of the knife and I will grieve you, whereby the slaughter may be rendered unfit and this will not count as a real sacrifice;

⁵³ Therefore, the *Aqedah* imparts eternal merit to Abraham and Isaac for their descendants. See, for instance, Y. Ta. 2:1 (8a) and the discussion, below, §5.

⁵⁴ From a literary viewpoint, the dialogue is structured within a pattern of *inclusio*: וילכו שניהם יחדו... וילכו שניהם יחדו "and they went both of them together... and they went both of them together" (Gen. 22:6b, 8b). For this literary device and its functions in the biblical literature, see Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles*, pp. 295–325.

⁵⁵ See also Rashi's commentary on Gen. 22:8, and *Yalkut Shimeoni* 247:101 (ca. 1200–1300).

⁵⁶ See also *Midrash Hagadol* on Gen. 22:3; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Targum Neofiti on the place.

⁵⁷ On the possibility of the existence of the words in italics (or a variant of them) in 4Q225 (dated ca. 150 B.C.E.–20 C.E.), see F. Gracia Martínez, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in 4Q225," in Noort and Tigchelaar, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, pp. 44–57, and their references to earlier secondary literature. See also L.A. Huizenga, "Obedience unto Death: The Matthean Gethsemane and Arrest Sequence and the *Aqedah*," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009), pp. 507–526, esp. 509–510.

therefore *bind me very firmly.*” Forthwith, “he bound Isaac.” Can one bind a man thirty-seven... years old? Only with his permission!

The willingness of Isaac to be sacrificed is stated already by Josephus (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.232), Pseudo-Philo (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* 32:1–3), and 4 Macc. 7:13–14 (between the 1st and early 2nd centuries C.E.).⁵⁸ That is, the root of the notion under review is much earlier than the editing time of the cited midrashic sources. It appears that the readiness of Isaac to die gladly for God’s commandment, as reflects from these sources, has been expressed against the background of the concept of *Qiddush Hashem*. This concept was deep-rooted in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism and later in its daughter-religion, Christianity.⁵⁹

3. *What Really Happened on the Mount?*

The Rabbinic sources reflect three approaches concerning what actually happened upon the mount in the land of Moriah:

(a) *Isaac Was not Hurt*

According to the biblical story, though Isaac was bound upon the altar, at the last moment, the Lord’s angel called Abraham from heaven, saying: “Lay not your hand upon the lad, nor do *anything* to him” (Gen. 22:11–12). Thus, Isaac was neither slaughtered nor hurt in any way, at least not physically. The biblical text is pictorially interpreted in Genesis Rabbah 56:7:

"ויואמר אל תשלח ידך"—וסכין היכן היה?—נשרו שלוש דמעות ממלאכי השרת ושחת הסכין. אמר לו: אחנקנו!—אמר לו "אל תשלח ידך אל הנער."
אמר לו: אוציא ממנו טפת דם! אמר לו: אל תעש לו מאומה—אל תעש לו מומה

And He said: “Lay not your hand upon the lad”—and where was the knife? Three tears of the angels of the service had dropped upon it and melted it. He (= Abraham) said to him: I shall strangle him (Isaac). He said to him: “Lay not your hand upon the lad.” He (= Abraham) said to

⁵⁸ For a detailed discussion of these sources, see Huizenga, “Obedience unto Death,” pp. 511–515.

⁵⁹ See also above, §1, and the references to the studies of Flusser and Safrai cited there.

him: let us bring forth from him a drop of blood. He said to him: “Do not do anything (מאומה) to him; do not make a blemish (מומה) in him.”

A more brutal description of Abraham appears in Midrash Hagadol (ca. 1300–1400 C.E.) on Gen. 22:12:

"אל תשלח ירך"—אמר אברהם לפני הקב"ה רבון העולמים אחנוק אותו ואעלהו לעולה לפניך. אמר לו "אל תעש לו מאומה!" אנתחנו איברים איברים לפניך, אמר לו "אל תעש לו מאומה!"

“Lay not your hand upon the lad”—Abraham said to the Holy One blessed be He: Lord of Heavens, shall I strangle him and bind him as a burnt offering in front of you. He said to him: “Do not do anything to him!”—Shall I cut him into pieces for you? He said to him: “Do not do anything to him!”⁶⁰

Despite the obvious view of Scripture and such an interpretation of it by rabbis, there were others who pushed in extreme directions: some say that Isaac was injured and bled, and some talk even about the death and resurrection of Isaac. These views were expressed in different ways in the halakhic and aggadic sources.

(b) *Isaac Was Injured and Bled*

The Tannaitic-halakhic Midrash, Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael (*Parashat Bo* 7 [// *Parashat Bo* 11], on Exod. 12:13; 2nd century C.E.) speaks of “the blood of the *Aqedah* of Isaac:”

"וראיתי את הדם" (שמ' יב, ג)—רואה אני דם עקדתו של יצחק, שנאמר "ויקרא אברהם שם המקום ההוא יהוה יראה וגו'" (בר' כב, יד) ולהלן הוא אומר (דה"א כא, טו): "וכהשחית ראה יהוה וינחם על הרעה וגו'", מה ראה? דם עקדתו של יצחק....

⁶⁰ See M. Margoliot, ed., *Midrash Hagadol on the Five Books of Torah* (Jerusalem, 1947), p. 355 (Hebrew; translation mine). Interestingly, Genesis Rabbah creates an antithetic picture of the reaction of the angels whose tears reached down earth (for the cries of angels, see also Pirqe deRabbi Eliezer 31) and the lack of any fatherly mercy from Abraham's side. Contrarily, even when God takes back his command, Abraham insists on sacrificing or at least hurting his son. Do the rabbis criticize or praise Abraham for being a tough worshiper? Based on the general trends of the rabbinic sources, presumably the intention is to praise. In contrast to these sources, Gen. Rabbah 56:8 attempts to soften this impression and tells about the fatherly compassion of Abraham at that moment: הוא שולח יד ליטול את הסכין ועיניו מורידות דמעות ונפלות דמעות לעיניו ("He stretched forth his hand to take the knife while the tears streamed from his eyes, and these tears, prompted by a father's compassion, dropped into Isaac's eyes"). However, "Yet even so, his heart rejoiced to obey the will of his Creator."

“And when I see the blood” (Exod. 12:13)—I see the blood of the *Aqedah* of Isaac, as it is said: “and Abraham called the name of that place ‘*the Lord will be seen*’” (Gen. 22:14), and later on it says: “And as he (= the angel) was about to destroy [Jerusalem], the Lord saw, and repented of the evil” (1 Chr. 21:15). What did He see? *The blood of Isaac’s Aqedah*...

Does “the blood of Isaac’s Aqedah” mean Isaac’s own blood, or does it refer to “the blood of the ram *as if* it was the blood of Isaac himself?” The Rabbinic sources are divided on this question. On one hand, Genesis Rabbah 56:9 holds that it was *not* Isaac’s blood:

R. Judah in the name of R. Benaiah said: He said before Him: Lord of all the universes, see the blood of this ram *as if* it were the blood of Isaac my son, the sacrificial portions of this ram *as if* they were the sacrificial portions of my son Isaac (הוי רואה דמיו של איל זה כאילו דמו של יצחק בני, אימוריו כאילו אימוריו דיצחק ברי)—as we have learned: “See, this is instead of that, this is an exchange for that; behold, this is a substitute for that. See, this is (a valid) exchange...”

The view that the ram’s blood and flesh are accounted as those of Isaac is expounded in much detail at Numbers Rabbah 17:2 (ca. 1100–1200 C.E.):

"ויקח את האיל ויעלהו לעלה"—חסר המקרא? מהו "תחת בנו"?
 אמר אברהם רבון העולמים תהא רואה כאילו דם יצחק זרוק לפניך;
 נטל האיל והפשיטו ואמר כך תהא רואה כאילו עורו של יצחק הפשטתי לפניך;
 נטלו והספיגו אמר כך תהא רואה כאילו יצחק מסתפג לפניך;
 שרפו ואמר כך תהא רואה כאילו אפרו של יצחק צבור על גבי המזבח.

“Abraham took it and offered it as a burnt-offering instead of his son;” as it says “And took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering”—does more need to be said? What then is the purpose of the additional words, “in the stead of his son”? Abraham said: “Sovereign of the worlds! Regard the act as though the blood of Isaac were being sprinkled before you!” He took the ram and flayed it, saying: “O consider the act as though I had flayed the skin of Isaac before You.” He took the ram and dried its blood with salt, saying: “O consider the act as though Isaac’s blood were being dried before You.” He burnt the ram and said: “O consider the act as though Isaac’s ashes were being heaped up upon the altar.”⁶¹

On the other hand, some rabbis hold that it was the blood of *Isaac himself*. Thus the halakhic Midrash Mekhilta deRabbi Shimeon bar Yohai, *Vaerah* 6:2:⁶²

⁶¹ Compare Ecc. Rabbah 9:7, 1; Pesiqta Rabbati 40; Tanhuma (Buber), *Shallah* 14.

⁶² J.N. Epstein and E.Z. Melammed, eds., *Mekhilta D’rabbi Sim’on b. Yochai* (Jerusalem, n.d.), p. 4.

רבי יהושע אומר "וידבר אלהים אל משה"—אמר לו ה"הקב למשה נאמן אני לשלם שכר יצחק בן אברהם שיצא ממנו רביעית דם על גבי המזבח, ואמרתי לו "בגדול זרועך הותר בני תמותה" (תה' עט, יא) ועכשיו הרי השבועה מבוהלת ובאת לפני שלא כדרך ארץ להוציא את בני ישראל ממצרים....

R. Joshua said, and God spoke to Moses—"The Holy One, blessed be He said, to Moses: I am faithful to pay the reward of *Isaac, son of Abraham, from whom issued one quarter (of a measure) of blood on top of the altar*, and I said to him, "By the greatness of your arm preserve the sons appointed for death" (Ps. 79:11). And now, behold, the oath is insistent....

This is similarly expressed in the aggadic Midrash Tanhuma, *Vayerah* 23:

He (= Abraham) took up the knife to slaughter him (Isaac), until there came forth from him *one quarter of his blood*. And Satan came and knocked Abraham's hand, so that the knife fell from his hand. And when he put his hand to take it up, a heavenly voice went forth and said to him: "Lay not your hand upon the lad" (Gen. 22:12); and if it had not done so, he (Isaac) would have been slaughtered already.

This Midrash also interprets the verse: "Lay not your *hand* upon the lad" and answers the question: "where was the knife?" However, its reply leads to a different direction from Genesis Rabbah 56:7, mentioned above: Abraham felt totally obligated to fulfill God's request to sacrifice Isaac. He even caused Isaac to bleed and would have slaughtered him if Satan (!) and a heavenly voice had not interfered and stopped him. Thus the rabbis strive to demonstrate the total faithfulness and uncompromising obedience of Abraham to God.

Several Christian sources speak about the blood of Jesus that "poured out in his sacrificial death on the cross" (Rom. 3:25; John 19:34; Heb. 9:14; 10:19). Christ's blood procures redemption from sin and death for all mankind (Eph. 1:7; Heb 9:12; 1 Pet 1:19; 1 John 1:7; Rev 1:5), justifies them before God (Rom. 5:9), sanctifies them, and acquires them as a holy people fit for the Lord (Heb. 13:12; Acts 20:28; Rev 5:9). It inaugurates a new covenant between God and man...." (Matt. 26:28 and the parallels; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 10:29; 13:20).⁶³ Does the blood of Isaac serve as a Jewish counterpart to the blood of Jesus, a theme that has an important place in the New Testament and later Christian

⁶³ See C.T.R. Hayward, "The Sacrifice of Isaac and Jewish Polemic against Christianity," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp. 292–306 esp. 294.

thought? Davies and Chilton answer this question in the affirmative.⁶⁴ However, it is reasonable to accept the thorough study of Hayward who concludes: “the blood (of the *Aqedah*) of Isaac originated without reference to Christianity at all.”⁶⁵ In fact, none of the previously mentioned Rabbinic texts “requires the hypothesis that it originated or developed with Christianity in mind; on the contrary, they make perfect sense within a purely Jewish religious and theological context,”⁶⁶ as was demonstrated concerning *Tanhuma, Vayerah* 23.

(c) *Isaac Died and Was Resurrected*

The biblical story ends with the words: “So *Abraham returned* (וישב אברהם) to his servants, and they rose up and went together to Beer-Sheva” (Gen. 22:19a). The word וישב, in the singular, applies to the main and dominant character of the story, Abraham, but it also refers to Isaac, who accompanied him (Gen. 22:3, 6–8).⁶⁷ However, some rabbis still wonder about the singular form and ask: where is Isaac, did he return with his father? This question is reinforced by the fact that Isaac was not mentioned in the following chapter (Genesis 23), about the mourning for and funeral of his mother. Indeed, Genesis Rabbah 56:11 relates:

“וישב אברהם אל נעריו”—ויצחק היכן הוא? אמר רבי ברכיה בשם רבנן שלחו אצל שם ללמוד ממנו תורה... רבי יוסי בן רבי חנינא אמר שלחו בלילה מפני העין [= עין הרע].

“So Abraham returned to his servants”—And where was Isaac? R. Berekiah said in the name of the rabbi: He sent him to Shem to study Torah...⁶⁸ R. Jose b. R. Hanina said: He sent him [home] at night, for fear of the [evil] eye.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ See P.R. Davies and B.D. Chilton, “The *Aqedah*: A Revised Tradition History,” in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978), pp. 514–546, esp. 539.

⁶⁵ See Hayward, “The Sacrifice of Isaac and Jewish Polemic against Christianity,” p. 295.

⁶⁶ Hayward, “The Sacrifice of Isaac and Jewish Polemic against Christianity,” p. 299.

⁶⁷ Compare, for example, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra’s commentary on Gen. 22:19. There are numerous examples in the Hebrew Bible of this phenomenon, that is, the use of singular language when the intention is plural (e.g., Deut. 4: 9–10, 19, 21, 25; 22:15a; 2 Sam. 6:2).

⁶⁸ Compare Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 22:19: “The angels took Isaac to the Beit Midrash of the Great Shem to study Torah, and he was there for three years.”

⁶⁹ For other solutions suggested by the rabbis, see Spiegel, “From the *Aqedah* Legends,” pp. 471–473, and references to additional sources found there.

There is also a very unusual Rabbinic view that speaks of the death of Isaac and his resurrection. This view is also expressed in various ways. Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer 31 and Midrash Hagadol on Gen. 22:12 speak of Isaac's death because of a horrible fear:

רבי אליעזר אומר כיון שהגיעה חרב על צווארו של יצחק פרחו נשמתו ויצאה.
וכשהשמיע הקב"ה קולו מבין שני הכרובים ואמר "אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל
תעש לו מאומה" חזרה נפשו לגופו, והתירו ועמד על רגליו...

R. Eliezer says:⁷⁰ when the sword touched the neck of Isaac his soul left him (i.e., he died). As the Holy one, blessed be He, spoke from between the two *Kerubim* and said "Lay not your hand upon the lad, and do not make in him a blemish," his soul returned back to his body, and he stood on his feet...⁷¹

Other sources speak of Isaac's having been physically slaughtered, burned, and afterwards resurrected from his ashes:

"ובהשחית ראה ה' וינחם" (דה"א כא, טו), מה ראה? אמר רב: ראה יעקב אבינו,
דכתיב (בר' לב, ג): "ויאמר יעקב כאשר ראם." ושמואל אמר: אפרו של יצחק
ראה, שנאמר: "אלהים יראה לו השה" (בר' כב, ח).

"And as he (= the angel) was about to destroy [Jerusalem], the Lord saw, and repented" (1 Chr. 21:15). What did He see? Rav said: He saw Jacob, our ancestor, as it is written, "And Jacob said when he beheld them" (Gen. 32:3). Samuel said: *He saw the ashes of Isaac*, as it says, "God will see for Himself the lamb" (Gen. 22:8) (B. Ber. 62b).

The view of Samuel was also asserted by the Amora Isaac Naphha at B. Zeb. 62a,⁷² followed by Targum Chronicles on 1 Chr. 21:15 (ca. 8th century C.E.):

"God has sent the Angel of Pestilence to Jerusalem in order to destroy it" (1 Chr. 21:15). However before [it could carry out] the destruction, He took notice of *the ashes of Isaac's Aqedah* that were in the base of the altar. He then considered his covenant with Abraham that He had made with him on the Mount of Divine Worship [= Mount Moriah]...⁷³

⁷⁰ In *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* 31 this saying is attributed to Rabbi Judah.

⁷¹ Margoliot, *Midrash Hagadol on the Five Books of Torah*, p. 355 (translation mine). For the various versions of this legend and similar others, as well as its relationship to the *tehiyat hametim* in the daily prayer, see Spiegel, "From the *Aqedah* Legends," pp. 483–485.

⁷² See also B. Ta. 16a.

⁷³ The translation here follows R. Le Déaut and S. Robert's French edition, *Targum des Chroniques (cod. Vat. Urb. Ebr. I)* (Rome, 1971), vol. 1, pp. 86–87. For the Aramaic text see *ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 128.

Again, do “the ashes of Isaac/Isaac’s *Aqedah*” in these sources mean the ashes of Isaac *himself*, or does it refer to the ashes of the *ram* of Isaac, which Abraham sacrificed instead of his son, as is understood by other Rabbinic sources (e.g., Pirq̄ deRabbi Eliezer 31)? Midrash Hagadol on Gen. 22:13 attempts to soften this view and states that the ram was the head of Abraham’s herd and its name was “Isaac.” So God said: let “Isaac” (the ram) come instead of “Isaac” (son of Abraham). Thus, “the ashes of Isaac” are nothing but the ashes of the ram named “Isaac” and are considered as the person Isaac himself. Another suggestion, much less legendary, appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (Y. Ta. 2:1 [8a]). Here the rabbis discuss not the real “ashes of Isaac” but “the ashes of Isaac *as if* (כאילו) they were gathered upon the altar” (רואין אפרו של) (יצחק כאילו צבור על גבי המזבח). The ashes were not there in reality but it should be imagined.

Though the roots of the legend about Isaac’s death to ashes and resurrection stem from the Amorites’ Midrashim, it was more developed and flourished in medieval times.⁷⁴ According to those legends, Isaac did not return from the mount with his father (Gen. 22:19a); rather, he died, was resurrected from the ashes, and was sent to the Garden of Eden for three years in order to heal from the wounds of the *Aqedah*, until his marriage with Rebecca at the age of 40 (Gen. 25:19).⁷⁵ As demonstrated by Shalom Spiegel, these legends developed particularly in Rhineland, Germany. Their historical background was the murder of entire Jewish communities in the crusaders’ pogroms in 1096, which also led to many Jewish suicides.⁷⁶ The legends showed that martyrdom for the oneness of God occurred already in patriarchal times and that the resurrection of the dead is from the Torah, exemplified by Isaac’s resurrection. In other words, Rhineland Jews who preferred death over denying their religion considered their death as a new *Aqedah*. They trusted that there is a hope and life after the horrible massacres. All who die for being a Jew, for being loyal to God of Israel and his commandments, would be resurrected even from ashes.

⁷⁴ On the legend concerning Isaac’s ashes, see Spiegel, “From the *Aqedah* Legends,” pp. 483–497.

⁷⁵ See in detail, Spiegel, “From the *Aqedah* Legends,” pp. 482–497.

⁷⁶ See Spiegel, “From the *Aqedah* Legends,” pp. 477–547; and recently Evan Chen, *The Binding of Isaac*, pp. 17–31.

4. *Where Was Sarah?*

An essential figure is missing altogether from the biblical story of the *Aqedah*: Sarah, Isaac's mother and Abraham's wife. Has she nothing to say after giving birth to Isaac? Did anyone consult her about what is going to be done to her only son? Indeed, the biblical narrator states that God spoke to Abraham only (Gen. 22:1–2). But did Abraham tell Sarah about the divine command? How did he explain Isaac's and his own long absence from home? Midrash Tanhuma (Buber; *Wayyera* 22; cf. *Midrash Hagadol* on Gen. 22:3) attempts to fill in this gap:

הלכה (שרה) ותקנה לו מאכל
אמר לה את יודעת, כשהייתי בן שלוש שנים כבר הכרתי את בוראי, והנער הזה
גדול ולא נחנך.
יש מקום אחד רחוק מאתנו, ששם מחנכים את הנערים, אקחנו ואחנכנו שם.
אמרה לו: לך לשלום!

She (Sarah) prepared food for him.

He (Abraham) said to her: I knew the Almighty when I was three years old; however, this lad (= Isaac) grew up but was not educated.

There is a place, far away from here, where they are educating youths.

I will take him there and educate him.

She replied, go peaceful!

After the *Aqedah* (Gen. 22), the first time we hear about Sarah is regarding her death and funeral in the following chapter (Gen. 23). The rabbis conclude that her death was caused by the *Aqedah*:

חזר יצחק אצל אמו, ואמרה לו: אן היית ברי?
אמר לה נטלני אבי והעלני הרים והורידני גבעות וכו' ובנה מזבח ונטל את הסכין
לשחוטני וכו'!
אמרה, ווי על ברי דעלובתא, אלולי המלאך כבר היית שחוט!
צווחה ששה קולות עד שמתה.

For Isaac returned to his mother, and she said to him: "Where have you been, my son?" Said he to her: "My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills etc., he built an altar and took the knife to slaughter me etc."

"Alas," she said, "for the son of an unhappy mother! Had it not been for the angel you would by now have been slaughtered!" Thereupon she uttered six cries...and she died (Leviticus Rabbah 20:2; ca. 400–500 C.E.).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ This view is followed also in medieval times by Rashi, on Gen. 23:2.

A different legend, a bit mystic, appears in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen. 22:20. Here the cause of Sarah's death is not a chat with Isaac but with Satan. The same one who caused God to test Abraham caused the death of his wife:

והוה בתר פתגמא האלון מן בתר דכפת אברהם ית יצחק
ואזל סטנה ותני לות שרה דאברהם נכס ית יצחק
וקמת שרה ופגנת ואשתנקת ומיתת מן אניקא

After these words and after Abraham bound Isaac, the Satan went to Sarah and told her that Abraham slaughtered Isaac. She fainted and became mad and died from her deep grief.⁷⁸

The rabbis do not explain how it happened that Sarah died in Hebron (Gen. 23:2), while Abraham's *Aqedah* journey started and ended at Beer-Sheva (Gen. 21:33; 22:19). Did Sarah leave her husband and move to Hebron when she heard about Abraham's *Aqedah* activity?

5. *The Mount of Aqedah and the Eternal Merit of the Fathers*

The Rabbinic sources consider the act of Abraham (some of them also that of Isaac)⁷⁹ in the *Aqedah* as *the* most important meritorious acts done by the patriarch(s) for his/their descendants, the Jewish people. The *Aqedah* has a central place in Jewish thought, liturgy and religious ritual as the greatest source of the eternal merit earned by the patriarchs.

The location of the land of Moriah upon one of the mountains of which Abraham bound his son is unknown. Generations of dispute between Jews and Samaritans have taken place concerning the chosen holy site, and particularly concerning the question where the *Aqedah* took place. The Samaritans related the *Aqedah* with Mount Gerizim, while the rabbis claimed connection between the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and the site of *Aqedah*, stating several textual sources. Both sides interpret some ambiguous biblical texts against the background of this pragmatic agenda, theological beliefs, and polemical intentions.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ In Zohar, part 1, 11:1, Sarah's death is explained as a result of her misbehavior in the celebration that she made in honor of Isaac's birth: she did not give anything to poor people, and therefore she was fated to die from grief for Isaac.

⁷⁹ See, e.g., Y. Ta. 2:1 (8a).

⁸⁰ On these issues, see the detailed discussion of Kalimi, "The Land/Mount Moriah," in *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy*, pp. 9–32; idem, "The Affiliation of Abraham and the *Aqedah* with Zion/Gerizim in Jewish and Samaritan Sources," *ibid.*, pp. 33–58.

Conclusion

The captivating biblical narrative of the *Aqedah* has proved to be a crown jewel of the ancient Israelites' literature. The story of the binding of Isaac raises several theological and humanistic questions involving man's relationship with God, along with man's relationship with son, wife, and surroundings. Highlighting genuine emotions and significant theological and ethical issues, the story holds ground in all Abrahamic religions. It played an enormous role in shaping these religions' beliefs, liturgies, and ritual, while transforming their literature and arts. Many Talmudic rabbis, along with generations of Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers trouble to comprehend it.

The various Rabbinic sources provide a wealth of perspectives on the *Aqedah*, as they attempt to fill in the gaps of the narrative and suggest various directions in the interpretation of Scripture. This article has shown how diverse and complex the Rabbinic responses to the *Aqedah* were. Some of the Rabbinic exegetical traditions reflect ideas first found in Josephus' writings, perhaps also the Dead Sea Scrolls, and/or are rooted already in Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Many of the exegetical traditions continue to influence various Jewish medieval biblical interpretations that have a great impact on Jews even today.

Generally, the rabbis are much less critical of God and Abraham than we might be. They see God's request as a mere test of Abraham's unconditional belief. But some rabbis clearly see the issues that many modern thinkers have raised concerning God's request. They absolve God of any blame by holding that Abraham misunderstood God's demand. Others accept God's choice to test Abraham, justifying God's action by blaming Satan and Abraham for unworthy behaviors. Still some rabbis seemingly considered the *Aqedah* to be Abraham's act of *Qiddush Hashem*. Abraham, in many sources, is viewed as a "knight of faith," who is truly motivated by his religious belief over moral command. He immediately commits the immoral act of killing his son without questioning God or even praying for God to reconsider. The lack of description and possible suppression of his feelings about the situation relayed to rabbis that Abraham indeed was quite noble. The rabbis attempt to understand and justify his immediate acceptance of the command as praiseworthy. Many rabbis consider the *Aqedah* a test of Isaac as well. Isaac knew his father was leading him to death, yet he obeyed him willingly.

Diverse Rabbinic approaches explain what really happened on the mount. Some believe that Isaac was not hurt physically, as stated in Scripture; others state that Isaac was injured and bled. Nevertheless, the blood of Isaac from *Aqedah* cannot be viewed as a counterblast to Jesus' blood in the New Testament. Still, others hold that Isaac died and was resurrected, a view based on the statement that Abraham alone returned from Moriah, and from the lack of mention of Isaac in the following chapter of Genesis.

Interestingly, throughout the course of the *Aqedah*, the question remains as to the whereabouts of Sarah within the text. Since she is not mentioned again until the following chapter on her death and funeral, the rabbis relate her death to the *Aqedah*. The Rabbinic sources dispute the Samaritans and connect the place of the *Aqedah* with the site of the Jerusalem Temple, as had been done already by the Chronicles.

In all, the rabbis consider Abraham's act of faith to be the most significant foundation of the merit of the patriarchs from which all future generations of Jews have benefited. In Torah readings, prayers, and rituals, the merit of the *Aqedah* is praised for its national and perpetual spirit. Thus, the binding of Isaac is of enduring eminence of Israel.