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March 27, 1961Report on the Rabbinical Thesis of Herman J. Blumberg  
Entitled"Some Rabbinic Views on the 'Binding of Isaac' ('Akedah) Narrative"

In 90 pages (including five chapters), plus 14 pages of Notes and 4 pages of Bibliography, Mr. Blumberg discusses the Rabbinic views on the 'Akedah. He begins with the 22nd chapter of Genesis itself, pointing out where, on mere linguistic grounds, there is room for different and divergent interpretations. He also gives a full lexicographical and philological explanation of the operative word nissah in Genesis 22: 1, showing how the various meanings of that word would fit into that particular context. But all of this is merely preliminary. Much more basic to Mr. Blumberg's work are the theological problems faced by the Rabbis in connection with, and on the basis of, this particular biblical narrative.

Here there is the problem of an omniscient God imposing a test; the difficulty of having God revoke His own (apparent) commandment; the purpose of biblical "tests" in general, and of Abraham's "supreme test" in particular.

Mr. Blumberg then addresses himself to the Rabbinic "Doctrine of Merits," in the consideration of which he largely follows the guidance of Marmorstein. After this general discussion of "merits," Mr. Blumberg deals with the particular role of Isaac within that Rabbinic doctrine. Here he is led to the consideration of that school of Rabbinic thought which would see in Isaac the actual "hero" of the 'Akedah story, and which thus leads to the doctrine of Vicarious Atonement.

Special attention is paid to the 'Akedah as the Scripture Lesson for Rosh Hashanah, and to the references to the 'Akedah within the Rosh Hashanah liturgy. At the same time, the author is aware of the striking Christian parallels presented by "another young man who carried his cross up a mountain to be killed and, through his death, to atone for mankind's sins." The very difficult question of "who borrowed from whom?" is adequately discussed with reference to the pertinent scholarly literature of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Mr. Blumberg has assembled an impressive amount of Rabbinic materials. His translations of the sources are felicitous. His use of secondary sources is judicious and critical. His diligence and comprehension are obvious.

What makes Mr. Blumberg's thesis particularly attractive are the eminently readable manner in which it is presented, the logical subdivisions in which his material is arranged, and the deep insight into its ancient and modern relevance which is brought out in a Preface and a Postscript.

There have been all kinds of treatment of the 'Akedah from early times through the present, - the Rabbinic treatment being only one of them, but, at the same time, the least easily accessible. It is found in widely scattered references

(continued next page)

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within the vast literature of Rabbinic Judaism. By bringing much of this material together, Mr. Blumberg has performed a task of real usefulness. What he has done should lend itself to publication, - even if in a somewhat altered form.

It is, therefore, with very great pleasure and personal satisfaction that I recommend to the Faculty of the HUC-JIR the acceptance of Mr. Blumberg's thesis "in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of M.A.H.L. and Ordination."

Jakob J. Petuchowski  
Referee

SOME RABBINIC VIEWS OF THE "BINDING OF ISAAC"  
( 'AKEDAH ) NARRATIVE

by

Herman J. Blumberg

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
requirements for the Degree of Master of  
Arts in Hebrew Letters and Ordination.

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Referee:

Professor Jakob J. Petuchowski

### DIGEST OF THESIS

This paper presents a review of certain Rabbinic notions concerning the narrative of the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Genesis. Using the story of Abraham and the binding of his son, Isaac, rabbis and their students develop - in sermons and homilies, with brief comments and more prolonged analysis - their ideas and hopes for man's relationship to God. Hence, in essence we are brought to a discussion of certain aspects of Rabbinic theology.

In viewing the 'Akedah, the Rabbinic mind was confronted with a contradiction: Why must the omniscient God test Abraham, declaring, only after he fulfills the command, "Now I know that you fear God"? After setting this twenty-second chapter into its Biblical context we turn to rabbinic solutions of the problem. And resolutions abound! The test is justified by certain of Abraham's wrong doings which cause his faith to be doubted. The test was for Abraham - to improve his good qualities, to increase his reward. The test was a vehicle for God's declaration of reason and justice before all the world.

But the 'Akedah was not only a source of theological difficulty. It served the Rabbis in their presentation of an idea of history. Abraham, as the protagonist of the Binding, justifies God's presenting Israel with a special historical task. From his acts of obedience, which reached

their height as he answered the call to Mt. Moriah - in itself a model of behavior - merit can be realized, merit by which future historical events can be justified, and individuals helped in their defense before the Supreme Judge.

As Abraham is a source of merit, even so does Isaac gain a central position in the Rabbinic understanding of these Genesis verses. Isaac is an adult who voluntarily offers himself on the altar. He is completely identified with the sacrificed ram. The ram-Isaac serves as a vehicle of vicarious atonement for future generations. This theme is reflected in the sermons surrounding Genesis 22 and, more specifically, in the liturgy and aggadah which bring The Binding of Isaac and the holy day of Rosh Hashanah together.

The image of Isaac created by the same Rabbis reminds one of another young man who carried his cross up a mountain to be killed and, through his death, to atone for mankind's sins. Thus we seek the Christian parallels to this Rabbinic view of Isaac and attempt to understand their common and unique sources and their mutual dependence.

"And after these things," we conclude with a brief comment on the relevance of these rabbinic views and discussions to the modern liberal Jew.

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## PREFACE

The format of a page from a Rabbinic Bible is interesting to behold. The Biblical text maintains a prominent position close to the center. Its bold letters become the first focus of attention. And yet the surrounding lines of print - smaller in size and employing a different set of characters - seem to engulf the few lines of narrative or legal formula or poetic verse. Five, six, perhaps seven blocks of print encompass the words of Scripture. They approach, outflank and overwhelm the center of focus. The eye jumps from one to another; the first view is soon forgotten.

Surely the form of this page is graphic testimony to the fate of the Bible at the hands of preachers and commentators of the Rabbinic period. Rabbis approached Scripture to stand reverently at its side. But year after year, generation after generation, these men surrounded it with new, startlingly different structures. Words of Bible provided strong foundations; upon them the Rabbis created new buildings to house their thoughts and aspirations and ideals. They brought Torah from heaven to earth so that they could live comfortably beneath its shade; they built it anew to continue gleaning from its pages inspiration and hope and comfort.

And now we stand away from their buildings to observe. Our vantage point is a good one. With some clarity we can see the original Biblical foundation - here the 22nd chapter of Genesis. Hopefully with equal clarity, we can also under-

stand the development which grew up around it. Our view will, of necessity, present the general specifications of this new community of thought and each building's unique facade. We will see the environment in which the community flourished and perhaps even understand the source of its materials. Hopefully, the reader will see unfold before him some of the concerns and ideals of the Rabbis. Ideally, the reader will gain insight into the development of Jewish thought in one particular historic period and realize the implications of that development for his own time.

Hopefully a Rabbinic thesis of this type will edify its reader; there is no such doubt as to its value for the author. The exercise has been exciting and fruitful. The literature on the 'Akedah opens windows into many facets of rabbinic thought. Months of research and reading and discussion and analysis have been rewarded by a richer understanding of ideas and problems and goals with which the Rabbis were involved. And now, with a deeper understanding of certain phases of the past I am prepared to continue... to go deeper in the study of past heritage, to move forward in the creation of present goals and future aspirations of religious concern.

This work has been guided by my teacher, Dr. Jakob J. Petuchowski. As professor of Rabbinics he has become my model of academic curiosity and discipline. He has inspired me with his personal dedication to teaching and to his students. I am truly indebted to him for his help.

I am grateful to Rabbi Zev Gottholt of Jerusalem, Israel, under whose tutelage I first opened to the Rabbinic discussions and began this study. With him I reached my first insights into the literature. I would also thank Mr. Leon Abramowski for providing me with a translation of the important R. Levi article from the French.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### The Biblical Narrative

בראשית כב: א - יט

ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את אברהם ויאמר אליו אברהם ויאמר הנני. ויאמר קח נא את בנך את יחידך אשר אהבת את יצחק ולך לך אל ארץ המריה והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך. וישכם אברהם בבקר ויחנש את חמרו ויקח את שני נעריו אתו ואת יצחק בנו ויכקע עצי עלה ויקם וילך אל המקום אשר אמר לו האלהים. כיום הסלישי וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא את המקום מרחוק. ויאמר אברהם אל נעריו שבו לכם פה עם החמור ואני והנער נלכה עד כה ונשתחוה ונשובה אליכם. ויקח אברהם את עצי העלה וישם על יצחק בנו ויקח כידו את האש ואת המאכלת וילכו שניהם יחדו. ויאמר יצחק אל אברהם אביו ויאמר אביו ויאמר הנני בני ויאמר הנה האט והעצים ואיה השם לעלה. ויאמר אברהם אלהים יראה לו השם לעלה בני וילכו שניהם יחדו. ויבאו אל המקום אשר אמר לו האלהים ויבן שם אברהם את המזבח ויערך את העצים ויעקד את יצחק בנו וישם אתו על המזבח ממעל לעצים. וישלח אברהם את ידו ויקח את המאכלת לשחט את בנו. ויקרא אליו מלאך יהוה מן השמים ויאמר אברהם אברהם ויאמר הנני. ויאמר אל תשלח ידך אל הנער ואל תעש לו מאומה כי עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אתה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך ממני. וישא אברהם את עיניו וירא והנה איל אחר נאחז בסכך בקרניו וילך אברהם ויקח את האיל ויעלהו לעלה חתה בנו. ויקרא אברהם שם המקום ההוא יהוה יראה אשר יאמר היום בהר יהוה יראה. ויקרא מלאך יהוה אל אברהם שנית מן השמים. ויאמר בי נשבעתי נאם יהוה כי יען אשר עשית את הרכר הזה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך. כי כך אברכך והרכה ארכה את זרעך ככוכבי השמים וכחול אשר על שפת הים

וירש זרעך את שער איביו. והחכרכו בזרעך כל גויי הארץ  
עקב אשר שמעה בקליו. וישב אברהם אל נעריו ויקמו וילכו  
יחריו אל באר שבע וישב אברהם כבאר שבע.

The student who approaches the 22nd chapter of Genesis is immediately confronted by a difficult and highly interesting narrative. Even a simple translation of the Hebrew involves the selection and evaluation of words which carry one far beyond a linguistic analysis. What does נסה mean? How do you translate העלהו? What does Abraham mean when he answers Isaac's question with the words:

אלהים יראה לו השם לעולה בני ? These are problems in translation; no wonder that the search for a proper interpretation of the narrative has occupied Biblical commentators and scholars in every generation. The difficulties will not be finally resolved in one paragraph, or, indeed, in one monograph. Nevertheless, the investigation can be stimulating and fruitful.

What can we say with surety as we read the Hebrew text? Only the most superficial of observations: A deity calls to Abraham, telling him to take Isaac, his only beloved son, to travel to the land of Moriah and, there, to perform some activity. (vv. 1-2) Abraham rises early in the morning, sees to the details of the journey, takes his son and two servant lads, and departs. (v. 3) In three days they arrive close by the destination, whereupon Abraham and Isaac take leave of the servants and proceed alone laden with fire, a knife and wood. (vv. 4-7) The son questions his father about a missing provision, the lamb (איה השם לעולה), the father answers and they continue together. (vv. 7-8)



At the designated place, Abraham builds an altar and arranges its wood. He binds Isaac and places him on the altar above the ordered wood. Abraham then picks up the knife to slaughter his son. (vv. 9-10) A מלאך, an agent of the deity, calls to Abraham, ordering him not to touch his son. He gives him a reason why. (vv. 11-12) At some point Abraham sees a ram caught in a bush, takes it and offers it as an עולה מן הכבש. (v. 13)

There follows in verses 14-18 the naming of the site by Abraham and an oath concerning the prosperity of Abraham's seed. The oath is pronounced by the agent of God. In verse 19 Abraham returns to his servant boys, they go together to Beer-Sheba where Abraham dwells.

We have said very little. Words have been left untranslated, specific actions described in unrestrained generality. This is a dramatic story which draws upon relations of God and man, of father and son. To offer any deeper analysis is to enter the caverns of theological, philosophical, literary and ethical value judgement. The exploration is a valuable one. Indeed Rabbis and Fathers of the Church, scholars, theologians, philologists and moralists have revealed in the search. Jonathan translated the words to Aramaic and gave them a particular meaning. Kierkegaard, almost 2000 years later, employed the same Biblical text to illustrate what was for him the highest religious attitude that man can achieve. Each saw in the narrative a reflection of his own idea of God, himself and man.

This is our task: to explore the nineteen verses of the twenty-second chapter of Genesis; to understand what they meant to commentators and poets from the earliest Rabbis of the Tannaitic period to the Jews of Medieval Europe; to view the 'Akedah through their eyes....and then, to understand it for ourselves.

#### On the "Geography" of the 'Akedah

But first we must place this chapter into its context in the Genesis narrative. Abraham has experienced a number of events since he left his father's household in Haran and journeyed to Canaan. (12:1 ff) He has migrated to Egypt (12:10 ff) and acquired great wealth there. (12:16) He has encountered his God and received a first promise concerning the prosperity of his descendants. (15:1 ff) He has entered into a covenant with his God (17:1) and, as a sign of faithfulness to the agreement, he has circumcised himself and every male in his household. (17:23 ff) He has fought to defend his brother Lot (14:13 ff), consorted with Hagar to produce an offspring, Ishmael. (16:1 ff) He has been promised a son by Sarah, his barren wife (18:1 ff) and intercedes with God's messengers for the men of Sodom. (18:16 ff)

In the narrative immediately preceding the 'Akedah (chapters 20-21) three important things happen to Abraham and Sarah. (1) They journey to the desert and settle between Kadesh and Shur at Gerar. There they meet Abimelech, the Philistine king with whom relations are good. The king fears



Abraham's God and offers him a "homesite." When there is a dispute over water cisterns they make a covenant: Abraham gives Abimelech sheep and cattle as a gift. (2:27) (2) The promise is fulfilled and at age 100 a son, Isaac, is born to Abraham and Sarah. He is circumcised and eventually weaned. On the day of the weaning, Abraham makes a great feast. (21:8) (3) Sarah, jealous lest Hagar's son, Ishmael, receive an inheritance from Abraham together with Isaac, causes Abraham to send the maidservant and her son off into the wilderness. This, the second recall of jealousy between Sarah and Hagar. (16:5 ff, 21:9 ff)

To complete the "historical" context into which the 'Akedah is placed one other event must be mentioned. In chapter 23:1-3, the chapter immediately following the 'Akedah, Sarah, at age 127, dies. The narrative reports that Abraham mourns for his wife and then turns to find her a permanent burial place. In essence this brings to a close the narrative of the first Patriarch. The following chapter is concerned with finding a wife for Isaac, a wife from among Abraham's own people. The woman is found and at the end of chapter 24 Isaac marries her. We will have cause to note that this is Isaac's first appearance since the events of Mt. Moriah.

## II. THE MEANING OF נִסָּה

The problem of interpreting the 'Akedah has already been hinted at. Here, as we examine the single word נִסָּה, (v. 1) we may begin to understand the depths of the complexity. How would one translate נִסָּה? And what does the translation reveal of a theological orientation? Indeed, the more proper question, what theological view is the commentator imposing upon the Biblical story?

Our task is twofold: (1) to examine the root letters נִסָּה as they appear in the Bible, arriving at a simple translation of the word; (2) to survey the rabbis and commentators, discovering their interpretations of the idea of נִסָּה.

### Biblical Meanings

The most common translation of נִסָּה is "to test."<sup>1</sup> Here the test is fashioned to discover if a preconceived notion is correct or if a desired result can be achieved. In this context נִסָּה is often followed by a statement of the desired result. In Exodus 16:4 God provided the "bread from heaven" to test the people, to see "if they will follow my law or not." In Deuteronomy 13:4 God suggests that through the false prophet he is testing the people "to know if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul." Again, in Judges we find God angry with Israel for having broken the covenant. He used foreign nations to test Israel, seeing "if they observe the way of

the Lord, walking in it (reading נִסָּה ) as did their fathers, or not." (Judges 2:22) Even more explicit is the "test" as formulated in the next lines (3:4) "to test Israel through them (the foreign nations), to know if they obey the commandments of God which he commanded their fathers through Moses."

In the narrative of Gideon this judge asks God for sure proof that he has the power to save his people. He devises two tests, employing a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. The first time the fleece is to be wet with dew and the ground dry; following this the fleece is to be dry and all the ground covered with dew. With the second test Gideon clearly states, "Once more I will test....with the fleece." (Judges 6:39)

Of further interest is the occurrence of נִסָּה meaning "to test" in parallel to other words, שָׁטַח and בָּחַן , here carrying the same connotation. Psalms 26 opens with this plea:

Vindicate ( שָׁטַח ) me, O Lord, for I have walked  
in my integrity....  
Prove ( בָּחַן ) me, O Lord, and try ( נִסָּה ) me,  
test ( נִסָּה ) my mind and my heart  
(Psalm 26:1-2)

Here, while "try" is the translation offered by the Revised Standard Version<sup>2</sup> for נִסָּה , it is clear from the context and the parallel verbs that the poet is asking God to test him, proving his innocence and his integrity. This, then, is our first rendering of נִסָּה , "to test."<sup>3</sup>

But this translation does not convey the nuances of the word in other contexts. How do the redeemed slaves approach God in the wilderness? In the Pentateuch and in

the later poetry of the Psalms we read of the children of Israel rebelling against God, challenging his effectiveness. They come to quarrel with him, to put him to the proof, to vex and try him. In anger Moses proclaims, "Why do you contend with me, why do you try ( נִסָּה ) God." (Exodus 17:2) One of the places at which they rebelled is even called

מַסָּה וּמִרִיבָה "because of the quarrels of the children of Israel and their trying God, saying, 'Is God in our midst or not.'" (Exodus 17:7) Here נִסָּה is paralleled by רִיב and it helps us to understand the particular shade of meaning. So does the context of נִסָּה in Psalm 78:41. Here we find

וַיִּשְׁבּוּ וַיִּנְסֵי אֶל וָקֶדֶשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַחַוּוֹ  
seems to come from the root חָוָה , "to pain," "to wound figuratively," i.e. "to provoke." We would translate, "They tried him again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel." In verse 56 of this same Psalm we find "to try" parallel to "to rebel against" and in verse 18 they try God for their own selfish purpose, "demanding food for themselves."<sup>4</sup>

Surely the people are "testing" God in the sense that they want to see if the expected result will be fulfilled. But more, their "show me" attitude is betrayed by the nature of their selfish request and by their quarrelsomeness. This is not Gideon speaking to God; certainly it is not God testing his people. It is a people vexing God, daring Him to prove himself.<sup>5</sup>

Other uses of נִסָּה suggest themselves. The word

seems to mean "to be accustomed to," "to have experience with." In this way the woman is described in Deuteronomy 28:56. She is delicate; she has not been accustomed to put the sole of her foot on the ground because of her delicacy and softness. Likewise, the young David is unable to move under the weight of Saul's armor for he has had no experience with it. (I Samuel 17:39)

Related to this meaning, Greenberg suggests that the word may have a causative meaning, "to cause to have experience of." In this way he understands נִסָּה as it is used in the theophany of Exodus 20:20. As well Judges 3:1-3, Koheleth 2:1 and 7:23, and Exodus 15:25 may be best understood in this way.<sup>6</sup>

One other shade of meaning may be seen. In Job 4:2 and again in Deuteronomy 4:34 we may translate נִסָּה as "to venture." In Job, Eliphaz the Temanite approaches Job, saying, "If one ventures ( נִסָּה ) a word with you, will you be weary." Likewise, in Deuteronomy 4:34 if God is asking if there is a god who speaks from the midst of fire or whose voice one can hear and live. He continues, "Does any god venture ( נִסָּה ) to come and take for himself a nation from the midst of another nation, with trials, with signs, with wonders and with war....?"

What does this investigation tell us about נִסָּה in Genesis 22? It is difficult to know exactly. Perhaps it was a test of Abraham's faithfulness, God wanting to know more about Abraham, to see if the desired result would

be achieved. There is merit (and fewer theological problems) in suggesting that God wanted Abraham to have a particular experience of Him, bringing about this event to widen Abraham's understanding of himself, his God and the world. More important than a precise answer here are the later interpretations of the נִסָּה, speculations that began as soon as the first scribe approached the Biblical text.

## A Genuine Test of Faithfulness

All rabbinic arguments look to words of Scripture for support, clarification and example. One such Scriptural passage, a verse from the Psalms, will appear often to clarify and bring support to different interpretations of נִסָּה .

In Psalm 60:6 we read נַחֲמֵה לִירֵאִיךָ נָס

לַחֲנוּכָס מִמֶּנִּי קֶשֶׁט סֵלָה . The Hebrew is quite difficult. Perhaps we might translate:

You gave those who fear you a standard around which to rally

Because of truth, Selah.<sup>7</sup>

In Midrash Tanchuma the נִסָּה of this psalm verse is understood as a test, a נִסְיוֹן . The midrash proceeds to compare occurrences of נִסָּה, distinguishing between נִסְיוֹן in which God participates directly and those in which he uses an agent, here other nations. The former method was used for the early generations; the latter tests were brought upon younger generations. In both instances נִסָּה seems to carry its "basic" meaning, i.e., to see if Abraham will remain faithful. So, too, Israel's faithfulness is tested, God seeing if the people "will follow my law or no." (Exodus 16:4)<sup>8</sup> That their faithfulness to God is being tested is made even more explicit in a variant reading, quoted in a note to Buber's Tanchuma collection:

Behold, you have given those who fear you a test upon which to be tested, Why? To find out who (in truth) does God's will, as it is written in Scripture, FOR THE SAKE OF TRUTH, SELAH.<sup>9</sup>

Why might God have cause to doubt Abraham's faithfulness? What reason to suspect and test this patriarch? In an attempt to answer the rabbis turn to analyze the phrase אַחֲרֵי הַנִּזְכָּרִים הָאֵלֶּה (v. 1) They ask, "What events are referred to?" Two answers are suggested, the first giving insight into Abraham's thinking, the second based upon his actions:

We remember that in the Biblical narrative Abraham makes a great feast, celebrating Isaac's weaning. (21:8) The Rabbis were aware of the feast.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Bereshith Rabbah uses it as the jumping off point for a justification of the test. Here, the question is asked as to what events have been referred to. And the answer:

AFTER THESE THINGS After the impure thoughts which were there. Who doubted? Abraham doubted. He said: "I rejoiced and made everything merry and I did not set aside (anything) for the Holy One, Blessed be He, not a cow or a ram." God said to him, "So that when you are told to sacrifice your son, you will not hesitate."<sup>11</sup>

The nature of הַנִּזְכָּרִים, impure thoughts or doubts, is made even clearer as we read this midrash:

AND TAKE HIM UP AS AN OFFERING You find that Abraham entertained doubts (הִרְרָה) concerning justice (דִּין). What did he say? Rab Levi said, "It occurs to me that I received my reward in this world, for the Holy One, Blessed be He, helped me before kings, and he saved me from the fiery furnace."<sup>12</sup> The Holy one, Blessed be He said, "Because you doubted me you must bring an offering, as it is written, TAKE YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON AND BRING HIM THERE AS AN OFFERING."<sup>13</sup>

The second answer points to an even more concrete example of Abraham's unfaithfulness, an example actually

recorded in the Bible. Again the question is asked, "What does the phrase אחר הוכרים האלה refer to?" A distinction is drawn between אחר הוכרים האלה and אחרי הוכרים האלה, the former referring to events close by in the text, the latter indicating events recorded much earlier.<sup>14</sup> From a quick investigation we realize that the preceding parashah ends with the story of Abraham and Abimelech, the covenant they made and the seven lambs given to the king by Abraham. (21:25-34) The midrash uses this incident to understand Abraham's unfaithfulness. Abraham had transgressed by making a covenant concerning the holy land which was not yet his possession; moreover, he had given Abimelech seven lambs, also property belonging to God. Hence the test to punish Abraham and, more important, for God to understand the true measure of his faith after this momentary lapse.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps we can better realize the magnitude of the transgression by reading the end of the Midrash:

AND ABRAHAM STRETCHED FORTH HIS HAND...never the less...they afflicted and oppressed Israel for more than 300 years in retaliation for his having made a covenant with the nations of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Even though Abraham stands successfully in the test, Israel must suffer for more than 300 years at the hands of her enemies. Again in Bereshith Rabbah the seven lambs cause a series of seven calamities and misfortunes to be brought on the Hebrew people by God.<sup>17</sup>

Here are two examples of imputed sin, one generation suffering for the wrongdoings of another, hence the ultimate

responsibility of one man towards another.

Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), the grandson of Rashi, attempts a more systematic proof of אחר. He, too, considers it to refer to the preceding parashah. His proofs are not too convincing; the scriptural examples he brings might be challenged. Nevertheless his explanation of God's anger with Abraham for having made a covenant with Abimelech is in good company. For the Rashbam the test is an actuality. God was teaching Abraham a lesson. He says, "And now, go, bring an offering and it will be seen if your agreement (with Abimelech) is helpful."<sup>18</sup>

In summary, we have viewed two reasons why God might want to actually test Abraham's faithfulness. Surely he had entertained skeptical notions about God's protection and justice. More serious, he has transgressed, making use of property not yet his. God had good reason to doubt Abraham's perfect faith and to bring the events of Mt. Moriah as a test.

#### The Test and Theology

Until now, we have dealt with what might be called the peshat meaning of Genesis 22. There are doubts as to Abraham's faithfulness. God brings a test in which Abraham demonstrates a full measure of faith and love. . . . God replies, כי עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלהים אחר "Now I know that you fear God." (v. 12) The question, the test, the conclusion...all the elements of a genuine test are present.



Imagine the problems this creates to the man of faithful heart and discerning eye! God is omniscient and His word, revealed in Torah, is true. There are no defects, omissions or contradictions. God is faithful to the covenant made with His children. Yet, here he tests man, certain of the full measure of his faithfulness only after the test is completed. Moreover, he has commanded the sacrifice of Abraham's only son, which will make impossible the fulfillment of the promise of the covenant that Isaac's children will multiply and fill the earth. (chapter 15) Most serious, the demand for a human sacrifice is in direct contradiction to God's expressed abhorrence of human sacrifice expressed in words of Scripture. These theological problems disturbed rabbis and commentators in every generation. Witness the bulk of Rabbinic literature. It is concerned with alternate solutions to the mystery and the contradiction.

Ibn Ezra, in his unique critical and "scientific manner" addresses himself to the theological implications of the 'Akedah, a subject completely ignored by his older colleague Rashi. His solution to the problem is that there is none! Man can not understand all of God's actions. In constructing this opinion he first reviews the gamut of opinions offered by other commentators. Before approaching the midrash selections themselves, it will be advantageous to read his catalogue of solutions:

AND GOD TESTED ABRAHAM (v. 1) There is one who suggests that we should read the text as if there were a w in the place of the o, and an x in place of the n. (Hence reading נשם, to lift

up Abraham as a model, a banner for Israel and before the other nations.) But the sense of the whole section contradicts them. נס must be taken in its literal meaning.

Philosophers state that there are two kinds of knowledge: (1) knowledge of what is to be, and (2) knowledge of that which is. This is the interpretation of נס (knowledge of what is to be) and ענה ירעה (knowledge of that which is.)

Saadia the Gaon said that the subject of נס is to demonstrate Abraham's righteousness to mankind; so too is the meaning of ירעה to be understood in the sense of הורעה (hiphil) "to make know." But didn't the Gaon know that when he bound his son, there was no one there, not even his servant boys!

Others said that the interpretation of העלהו שם לעולה is that he should take him up the mountain and this would be considered as an offering. But Abraham did not know the secret of prophecy and he hurried to slay him. God then said, "I didn't request this."

Still others said that העלהו לעולה is an example like that found in Jeremiah 35:2, AND GIVE THEM WINE TO DRINK. (Here the point is that God gave Jeremiah a command which God knew would not and could not be carried out.) Similarly here: העלהו לעולה

Now these rabbis were in need of these explanations for they said, It is not possible that after God gave a command (22:2) that he would then say, "Do not do it." (Gen. 22:12) Indeed, they did not pay attention to the process where the commandment concerning the priesthood of all the first born is changed to that of the dedication of the tribe of Levi after one year. Likewise, after Scripture says in the beginning AND GOD TESTS ABRAHAM, all the claims ceased and God tested him so that he would receive a reward.

And the sense of כי ענה ירעה is like that of ואם לא אענה (Gen. 18:21) (Ibn Ezra does not return to discuss this.)<sup>19</sup>

With this capsule view of the various solutions in mind, we may profitably turn to the aggadic literature and

witness the development of the theme of נִסִּים in the 'Akedah.

### 1. Abraham Did Not Understand

We begin with a simple explanation: Surely Abraham didn't understand the command! God had only requested that he bring Isaac to the mountain. To what can this situation be compared?

To a king who said to his friend, "Bring your son (בְּנִי) to my table." His friend brought him and had a knife in his hand. "And did I say to bring him to eat! I asked you to bring him. I made the request out of love." So it is written I NEVER CONSIDERED IT (Jeremiah 19:3)....This is Isaac.<sup>20</sup>

A similar aggadah sets it forth even more explicitly. Abraham is surprised that God is reversing the promise that his name will be established through Isaac's descendants:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Abraham, I WILL NOT PROFANE MY COVENANT AND MY UTTERANCES I WILL NOT CHANGE (Psalm 89:35) When I said to you, take your son (v. 1) I didn't say to slay him, but only to take him up there - out of love. I asked you to bring him up and you fulfilled my command. And now, take him down.<sup>21</sup>

Somewhat amusing is the related passage where Abraham's misunderstanding is combined with his perfect faith. From the beginning Abraham wasn't sure of the command. In his zealoussness he took the more difficult of the alternatives.

AND BRING HIM UP FOR AN OFFERING. I am not sure (if this means) to bring him as a real offering (עֹלָה) or if his being brought to the top of the altar stands in place of an offering. In the end it was understood that the latter was correct. But Abraham our father, in that he wanted to fulfill his maker's will at all expense, thus interpreted it in the former way.<sup>22</sup>

### 2. To Temper Abraham

But if problems of contradiction and God's faithfulness to his promise are solved in the simple manner, there remains another problem: Why the command at all? We find a first clue to our answer as the Rabbis suggest, Proverbs 17:3 as a description of the act of the 'Akedah:

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS THAT GOD DID TEST ABRAHAM. This is what scripture refers to as it is written: THE CRUCIBLE IS FOR SILVER AND THE FURNACE FOR GOLD AND THE LORD TEMPER'S HEARTS (OF MAN). And GOD SAID, TAKE, NOW, YOUR SON. Immediately AND ABRAHAM ROSE EARLY.<sup>23</sup>

The same contradiction between God's promise and this command is voiced, this time by the ministering angels:

DO NOT TOUCH THE LAD. When Abraham grabbed the knife the ministering angels shouted and cried bitterly before the Holy One, Blessed be He, saying, "Lord of the Worlds! Abraham is slaughtering his son and you said that he would be known through Isaac's descendants. To whom will you say at Mt. Sinai I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD? (Exodus 20:2) Who will say before you at the sea THIS IS MY GOD AND I WILL ADORN HIM?" (Exodus 15:2)

God answers their complaint, offering an explanation of the test:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: I tested (נִסִּיתִי) Abraham and (found that) his heart is like mine.<sup>24</sup>

We must understand נִסִּים in this context as it parallels כֶּסֶם and זָהָב. Both gold and silver achieve their purity and fineness through repeated firings (heatings and coolings) in a furnace or kiln. The heart of man is brought to a desired consistency or level or purity through a like process of tempering. God imposes tests on man, here Abraham, commanded to sacrifice his son, to improve his good qualities.



Bereshith Rabban adds to our understanding of the idea of tempering as it compares God's actions towards righteous men to the work of a flaxmaker and his flax:

THE LORD TESTS THE RIGHTEOUS, BUT HE DESPISES THE WICKED MAN AND THE LOVER OF VIOLENCE (Psalm 11:5) Rabbi Yochanan said: When the flax is poor the flax maker does not beat it too much for it breaks but when his flax is good, he beats it more and more. Why? Because it continues to improve in quality. Likewise the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not test the wicked. Why? For they are not able to survive, as it is written, THE WICKED ARE SWEEPED AWAY LIKE WATER. Who does he test? He tests the righteous as it is written, THE LORD TESTS THE RIGHTEOUS.<sup>25</sup>

Both Rabbi Moses ben Nachman and Seforno, commentators of the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively, reflect the same idea in a much more sophisticated manner. For the Ramban the test was a real one with the purpose of bringing Abraham's potential power into actuality. In this way he can receive the reward for good deeds (deeds actually performed) in addition to the reward of a good heart (potential). Only the righteous are tested and the test is made for the man who is being tested and not for God.<sup>26</sup> In this way his merit is made complete.<sup>27</sup> Seforno agrees. Abraham's love and fear are turned from potentiality to actuality. Abraham draws close to the image in which he was created.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. The Test to Increase Abraham's Reward

Ramban's comment provides a bridge to a related, but different idea. He distinguishes between the reward for intended good deeds and the benefit accrued from commandments which are carried out. Hence the test becomes a vehicle

through which Abraham may change the nature of his reward.

The Midrash, too, proposes this idea, drawing concrete images to illustrate the point. The act of the 'Akedah and its separate parts become means by which Abraham's reward is increased.

The Tanchuma records a conversation to explain the repetition of adjectives in verse two:

God:	TAKE YOUR SON
Abraham:	Which son?
God:	YOUR ONLY SON
Abraham:	One is an only son to his mother and the other is an only son to his father
God:	THE ONE WHOM YOU LOVE
Abraham:	Is there a limit to the emotions?
God:	ISAAC <sup>29</sup>

The name of the son is not revealed immediately. A parallel Midrash in Bereshith Rabban gives a reason for the extended conversation:

Why did He not reveal it immediately? To make him feel how dear his son was to him and to give him a reward for each part of the command.<sup>30</sup>

The same principle is understood behind the repetition of adjectives in the parashah לך לך (Chapter 12:1 ff)

To make him feel the dearness of his home and to give him reward for each part of the command and for every step.<sup>31</sup>

Every action that Abraham performs is rewarded:

וַיֵּקֶם וַיֵּלֶךְ (v. 3) become two separate actions and

bring with them a double reward:

HE ROSE UP AND HE WENT (The action is repeated)  
to give him reward for rising and reward for  
going.<sup>32</sup>

Even the vague instructions and the three-day journey are understood in this way: "To afflict him and to give him reward for each and every step."<sup>33</sup>

Related here is another interpretation of נס , using Psalm 60:6: Abraham is tested "to give him his reward in truth."<sup>34</sup> And as we have seen, even Ibn Ezra, after a long analysis of various interpretations of the nature of the test concludes that in the last account, God is testing Abraham to increase his reward.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. The Test as Testimony

The sole object of all the trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach man what he ought to do or believe so that the events which form the actual trial is not the end desired; it is but an example for our instruction and guidance.<sup>36</sup>

Thus the philosopher Maimonides introduces his discussion of divine tests in general, the 'Akedah in particular. The test is an attestation to the world of absolute love and fear of God, unbounded by thoughts of reward or punishment. Maimonides' comment returns us to a familiar theological question: the tests appear to be a means by which God learned the intensity of the faith and the devotion of man. But understanding an omniscient God, How can this be?<sup>37</sup>

A search for the solution to the problem is a prominent theme in Midrashic Literature, not only in regard to the 'Akedah, but concerning all of the tests under which

Abraham is purported to have passed.

In Aboth 5:3 we read:

Abraham, our father, was tested with ten tests and he passed all of them to testify ( להוויע ) how great was Abraham's love.<sup>38</sup>

This is a significant statement for two reasons: (1) it shows a connection between the tests; (2) it gives an underlying reason for them.

We find a catalogue of the tests in many places. There are differences in the particulars of each list, but all include the migration from Haran, the war with the kings, the Covenant of the Pieces and the 'Akedah. The 'Akedah is the final and most important of them. It outweighs all of the previous ones, for if Abraham had not accepted it, the value of all of them would have been lost.<sup>39</sup> The relative importance of the 'Akedah is indicated by this midrashic statement:

AND GOD SAID, TAKE YOUR SON. Rabbi Shimon ben Abba said, The " וְיִשְׂרָאֵל " is nothing other than an expression of request. To what can this situation be compared? To a human king who was victorious in many wars. He had one hero who won all of them for him. Once the king was engaged in a fierce battle. He said to his warrior hero, "Do me a favor, win this battle for me so that they will not say that there was nothing to the earlier ones." Even so did the Holy One, Blessed be He, say to Abraham: "Abraham, I have tested you in many tests and you succeeded in all of them. Do me a favor. Undergo this test (the 'Akedah) so that they won't say that there was nothing to the first ones."<sup>40</sup>

We return to the second significance of the Aboth passage: The tests, and in particular the last of them, the 'Akedah, testify to Abraham's love. We have seen before in Deuteronomy 13:4 that God tests the children of Israel to

know if they love Him with all their hearts and souls. A midrash echoes this theme:

The tenth test: AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS THAT GOD TESTED ABRAHAM. He tested Abraham each time to understand his heart, to know if he was able to stand and observe all the commandments of His torah as it is said, BECAUSE ABRAHAM OBEYED MY VOICE AND HE OBSERVED MY WATCH, MY COMMANDMENTS, MY LAWS AND MY TORAH.<sup>41</sup>

But in Aboth and in many other passages we find one crucial difference: The test is not for God's information, certainly in his omniscience he already knows, but rather to testify to others of Abraham's love and his faithfulness to God.

A Midrash from Bereshith Rabbah demonstrates this well. Abraham is stopped from sacrificing his son, tears from the ministering angels melt the knife. Abraham wants to choke or at least shed a few drops of Isaac's blood. God replies:

DO NOT DO ANYTHING TO HIM. Do not blemish him for now (כי עתה ידעתי) I have made it known to all (הורעתי) that you love me AND DID NOT WITHHOLD YOUR SON....So that they can not say: All the suffering that is not personal (part of one's own body) is not really suffering. But I consider it as if I commanded you to sacrifice yourself and you did not hesitate.<sup>42</sup>

The interpretation is, of course, based on ירע, making it a causative hiphil or a piel instead of a plain kai. This removes the difficulty in what is implied in the Biblical text that God has sure knowledge of Abraham's faithfulness only after the test is completed. We read ירעתי or הורעתי; now everyone knows the extent of

של ירא שמים

And did God not know it before, as it is written RELATING THAT WHICH HAS NOT YET HAPPENED BEFORE HAND AND IN ADVANCE (Isaiah 46:10) Do not read ידעתי "I knew," but ירעתי "I will make known." Now all those who come will know the extent of the strength of one who fears God, even to slaying his son, his only son; all this adds greatness to his great and awesome name.<sup>43</sup>

Why must God display Abraham's greatness? And to whom must he display it? We bring a selection of midrashim, each a partial answer to better understand the idea of the Test as a Testimony:

(1) The idolator asks: Why did The Holy One, Blessed be He, cherish Abraham? The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: Behold I ask him to sacrifice his son and he obeys me.<sup>44</sup>

The test is performed, then, as testimony to the idolator of God's wisdom in having chosen to love Abraham.

(2) Bereshith Rabbah brings an exciting interpretation, our third, to the sixth verse of Psalm 60, an interpretation of great relevance here: We will recall the difficulties in rendering a suitable English translation. But more important than the translation is the rabbinic interpretation: The נס of Genesis 22:1 is understood from the root נסע, to lift up; there is an interesting play on words.

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS THAT GOD TESTED ABRAHAM. It is written: THOU HAST SET UP A STANDARD FOR THOSE WHO FEAR YOU TO RALLY AROUND, BECAUSE OF TRUTH, SELAH. Elevation after elevation and raise after raise in order to exalt you in the world, in order to elevate you in the world like this banner of a ship, and why all this? FOR THE SAKE OF TRUTH - in order that the Divine Attribute of Justice would be verified in the world. For if a man would say to you, "He whom He wants he makes

rich or poor or a king....Abraham, he desired to make him a King. He did so; according to His desire He made him rich."

(When one speaks like this) you are able to reply, saying, "Are you able to do that which Abraham our father did?" He answers, "What did he do?" and you reply, "He was one hundred years old when a son was born to him and after all this trouble it was said to him, TAKE YOUR SON....and he did not tarry. Behold, YOU HAVE GIVEN TO THOSE WHO FEAR YOU A BANNER AROUND WHICH TO RALLY (TO EXALT YOURSELF)."45

Again, in the Bereshith Rabbah Rab Yose Ha Gelili says, "He elevated him like the banner of a ship."<sup>46</sup>

(3) From the Tanchuma:

....Abraham said before the Holy One, Blessed be He, "Lord of the Universe, man tests his fellow for he does not know what is in his heart. You who search hearts and minds, why did you have to do this to me? Was it not revealed to you before that when you said that I should sacrifice my son, that I was quick to slaughter (him) with perfect heart?" The Holy One, Blessed be He said to him, "To testify to the nations of the world that I did not choose you without reason, as it is written in Scriptures, FOR NOW I HAVE MADE IT KNOWN THAT YOU FEAR GOD."<sup>47</sup>

(4) The Tanchuma also comments on Psalm 60:6,

What does nei mean? It means to exalt them, as it is written in Scripture, LIKE A BANNER ON THE HILL (Isaiah 30:12) And why did the Holy One, Blessed be He, test him? In order to exalt Him so as not to give the world an opening, saying, He elevated him, but did not test him nor did they pass the test. Therefore AFTER THESE THINGS, GOD TESTED ABRAHAM.<sup>48</sup>

(5) Bereshith Rabbah brings one other interesting midrash. It is similar to the one mentioned above which compares God tempering Abraham, improving his good qualities through trial as the flax maker beats the

flax to improve it. But here there is a subtle difference. The artisan strikes the good vessel not to improve it, but to show its perfection and to demonstrate the worth of his artistry and equipment:

Commenting on nei Rabbi Yochanan says,

The artisan, when he examines his furnace, does not examine the defective vessels. Why? For if he taps it, he will break it. And what does he examine? The good vessel for even if he strikes it a number of times, it will not break. Thus, the Holy One, Blessed be He, does not test the wicked, rather the righteous as it is written in Scripture, THE LORD TESTS THE RIGHTEOUS (Psalm 11:5)<sup>49</sup>

(6) One further comment from the Tanchuma. Earlier we read that Abraham didn't really understand the command. The test was not to be completed. It was an opportunity for Abraham's faith to be tempered. Here, beginning with the Jeremiah verse we again read of Abraham's understanding and one view of the purpose of the 'Akedah.

WHICH I DID NOT COMMAND (Jeremiah 19:5)....to Abraham that he should sacrifice his son, but I said to him, DO NOT COME NEAR TO THE BOY.... in order to show how Abraham was obeying my word. For the nations of the world would say, Why does the Holy One, Blessed be He, love Abraham so much? Therefore God said to him: TAKE YOUR SON Behold, FOR I DID NOT COMMAND ABRAHAM TO SACRIFICE HIS SON.<sup>50</sup>

From these six selections we can understand the answers to the problems posed above:

1) There is a strand of Midrash which regards the 'Akedah as a means of exalting Abraham, of holding him up as a model of perfect faithfulness in God.

(2) Through Abraham God is able to justify (a) the

Divine attribute of Justice - Abraham is not exalted without having earned the honor; (b) God's selection of Abraham as a partner in the Covenant and his love for him; (c) the existence and value of torah as a source of righteousness, personified by Abraham.

3) God is offering these justifications to the nations of the world ( אומות העולם ), to the idolators ( עכו"ם ), in short, before any one who would challenge God and the position which the children of Israel imagined themselves to enjoy.

We will return to this theme with its apologetic overtones when we discuss the Concept of Merit, the particular place of Israel and the righteous person in the world. Here, suffice it to realize the zeal with which the rabbis build up Abraham and his deeds.

Two other comments, growing out of this discussion, remain. Having surveyed the use to which the rabbis put the 'Akedah we are in a position to better understand the series of statements which show remarkable insight into the literary structure of the narrative.

Rabbi Akiba says, He really tested him so that they would not say, "He took Abraham by surprise and confused him and he did not know what to do!"<sup>51</sup> Every detail of the narrative becomes important. We have seen one explanation of the repetition of adjectives in verse two. Another suggestion is made: The command is given in parts so as not to derange Abraham.<sup>52</sup> Abraham is pictured as moving with intent.

Even the three days' journey falls into place. From Beer-Sheba to the land of Moriah is a one-day walk. "Why does Scripture say that it was on the third day and not on the first or second day?" And the answer: "So that the nations of the world would not say, 'God took him by surprise and he went to slaughter his son in confusion.'<sup>53</sup> 'or in anger.'<sup>54</sup> 'If he has his sense, he would not have obeyed God to offer his son as a sacrifice.'<sup>55</sup> One Rabbi has him go and return on each of the first two days without seeing anything. He sees the mountain on the third day, demonstrating that he was acting calmly and in full possession of his faculties, rather than in confusion.<sup>56</sup>

A fascinating sidelight of the whole discussion as to whom God wishes to testify concerning Abraham is the entrance of a Satan element which appears to parallel the prologue to the Book of Job and the further comparison of Abraham and Job as ירא שמים.<sup>57</sup>

The earliest reference to a conversation between Satan and God is found in the Book of Jubilees. The feast that Abraham arranged to celebrate Isaac's weaning (21:8) is used to construct a prologue to the 'Akedah. Similarly, in the prologue to Job a feast, here made by the sons (Job 1:4-5), precedes the conversation between שטן והאלהים, Satan and God. (Job 1:6 ff) The feast and Abraham's action or lack of action becomes the motivation for a discussion between God and Satan:



And it came to pass in the seventh week in the first year thereof, in the first month in the jubilee, on the twelfth day of the month, there were voices in heaven regarding Abraham, that he was faithful in all that he told him and that he loved the Lord, and that in every affliction he was faithful. And the prince Mastima (Satan) came and said before God, "Behold, Abraham loves Isaac his son and he delights in him above all things else; bid him offer him up as an offering on the altar, and thou wilt see if he will do this command, and thou wilt know if he is faithful in everything wherein thou dost try him."<sup>58</sup>

The text continues, enumerating ten tests in which God had tried Abraham and found him to be faithful. In the following chapter the conclusion of the story is given:

And Isaac stood before him and before the prince Mastima, and the Lord said, "Bid him not to lay his hand on the lad, nor to do him any thing to him, for I have shown that he fears the Lord."

\* \* \* \* \*

For now I have shown that thou fearest the Lord and hast not withheld thy son, thy first born son from me, And the prince Mastima was put to shame; and Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and behold a ram....

....in the stead of his son

And Abraham called that place "The Lord hath seen," so that it is said (in the *gunt*) the Lord hath seen; that is, Mt. Slon.<sup>59</sup>

The aggadic literature carries the same theme. Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra comments on *נח* in a way strikingly similar to that of *Jubilees*:

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS THAT GOD DID TEST ABRAHAM. What does *נח* mean? After Satan's words, as it is written, AND THE BOY GROW UP AND WAS WEANED, (Gen. 21:8) Satan said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: "You graciously bestowed to this old man a son in his one hundredth year. For every meal that he has arranged he hasn't offered before you one pigeon or young chicken." God

replied, "He has done nothing, but if I command him to sacrifice his son before me, he will do it immediately." Immediately, AND GOD TESTED ABRAHAM.<sup>60</sup>

In b. *Baba Bathra* there is a conversation between God and Satan in which Satan's journey on earth is being discussed. In words almost identical to those of the first chapter of Job, the two speak first about Abraham and his faithfulness and then about Job and his faithfulness.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, *Bereshith Rabbah* constructs a reason for the test, based upon Abraham's doubted faith. Here the conversation is between God and the ministering angels; here equated with *beth din*:

Rab Elazar said: *אלהים ונחלים*, God and his Beth Din, The ministering angels said: Abraham rejoices and cause merriment, but he did not dedicate to the Holy One, Blessed be He, a cow or a ram. The Holy One, Blessed be He said, So that when it is said to him that he should sacrifice his son, he would not hesitate.<sup>62</sup>

Satan himself returns in the aggadic embellishments on the 'Akedah as Abraham and Isaac walk to Mt. Moriah. He attempts to interrupt Abraham, confronting the old man with the cold logic of his deed. Unsuccessful, Satan turns to Isaac.<sup>63</sup> We will see in another context the measure of success he has with the younger man. The ministering angels, too, return in the rabbinic writings as they plead Abraham's case before God. They realize the measure of Abraham's faithfulness and are eager to save him from destroying his only son.

This recurring theme of Satan and the ministering angels as the accuser and then, for the ministering angels,

as the chief defender, is but another indication of the great faith and love which Abraham had for God. Even in the face of this foreign, deceptive person who is trying to disprove and discredit Abraham, he maintains his faith in God.

### III. THE CONCEPT OF MERIT

Rabbinic discussion of the 'Akedah is concerned, in large measure, with aspects of what has come to be called "The Doctrine of Merits (זכות)." The concept itself explains the relation of the deeds of one individual to the fate of others, his contemporaries and his descendants (and/or ancestors). It is based upon the idea of imputed punishment and reward. The good deeds and wrong doings of one generation have a beneficial or adverse effect upon the lives of others in their own era, or at some other time in History. Ultimately, the Concept of Merit brings one to a view of "human solidarity," that is, of the continued relationship and interdependence of all men throughout history.<sup>1</sup>

This general concept may aid us to understand the ethical, philosophical and religious ideas of the early rabbis. In discussing merit, they must define ways in which it comes about; how it grows up in the world. Thereby they are indicating their ideal of ethical and religious life. Furthermore, in suggesting upon whom this merit is to be bestowed they are making value judgement as to the worth of that individual or nation and betraying their prejudices as to their view of the world. Hence, in examining the 'Akedah as it reflects the Concept of Merit, we are opening windows from which the ethical, religious and philosophical ideas of the rabbis can be viewed.



## Models of Behavior

The righteous men of Israel built up merit for themselves and their posterity by the quality of their faith and love of God and by their deeds.<sup>2</sup> Certainly their actions and beliefs became examples of important moral qualities worthy of emulation. "They came to personify the great moral teachings for which Judaism lives."<sup>3</sup> Marmorstein describes the process by which simple ethical ideas develop into general conceptions:

They (simple ideas) originally impersonate personalities and events who are the bearers of the ethical ideal. The Fathers, the pious, the various Biblical personalities whose merits are spoken of, represent faithfulness, adherence to God's word and obedience to His command, lovingkindness and self sacrifice, unselfishness and love. Speaking, therefore, of the merits of these personalities, means, if we divert them of their names, idealisms of general notions of the different merits.<sup>4</sup>

How well the principals of the 'Akedah, Abraham and Isaac, reflect this idealized catalogue of virtues.

When God calls, Abraham answers simply, "הנני", Here am I." (v. 1) The Tanchuma understands this as an "expression of humility and piety, for this is the humility of the pious ones everywhere."<sup>5</sup> A parallel passage in Bereshith Rabbah has God answer Moses with this proverb when Moses imagines himself like Abraham: "Do not glorify yourself before a king and do not stand in the place of greatness." (Proverbs 25:6)<sup>6</sup>

Rejoicing to fulfill God's will, Abraham binds the donkey himself (v. 3) and merit is accrued to him.

Abraham is considered the first man since the creation of the world to bind his own ass.<sup>7</sup> And the merit which his zealousness has earned is counterbalanced against Balaam's zealous binding of his donkey to curse Israel, zeal emerging out of hate in contrast to Abraham's love.<sup>8</sup>

We learn other things, how be it less profound, from Abraham. He arose early in the morning, proof that a חלמיר חכם does not go out at night by himself.<sup>9</sup> It is proper דרך ארץ, manners, for a man not to go out with less than two servants, viz. Abraham who "took his two servants with him." (v. 3)<sup>10</sup> If Abraham and other Biblical personalities were accustomed to rising early to do God's will, how much the more so should the common man rise early.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the צדיקים Abraham and Isaac offered their morning prayer early in the morning and accordingly we fix the time of our prayer.<sup>12</sup> We even learn from Abraham that the "zealous ones anticipate fulfilling a commandment." In Leviticus 12:3 we read the command that the circumcision ceremony is to be performed on the eighth day. The Rabbis, identifying Abraham's early rising with this eighth day mentioned in Leviticus comment, "(Abraham's early rising) teaches that although it is acceptable to perform the circumcision at any time during the eighth day, the zealous ones anticipate a commandment and perform it early."<sup>13</sup>

## Merit, Israel and the World

Important understanding of the Doctrine of Merit is

gained by placing it into its cultural and philosophical environment. Stoic philosophers were concerned with the aim and purpose of the creation of the world. Moreover, they questioned its continued existence.<sup>14</sup> These Greek philosophers were joined by the Early Church Fathers in suggesting that the world was created for the sake of man.<sup>15</sup> From this conclusion it is but a short step to a rivalry between religious groups, claiming that their version of man (i.e. the Christian or the Jewish) is the one for whom the world was created. This step takes us into the world of polemics; there, we find ample reason for a development of the idea of Merit among the rabbis.

The Rabbis concerned themselves with the question of the purpose of the world and thereby fostered the development of the idea of merit: The world was created "for God's glory...for man's sake...for the righteous...for Torah's merit...for the sake of Israel."<sup>16</sup>

The catalogue jumps to life with a few words of explanation. We have seen why some rabbis could not rest with man as the final object and purpose of creation. Instead, the righteous man became for some the ideal pillar of the world. Marmorstein described the continuing process:

Some tried to find the ideal of righteousness personified in the life and deeds of some Biblical personalities. Others substitute Torah for the individuals who represent by their actions and works the ideals laid down in Torah. As a matter of fact both preach the same doctrine. The world was not created in vain. It was called into existence for the development of the righteousness for which Torah, and with it Judaism, stands. This will also explain the doctrine, "for Israel's sake was the world created."<sup>17</sup>

Israel becomes the vessel through which Torah and Righteousness are presented. "Israel as the assembly which is able to bring forth the proper type of righteousness, has the opportunity to supply ideal personalities for whose sake it was fit to create the world."<sup>18</sup>

Related to the answer is the idea that the world actually exists for Israel, for the righteous and for peculiar commandments. They become the moral pillars of the world, supporting it and giving it reason and purpose.<sup>19</sup>

Marmorstein suggests that the view is neither chauvinistic nor does it reflect self-conceit on the part of the Rabbis, rather "its development is usually connected with the polemics of the day....The Aggadists did not proclaim the idea before the Church tried to deprive the Synagogue of her spiritual rights and privileges."<sup>20</sup> While one may disagree with Marmorstein's protection of the "oppressed" Rabbis, a polemic battle between Church and Synagogue does help to explain the development of the Merit idea. Israel had to justify herself in the face of Church claims that it had engulfed, superseded and outdated the Hebrew religion, its Laws and its writings. The world, argued the Rabbis, was created and continued to exist for the righteous brought to maturity through Israel by upholding and following its Torah.<sup>21</sup>

With this background we are better able to understand many of the statements relating to the 'Akedah - midrashim which suggest the close causal relationship between Israel and its righteousness on the one hand and the creation and continued existence of the world on the other.

We have seen how Abraham and other righteous men become a model for future generations. Asking the question, "Why is Abraham's name doubled," (v. 11) Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob answers, "(Once) for him and (once) for the (future) Generations. There is no generation which does not have in it one like Abraham...David...Moses...or Samuel."<sup>22</sup> Kasher interprets this on the basis of other midrashim as "to hint that one like him will be found in the coming generations to guard the world through his merit."<sup>23</sup>

Not only is the world guarded through the merit of these righteous men, but it is upon their merit that the world was created. Here in particular Abraham and Isaac are singled out.

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to create the world, the ministering angels said to him, WHAT IS MAN THAT YOU REMEMBER HIM. (Psalm 8:5) The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, "You say, 'What is man that you remember him?'.... Behold I show you Abraham's glory as it is written in scripture AND GOD REMEMBERED ABRAHAM. (Genesis 19:20) You say, 'And man that I should remember him,' as it is written in scripture AND GOD VISITED SARAH." (Genesis 21:1) He said to them, "You are destined to see the father who slaughtered the son and the son who is slaughtered in sacrifice of God's name."<sup>24</sup>

Again, a delightful statement in the Tanchuma shows the special task of Abraham and Isaac. We have read of Satan meeting father and son on the road to divert them from their goal. Here Satan, angered that Abraham and Isaac are not to be dissuaded, sets a big river before them. Abraham enters to his knees and then to his neck. Then he complains to God that neither he nor Isaac will be left to unify God's name.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, answered: "By your life, through you shall my name be unified in the world." Immediately, the Holy One, Blessed be He, commanded the spring, the river dried up and they stood on dry land.<sup>25</sup>

The Patriarchs receive the blessing of the world by means of the sacrifice each has made.<sup>26</sup> The world would have been destroyed if Israel had not taken the Torah; indeed, all of the good things of the world came about because of Israel's having accepted the Torah.<sup>27</sup> Without Israel the nations of the world would not continue to exist.<sup>28</sup> Even far distant nations are blessed only because of Israel.<sup>29</sup> As long as Israel continues to do righteously, the nations of the world will be blessed.<sup>30</sup> Israel and its righteous men are the pillars of the world. Abraham and Isaac, in the events of Genesis 22 display the faithfulness and love of God, the ideal moral behavior which makes Israel worthy of this honor.

#### The 'Akedah and Merit

That the 'Akedah is singled out as a special event from which the nations are to enjoy merit is made very clear. Levy suggests

that the submission of Isaac in being bound upon the altar is regarded in Jewish theology as the historic cause of the imputation of virtue to his descendants.<sup>31</sup>

He is quick to point up the fact that "the 'Akedah does not stand alone in its presumptive beneficent influence on posterity."<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the other patriarchs are included; merit is accrued from other righteous personalities. "But,"

he continues, "this slight variation does not affect the general validity of the conclusion...that the theory of 'Original Virtue' is modelled on lines analogous to the Christian notion of Original Sin."<sup>33</sup>

Professor Levy errs in his making Original Virtue and Original Sin analogous, the former the Jewish counterpart of the latter. He ignores the large collection of rabbinic statements which argue over the time limit of imputed merit or virtue. Obviously, merit in Judaism does not assume the importance and central position that is fostered upon the Christian concept of Original Sin. Moreover, merit, despite Professor Levy's clarification, does not hinge on the 'Akedah alone. All the patriarchs and other biblical heroes seem to share in it. While Abraham and Isaac do assume a central position in the Merit idea, the role Levy would give them and the deed on Mt. Moriah is overemphasized.<sup>34</sup>

Cohon suggests this in his discussion of Imputed Merit.<sup>35</sup> Marmorstein, as well, maintains that "of all the fathers, Isaac has the greatest share in bringing about atonement of Israel's sin. The Sacrifice of Isaac is referred to in this connection numerous times in the prayers and homilies in these centuries, although the merits of Isaac are seldom alluded to in the Aggadah."<sup>36</sup> We will return to deal with the peculiar relationship of Isaac to the Doctrine of Merit and Vicarious Atonement,<sup>37</sup> but only after we have investigated thoroughly the 'Akedah and Abraham the protagonist as sources of Merit.

In beginning our investigation, we must remember that the Rabbis were interested in finding Merit in the deeds and actions of the Patriarchs. Merit is earned through faith and love of God and by the performance of deeds, commandments which demonstrate their zeal and unbending belief.<sup>38</sup> We have already seen that the tests which Abraham underwent were brought together by the Rabbis; a connection was made between them. They are all seen as demonstrations of Abraham's love. The 'Akedah is the tenth and final test in which Abraham exhibits his "unswerving devotion to God" and by which merit is stored up for the people.<sup>39</sup>

The rabbis imagine Abraham as himself cognizant of the relation between the tests. Commenting on וְיִשְׁכַּח אֱבֶרֶת (v. 16) they offer these words:

Another explanation: What is the need for this oath. Rabbi Chama in the name Rabbi Chanina: He (Abraham) said to Him: "Swear to me that you will not try me anymore from now on." This is comparable to a king who was married to a woman. She bore him one son. He divorced her...a second son... he divorced her...a third...he divorced her.<sup>40</sup> When she bore him a tenth son all of them gathered to the king and said, "Promise us that you will not divorce our mother again." Thus, when Abraham our father was tested with the tenth test he said to God, "Swear to me that you won't test me from now on."<sup>41</sup>

Here, Abraham himself is pleading for the future generations, based on his ten trials.

The Rabbis were indeed quick to tie together series of events. Using the number ten, they compared the ten times that his descendants tried the Holy One, Blessed be

He, in the wilderness. The Merit of Abraham stands for them, God having advanced the "healing" to the "wound."<sup>42</sup>

Moses recalls before God the ten tests as he pleads for his people:

Moses said to Him, "Do you remember that you tested Abraham with ten tests? Let this 'ten' (tests of Abraham) counter-balance the 'ten' (commandments) which we have destroyed."<sup>43</sup>

The children themselves invoke Abraham's merit in their own defense:

We are descendants of that same man who was tested with ten tests from God, Let his merit stand for us.<sup>44</sup>

The ten tests are invoked together, but their ultimate significance is overshadowed by the 'Akedah itself. We will see how the deed of Abraham is developed and exalted, his action becomes the finest demonstration of faith, love and zealousness for God. Isaac, too, takes on a significance which is completely absent from the Biblical narrative.<sup>45</sup> And matching the magnificent act of obedience is God's consideration of Abraham's descendants as he awards them the merit earned by the principals acting out the command of God.

#### Abraham A Source of Merit

We are struck by the portrait of Abraham drawn by the rabbis. They are conscious of the deep pain he must have felt, sorrow hidden by tears of inner grief,<sup>46</sup> and yet, "when the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Abraham, TAKE YOUR SON, he rose early in the morning and took him (Isaac) quickly and zealously."<sup>47</sup> The Sifre suggests the magnitude

41.

of Abraham's faithfulness, even hinting at Abraham's evaluation of his own life vis-a-vis Isaac's.

Even if God requested of our father his eyeball, Abraham would have surrendered it to him....He would even have given him his soul which is more beloved to him than anything, as it is written in Scripture, TAKE YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON ( יחיד ) (v. 2) And is it not known that Isaac was his son, his יחיד?

Then calling upon Psalm verse 22:21 "Save my soul ( נפש ) from the sword and my יחיד from the power of the dog," the Midrash continues:

But נפש is called יחיד as it is written SAVE MY SOUL FROM THE SWORD, יחיד FROM THE POWER OF THE DOG.<sup>48</sup>

And again in the words of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai:

The Holy One, Blessed be He said to him, "By your life, I consider it as if I would have told you to slay yourself and you would have not tarried....on my name you would have obeyed, slaughtering for the sake of my name....

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him, "You did not hold back your son, your יחיד. But it is already explained as Isaac. What then is יחיד? Abraham's soul, for the soul is called יחיד as it is written, SAVE MY SOUL ( נפש ) FROM THE SWORD, יחיד FROM THE POWER OF THE DOG (Psalm 22:21)<sup>49</sup>

How compassionate is the father pictured at the very moment of the sacrifice:

He sends forth his hand to take the knife and his eyes stream forth tears and they fall to Isaac's eyes. (Tears) of a compassionate father.

and nevertheless

He went rejoicing to fulfill his creator's will.<sup>50</sup>



He is happy to fulfill a מצוה

....He did not do it under compulsion, but in joy, as it is written, AND HIS COMMAND HE DESIRED VERY MUCH (Psalm 112:1)<sup>51</sup>

The rabbis do not ignore Isaac. Far from it. They draw a portrait of him similar to that of the father. Abraham and Isaac are seen as צדיקים, joyous in their effort.<sup>52</sup> They walk together in joy:

One to bind and one to be bound  
One to slay and one to be slain.<sup>53</sup>

The angels see that "the father binds with all his heart and the son allows himself to be bound with all his heart."<sup>54</sup> The Rabbi described every movement, finding in them inspiration and meaning. Father and son bringing the stones and the fire and the wood are pictured thusly: "Abraham, like one who prepares his son's wedding, and Isaac, like one who prepares his own Chupah."<sup>55</sup> And indeed both are to receive a blessing. Commenting on ברך אברהם ויברכה אברהם

, the doubling of the blessing and the increase in seed (v. 17) they say,

A blessing for the father and a blessing  
for the son  
a multitude for the father and a multitude  
for the son.<sup>56</sup>

#### Recipients of Merit

The Rabbis were not satisfied to simply describe the emotional attitude of father and son. The deed was too terrifying and unusual. The father is about to kill his son; God's promise that Abraham's seed will inherit the

earth is about to be broken. Into the mouths of the ministering angels are placed words of astonishment at the magnitude of the deed and petitions for mercy before the Holy One, Blessed be He.

....The ministering angels gathered in groups (in heaven) above....What were they crying? THE HIGHWAYS LAY WASTE, THE WAY-FARER CEASES, HE HAS BROKEN THE COVENANT, DESPISES THE CITIES (Isaiah 33:8) Does not God desire Jerusalem and the Temple which he intended to leave to Isaac's children? HE DID NOT CONSIDER MAN (Is. 33:8) Was there no merit for Abraham; is there no prior value (merit) for all creatures?<sup>57</sup>

Their problem is a familiar one: How can God reverse himself, turning back the covenant he has entered into with Abraham? If the son is killed, then the promise (Genesis 21:12) that Abraham will prosper and multiply through Isaac his son is broken and unfulfilled. The ministering angels feel this injustice; Abraham himself is conscious of a contradiction.

How well the portrait of the suffering father is drawn, the father who even in his pain expresses the moral contradiction he sees before him. The Midrash selects a familiar Psalm verse to establish the outline of the portrait:

Though he went his way crying,  
Carrying the trail of his seed;  
Surely, he will come in joy,  
Bearing his sheathes. (Psalm 126:6)

And then fills it in from the 'Akedah narrative:

HE WENT HIS WAY This is Abraham, for when the Holy One, Blessed be He, tested him, saying, TAKE YOUR SON....even though he was crying in his heart, his lips said to God, HERE AM I.

HE WENT HIS WAY. When? At the time he was carrying the trail of his seed, as it is written in Scripture, FOR YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL CONTINUE THROUGH ISAAC (Genesis 21:12)

SURELY HE WILL COME CARRYING HIS SHEATHES. AND ABRAHAM RETURNED TO HIS SERVANTS (v. 19) Who caused him to receive a reward for having kept quiet and made himself like a mute, as it is written, AND LIKE A MUTE, I WILL NOT OPEN MY MOUTH (Psalm 38:14) For he has an opportunity to say to Him: Yesterday you promised me that your descendants shall continue through Isaac. And now you are telling me to kill him. But he did not say anything. He kept quiet, therefore, SURELY HE WILL COME IN JOY, CARRYING HIS SHEATHES.<sup>58</sup>

The astonishment at the contrast between Abraham's faithfulness and the potential of God breaking the covenant was not left unchallenged. For the rabbi it became a *מחנה* to seek merit for future generations based on Abraham's faithful deed. Many different versions of the petition can be found, and a fuller discussion of the date and significance of the prayer attributed to Rabbi Yochanan will be given below.<sup>59</sup> Here, suffice to suggest the tone of the prayer as it appears in *Bereshith Rabbah*:

God called the name of the place *יהוה יראא*  
Rabbi  
Yochanan: Lord of the World, when you said to me TAKE YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON I had something to reply: Yesterday you said to me, your descendants will be called through Isaac, and now you command me TAKE YOUR SON. God forbid that I should have done so (to reply), rather I restrained my compassion to do your will. So may it be your will, Lord our God, that when Isaac's descendants come into trouble, you will accord to them the 'Akedah and you will be filled with compassion towards them.<sup>60</sup>

And in the *Mishneh*, where one version of the prayer is

recorded, we read, "He who answered Abraham at Mt. Moriah may he answer you."<sup>61</sup>

The structuring of a prayer by which Abraham's merit could be invoked for future generations was very convenient. Indeed, "he who answered Abraham at Mt. Moriah" was to answer those prayers. God was to abandon his attribute of justice in favor of mercy and compassion for the Patriarchs' descendants.<sup>62</sup>

When the Egyptians were pursuing the Children of Israel, God's compassion prevailed and He said to Moses, "I remember the prayer of Abraham, my beloved, which he prayed when I commanded him to slay his son Isaac. Immediately, he accepted the command in love."<sup>63</sup>

Commenting on *יהוה יראא* (v.14), Ta'anith suggests that God will remember the 'Akedah and be filled with compassion.<sup>64</sup> He will turn justice to mercy.<sup>65</sup>

God promises to remain with the children of Israel in every hour of their trouble.<sup>66</sup> Using Psalm verse 60:6, now in another context, *מג* is understood as *מנוח*, a place of refuge.

AND GOD TESTED ( *נסה* ) ABRAHAM. This is what Scripture says *נחמה ליראך נה להחיותם* (Psalm 60:6) (meaning) a place of refuge, for Israel is delivered from the judgment of Gehinom, but the wicked have no shelter, as it is written, THE EYES OF THE WICKED WILL BE DIM AND A PLACE OF REFUGE WILL BE LOST TO THEM.<sup>67</sup>

For the Merit of the 'Akedah the children of Israel will be relieved from their enemies:

Rab Chafni, son of Isaac, said: Just as our father Abraham was binding his son below, the Holy One, Blessed be He bound the guardian angels of the idolators above (in heaven).<sup>68</sup>



And again, commenting on the כול of the blessing (v. 17)

Just as the sand is a fence to the sea - when the sea storms the waves are broken when they reach the sand - so with Israel: as many times as the nations rise up against Israel, in the end they are broken before them (Israel). So you will find with Pharaoh, Saisa, Babylon, Haman, and the Greeks; likewise all men are destined to fall before them, as it is written: I SET MY REVENGE AGAINST EDOM (Ezek. 25:14)<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, שער אויב in the same blessing (v. 17) is understood as a specific enemy whom Israel will destroy, חמור , the people of Palmyra, who participated in the destruction of both the first and the second Temples.<sup>70</sup>

Heinemann discusses at length the method by which the rabbis sought to relate events in Scripture, one to another. Of particular interest is the qualitative similarity between a deed and its rewards.<sup>71</sup> The act of Abraham's binding the donkey himself (v. 3) is brought together with other such unusual "bindings."

"Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass," (v. 3) Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said, "Love upsets accepted mode of behavior" (for we read) Abraham rose early in the morning (and saddled his ass)." But didn't he have servants? (Yes,) but love upsets accepted mode of behavior.<sup>72</sup>

The midrash proceeds now to describe other examples of love and hate bringing about such unusual behavior: Balaam in his hate saddles his ass himself. Pharaoh readies his own chariot. And Joseph, overcome by the love of father, readies the chariot to go out to meet Jacob. Those acts done out of love come to counterbalance the similar deeds of enemies:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said...."Abraham's binding....counterbalances the binding of Balaam who went out to curse Israel. Joseph's preparing his own chariot counterbalances Pharaoh's - who went to pursue Israel."<sup>73</sup>

Heinemann underlines the significance of this midrash. The rabbis point out the similarity of expressions to emphasize that enthusiasm causes a man to do unusual things. But Shimon ben Yochai has carried the implication one step further. The identification of like deeds of שונא and אומה shows that the deeds which our fathers performed put the medicine before the wound, wounds which our enemies are plotting to give us ...

He (Shimon ben Yochai) comes to tie the deeds of the righteous which are in our power to do with the dangers which were annulled by them. The rule which he feels, (even though he does not express it in full) is the rule of harmony between our deeds and our fate. This is not a psychological rule, but a moral one.<sup>74</sup>

Thus there is an intimate relationship between the acts of different generations, one common, interwoven fate moulded together by the principle of merit.

At the time that Abraham is binding his son, God prepared two lambs, one for the morning sacrifice and one for the evening. When Israel brings the תמיד offering to the altar and reads Scripture, God will remember the Binding of Isaac.<sup>75</sup>

But more specific parallels between the 'Akedah and particular Biblical happenings are evident:

The word הנני appears in Exodus 16:4 and, of course, in Genesis 22. The former הנני occurs in context where God brings food ( לחם ) to the Israelites

wandering in the wilderness. It has resulted from merit earned by the latter הניני .

Rabbi Chanina said, When the Holy One, Blessed be He, called to Abraham, he answered saying, HERE AM I הניני . God said to him: "By your life, with the same expression I will reward your children, as it is written, BEHOLD, I AM (הניני) CAUSING BREAD TO RAIN DOWN UPON YOU FROM THE HEAVENS." (Exodus 16:4)<sup>76</sup>

God declared that he will save Israel by cleaving the Red Sea upon the merit of Abraham's having cleaved the wood for the sacrifice.<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, events having occurred in the third day are related first to ירידת יום השלישי של מתן התורה and then to the third day mentioned in the 'Akedah. A series of events which occurred on the third day are listed and then the question:

By what merit (did these things occur)?...  
Rabenu and Rabbi Levi: Rabenu said, By the Merit of the third day of the giving of Torah  
...and Rabbi Levi said, By the Merit of the third day of Abraham our father, as it is written in scripture, ON THE THIRD DAY....HE SAW THAT PLACE FROM AFAR.<sup>78</sup>

And again in Esther Rabban the principle is established that Israel never suffers more than three days based upon Abraham's experience.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, merit is accrued to future generations because of Abraham's act of שמחה , of bowing in prayer.<sup>80</sup>

The knife itself is singled out for special significance:

Why is it written מאכלה and not כלין (regular knife)? For Israel ate food by its hand.<sup>81</sup>

Or in another formulation of the same thought:

All food which Israel eats in this world is eaten by the merit of that knife (מאכלה).<sup>82</sup>

As well, the name הר הבוריה and the cryptic statement of verse 14 ויקרא שם המקום ההוא יהוה יראה אשלח calls to the reader with the familiar words הר הבוריה . הר הבוריה is taken alternatively as a place from which fear of God instruction (Torah), goes forth, where the righteous teach before God and a place from which God shoots down the wicked and takes them to Gehinom.<sup>83</sup> מוריה is equated with Jerusalem and the Temple.<sup>84</sup> Heinemann underscores the historical importance of particular place names. The altar is seen as that one upon which Adam and Noah and his sons each use.<sup>85</sup> It is המזבח , THE altar which David and Solomon used and that site which is destined to be the Temple.<sup>86</sup> Thus the 'Akedah becomes the foundation of the commandments of the people of Israel and its hope.<sup>87</sup>

#### IV. ISAAC AND MERIT

The role that Isaac plays in the Rabbinic concept of Merit is hard to discern. A general examination shows that "the merits of the second patriarch do not figure to the same degree....as that of the other two. Individually, his (Isaac's) merits are seldom alluded to."<sup>1</sup> And yet this same author suggests that "of all the fathers, Isaac had the greatest share in bringing about the atonement of Israel's sin."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the story of the binding of Isaac does occupy a dominant position in the liturgy concerned with atonement. The theme appears many times. Isaac is the defender and advocate of Israel in times of distress and visitation on account of sins or when Israel is being judged.<sup>3</sup> But it is important to realize that although the references are found many times in the prayers and homilies of the Rabbis, the particular merits of Isaac are seldom alluded to in the Aggadah.<sup>4</sup> In this distinction we see the beginnings of a discussion of the unique position Isaac assumes in the merit idea.

##### The Character of Isaac

The portrait of Isaac presented by the Rabbis is indeed unusual; its lack of relationship to the Biblical understanding of the event is cause for wonder. Isaac's faithfulness and righteousness are emphasized. He is viewed as a partner, climbing Mt. Moriah with his father

to build the altar. They walk together, "one to bind, one to be bound; one to slay, one to be slain."<sup>5</sup> As Abraham petitions God to bring merit from the 'Akedah, so does Isaac offer a similar prayer. In Ekhah Rabbah Abraham's petition is recorded in a version similar to that with which we are now familiar. Immediately following we read:

Isaac began, saying, "When Father said to me, 'God will provide the Lamb; (you are) the offering, my son,' I did not hesitate over your command; but I was wilfully bound on the altar, and I stretched out my neck under the knife. Will you not consider this to my favor and have compassion on my descendants!"<sup>6</sup>

And in Shemoth Rabbah merit is accrued to the people about to be killed for Isaac's voluntary deed. Moses pleads with God not to kill the people in the wilderness. He invokes the merit of Abraham and Jacob and then petitions:

If they (the children of Israel) must be killed, remember Isaac who stretched out his neck on the altar to be slaughtered for the sake of your name.<sup>7</sup>

Again, when God sees that Israel has no merit to enter the Holy Land, Isaac is remembered and merit imputed from him to the children of Israel.<sup>8</sup> Identical to a statement describing Abraham's concern with future generations we read:

Isaac went to sit down at the threshold of Gehinom to save his children from punishment of hell.<sup>9</sup>

Each of the Patriarchs is seen as loving God "with all his heart." We know that this applies to Isaac "for he bound himself on the altar."<sup>10</sup> Both Abraham and Isaac are credited with maintaining all of Torah:

Abraham maintained the Torah, all of it, for he offered a sacrifice...a ram. Isaac maintained what is written in Torah. He threw himself before his father as a slaughtered lamb.<sup>11</sup>

Not only is Isaac seen as an equal partner in the events that transpired on Mt. Moriah, and not only is Isaac consistently credited with merit for his voluntary and conscious act of sacrifice, but he is pictured as being in conflict with Abraham. Isaac asks the question (v. 7) and Abraham answers. (v. 8) The Rabbis seize the language of the narrative, וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִי , and ask:

Why does it say "Abraham" and not just "his father"? For he was not considered as a father, but as a rival contestant.<sup>12</sup>

Thus we come to realize that there is considerable discussion that sets off Isaac as a separate character, important to Rabbinic understandings of Genesis 22. The occupation with this new development is exciting; the investigation will be greatly rewarding as we come to understand one school of thought which bestows great significance on the merit and power of expiation that Isaac brings forth.

#### 1. Isaac's Age

In verse five of our narrative Abraham instructs his servant boys to remain at a certain spot with the donkey. He explains that Isaac and he will go further, pray and return. The text reads וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבְרָהָם אֶת יְצָחָק וְאֶת שְׁנֵי עֲבָדָיו (v. 5) This was very disconcerting to the Rabbis for, surely, Abraham should have used the singular: he alone was to return from the act of prayer. Some rabbis suggest that he used the

plural so as not to excite Isaac.<sup>13</sup> Abraham had to hold his hand, says another rabbi, so that Isaac would not flee.<sup>14</sup>

In his exposition of verse five Ibn Ezra suggests the same idea, and, characteristically, sums up all other arguments on the subject. It will be well for us to review his comments as a prelude to further discussion:

Our Rabbis of blessed memory said that Isaac was 37 years old when he was bound; if this was an authentic tradition we would accept it. But, when employing reason, this view is incorrect. For then it would have been worthy for Isaac's righteousness to be revealed and his reward to be twice that of his father, for he would have been giving himself willingly for the sacrifice. But the scriptural text says nothing about Isaac.

Others say that he was 5 years of age. This too is improbable for he carried the wood for the burnt offering.

Most reasonable is the view that he was about 13 years of age and his father forced him and bound him against his will. The proof of this is that his father kept the secret from him and said, GOD WILL PROVIDE A LAMB, for if he had said to him, "You are the offering," Isaac probably would have fled.<sup>15</sup>

Isaac's age is a critical issue, for it becomes an index to the degree of his involvement. If Isaac is young, then Abraham could have bound him against his will. If he is an adult, then he must have stretched out his neck willingly; otherwise the elderly Abraham could not have accomplished the binding. Isaac, in the flower of youth, would have been too strong.

How old is Isaac? The Midrash, concerned with establishing the act as voluntary or compelled, answers the question. The only specific mention of his age is as an

adult of 37, or at the youngest, at age 26.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, we will see that with the exception of a few references to Abraham having concealed the final act from him so as not to excite the young boy, Isaac is seen as cognizant of the act and willing to participate in it.

## 2. Isaac's Active Awareness

Was Isaac aware of what was happening? Many Rabbis answer with a resounding "yes." They offer interesting interpretations and additions to the original Biblical text to support their answer.

Commenting on Isaac's seemingly naive question, it is written

Isaac merited before Abraham in five things: strength, wealth, wisdom, stature, and length of years. How do we know that he had wisdom? He asked his father, BEHOLD, THE FIRE AND THE WOOD, WHERE IS THE LAMB FOR THE OFFERING?<sup>17</sup>

The implication here is that he really knew the answer, but pretended as if he did not understand.<sup>18</sup> But this is a rather subtle approach; the Rabbis were ready to go further, building stories which would demonstrate Isaac's knowledge of the fact that he was to be the offering and, consequently, his willingness to be sacrificed.

One strand of midrash creates a series of conversations between Isaac and Ishmael. The phrase אחר הנריים האלה is interpreted as referring to incidents between the two sons:

AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS What doubting was there? Isaac doubted for he was having a discussion with Ishmael (for

Ishmael was boasting). Ishmael said, "I am greater than you. I am inheriting the world for I am my father's first born, and the first born always gets a double inheritance." Isaac said to him, "Tell me, what does the Holy One, Blessed be He, have of yours?"

Ishmael: I'll tell you what I did. If I did nothing else, I was 13 years old when father circumcised me. I could have said, 'It is impossible to circumcise me.' But I gave my soul and I accepted it.

Isaac: Look, you only lent the Holy One, Blessed be He, three drops of blood and I know that when the Holy One, Blessed be He, requests to slaughter me - and I am 37 years old - and God says to father to sacrifice me, I will not tarry.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the angel, "It is time." Immediately, he jumped on Abraham, as it is written, AND IT CAME TO PASS AFTER THESE THINGS.<sup>19</sup> Here you learn that there was doubting there.

Similarly, we read in the words of Rabbi Yehudan:

We have searched the book of Genesis, but did not find (the reference to) THESE THINGS. What did (the author) see to say AFTER THESE THINGS ...TAKE YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON? (He saw) nothing other than all the things that were between Isaac and Ishmael. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Isaac, "By your life, I will fulfill your desire."<sup>20</sup>

There is one further variation in which Isaac, arguing with Ishmael, swears:

Would that God would reveal himself to me, telling me that I should cut off one of my limbs.<sup>21</sup>

For some the fabrication of a "prologue" is not necessary. The ambiguously worded eighth verse of Genesis 22 provides an opening for Rabbinic discussion which would leave Isaac with clear knowledge of his role in the activity. By



changing the masoretic punctuation we may read,

אלוהים יראה לו חסד, לעולה בני, "God will show himself a lamb, my son is the offering."<sup>22</sup> Even without a new punctuation, understanding חסד from the Greek meaning "you," we again have the father directly informing his son.<sup>23</sup>

A delightful midrash, commenting on לעולה בני conveys the same idea. In great detail Isaac is pictured as fully cognizant of the act, and yet, behaving as a צדיק, joyous before God:

THE RIGHTEOUS REJOICED IN GOD (Psalm 33:1)  
When the righteous men see the Divine Presence of the Holy One, Blessed be He, immediately they sing a song. So we found when Isaac was bound and he saw the heavens opening, immediately he sang a song.

When Isaac said to his father, BEHOLD, THE FIRE AND THE WOOD: WHERE IS THE LAMB FOR THE OFFERING? his father replied, "לעולה בני" - "You are the lamb for the offering." Immediately, Isaac was bound above the fire. He began to see the Divine Presence above him in heaven, standing to receive him as a pleasant odor. Thus Isaac was overjoyed and he sang a song. What song did he sing? - the song of sacrifice.<sup>24</sup>

We have seen the introduction of Satan by the Rabbis. He is a disturbing influence which the faithful Abraham overcomes. As a result, Abraham's faith in God is even deeper and more permanent. The Rabbis have Satan turn to Isaac after the unsuccessful attempt at diverting Abraham. From this midrash we learn that Isaac is aware of the act to be performed. More important, we understand the close relationship between Isaac's awareness and his reaction. But how subtle the difference between confident father and impetuous son! Abraham is unmoved. Isaac, too, is not to be diverted, but

a question, one question, leaves his lips. Hear the conversation between Isaac and Satan:

Satan: Son of an unfortunate one, he is going to slay you.

Isaac: For that purpose (we are going).

Satan: If so, all those things which your mother made for you will go to Ishmael, the hated one. He will be the heir. Does it not bother you?

If something is not completely effective, it is partly so, as it is written, AND ISAAC SAID TO ABRAHAM HIS FATHER: WHERE IS THE LAMB FOR THE OFFERING? AND ABRAHAM SAID, THE LORD WILL PROVIDE THE LAMB, MY SON, and if not, you will be the lamb for the offering. AND THEY WENT THE TWO OF THEM TOGETHER, One to bind, and one to be bound; one to slay and one to be slain.<sup>25</sup>

In yet another description, commenting on AND HE PUT THE WOOD ON ISAAC, HIS SON, Bereshith Rabbah says:

To what can Isaac be compared? To one who goes out to be burned and his (kindling) wood is on his shoulders.<sup>26</sup>

And in one other comment, Isaac, carrying the wood, is likened to "one who bears his own cross on his shoulders."<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Isaac's Voluntary Submission

The portrait of Isaac is growing. For many Rabbis he is an adult, fully aware of the consequences of the journey to Mt. Moriah. And now we learn something more: Isaac is aware and he cooperates (willingly). His submission is totally voluntary. He, like Abraham, is aware of God's command. His faith in God, his fear of the Creator is no less than that of the father.

The Rabbis, dwelling upon the deeds of the Patriarchs, recall Abraham and Jacob, their positive deeds. Of Isaac

they say,

Who was so active before Thee as Isaac,  
who allowed himself to be bound upon the  
altar!<sup>28</sup>

Isaac, himself, reflects his active and voluntary participation and his deep concern as he speaks with his father on Mt. Moriah:

When Abraham sought to bind his son, Isaac said: Father, I am young and I am afraid lest my body move in fear of danger and I will grieve you, and lest the sacrifice be void; it will not be credited to you as a sacrifice. Hence, tie me well. Immediately, AND HE BOUND ISAAC.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, Isaac said to Abraham, his father:

Father, tie me well, my hands and legs, lest I rebel and profane the command, HONOR THY FATHER....Abraham tied his hands and leg and bound him on the altar.<sup>30</sup>

These statements reveal two important considerations.

(1) Isaac admits himself to be a נער , young in age, yet he is old enough to be fully conscious of what is to happen. (2) Isaac is concerned with being a proper sacrifice so that his father will be able to fulfill the command.

An interesting midrash carries us still further into a realm in which Isaac not only eagerly sacrifices himself so that his father can fulfill God's command, but he is concerned with events after his death. Abraham, in response to Isaac's innocent question tells his son what will really happen. Isaac replies:

Isaac: My poor old mother, what will you tell her?

Abraham: I will tell her that Isaac had already been slain (before being sacrificed).

Isaac: Won't she die from affliction? When you burn me, take my ashes and bring them to my mother so that by them she will be consoled.<sup>31</sup>

A lovely midrash brings together the concern of Abraham and Isaac, father and son eager to perform God's commandment:

AND WHERE IS THE LAMB FOR AN OFFERING? Isaac said, BEHOLD, THE FIRE AND THE WOOD, WHERE IS THE LAMB FOR AN OFFERING? Abraham replied, "My son, you are the offering."

At that moment the expression on Abraham's face changed and he thought, "I am an old man and he is young; perhaps he will run away. What will become of me?" Isaac said, "Father, do not fear. May it be God's will that one quarter of my blood be accepted (as atonement for Israel).<sup>32</sup> But tie me well so that I do not move. And when you return to Sarah, my mother, do not tell her suddenly, lest she injure herself. If she is on the roof, lest she fall and die; if she is standing by a cistern, lest she throw herself in; if she is holding a knife, lest she kill herself with it.

At the same time that Isaac was agreeing (to the sacrifice) with word of mouth, his heart was saying, "Who will save me from the hand of my father; I have no helper other than the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is written MY HELP IS FROM GOD, THE CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH. (Psalm 121:2) And the ministering angels were saying, "Come, see two righteous men: the father who slays and the son who stands ready to be slain. And they do not delay one another".<sup>33</sup>

For the present let us note (a) Isaac's concern, and (b) the use of Isaac's ashes (and blood) for a specific purpose following his death (sic).

Isaac and the Ram - An Offering of Atonement

Those Rabbis who make a case for an adult Isaac voluntarily offering himself to be sacrificed seem to have a goal:



to find in this patriarch an instrument of Vicarious Atonement for the sins of future generations. To accomplish this they proceed to further elaborate on the Biblical account.

But what is consumed in the 'Akedah? In the Biblical account it is a ram. We read: וישא אברהם את עיניו והנה איל אחר נאחו בסך בקרניו וילך אברהם ויקח את האיל (v. 13). The text is not clear; the words אחר and חתה כנו multiply the complexities. At some point a ram is offered as an עולה. More we can not say with surety.

THIS IS THE LAW OF THE BURNT OFFERING  
(Leviticus 6:2) And what is a burnt offering-  
ing? That which is burnt before the Holy  
One, Blessed be He, and atones for Israel's  
sins. For when Abraham made the offering of  
the ram, as it is written AND HE LIFTED UP  
HIS EYES AND LOOKED, AND, BEHOLD, A RAM אֶמְרָא.  
And what is אֶמְרָא ? The Holy One, Blessed be  
He, saw that (Abraham) came with all his heart  
and soul to make an offering - Isaac, his son,  
as the עֹלָה - He sent a ram....to offer it  
up in place of ( חֲנוּךְ ) Isaac. This is what  
the text means when it says, וְהָיָה אֵילִל  
אֶמְרָא .... 34

Hence, the ram is a substitute for Isaac, and, more important, the act is considered meritorious for future generations:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, promised Abraham that when his descendants would offer up burnt offerings God would accept them immediately (as offerings of atonement).<sup>35</sup>

And he took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Rabbi Berechyan said: The pleasant odor of the sacrificed ram went up before the Throne of Glory and was pleasant to Him like the pleasant odor of Isaac. Then He swore to bless (the children of Israel) in this world and in the world to come.<sup>36</sup>

Abraham said before Him: "Lord of the Worlds! Behold I am slaying the ram. Consider it as if my son, Isaac, is slaughtered before you."

He skinned it like the ram.... "Consider it as if my son Isaac is skinned" before you."

Thus, with everything he did with the ram he said, "Consider it as if it were done with my son Isaac. Behold, this in place of this; this as a substitute for this; this in exchange for this." 37

AND OFFER HIM AS A BURNT OFFERING      תחת כנור  
Abraham said, Lord of the Worlds! Consider it  
as if I sacrificed my son first and afterwards  
sacrificed this ram      חתני (after him) as you  
say, AND AZARYAH WAS GATHERED TO HIS FATHERS AND  
YOTHAN, HIS SON, RULED AFTER HIM      תחתיו  
meaning      אחריו      38

tant subject of discussion. The Rabbis ask where the ram came from: Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Yosi suggest differing answers:

The former said, It came to hand (provisionally) at that time.

The latter said: (The ram) was at the head of Isaac's flock and it was called Isaac, but it was not recognized. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said, "Let this Isaac come in place of that Isaac."<sup>39</sup>

Hence, Isaac and the ram are equated; the ram's sacrifice is considered as if Isaac himself was offered up.

Now we can better understand Rashi's quote from the Midrash Aggadah. Commenting on verse 14 he includes this explanation:

THE LORD WILL SEE (CHOOSE) this (binding) to pardon Israel every year and to save them from punishment so that in every generation, on this day, it will be said, "On the mountain, the Lord will see Isaac's ashes burnt and standing as atonement."<sup>40</sup>

This parallels other comments on the phrase יִרְאוּ יְיָ : In answer to the question, What did God see?, Rabbi Isaac Napacha said: "He saw Isaac's ashes resting in that same place,"<sup>41</sup> and Rab answers, "He beheld the ashes of (the ram of) Isaac as it says, GOD WILL SEE FOR HIMSELF THE LAMB."<sup>42</sup>

The ram and Isaac are often equated. So, too, are the ashes left on the altar considered as those of Isaac - the Ram. For these rabbis it is "as if" (כְּאִילוּ ) Isaac was burned and his ashes remain on the altar.<sup>43</sup> Even though Isaac does not die, Scripture considers it as if he was slaughtered.<sup>44</sup>

Spiegel suggests the importance of the ashes in the custom associated with fasting. The ark is placed in the street of the city and roasted ashes are placed on it. Rabbi Samuel bar Nachman offers as an explanation of the ritual the statement, "In order to recall the merit of Isaac."<sup>45</sup> Further, Spiegel records a petition from the Shofar service of Rosh Hashanah that calls for God's mercy based on the completed sacrifice at Mt. Moriah:

Look at the dust of Isaac our father who was burned on the altar and deal with your children in mercy.<sup>46</sup>

This is the goal of the Rabbis: From Isaac's voluntary sacrifice, which, in contrast to the Biblical text, is completed, we find merit and atonement for the children of Israel. In the Temple ritual the ashes are important as the sign of atonement. Here, the ashes, remaining on the altar, are the symbol of the completed act, of Isaac's merit. They stand from generation to generation to remind God of his obligation to excuse their sins. Thus, they become a symbol of Vicarious Atonement.

This is stated, quite explicitly, in the Tanchuma:

When Isaac's descendants are sinning and becoming involved in trouble, let the Binding of Isaac be remembered and considered before you as if his ashes were burnt on the altar and pardon them and redeem them from their trouble.<sup>47</sup>

Just as the ashes have a redeeming value, either directly - in the Temple ritual - or vicariously - in this discussion, so too is the blood important in the system of expiation. Both the blood and the ashes, indeed, any injury

that shows suffering or death, have the power to expiate man's sins and reconcile him with his God. The ashes, the blood, death and suffering all serve as instruments of atonement.<sup>48</sup>

#### The 'Akedah and Rosh Hashanah

Having established Isaac as an instrument of vicarious atonement, we can better understand the relationship between the 'Akedah and the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. Marmorstein directs our attention properly:

The merits of the fathers effect atonement and forgiveness for their children's sins.... these Patriarchs appear as solicitors and advocates before God who judges Israel.<sup>49</sup>

The statement of Rabbi Hama ben Hanina illustrates this:

Just as a son of a king, who had a case to defend before his father, is told: "If thou dost desire to be acquitted in my court (judgement), appoint for thy defense that solicitor and thou wilt be acquitted." Likewise God says to Israel, "My children, do you desire that I shall justify you in my judgement? Recall before me the merits of your fathers and I shall pardon you."<sup>50</sup>

Marmorstein continues:

This is particularly the case on the Day of Judgement. This doctrine influenced a great deal of the liturgy of the New Year and that of the Day of Atonement. They had a type of prayer and supplication, of hymns and poems called זכרון אבות, the remembrance of the merits of the fathers.<sup>51</sup>

When we examine the liturgy we find the most significant passages of זכרון אבות as it relates to the 'Akedah in the Zikhronoth section of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service. In that prayer we read:

Our God and God of our Fathers, remember us favorably and visit us with a destiny of eternal salvation and mercy. O Lord our God, remember in our favor the covenant and the lovingkindness and the oath which you swore to Abraham our father at Mt. Moriah and let Abraham our father's binding of Isaac his son on the altar appear before you. He restrained his compassion to perform your will with perfect heart. So too, let your mercy restrain your anger from upon us.<sup>52</sup>

and the prayer ends with the further petition:

For you remember all the forgotten things and there is no forgetting before the throne of your glory, and this day remember the Binding of Isaac and his seed in mercy. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who rememberest the Covenant.<sup>53</sup>

Israel Levi reminds us that the idea was not part of the Temple ritual. We know it from the Aggadah, from a prayer attributed to Rabbi Yochanan, a Palestinian Amora of the third century.<sup>54</sup> The prayer appears with variant readings in a number of sources:

AND ABRAHAM CALLED THE NAME OF THE PLACE יהוה יראתו Rabbi Bibi Rabbah in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: He (Abraham) said before God, "Lord of all the Worlds. From the time that you said to me, TAKE YOUR SON, YOUR ONLY SON, I had something to reply: 'Yesterday you said to me, YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE KNOWN THROUGH ISAAC, and now you say, TAKE YOUR SON.' God forbid that I would not do so. But I withheld my mercy to perform Your desire. So let it be Your desire, O Lord our God, that when Isaac's descendants get into trouble You will remember that binding and be filled with compassion for them."<sup>55</sup>

Other versions convey the same idea. Jerusalem Talmud Ta'anith states that Isaac's descendants will be in trouble with no one to speak in their defense. Abraham pleads that God will be their defender.<sup>56</sup>

Vayikra Habbah is more explicit, distinguishing between God's justice and mercy:

When Isaac's descendants come into the power of transgression and wicked deeds, recall the Binding of Isaac, their father, and move from the throne of justice to the throne of compassion. Be filled with mercy towards them and be compassionate. Turn the attribute of justice to an attribute of mercy.

and a time is given:

When? In the seventh month.<sup>57</sup>

An indication of time and a frame of reference is also suggested in this version:

When, on this day, Isaac's descendants are being judged before you - even though there are a number of accusers accusing them - just as I kept silent and did not answer you, likewise you shall not listen to them.<sup>58</sup>

A connection is made between the Day of Judgement, Rosh Hashanah, and the 'Akedah. Some Rabbis consider the event of Mt. Moriah to have taken place on that day.<sup>59</sup>

It is important to discover when and how the theories of Merit and Vicarious Atonement made their way into the thought of some rabbis. Then we will better be able to understand their relationship to the 'Akedah, and, in turn, their connection with Rosh Hashanah. There are two classic views concerning the date and source of this idea in Jewish literature:

Abraham Geiger, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, suggests that the Rabbis borrowed the idea from Christianity through the Syrian Church in Babylonia and that the borrowing is very late, in the third century of this era. Geiger's

denial of an earlier date is very strong. Human sacrifice is repulsive to Judaism. God does not need recompense to forgive and be merciful to His creature. There is no idea of transfer of sin from one generation to another, or from one man to another. There is no vicarious pardon or sin and no guardianship of atonement. The idea of merit accruing from the 'Akedah is contradictory to the Torah and should be removed from the liturgy.<sup>60</sup>

Geiger supports his case by pointing to the Bible's silence on the matter; the Genesis narrative is not referred to any place in Scripture. The Mishneh makes no reference to it. It mentions only the danger in which Isaac found himself and the prayer of Abraham. Even the shofar which is used at Rosh Hashanah has no specific connection with the ram of the 'Akedah. The horn of any animal, a gazelle or a bull or a ram, could be used.<sup>61</sup> Geiger suggests that only the Babylonian Talmud establishes a connection between the ram's horn and the sacrifice of Isaac:

Why does one blast with the horn of a ram?  
So that I will remember to your favor the  
Binding of Isaac, the son of Abraham.<sup>62</sup>

The author of the idea is Rab, the first head of the Babylonian Academy. It was here in Babylonia that the reading of the 'Akedah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah was adopted. The Mishneh had assigned Genesis 21 for the first day; only on the second day - celebrated in Palestine - was the 'Akedah portion read.

Levi takes Geiger to task on several levels.<sup>63</sup> Surely his preoccupation with Reform created difficulties for him.

Levi suggests that many of the men who concerned themselves with this idea were Palestinians - indeed, none of the important ones lived in Babylonia - and that many of them lived before Rab whom Geiger considered as the author of the relevant Zikhronoth passage in the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service.

More seriously, no one assumes that the Rosh Hashanah 3:3 reference is to the synagogal cult, but rather to the much earlier Temple ritual. Here the rite of sounding the horn is more important than the interpretation. The tradition had never been fixed - the horns of other animals are sometimes referred to.<sup>64</sup>

A more important issue is raised by Levi concerning the Scriptural portion to be read on Rosh Hashanah. If we can discern when and where the 'Akedah became fixed as the reading for that holy day, we have an indication of the origin of ideas of Vicarious Atonement in Rabbinic literature.

Geiger had suggested that the Babylonian school adopted the reading of the 'Akedah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah. The Mishneh assigning Genesis 21 for the first day means that in Palestine, only on the second day was Genesis 22 read.

Büchler<sup>65</sup> takes us to an examination of the sources and to a plausible understanding of how the 'Akedah passage came to be associated with Rosh Hashanah:

In the Mishneh, Megillah 3:5 we read:

On Pesach they read the section מִקְרָא (Lev 23:1 ff) in the Law of the Priests (Leviticus). At Pentecost they read the

section SEVEN WEEKS (Deut 16:9-12): at the New Year IN THE SEVENTH MONTH IN THE FIRST DAY OF THE MONTH (Leviticus 23:23 ff)

These sections were set, according to Büchler, to educate the people in their dispute with the Sadducees.

A gradual change from these portions is recorded in b. Megillah 3:6. More specifically, in the Tosefta, Megillah 3:6, Genesis 21 is given as the reading. "Though only cited by the Tosefta with the formula 'some say,' it must be considered as original." A Boraitha in Megillah 31, the Jerusalem Talmud, Megillah 3:7 and the Pesikta homily suggest two portions - both Leviticus 2? and Genesis 21, declaring the Genesis reading to be first.

Addressing himself to the question of why Genesis 21, Büchler asks,

Where is it explicitly stated in the Bible that Sarah was remembered on New Year's Day? What led the Aggadah to make such a statement? Should we not rather explain the matter, that, independent of any purpose, this portion was read on New Year's Day, and, on this account, was it that the incident of the birth of Isaac became associated with that festival? Yet, why was this part of the Law recited on so solemn an occasion? A simple way out of the difficulty is supplied by a consideration of the triennial reading of the Law, which must undoubtedly be presupposed in Palestinian sources....<sup>66</sup>

Büchler continues to examine the development of the Triennial Cycle. He fixes Genesis 30:22 as the Rosh Hashanah portion for the first year.<sup>67</sup> Here God remembers Rachel. This is substantiated by an aggadah in b. Rosh Hashanah 10 b in which Rachel is remembered on Rosh Hashanah Day. He continues,



When once it was assumed that one of the Patriarchs was remembered in this day in respect to the blessing of children, the idea broadened to include Rebecca and Sarah as well. Hence it comes that the portion describing how Sarah was visited by God was selected as the reading for the New Year.<sup>68</sup>

Buchler concludes his analysis by alluding to the rule set down in Palestine that no column of the Torah was to be skipped over in moving from one section to another. (Megillah 4:5)<sup>69</sup> Babylonian Jews also obeyed this rule. With Genesis 21 set for the first day, to prevent the necessity of rolling the Torah to another place, they selected Genesis 22:

When the Seder was adopted as the New Year portion, perhaps also by some Palestine communities as well, a theory arose in connection with it that Abraham's attempted sacrifice of his son happened on this day.<sup>70</sup>

Buchler's approach is attractive. The reading of Genesis 22 on Rosh Hashanah is a result of the Triennial Cycle and the fixing of reading for the Holidays. It is only after the reading is assigned, arbitrarily, to the day that a theory is suggested linking the events of Moriah with the day of Rosh Hashanah.

Levy seems to follow Buchler's reasoning and refutes Geiger's argument based on the Torah reading<sup>71</sup>. He goes on to answer his other main argument, that the Zikhronoth prayer was composed by Rab in the third century. His refutation involves an analysis of the nature of the Malkhiyoth, Zikhronoth, Shofaroth section of the Musaf service. For him the

three passages form a unit whose character is clearly messianic, the final redemption of the whole people. This is a logical extension of the theme of merit from the regular Amidah which speaks of לְכָרְתִּי אֲבוֹתַי. The 'Akedah, referred to so clearly in this Musaf Service Amidah, becomes the clearest form of the Merit of the Patriarchs. This earlier idea is no later than the first century of this era. This unity, this messianic theme, is broken by the introduction of a new element הַיּוֹם הָרַב הַזֶּה, the idea of a recreation of the world and with it the judging of all people. This does not concern collective salvation of Israel but the fate of the individual. For Levi the phrase has all the characteristics of an addition penned by Rab. He is revising an old prayer and adding to it. He summarizes his conclusion thusly:

The order of the Malkhiyoth, Zikhronoth and Shofaroth which we recite during the Rosh Hashanah Musaf service was already diffused in the first century C.E., and since the remembrance of the 'Akedah became an integral part of it there is no doubt that the understanding (of Merit and Vicarious Atonement) which was expressed in it was already wide spread in those days.<sup>72</sup>

Spiegel discusses these two contrasting views and draws a more moderate conclusion. It is difficult to date the prayer. Nevertheless we must conclude that the Amoraim in Palestine knew of the conversation of Abraham with God (Rabbi Yochanan's prayer) and that it was known one hundred and fifty years earlier in the Zikhronoth to the second generation Tannaim. Moreover, the idea of merit did not



come from contact with the Syrian Church in Babylonia. All of the Amoraim were familiar with it; the school of Rabbi Yochanan was conversant with the idea. Merit and Vicarious Atonement as expressed by Rabbi Yochanan and in the Zikhronoth prayer have their origin early in the thought of that Rabbi.<sup>73</sup>

The problems of the date of association of the 'Akedah and Rosh Hashanah and of the source of the Merit idea are difficult and their final resolution is beyond the scope of this paper. Hence we recognize the problem and move on, continuing our examination of the themes of Rosh Hashanah as they are developed by the Rabbis using the 'Akedah story.

#### 1. The Day of Judgement

A number of elements are joined in the liturgy, presenting the New Year festival with a composite meaning. The holiday is understood as the anniversary of creation with the implication of an annual re-creation. Men's fate is fixed at the time as the order of the world is re-established. The Enthronement Psalms, prominent in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, are important here. The God-King re-ascends his throne and judges mankind; reviews their deeds and settles their destinies. Here the Biblical-Rabbinical name of

יום הזכרון, Day of Remembrance, is given meaning. The God-King remembers the past of each individual. But more. He also remembers the deeds of the ancestors and considers their merit that may be credited to those presently under judgement.

Rabbinic exegesis of the 'Akedah presents this picture. At the moment of judgement, when God is to decide the fate of the children of Israel, he is asked to remember the merit of the 'Akedah and to be merciful to the straying children. In one version of Rabbi Yochanan's petition God is asked to move to the throne of mercy and judge the children of Israel with a measure of compassion.<sup>74</sup>

We have seen how the ashes of the ram-Isaac become an instrument of atonement, awakening God's memory of the meritorious deed to have it applied to those standing before His Throne of Judgement. Likewise, the shofar or horn ( 177 ) is associated with judgement and redemption. Commenting on Psalm 75:11 we read in Midrash Tehillim:

All the Horns of the wicked I will cut off,  
But the horns of the righteous shall be  
exalted.

Ten horns of salvation are counted as having been given to Israel by God, and one of them is the horn of Isaac from the 'Akedah.<sup>75</sup>

The horn is to be used on Rosh Hashanah when the children of Israel are being judged:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, "Your children are destined to come before me and to be judged on Rosh Hashanah. If they want me to pardon them, let them blast forth on that day with the Shofar." Abraham said to Him, "What is a shofar?" God replied, "You do not know?" Abraham, "No." "Turn around and look behind you."

Immediately Abraham lifted his eyes and there was a ram behind, caught in the thicket by his horns. It is written here God said, Let them sound with this horn and I will pardon their sins.<sup>76</sup>

And again,

Rabbi Chanina son of Rabbi Isaac said: All the days of the year Israel is caught in transgression and entangled in troubles. But on Rosh Hashanah they take the shofar and sound it. They are remembered before the Holy One, Blessed be He, and He pardons them. They will be redeemed by the horns of a ram, as it is written, THE LORD WILL BLAST FORTH ON THE TRUMPET. (Zechariah 9:14)<sup>77</sup>

The element of Vicarious Atonement is brought out clearly from these selections:

Rabbi Abahu said, Why do they sound the horn of a ram on Rosh Hashanah? The Holy One, Blessed be He said, "Sound a shofar made of a ram's horn before me so that I remember in your favor the binding of Isaac, son of Abraham, and I consider it as if you bound yourselves before me."<sup>78</sup>

The Pesikta de Rav Kahana adds:

And turn for them the attribute of justice to mercy. When? In the seventh month.<sup>79</sup>

## 2. Messianism

The blasting of a trumpet as a symbol of redemption is a theme common to a specific Day of Judgement and to the Final Judgement Day at the end of time. The trumpet would herald the coming of the Messiah and final redemption from wrongdoing and transgression. Thus we arrive at another important theme reflected in the liturgy and aggadah surrounding Rosh Hashanah. Beginnings, the beginnings of new months and the New Year were accompanied by the sounding of trumpets. As well, royal processions, with the God-King re-ascending his throne and judging man were to be heralded by blasting trumpets. In the period envisioned by the apocalyptic writings the trumpet was to announce the end of days

with the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. Indeed, from earliest times, Rosh Hashanah was known as יום הדין, the Day of Trumpet Sounding.

Cohon observes that the incidents of the 'Akedah are invested with Messianic significance. He continues to suggest that the messianic tones are "reminiscent of the Gospel Story."<sup>80</sup> The Messianic overtones attached to the 'Akedah together with the elements of a doctrine of Vicarious Atonement provokes an interesting question of origins and relationships of the Midrashic literature to other sources. We will first attempt to see these Messianic elements as they appear in the literature surrounding the 'Akedah and then return to explore the origins and elements parallel to other literatures. This will become a summary of the entire discussion of Isaac and the 'Akedah as we turn back to understand the extent of the parallel between Isaac and the 'Akedah on the one hand and the figure of Jesus, the Messiah, on the other.

The rabbinic discussion with messianic allusion centers first upon the ram and the conclusion of the binding. Already we have seen the ram and Isaac identified, the blood and the ashes of the completed sacrifice serving as atonement. The ram's importance is heightened as its horn is used as the trumpet, reminding God of Isaac's merit. In Abot de Rabbi Nathan each part of the ram is made significant and invested with a messianic significance:

Gabriel ran and brought him before Abraham and Abraham offered the ram in place of his son. That day was Rosh

Hashanah and he made five pious deeds  
( חמשה ) from the ram:

He took the horns and sounded on them  
The wool was for חלה  
His skin for Tephillin and M'zuzoth  
His legs for flutes  
His sinews for harp strings.<sup>81</sup>

That no part of the ram went to waste is attested to in other places as well. His ashes formed the base of the inner altar of the Temple whereon the expiation sacrifice of the Day of Atonement was to be brought. His ten sinews were the ten strings on David's harp. His skin was used as Elijah's girdle. His left horn was used by God at Mt. Sinai. The right horn, larger than the left, was destined to be blown in the future at the time of the gathering of the exiles.<sup>82</sup> The ram was considered as one of the things created on the Sabbath evening ביום השבת.<sup>83</sup>

The Rabbis attributed the origin of the first three blessings to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, respectively. Thus, Isaac is the first man to say the ברכה prayer with its emphasis on Resurrection. When Isaac heard the angel say, "Do not send forth your hand," he recited the blessing of Resurrection: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who revivest the Dead."<sup>84</sup>

That Isaac did not really expire in the Biblical narrative is no problem for the Rabbis. On the contrary, they make a case for Isaac's death. There is no mention of his return from Mt. Moriah with Abraham and the servant boys. They speculate as to where he went: He went to study in a Beth Hamidrash to insure his worth.<sup>85</sup> He traveled a dif-

ferent route. He went to Paradise for three years to heal the wound suffered at the hands of his father.<sup>86</sup>

There are actual descriptions of how Isaac died and was resurrected. Rabbi Yehudah said,

When the knife reached his neck, Isaac expired ( פתח ויצא נשמתו ). When God caused His voice to be heard from between the two cherubim saying DO NOT TOUCH THE LAD, his soul returned to his body and he was restored to life. He stood up and knew resurrection, from the Torah. For all the dead are destined to be resurrected. At that time he said, Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who restores the dead.<sup>87</sup>

Not only is Isaac destined to be resurrected, but "upon the merit of Isaac, who sacrificed himself on the altar, the Holy One, Blessed be He, will restore the dead."<sup>88</sup>

Spiegel cites a number of alternative explanations which the Rabbis offer for Isaac's death. Realistically, he may have fainted or expired from fear of the knife. Some suggest that he saw the Divine Spirit or the Glory of God from between the heavens. In awesome fear he expired. The טל אורח of Isaiah 26:19 is considered as the dew of resurrection, a life-giving liquid from God which restores Isaac's life. As well, some later Midrashim enhance the blessing even more, placing it into the mouths of the angels.<sup>89</sup>

In addition to these two major messianic images, the ram and the resurrected Isaac, other elements of the 'Akedah take on special messianic significance. Heinemann suggests the knife and the location of the Binding have been given special meaning. The donkey, too, is singled out. He is

destined as the ass created כִּין חֲמֹר , as the animal upon which Moses rode when he went down to Egypt and the ass upon which the Messianic, son of David, will ride at the end of time.<sup>90</sup> The ram, too, was brought from Paradise where it had been pasturing under the tree of life, having been placed there כִּין חֲמֹר .<sup>91</sup>

In summary, two elements dominate the picture of Isaac as the Rabbis understood his role in the 'Akedah: (1) the Vicarious Atonement that he provided by his willing sacrifice and hence his importance at time of Judgement, Rosh Hashanah; (2) the messianic overtones which surround the events and the objects connected with the 'Akedah.

But these observations raise other questions. What are the origins of the theory of Vicarious Atonement and Merit from one individual to another? How did the ideas find their way into Judaism? What is the relation between these concepts and those found in the early writings of the church? It is to this discussion that we now turn.

#### On Origins and Parallels

##### 1. Pagan Sources

The idea of human sacrifice is familiar to the student of mythology. Even in Biblical literature we can find references to this practice. Here the earlier practices are recorded as they are denied by Hebrew prophets and other Biblical authors. The whole animal sacrificial system represents a development, a refinement of the earlier, more primitive system.

In Greek literature we find many instances of fathers who sacrificed sons or daughters whom they loved in order to do good for the nation, to appease the gods, or to redeem the lands from war, drought, blight or plague.<sup>92</sup>

Philo strives to prevent a comparison between the act of human sacrifice and the Binding of Isaac, where the latter is considered insignificant and inferior because of its not having been completed. Spiegel reviews Philo's argument; Abraham did not do what he did for glory, in anger or excitement, to meet the needs of the hour. Rather he fulfilled his Creator's command in love, the love of father for his son, the love of man who fears God.<sup>93</sup>

This becomes a central thesis of Spiegel's examination of the Midrash on Isaac and the parallel Christian literature. The identification of Mt. Moriah as the Temple, the praise of the mountain and the rabbinic approach to all of the events of the 'Akedah show the change from human to animal sacrifice in glowing terms of approval and sanction. These midrashim were fighting against the earlier tendency of the pagan world for human sacrifice.

Christian thought, drawing upon the same sources, makes the idea of Vicarious Atonement through sacrifice as central doctrine:

The idea of atonement and pardon to the entire community through the blood of the first born who is sacrificed on the spring month is implanted in the darkness of an ancient pagan period which was accustomed to sacrifice the first born sons on the New Moon of the New Year to appease and entice the gods...and thus the community is saved and pardoned by means of the blood of one individual.<sup>94</sup>

Judaism rejects their solution, particularly the emphasis on one individual, but in its ideas of merit, of suffering, of redemption through the blood and ashes we see the influence of pagan sources and the currents of thought that were dominant when the Tannaim and Ammoraim were discussing and writing. Both religions absorbed, consciously or unconsciously, or by way of polemic from the earlier primitive idea. The parallels and the difference seem to have been taken from a common pagan source. There are hints of this pagan source in the midrash. Christianity built them into a central doctrine. We, in response, tried to blot out remnants of the earlier pagan ideas and attempted to counterbalance Christian views. As a result we have only hints of the idea. Nevertheless we can substantiate the idea of Isaac's being slaughtered and resurrected. Truly, there was a constant interaction between early Christianity and the beginnings of Judaism in this era.<sup>95</sup>

## 2. Christian Parallels

The Christian idea of atonement, of man's reconciliation with God is accomplished through the sacrificial death of Jesus. The idea is explained more fully in the Oxford Dictionary of the Church's definition of atonement:

The need for such reconciliation is implicit in the Old Testament conception of God's absolute righteousness, to which nothing impure or sinful can approach. Its achievement is here represented as dependent on an act of God himself, whether by the Divine

appointment of the sacrificial system through which uncleanness, both ritual and moral, may be purged by the shedding of blood (Hebrews 9:12) or, in a prophetic view, by the future divine gift of a New Covenant....by the action of a Divinely sent Servant of the Lord who is "wounded for our transgressions" and "bares the sin of Man." (Isaiah 53:5, 12)<sup>96</sup>

Levi suggests that the Gospels never mention redemption. Jesus does not represent himself as a voluntary expiator of sin. It is Paul who creates the link between Jesus and Expiation of sin in the authentic Pauline Epistles.<sup>97</sup>

In the Letter of Paul to the Romans references to Jesus as expiator for man's sins abound. He writes, "The righteousness of God has been magnified....through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ who God put forth as an expiation by his blood." (Romans 3:21-25) Jesus' death becomes the key event: "Jesus...was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification." (Romans 4:24-25) "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Since therefore we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God." (Romans 5:8-9) In the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul states his view clearly, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with Scripture." (I Corinthians 15:3) Again, we read, "God has not destined us for wrath, but to salvation through our Lord, Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep, we might live with Him." (I Corinthians 5:9-10)<sup>98</sup> Levi observes that the idea is presented sometimes as if God is delivering from sin by Jesus,



but ignoring his merit. Other times Jesus himself is seen as voluntarily offering himself in expiation for sin. Again, we sometimes feel that it is not from design, but accidental.<sup>98</sup>

From where did Paul learn the idea of Vicarious Atonement? Certainly, the pagan notion of atonement through the sacrifice of the first born must not be ignored. The Christian interpretation of the Servant of God passages, exemplified by Isaiah 53, suggests that in the servant was seen the image of the future suffering Messiah. It is an easy and logical step for Paul to continue from there.

Interestingly, the 'Akedah, as Paul understands it, becomes a second "Jewish" parallel to his doctrine. Of course, in the Biblical narrative the ultimate reward of the binding has nothing to do with atonement and expiation. Nevertheless, we have seen that many Rabbinic views of the story provide suggestive parallels to the death of Jesus. Paul admits the divine affiliation of Jesus. God takes Abraham's place; Jesus stands in Isaac's position. The redemptive value of the sacrifice, the resurrection, the victory over Satan, and the Messianic overtones are all seen in the death of Jesus.<sup>99</sup>

We find that New Testament literature refers to Isaac, even as it looks to the other Patriarchs, for models of faith. However, Isaac, in particular, is considered a son of promise and the father of the faithful. (Hebrews 11:17-19) (James 2:21) The 'Akedah is cited as an example of faithfulness, and the sacrifice of Isaac is seen as parallel, an earlier form of Jesus' sacrifice.<sup>100</sup> In Galatians 4:21 Paul draws an allegory based on Abraham's two wives:

...But the son of the slave (Ishmael) was born according to the flesh; the son of the free woman (Isaac) through promise. These women are two covenants. One is from Mt. Sinai bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar...corresponds to the present Jerusalem....but the Jerusalem above (Sarah) is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, REJOICE O BARREN ONE THAT DOST NOT BEAR...Now we (you) brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Even more explicitly, alluding to Jesus we read,

Now the promise was made to Abraham and to his off-spring. It does not say "to his offsprings," referring to many; but referring to one... "And to your offspring" which is Christ. (Galatians 3:16)

Direct references in the New Testament are scant, but we must not ignore Paul's description of Christ as the "Paschal Lamb who has been sacrificed." (I Corinthians 5:6-18) He is the lamb who sacrificed himself and thereby redeemed future generations. Likewise, Jesus is called "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29) and in the Revelation to John the lamb is described:

I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain....and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb....and they sang a song, saying: Worthy art thou to take the scroll and open its seals, for thou wast slain and Thy blood did ransom men for God. (Revelation to John 5:6 ff)

Jesus is called the "Paschal Lamb who has been sacrificed" (I Corinthians 5:6 ff) and through his death the blood of the faithful is justified:

While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man, though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die, but God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners



Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.... (Romans 5:6 ff)<sup>100a</sup>

Schoeps suggests that Paul's teaching of atoning suffering is "genuinely Jewish for the synagogue maintained the atoning value of certain pious individuals and probably also the doctrine of the suffering Messiah."<sup>101</sup> He believes that the 'Akedah provides a link between the "genuinely Jewish" ideas and Paul's fully developed Doctrine of Salvation through Jesus.

Since the Binding of Isaac was a Jewish concept which must have been familiar to Paul, a former Pharisee, it served as Paul's model when he undertook to develop out of the doctrine of the messianic atoning death of a divinely sent envoy, his doctrine of salvation through Christ's death on the cross.<sup>102</sup>

And further,

The significance of the cross for Paul cannot be fully understood without tacit reference to the Sacrifice of Isaac. Paul's exegesis here is Rabbinical. We must remember, however, that in Paul's thought the 'Akedah of Isaac is mainly the "type," the "shadow" for the redemption wrought fully and finally by the death of Jesus Christ.<sup>103</sup>

The early Church Fathers extend and amplify the parallel suggesting the 'Akedah as an example of faithfulness, the precursor, the type in which Jesus becomes the supreme example. Christ becomes the Isaac of the Gospel.<sup>104</sup>

Parkes suggests that the parallel between Isaac and Christ is rarely used by these Church Fathers. He continues:

But considering how apposite the parallel is, it is surprising that it is not used more frequently. It may be that the silence

is due to the fact that they were aware that it was used by Jews, and that therefore, they were unwilling to emphasize the similarity.<sup>105</sup>

No one will deny the level of similarity between the two figures and the events. The question of which idea is prior in time is more difficult. Petuchowski disagrees with Schoeps. He points to the fact that none of the Jewish sources upon which Schoeps bases his arguments antedate Paul. "Paul's dependence upon Jewish ideas can, therefore, be at best considered plausible, but it cannot be proved."<sup>106</sup> He suggests another view:

It seems to us, however, that it is just as plausible to assume a Jewish dependence upon Christian ideas.

Thus the build-up of Isaac as a sin-expiating figure is a reaction to the Christian idea, a kind of "competitive" line to answer for man's inadequacies and fears before the Divine Judge.<sup>107</sup>

Parkes establishes a similar hypothesis. He cites Origen who reported the distress of the Jews in the second century:

They had no altar, no Temple, no priest and therefore, no offerings of sacrifice. They felt that their sins remained with them and that they had no means of attaining pardon.<sup>108</sup>

In response to this uncomfortable situation and in response to the Christian answers, the Rabbis dwelt upon the 'Akedah, finding in Isaac an instance of voluntary submission and sacrifice from whom merit could be garnered for their protection and defense.<sup>109</sup>

This view makes sense and provides an additional explanation for the development by the Rabbis of Isaac as the main hero of the 'Akedah. Cognizant of earlier pagan ideas of atonement and responding to the pressures of the Church, they turned to Isaac as a symbol of Jewish faithfulness to God, and, for some, a figure through whom they could find expiation from their wrongdoings.

#### V. AND AFTER THESE THINGS...A Postscript

After these things...what more can be said? The survey of Rabbinic understandings of the Binding has been completed. The views of scores of Rabbis stand before the reader and he must evaluate them for himself.

But after all these things, after the research and the compilations, after the ordering and the writing and the rewriting, I, the author, would add one more word.

As a student, I have found this paper a most important source of learning. The research has taken me deep into Rabbinic literature and brought me to understand some of the problems that a student of the past must confront. I have become familiar with classic scholarly approaches. The sweeping generalizations of Abraham Geiger and Hans Schoeps stand before me, testimony to the result of hasty conclusion and unbridled bias. The diligence of Spiegel and Levi and Marmorstein serve as my model for future study and research in this field of enquiry. The discipline of writing a research paper may serve as a fruitful preparation for future projects of like nature.

But surely this has been more than an academic exercise. I have gleaned understandings that may help me as I join that group of men who would attempt to discern the relationships of man to God, of God to his people.

For the Rabbis, the deeds of their ancestors could serve as models of behavior and inspiration for their own conduct. Moreover, in times of oppression these stories of

the past could become living proofs of the nearness of God and of his protection. Through them the fears and pains of the distraught could be dispelled. The Rabbi knew that he did not live alone. There were strong chains linking him to his particular past; he felt a bond between himself and generations of Jews in the past, or those yet unborn. At the same time he realized that he could not rely completely upon this history. He had a role in it, a duty to direct his own destiny.

How well the words of Hillel bring these opposing tendencies into bright relief:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?  
Yet when I am for myself alone, what am I.

Surely the modern Jew will object to the specifics of the Merit system here described. Abraham's deeds, his demonstrations of faithfulness and his acts of obedience are not fitted to our convictions and view of the world. We do not expect the Binding of Isaac to stand and protect us against the straits into which our twentieth century tormentors might force us. We will not look for divine intervention, God cutting a way of life for us in reward for Abraham's cleaving of the wood. We do not really seek atonement through the sufferings of Isaac. We do not accept the direct and literal relationship between events in the past and happenings in our lifetime.

And yet, Hillel's words might remain as a motto that keeps before our eyes the understanding of a balance between the present and the past, between our lives and the future.

Men are intimately related. My actions may affect one other. My good deeds may help; my errors and failings may bring harm. There can be a modern understanding of the Merit idea.

At the present time these words have little meaning. Hillel's pointed statement falls on deaf ears. The Merit of the Fathers which we repeat in prayer on every occasion of worship is not understood. Perhaps we must rewrite the words, capturing the essence of their meaning...of the meaning they once conveyed and the meaning they may yet have - for our people. Perhaps we may live under the canopy of Merit, if we but understand it for our generation.

This is the task and it is quite similar to the strivings of leaders of the children of Israel in past generations: To observe and to reflect; to encompass the world of knowledge, both religious and secular; to understand them, to reflect upon them, to reject where we must and to absorb where we would; to bring heaven to earth for ourselves and for our people.... This is our task. May we accept it and labor toward its fulfillment.

# FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER II

(Particular editions of primary sources are listed in Bibliography under "Primary Sources")

1. Moshe Greenberg, " נסח in Exodus 2:20 and the Purpose of the Sinitic Theophany," Journal of Biblical Literature, (Sept. 1960), Vol. LXXIX, Part III, p. 273 ff. I have utilized Greenberg's classifications as the basis for my own, expanding and changing where necessary.
2. The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version (New York: 1952). Throughout this paper I have consulted the R.S.V. for my own translations and for transliterations of Hebrew words familiar to the English reader.
3. cf. Daniel 1:12, 14; II Chronicles 9: 1, 32:31; Isaiah 7:12; I Kings 10:1.
4. Likewise in Psalm 106:14 we read וַיִּחָאוּ חֲמֹה בְּסִדְרָם וַיִּנְסוּ אֶל כִּישְׁלוֹן. Here the parallel to נסח is quite subtle: "They craved (the delicacies of Egypt) in the wilderness." Their test of God was caused by their selfish craving.
5. cf. Deuteronomy 6:16, 33:18; Numbers 14:22; Psalm 106:14. In Psalm 95 נסח is parallel to נִחַן and in Exodus 17:7 the mention of נסח is followed by the question: הֲיֵשׁ אֱלֹהִים בְּקִרְבֵּנוּ אִם לֹא? In these latter instances נסח might be translated "to test" as in the first category, but in my opinion they fit more appropriately here.
6. Greenberg, op. cit., pp. 275-276.
7. This translation is not too adequate. The superscription refers to specific historical events, to David and Joab and their victorious battles with the surrounding nations, recorded in II Samuel 8. The first two lines of the hymn describe the terrible effects of the battle on the people. Line seven is a petition to deliver them from their enemy and to give them victory. Is verse six to be considered part of the opening theme of despair, or shall it be attached to the optimistic note of verses seven and following?
8. Midrash Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 43.
9. Ibid., note 226.
10. b. Baba Metzi'a 87a.

11. Bereshith Rabbah 55:4. Kasher, in the Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation (New York: 1957), Vol. III, p. 130, points to the difficulty in translating על נסח. Possibly it means, "I know that," or "I forgive you on condition that." Important for our understanding is the causal relationship between Abraham's הרחיקים and the motivation for the test.
12. Another midrash (Ber. Rab. 44:7) expands on this. Abraham realizes the many rewards he has enjoyed in this world and was fearful lest he not be guarded by God in the world to come.
13. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Lekh l'kha 13.
14. Or Ha-afelah, as quoted in Torah Shelema, M.M. Kasher, ed., (Jerusalem: 1935), Genesis 22, Article 7. cf. Ber. Rab. 44:5. There is some disagreement as to which refers to נסח and which refers to נסוג.
15. Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, Friedmann, ed., 8. p. 45.
16. Ibid. The text is corrupt: אך על פי כן לזיחה ענינו את ישראל.
17. Ber. Rab. 54:4.
18. Rashbam Commentary on the Torah, David Rosén ed., (New York: 1949), Vayera 22.
19. Ibn Ezra, commentary to Genesis 22:1.
20. Ber. Rab. 56:8.
21. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 40. cf. b. Ta'anith 4a.
22. Midrash Hagadol, S. Schechter ed. (Cambridge 1902), Vayera, column 318.
23. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 41.
24. Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, (Mas.) as quoted in Kasher, Torah Shelema, Genesis 22, article 131.
25. Ber. Rab. 55:2. This midrash and others like it also suggest the test as the vehicle by which God displays the qualities of His righteous subjects. See page 21.
26. Commentary of the Ramban to the Torah, Tzvi Eizenshtat ed., (New York: 1958), Vayera, Genesis 22:1.
27. Ibid., v. 12.

28. Seferno, commentary to Genesis 22:1.
29. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 44.
30. Ber. Rab. 55:7.
31. Ibid., 55:7.
32. Ibid., 55:8.
33. Lekach Tov, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22, article 67. Other explanations are offered for the repetition of adjectives. See page 27.
34. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 33.
35. Ibn Ezra, commentary to Genesis 22:1.
36. Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed, tr. Friedlander (New York: 1881), p. 113.
37. Ibid., p. 112.
38. Mishneh Aboth 5:3.
39. Ber. Rab. 56:11.
40. Midrash Hagadol, S. Schechter ed., Vayera 317. of. b. Sanhedrin 89b; Ber. Rab 65:17; Pirke Rabbi Eliezer 31.
41. Pirke Rabbi Eliezer 31.
42. Ber. Rab. 56:7.
43. Midrash Haseor, (Mas) quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22, article 135.
44. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 43.
45. Ber. Rab. 55:1.
46. Ber. Rab. 55:1.
47. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 46.
48. Ibid., Vayera 43.
49. Ber. Rab. 55:2. This midrash includes another analogy: The farmer puts his strong cows under the yoke and not the weak ones who could not bear the strain.
50. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 46.

51. Ber. Rab., 55:6.
52. b. Sanhedrin 89b.
53. Tanchuma Hanidpas, Vayera 22.
54. Ibid., Vayera 22.
55. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 46.
56. Kohleth Rabbah 9:2.
57. b. Sota 31a.
58. The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament (in English), R. H. Charles ed., (Oxford: 1913), Vol. II, 17:15 ff.
59. Ibid., 18:9 ff.
60. b. Sanhedrin 89b.
61. b. Baba Bathra 15b.
62. Ber. Rab. 55:4.
63. Ber. Rab. 56:4.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. A. Marmorstein, The Doctrine of Merits in Old Rabbinic Literature, (London: 1920), p. 187.
2. Ibid., p. 175 ff.
3. Ibid., p. 25.
4. Ibid., p. 26.
5. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 44.
6. Ber. Rab. 55:6.
7. Midrash, quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22, article 67.
8. Mekhilta, Lauterbach ed., Vol. I, Beshalach 2, p. 199 ff.  
The "balance" and application of Abraham's binding against Balaam's is understood from parallel midrashim: cf. Bamidbar Rabbah 20:11.
9. b. Chullin 55a.
10. Vayikrah Rabbah 26:7.
11. Mikhlita, Lauterbach ed., Vol. I, Pischa 11, p. 86 ff.
12. Ibid., Vol. I, Beshalach 6, p. 237 ff.
13. Sifra, Weiss ed., Tazri'a 58b, Column C.
14. Marmorstein, op. cit., p. 28.
15. Ibid., p. 108.
16. Ibid., p. 127.
17. Ibid., p. 118.
18. Ibid., p. 127.
19. Ibid., p. 128 ff.
20. Ibid., p. 27, 128.
21. Ibid., pp. 27, 96, 128.
22. Ber. Rab. 56:6.
23. Kasher, op. cit., Note to Genesis 22, article 122.
24. Tanchuma Hanidpas, Vayera 18.

25. Ibid., Vayera 18.
26. Midrash Tadsheh 14, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22, article 190.
27. Midrash Aggadah, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22, article 199.
28. Peskita Rabbathi, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22, article 197.
29. b. Yebamoth 63a.
30. Midrash Tannaim 15:9, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., article 198.
31. S. Levy, Original Virtue and Other Short Studies (London: 1979), p. 3.
32. Ibid., p. 4.
33. Ibid., p. 4.
34. Ibid., p. 4.
35. S. Cohon, "Original Sin," Hebrew Union College Annual (Cincinnati: 1948), Vol. XXI, p. 316.
36. Marmorstein, op. cit., p. 149.
37. See below, p. 51 ff.
38. Marmorstein, op. cit., chapter 5.
39. S. Cohon, op. cit., p. 316.
40. Levi in his commentary to Ber. Rab. points out that he returns and marries her each time. Midrash Rabbah, A. A. Levi ed. (Tel Aviv: 1956), Vol. II, p. 435.
41. Ber. Rab. 56:11.
42. Pirke Rabbi Eliezer 26.
43. Shemoth Rabbah 44:4.
44. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 43.
45. See below, p. 51 ff.
46. Vayikrah Rabbah 20:2.
47. Bamidbar Rabbah 17:3; b. Chullin 16 a.



48. Sifre, M. Friedman ed., Haazinu, p. 134, paragraph 313.
49. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Shelach 27.
50. Ber. Rabbah 56:5.
51. Midrash Tehillim as quoted in Rasher, op. cit.,  
Genesis 22, article 48.
52. Midrash, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22,  
article 97.
53. Ber. Rab. 56:4; Pesikta Rabbathi, M. Friedman ed.,  
Bechodesh Hashevi'i 170b.
54. Midrash Hagadol, Vayera, 322.
55. Midrash, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis 22,  
article 104.
56. Ber. Rab. 56:11.
57. Ber. Rab. 56:8.
58. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 39.
59. See below, p. 66.
60. Ber. Rab. 56:10.
61. Mishnen Ta'anith 2:5.
62. ברה הדין - ברה הרמים
63. Midrash Vayosh'a 1.
64. b. Ta'anith 4:4.
65. Pesikta de Rab Kahana, Bechodesh Hashevi'i 138b.
66. Midrash Hagadol, Vayera, 326.
67. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 43.
68. Ber. Rab. 56:5. The midrash ends in a discussion as  
to the length of time that imputed merit lasts.  
When must people begin to rely upon their own merit  
in place of the Merit of the Fathers?
69. Midrash Aggadah, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit., Genesis  
22, article 195.
70. Ber. Rab. 56:11.
71. Heinemann, Darkhe Ha-aggadah (Jerusalem: 1949), p. 67 ff.

72. אהבה - שואה - בקלקלה את השורה
73. Ber. Rab. 55:8.
74. Heinemann, op. cit., p. 63.
75. Vayikra Rabbah 2:10.
76. Shemoth Rabbah 25:5.
77. Ber. Rab. 55:8. cf. Mekhilta, Lauterbach ed., Vol. I  
Beshalach 4, pp. 218-219, where the scene of Mt.  
Moriah is related to the Crossing of the Red Sea.
78. Ber. Rab. 65:1.
79. Esther Rabbah 9:2.
80. Ber. Rab. 56:2.
81. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 46.
82. Ber. Rab. 56:3.
83. Tanchuma, Buber ed., Vayera 45.
84. Ber. Rab. 56:10.
85. Sifre, Devarim 28, as quoted in Kasher, op. cit.,  
Genesis 22, article 169.
86. Pirke Rabbi Eliezer 31.
87. Heinemann, op. cit., p. 31.