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SARAH'S ROLE IN THE *AKEIDA* IN MIDRASHIC LITERATURE

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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Advisor: Dr. Leonard S. Kravitz

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Goal of this thesis: to analyze the range of midrashic responses to Sarah's absence from the *akeida*. The thesis attempts to better understand the historical contexts of each midrashic tradition and its influence on the text. The midrashim are also analyzed as literature, with an eye to understanding the theological impact of their interpretations.

The contribution of this thesis: to gather into one source the range of midrashic responses to Sarah's role in the akeida, beginning with the earliest extra-biblical literature and culminating with modern midrashim. The thesis also contributes a better historical and literary understanding of this compelling midrashic tradition.

Divisions: The sixteen chapters and divisions of this thesis are organized according to texts, in historical order. Thus, it begins with the biblical text itself and then deals with (in this order): The New Testament, extra-biblical literature, targumim, The Talmud, Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Midrash Tanhuma, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Sefer ha-Yashar, Yalkut Shimoni, Midrash ha-Gadol, and modern midrashim and commentaries.

Materials: In addition to the primary sources listed above, a variety of secondary sources are listed in the bibliography.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The *akeida* may be the most debated narrative episode in Jewish literary tradition. Generations of commentators, philosophers, and students of literature, representing all three monotheistic religions, have grappled with the complex theological questions embodied in this most challenging pericope. Genesis 22 asks the biblical reader to confront God's demand to Abraham to murder his son Isaac. Not only is Isaac the only son of Abraham's wife, he also is the only possibility for the fulfillment of the divine promise for which Abraham has already sacrificed so much. What kind of God demands such a deed? What kind of father would agree to carry it out? This haunting narrative raises fundamental issues of faith.

One of the text's most intriguing questions is raised from silence. Where is Sarah? How could a figure who has been so prominent throughout the earlier biblical episodes suddenly disappear? Given the powerful connection between this particular mother (for whom conception was so difficult and desired) and her only son, why would she be completely absent from the story of his near sacrifice? Confounding the intrigue is Sarah's sudden death following the pericope.

Though separated textually by a genealogy, the *akeida* and the death of Sarah seem related in some way, as the rabbis imply in some of the classical midrashim.

The problem of Sarah's absence in the *akeida* narrative is not new. Literatures as early as the Talmud and the Targum have noted and tried to explain it. Throughout the tradition of midrashic literature, Sarah's role in the *akeida* was explored, expanded, and developed. With the feminist revolution and modernity, modern commentators have harvested these classical texts and created new ones as a way of teasing out more theological issues raised by Sarah's absence. A group of modern midrashim has been added to the classical cannon, and a group of modern commentaries written, addressing those very issues.

This paper seeks to trace the development of Sarah's role in the *akeida*, from the biblical text itself through contemporary literature. After analyzing the biblical text, we will deal with the extra biblical literature and targumim. The main body of literature addressed will be the classical midrashim, spanning more than ten centuries. Finally, the analysis will move toward modernity, and deal with new commentary and midrash.

This paper employs two approaches to the textual tradition of the *akeida*. The first is to analyze the texts within their historical contexts. Various texts will be juxtaposed to better understand the authorial agenda and

literary history. Where the literature chose to address Sarah's absence, we will ask what the author/editor's theological agenda may have been, and what forces of history may have influenced it.

The second approach is literary. We will seek to explicate the many meaningful issues raised by the spectrum of texts, regardless of the original historical context or authorial intent. On this level, we will seek to provide a usable resource to the contemporary biblical reader, offering a range of new insights gleaned from a rich textual tradition. There are many areas of overlap between the two methods of analysis. Questions of historical context and literary meaning often inform each other, and this paper does not attempt to absolutely separate the two methods. Instead, we utilize both as we address the midrashic tradition at every stage.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BIBLICAL TEXT

It is possible to read the biblical text in a straightforward way and conclude that Sarah's absence from the *akeida* is either intentional or inconsequential. Perhaps the midrashic tradition reflects a desire to eisogetically write her into a text in which she seems logically to belong. It can be argued that the text itself indicates that Sarah's absence is not significant. The *akeida* pericope is a self contained narrative. It tells a complete story, with a fluid beginning, middle, and end. It opens with the formula: "ויהי אחר הדברים האלה" (Gen. 22:1), indicating the start of a new story, and ends after the story has closure. The next unit describes a genealogy (Gen. 22:20-24) that also begins with: "ויהי אחרי הדברים האלה" (Gen. 22:20), indicating a new pericope. The content of the episode is about the relationship of God and Abraham (Isaac's role is minor until rabbinic literature enlarged it[1]), and doesn't include Sarah. The *akeida* seems complete without Sarah, her absence incidental.

On the other hand, there are several clues within the biblical text that Sarah's absence is significant. The

[1]Geza Vermes, Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 193.

rabbis, and the modern writers after them, have developed a range of interpretations from these clues. Perhaps the best example is that the trial more suited to Sarah's relationship with Isaac than Abraham's. While Isaac is Sarah's only son, he is not Abraham's only son. Yet God in the biblical text calls Isaac Abraham's "only son" (Gen. 22:2). Similarly, had a traumatic experience with infertility (a recurring theme in the biblical text) and her maternal connection to Isaac was incredibly deep.

It is even possible that was Sarah's absence was actually highlighted by a later editor. It is possible to read Sarah's role in the episode by noting the wider context. Zackovitch has claimed that the editor of the biblical text may have used the technique of juxtaposition in order to offer exegesis. In this view, some biblical material was placed alongside other biblical material by the editor as "inner-biblical interpretation." The technique may have been used to solve textual problems or reread them within the editor's own beliefs.[2]

Regarding the *akeida* in particular, Zackovitch raises the possibility that a later editor placed it after the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21) and before the death of Sarah (Gen. 23) to indicate Sarah's sin (the expulsion)

[2]Yair Zackovitch, "Juxtaposition in the Abraham Cycle," in Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrgom, Wright et al eds. (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 510.

and punishment (the binding and her death).[3] In this view, Sarah's role in the *akeida* is significant, despite her seeming absence. By placing what may have been an early trial myth after the account of Sarah's cruelty, and before her unexplained death, an editor may have sought to make a theological statement of sin and punishment. Zackovitch strengthens his position by noting that some of the earliest midrashic material is aware of the connection. In fact, Zackovitch uses rabbinic material to defend his use of juxtaposition in general, saying: "The rabbis assumed that the textual proximity of different items may create an additional stratum of meaning."[4]

The wider biblical context may offer other clues that Sarah's absence had meaning. The narrative that follows the *akeida* culminates with the birth of Rebecca, who will ultimately insure the covenant by mothering Isaac's sons (as Sarah did for Abraham). It is about Rebecca that the text will say "And Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Gen. 24:67). In fact, Sarah's only role after the expulsion of Hagar is to die. The text reminds us through Rebecca of the deep attachment of Isaac to his mother, ignored in the *akeida*.

The genealogy also serves to highlight the continuation of the covenant. Isaac is spared and is then able to

[3]Zackovitch, 521.

[4]Zackovitch, 510.

ultimately fulfill God's promise to Abraham and carry on the lineage. Rebecca's birth is not only a foreshadow of the future, but a reminder of the past; as Sarah was the vessel through which the covenant is fulfilled, Rebecca will play the same role. The placement of the genealogy here seems intentional.

The chapter following the *akeida*, Genesis 23, begins with the death of Sarah. It is unclear why Abraham and Sarah were not together when she died. Many later midrashists would offer a myriad of alternative explanation. It is also unclear how much time has passed in between, with only the genealogy to provide a clue. Various sources have separated the two events by many years, while others have made them continuous. That the editorial hand placed Sarah's death so soon after the *akeida* narrative cries out for interpretation. Surely, the editor had some theological connection in mind. For centuries, writers and commentators would offer different interpretations, seeking to explain why.

In summary, it is possible to read the *akeida* in a straightforward way, and not take note of Sarah's absence. Yet there are textual clues that seem to weight it with significance. These clues include incongruities and problems (why did Abraham return to Ber Sheba and Sarah die in Hebron? How much time passed between the episodes? Why does the text describe a trial more suited to Sarah's relationship with Isaac than Abraham's?) and contextual clues gleaned from

analyzing juxtaposition (following the Hagar expulsion and preceding Rebecca's genealogy and the death of Sarah).

Zackovitch suggests that the clues of Sarah's role in the *akeida* imply that an editor may have wanted to make a theological statement of sin and punishment. Perhaps there was a lost version of the text in which Sarah appeared. Or, it may be that the clues and incongruities are random. On a homiletical level, they give rise to a breathtaking range of interpretive possibilities that have been offered by many writers and will be explored in the pages below.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NEW TESTAMENT

Having analyzed the biblical text version of the *akeida* found in the Old Testament, we look at the New Testament. Though this Christian text has a distinct theological agenda, it was composed at the same time as the earliest literature that followed the canonization of the Old Testament. In fact, some scholars argue that the rabbis composed some of their material in response to emerging Christian traditions. Therefore, the clues brought by the New Testament regarding Sarah's role are a relevant link on the chain of interpretation.

In fact, the New Testament contains elements that lay the groundwork for later texts to read Sarah back into the *akeida*. A document reflecting emerging Christian theology, it seems concerned with presenting Isaac as a prefigure for Jesus. As we will see, the parallel was easy to make based on Genesis 22. Consequently, the New Testament literature serves the agenda of reading Sarah as a prefigure for Mary, mother of the sacrificed son. The later extra-biblical literature will pick up this theme and more explicitly connect Sarah to the *akeida* as a Mary figure.

The New Testament connects Jesus to Isaac indirectly in its discussions of faith over law, a polemic against classical Judaism. Hebrews 11 attempts to show how each Old Testament figure received divine help through their unending faith. Regarding Abraham, it states:

> By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God *was* able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

The New Testament adds a motif to the trial completely absent from the Genesis version: resurrection. The notion that Abraham was ready to sacrifice the only son of his wife because he knew "that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead" (Hebrews 11:19) is completely new. On the contrary, the Genesis account indicates that Abraham was obeying God simply because it was God's will. This distinction reflects a fundamental difference between the Old Testament's emphasis on obeying God's commandments, and the New Testament's polemic against law in favor of faith. In the theology of the New Testament then, Abraham's act had to be justified in terms of faith. The notion that God would resurrect the son provided the necessary motivation for faith. Finally, it is no surprise that resurrection was the chosen motif, since the resurrection of Jesus is a cornerstone of Christian theology. Certainly, Isaac is seen here as an early model for Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection.

Other New Testament parallels have been noted by scholars, generally Christian, seeking to show that Isaac actually prefigured Jesus. These references include James 2:21-24, and less convincingly Romans 8:32 and John 1:29 and 3:16.[5] Vermes has led the contemporary movement to read Isaac this way, while Davies and Chilton have argued that later reading by rabbis of Isaac as a sacrifice was an attempt to reclaim Isaac from Christianity.[6]

Regardless of their origin, the parallels that have grown out of the Jewish and Christian traditions between Isaac and Jesus are real. It seems equally clear that the parallels between Mary and Sarah are equally salient, and that later traditions rewrote Sarah into the *akeida* in part because of her similarity to Mary.

There are very strong parallels in Luke between Sarah's conception of Isaac, and Mary's of Jesus. Mary, like Sarah, is visited by an angel (Gen. 18, Luke 1:28), is promised a son (Gen. 18:10, Luke 1:31), questions the promise (Gen. 18:12, Luke 1:34), and is encouraged to accept God's power (Gen. 18:14, Luke 1:37). Obviously, there are several major distinctions. Mary didn't believe because she was a virgin, while Sarah was both elderly and infertile. Though Genesis

[5]see Robert Martin-Achard, "Isaac", in David Noel Freedman, ed., Anchor Bible Dictionary, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 469.

[6]see P.R. Davies and B.D. Chilton, "The Aqedah: A Revised History Tradition." Catholic Biblical Quarterly, no. 40, 1978.

18 assumes that this son is the key to fulfilling God's promise to Abraham, Luke 1 overtly links the son, Jesus, to the crown of David.

In the Hebrews 11 account, Sarah is seen as meriting the birth of Isaac because "she judged him faithful who had promised" (Hebrews 11:11). Much as Mary believed the divine promise in Luke 1, here Sarah's piety is emphasized in contrast to the obvious skepticism she expressed in Genesis 18. Here also, Sarah's womb was "able to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child" (Hebrews 11:11) because of her faith. Like Mary, she is the believing vessel, worthy of the divinely given conception and birthing.

Thus, there are significant parallels between Sarah and Mary in the New Testament. Therefore, it is not surprising that extra-biblical literature even more directly connects the *akeida* to the crucifixion, Isaac to Jesus, and Sarah to Mary. The extra-biblical literature is explored below.

CHAPTER FOUR: EXTRA-BIBLICAL LITERATURE

Extra-biblical texts contain a broad spectrum of references to Sarah and the *akeida*, reflecting an even broader spectrum of different agendas. Overtly Christian texts like the Testament of Isaac continue the New Testament motifs linking Isaac and Jesus, Sarah and Mary. Pre-rabbinic and historical Jewish texts like Josephus and Philo are more concerned with the elevation of the patriarchs or like Maccabees, which is concerned with martyrdom.

The Testament of Isaac overtly connects Isaac to Jesus through a genealogy. In it, Isaac is assured that after his death, one of his descendants will be the messiah who will be born of a virgin (3:17-19). Though this text's origin was probably Jewish, it was obviously redacted within an overtly Christian context.[7] It parallels Matthew 1:1-18 which recounts the genealogy from Abraham to Jesus. This text makes stronger the connection that much of the early extra-biblical material and earliest midrashic literature made between Jesus and Isaac. Much of Jewish literature can be

[7]W.F. Stinespring, trans., The Testament of Isaac, in Charles, R. H., ed., Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 904.

read against an emerging Christian tradition that read the binding of Isaac as a foreshadow to the crucifixion, and Sarah as a foreshadow of Mary.

Though the Testament of Isaac only mentions the *akeida* in passing (and never mentions Sarah), it contains a strong echo. At the moment that the angel appears to inform Isaac that his time has come to die, he confuses the messenger with Abraham, his father. "I am truly amazed concerning you," he says, "Are you not my father Abraham?" (2:10). It seems intentional that as in the *akeida*, he once again is called to death, and he thinks of his father, who was the "angel" of his first death.

The text recalls the *akeida* at the end. Just after Isaac's death, the very next verse, says:

> And our father Isaac was like the silver which is burned, smelted, purified, and refined in the fire; likewise everyone who shall come forth from our father Isaac, the father of fathers (8:3).

Isaac appears as one who has died and then is resurrected. It is as if through the *akeida* he died and then reemerged better and more perfect than before. One can't help but read this imagery as a parallel with the Christ imagery. Clearly, there was an extra-biblical tradition reading Isaac as the model for Jesus.

Pseudo-Philo adds an additional layer to the birth of Isaac. Speaking through Joshua, God recounts that:

> I gave him Isaac and formed him in the womb of her who gave birth to him and commanded her to restore him quickly and give him back to me in the seventh

> month. And therefore every woman who gives birth in the seventh month, her son will live, because upon him I have brought my glory and revealed the new age. (Pseudo-Philo 23:8)

There certainly seems to be Christian imagery here, with Sarah depicted as a parallel to Mary. Both women served as vessels of divine conception. The notion that the child was placed in the temporary dwelling of the womb until being given back to God, the reference to the revelation of the "new age", and the absence of Abraham's direct role as the father support this Christian image. Here Sarah is the vessel for God's birth of Isaac.

The Christian imagery is confirmed in Pseudo-Philo's version of the *akeida* itself. First, there is a repetition of the divine birth motif. The *akeida* account is preceded by the phrase, "And he gave him a son at the end of his old age and took him out of a sterile womb" (Pseudo-Philo 32:1). The womb here is seen only as a vessel, since it has no birth power of its own. The son is given by God, the mother acting only as a temporary shelter for the divinely given child. There is no mention of Sarah's name or of her role as mother, for it is her womb as vessel that is important in this version.

God emphasizes Isaac's God-giveness by including in his command to Abraham "Kill the fruit of your body for me, and offer for me as a sacrifice what has been given to you by me" (Pseudo-Philo 32:2). This phrasing indirectly highlights the sense of Sarah as vessel. The fruit is Abraham and the child

is God's. Sarah's role, as before, is limited to that of temporary shelter, even in her absence.

A common motif regarding both Abraham and Sarah in Pseudo-Philo is the notion that Isaac is not really their child, but God's. Just as Sarah was told earlier that she would only have Isaac for the seventh months of pregnancy, and then he would be "restored quickly" to God (23:8), Abraham is told to offer to God as a sacrifice "what has been given to you by me" (32:2). Both parents are told that they will have to return the child to God, to whom he ultimately belongs. This motif seems to frame the *akeida* in terms of the Christological imagery of the sacrifice of Jesus. Isaac represents the Christ child, Abraham his natural father, and Sarah his mother Mary.

Isaac goes so far as to utter the following speech after his father reveals his intention to sacrifice him:

> Now my blessedness will be above that of all men, because there will be nothing like this; and about me future generations will be instructed and through me the peoples will understand that the Lord has made the soul of a man worthy to be a sacrifice. (32:3)

Isaac is the Christ through whose sacrifice all people merit. Pseudo-Philo successfully re-frames the *akeida* as a Christ parallel with Sarah serving as the vessel for the divine birth of the Christ-child.

Pseudo-Philo ends the episode with a direct address from God, stopping the sacrifice, saying:

For now I have appeared so as to reveal you to

> those who do not know you and have shut the mouths of those who are always speaking evil against you. Now your memory will be before me always, and your name and his will remain from one generation to another. (32:4)

Unlike God's promise in the biblical text, in which an angel speaks for God, this text seems to be a direct polemic about some group at the time who were denouncing the Israelite religion. Perhaps Pseudo-Philo's christological motif was an attempt to regain authenticity and combat the emerging Christian tradition on its own terms. This text may have been a polemic against Jews who were turning toward the fledgling Christian tradition, seeking to reclaim Christian notions within the Old Testament framework.

According to Sanders, the purpose of the Testament of Abraham, in both of its two recensions, was to depict God's merciful judgement and the importance of good deeds and repentance.[8] The author's vehicle for this theological message is an account of God's attempt to convince Abraham to accept his death willingly. This fable, particularly in Recension A, contains striking parallels and contrasts to the biblical *akeida* narrative. In this version, Sarah outlives her husband, and wails bitterly at his death (20:7). In a further literary twist, the testament depicts Abraham the father as the one who must face his own death at the request of God. Isaac takes on his father's role in the *akeida*,

[8]E.P.Sanders, trans., The Testament of Abraham, in R. H. Charles, ed., Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 879.

being the one who must inform the victim of the coming death (4:8). When Isaac's dream is told, revealing the truth of the angel's mission, Abraham, Isaac, and the angel are hidden from the presence of Sarah and the entire household (7:1-12), just as the father and son go up the mountain alone and encounter the angel in the *akeida*. In the most striking contrast between the two stories, where the biblical Isaac does not resist (and in the later midrash is even seen as the enthusiastic victim), here Abraham rejects God's will completely. He refuses to follow the angel into death (7:12, 15:11) and only succumbs when he is tricked into his own death (20:9). Thus the two stories are parallel, with Abraham and Isaac reversing their roles. Abraham's resistance in the newer version stands in ironic contrast to Isaac's willingness in the earlier tale.

The most relevant difference between the two recensions of the Testament of Abraham is that where in A Sarah outlives Abraham, in B she dies of grief, not knowing what has become of Abraham (12:15). This scene is strikingly similar to some of the midrashic traditions surrounding the *akeida* in which Sarah dies of grief and worry about Isaac's plight during his absence.

Josephus concerns himself with two issues in the biblical account of the *akeida* when he includes it in his history. As with the midrashists we will see later, he is concerned by the question of why Sarah was completely absent

during the episode, and why she dies so soon afterward in the text. In answering the first question, Josephus writes that Abraham "concealed from his wife God's commandment and his own resolve regarding the immolation of the child" (Jewish Antiquities I:225) as part of his determination to obey God perfectly. Josephus solves the problem of Sarah's absence from the scene consistently with his view of Abraham's piety. It is worth noting that at as early as Josephus' writing, readers of the biblical text were already puzzled by Sarah's absence from the *akeida*, and were trying to develop logical answers.

Josephus' solution to the second problem is less satisfying logically. In his attempt to give this terrifying story a happy end, he writes

> And they, restored to each other beyond all hope and having heard promises of such great felicity, embraced one another and, the sacrifice ended, returned home to Sarra and lived in bliss, God assisting them in all they desired. Not long after Sarra died... (Jewish Antiquities I:236-237)

All ambiguity in the biblical text is erased here, as one no longer need imagine how this family could survive so traumatic an experience. Josephus makes sure his reader knows that Sarah's death was in no way connected to the *akeida*, and that she died as happily married to Abraham as ever.

Josephus' agenda seems to be to uphold the patriarchs as models of piety and merit. He avoids conflicts between the characters in their family relationships. He emphasizes

Abraham's willingness to carry out the act, as well as Isaac's (a motif common throughout midrashic and extra-biblical literature). The side-effect is to question Sarah's piety. Abraham doesn't tell her, lest she persuade him not to carry out the deed. She is seen as less reliable in fulfilling God's will. He spares her from knowing about the sacrifice, less to protect her, than to avoid a confrontation and jeopardize his plan.

In upholding Isaac's piety and describing the joy with which he received the news of the sacrifice, Josephus has him say, "he deserved never to have been born at all, were he to reject the decision of God..." (Jewish Antiquities I:232). In a subtle way, Josephus has Isaac define the very purpose of his birth as this moment of sacrifice. This view parallels that of Pseudo-Philo, in which Isaac is given to Abraham through Sarah for the sake of this very moment. Here too, Sarah is the sacred vessel to serve divine purpose. Knowing her maternal instinct, however, Abraham hides the deed from her, lest she interfere with God's plan. As a vessel, her role is finished.

Philo makes only two references to Sarah in his discussion of the *akeida* within his text On Abraham, both of which are indirect. In the first, he introduces the trial by noting that part of why Isaac was so cherished was that he was born "in full wedlock" (On Abraham 168). Here, Philo is less concerned with Sarah's absence than with implicitly

explaining why God said "your only son" in Genesis 22. Ishmael was not born to Abraham's true wife, and was therefore born out of wedlock. Still, like the midrashim that would follow him, Philo frames the trial by reminding the reader that Isaac was Sarah's child as well.

In his second reference to Sarah, Philo reminds us that she laughed at the promise of Isaac's birth. He brings the laughter motif in his discussion of the joy with which Isaac received the coming sacrifice. Just as his name means laughter, he would be taken in slaughter with joyous laughter. Philo notes that there is grief within laughter, and he brings Sarah's mixed emotional reaction to the unlikely promise as an example (On Abraham 206). In doing so, he effectively returns Sarah to the *akeida* narrative. By depicting her own ambivalence, the reader is reminded not only of her absence, but of the torture she might have felt over the dilemma of obeying God's command and protecting the beloved, only son.

The account in Jubilees of the *akeida* contains two relevant differences. In its version, the trial is conceived by "Prince Mastema" who like Samael and Satan in other versions, pushes God to test the loyalty of Abraham (17:16). The second change depicts Abraham returning to Ber Sheba, dwelling there for a time, and then going to Hebron. There, with her husband nearby, Sarah dies (19:2). Jubilees explains Abraham's seeming absence at the time of Sarah's

death. Suddenly, the text inserts the phrase: "we were testing him whether he would exercise self-control" (19:3). Jubilees smooths over the problem of how much time passed between the *akeida* and Sarah's death by recontextualizing it as another trial of Abraham.

Though 4 Maccabees doesn't deal directly with Sarah, it makes a reference to the *akeida* that may recall her to the reader. This text refers to the *akeida* by comparing the trial of Abraham to that of the mother of the seven martyrs (14:20). The text begins by exalting the mother who placed her piety above the lives of her own children. Ironically, in order to demonstrate the depth of her righteousness, the text describes at length the extent of her love for her children, even more than that of a father to his child (15:4). The text notes that her "manly courage" enabled her to overcome her "mother love" (15:23). 4 Maccabees' repeated emphasis on the strength of a mother's love calls even more attention to Sarah's absence from the *akeida*. The author may not have intended for the reader to recall Sarah during the description of the pious mother, but the parallel seems quite strong.

In summary, the extra-biblical literature contains a range of references to Sarah and the *akeida*. Some Christian texts attempt to strengthen the parallels between Sarah and Mary, while Jewish texts are more concerned with preserving the reputations of the patriarchs. Even those texts who

don't mention Sarah explicitly, recall her subtly.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE TARGUMIM

The earliest rabbinic midrashic tradition is contained within the targumim, translations of the biblical text into Aramaic. In them we can see the earliest seeds of the midrashim that would be composed later. Regarding Sarah's role in the *akeida*, the earliest targumim are virtually silent. Pseudo-Jonathan, a much later targum is discussed here even though it is contemporaneous with and similar to much later midrashim. As we shall see, this free translation like the midrashim of its time, uses the *akeida* as an opportunity for polemic against Islam. There is one subtle change in the early targumic account of the *akeida* that will be seen below.

Of the extant targumim, only Pseudo-Jonathan explicitly writes Sarah into the *akeida* narrative. It so does in several notable ways. Paralleling several midrashic traditions, Pseudo-Jonathan describes the competition between Isaac and Ishmael as the cause of the trial. Where Onkelos leaves the original cause of the trial unchanged, Neofiti justifies it within the context of the tenth trial, as does the fragmentary targum. What is most striking for our

investigation is Isaac's reasoning as to why he should be Abraham's heir, saying, "because I am the son of Sarah his wife, while you are the son of Hagar, my mother's maidservant."[9] Maher claims that Isaac's argument is found in no other source. He suggests that it represents a polemic against Islam. The Jews as descendants of Isaac, are the true inheritors of God's revelation. Muslims did not receive God's revelation, since they were descendants of Ishmael.[10] According to this analysis, Sarah becomes a central figure. It is she as the real wife of Abraham that holds the power of legitimacy and progeny. The biblical text establishes this precedent by rejecting Ishmael, but the targumic account draws upon it in constructing the polemic against Islam. The role of mother as sacred vessel who insures the covenant becomes highlighted.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan further injects Sarah into the narrative, with references completely absent from the other targumim. Pseudo-Jonathan connects the narrative both to the genealogy of Genesis 22:20-24 and to the death of Sarah (Gen. 23:1). Before the genealogy, but after the phrase "after these things..." (Gen. 22:20) the targum inserts the sudden appearance of Satan.

> *...after Abraham had tied Isaac, Satan went and told Sarah that Abraham had slaughtered Isaac. And Sarah arose and cried out and was choked and died*

[9]Michael Maher, trans., Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark ltd., 1992), 77.

[10]Maher, 78.

of anguish.[11]

The targum seeks to explain the sudden death of Sarah, so soon textually after the *akeida*. This interpretation asserts that they were linked not only in continuous text, but also in time. The targum then needs to explain how Sarah died, the answer being anguish at the news of what occurred on the mountain. The text goes so far as to offer four verbs to convey the power of the scene: she rises, cries out, chokes, and then dies. Ironically, Sarah is misinformed, and the conveyer of the news is Satan himself.

The targum continues by weaving in the genealogy. "*Abraham came and passed the night on the way,* and Abraham was told: "Behold, Milcah also has given birth; *by the merit of her sister she was able to bear* children to your brother Nahor."[12] The targum highlights the role of women as child bearers by relating Milcah's birthing ability to the merit of Sarah. In fact, the genealogy culminates with Rebecca's birth, the guarantor of the future generations. Thus the targum attributes the continuation of the covenant to Sarah as much as Abraham and Isaac.

One of the most important elements of the *akeida* developed by the targumic and then later exegetical tradition is merit. In the biblical account, the messenger of God calls out to Abraham the second time, saying that because

[11]Maher, 81.

[12]Maher, 81.

Abraham did not withhold his son from God, he would be blessed, his seed would be as numerous as the stars and the sands, he would posses the gates of his enemies, and by him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 22:16-18).

In the targumim, God's promise is preceded by a plea from Abraham. Pseudo-Jonathan records this version:

> *"I beseech, by the mercy from before you, O Lord! It is manifest before you that there was no deviousness in my heart, and that I sought to perform your decree with joy. Therefore, when the children of Isaac my son enter into a time of distress, remember them, and answer them, and redeem them. All these generations to come will say:* 'On *this* mountain *Abraham tied his son Isaac, and there the Shekinah of* the Lord *was revealed to him."*[13]

Onkelos is vastly more simple, with Abraham referring only to the future generations who would worship at that mountain. Neofiti is more similar to Pseudo-Jonathan, adding more detail. Neofiti actually has the future generations calling the mountain the place where Abraham *sacrificed* Isaac, rather than tied him. The fragmentary account is most similar to Pseudo-Jonathan.

The common theme in all four targumim is the emphasis on the future generations. There certainly seems to be a theological statement by the various targum authors about redemption. Perhaps they were reassuring a suffering constituency that Abraham's merit would protect them. The theology of the targum seems to emphasize those actual human

[13]Maher, 80.

beings who are the descendants of Abraham, and the audience of the literature.

Pseudo-Jonathan adds a twist to the notion of the merits of the children by connecting Milcah's fertility and subsequent birthing of her many offspring to the merit of Sarah. Just as the future offspring merit due to the acts of Abraham, now they merit due to Sarah as well. In fact, they owe their very existence to her merit, without which, the text implies, Milcah would not have been able to bear children. By adding the element of Sarah's death at the news of the *akeida* and attributing Milcah's fertility to her merit, Pseudo-Jonathan makes Sarah's place as central to the text as Abraham and Isaac.

In summary, Pseudo-Jonathan reflects a later targumic tradition in dialogue with Islam, with Sarah representing the sacred vessel for the legitimate continuation of Judaism. The earlier targumim contain a motif highlighting Jewish offspring and emphasizing the importance of Sarah's fertility for Jewish continuity.

CHAPTER SIX: THE TALMUD

The Babylonian Talmud contains none of the midrashic references to a direct role for Sarah in the *akeida*. In fact, the Talmud (probably inadvertently) solves some of the problems in the biblical text leading one to find Sarah' absence troubling. In only one instance the Talmud text record a midrashic thread that brings Sarah back into the *akeida* story.

Bava Batra 15b contains a conversation between God and Satan. The latter has searched the earth seeking God's most faithful subject. He reports:

> I have traversed the whole world and found none so faithful as thy servant Abraham. For thou didst say to him, Arise, walk through the land to the length and breadth of it, for to thee I will give it, and even so, when he was unable to find any place in which to bury Sarah until he bought one for four hundred sheckels of silver, he did not complain against thy ways (Bava Batra 15b).

The motif of Abraham as suffering servant is not unique in rabbinic literature. The *akeida* becomes commonly known as the tenth trial, within the view that each successive biblical episode is a trial of Abraham's faith, culminating with the sacrifice of his own son. It is therefore astonishing that Satan in this text refers to Abraham's

difficulty in negotiating a burial plot for Sarah as the best evidence of Abraham's faith.

By bringing Sarah's death as the evidence for Abraham's faith, the text has reminded the reader of Sarah's own faithfulness. One would expect the binding of Isaac to be Satan's proof, and yet remembering Sarah's death shifts our focus back to her. The rabbinic author uses the juxtaposition in the biblical text between the *akeida* and Sarah's death to tie her into Abraham's faithfulness, and read her back into the difficult trial.

The motif of Satan challenging God over the faith of God's servants seen here in Bava Batra will be greatly developed in later midrashim, as we will see. Ultimately, Satan will actually appear to Sarah and the connection between the trial and her death will become explicit, as with Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Jubilees.

The role of faith in this text echoes some of the Christian texts presented earlier. The New Testament polemics of faith over law as with Hebrews 11 seem particularly relevant. In addition, the Testament of Isaac contains the same emphasis on the piety of the patriarch. In contrast, the more Jewish of the texts, the Testament of Abraham depicts the patriarch struggling persistently against God's will. It may be that the Talmudic rabbis were trying to respond to Christian accusations that law took precedence over faith in Judaism. In this Bava Batra text, rather than

depict Abraham's righteousness through his following God's command to sacrifice his son, it shows his faith even during the loss of Sarah and the struggle to bury her.

Regarding the juxtaposition between the *akeida* and Sarah's death, other references counter the Bava Batra text. Rosh Hashana 16b and Bava Kama 93a both record a similar midrash, in which the reason that Sarah dies before Abraham is as punishment for her "calling for divine judgement of one's fellow man."[14] Her sin was embodied in her plea about giving Hagar to him as a concubine, saying "My wrong be upon you" (Gen. 16:5). Here, Sarah's death is removed from proximity to the *akeida* and juxtaposed with the much earlier Hagar cycle.

In a similar text, during a discussion of eulogies in Sanhedrin 46b, the rabbis maintain that Sarah's burial was delayed for the sake of Abraham's honor. The midrash goes on to report that Sarah was pleased that Abraham was so honored. This text seems to read no relevance in the juxtaposition between the *akeida* and Sarah's death. Similarly, it sees no real significance in the fact that Abraham and Sarah were so far apart at the time of her death, except to offer a teaching about delaying burial for the sake of the living mourner.

In a final reference to Sarah's death, Bava Batra 58a depicts a scene in which Abraham lies with Sarah's body in

[14]Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana 16b and Bava Kama 93a.

the cave of Machpelah. This text clearly seeks to erase any question of the depth of Abraham and Sarah's love at the time of her death, even though it follows the *akeida* and they were so far apart. It may be that the Talmudic authors were unaware of midrashic traditions relating Sarah's death and the *akeida* (because they had not yet been developed) or that they rejected those midrashim.

The Talmudic text indirectly solves the problem in the biblical text that Sarah's relationship seems more appropriate for the trial of the *akeida* than Abraham's. The Talmud doesn't emphasize the urgency of Sarah's infertility. Rather, it focuses the urgency on Abraham. Yevamot 64a goes so far as to suggest that the problem bearing children was Abraham's, since it took him so long to conceive a child with Hagar. In answering the question why the patriarch's were barren, the text says "Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous." Here the urgent desire for fertility is Abraham's, and consequently, the *akeida* is an appropriate trial.

Ta'anit 8b does describe Sarah's longing for a child, but in the context of comparing women to rain. Both are controlled by God. Interpreting Deuteronomy 11:17 which states "and He shut up the heavens", the text notes that just as God closes the skies and withholds rain, God also closes wombs and withholds children. Similarly, God remembers to provide rain, as God "remembered Sarah" (Gen. 21:1). Though

the text acknowledges the high stakes of fertility for Sarah, it is within the broader context of seeing childbirth as one of the cycles of nature controlled by God. Here again, Sarah is a vessel as seen in extra-biblical literature, the means for the birth of the child willed by God.

Kiddushin 29a strengthens the notion that Abraham is the logical choice to carry out God's commands about Isaac, within the context of a discussion of circumcision. Mother's are not obligated to circumcise their sons because God commanded Abraham, not Sarah. Here too, Abraham's parenting role is highlighted by the Talmud, while Sarah's is de-emphasized.

In summary, the Babylonian Talmud does not contain any midrashic traditions giving Sarah an explicit role in the *akeida*. In general, it tends to smooth over some of the biblical problems that lead to a need for Sarah, though probably inadvertently. Abraham's strong parental connection to Isaac is emphasized while Sarah's is not. Sarah's death is usually removed from its proximity to the *akeida*, with the notable exception of Bava Batra 15b which implies that Sarah's death (and not the *akeida*) is Abraham's ultimate trial.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Genesis Rabbah

Genesis Rabbah[15] is the first midrashic text to explicitly weave Sarah into the *akeida* narrative. The midrashic editor's decision began a tradition of explicitly including Sarah in the *akeida* in midrashic literature that developed, continued, and persists today. In this section we will see these earliest motifs that provide the basis for a rich tradition of reading Sarah into the *akeida*.

One of the great challenges in reading Genesis Rabbah (GR) is in its seeming theological incoherence. Though the midrashim are arranged according to the order of Torah portions, it is questionable as to whether there is any editorial point of view. At times the text seems to be a series of unrelated *aggadot*, juxtaposed only because they relate to continuous biblical verses. Niehoff has called the exegetical process in GR "associative thinking."[16] Exegetical

[15]Genesis Rabbah was probably redacted no later than the fifth century C.E. It contains elements found in much extra-biblical literature as well as the Talmud, which may have come from common sources. See Moshe David Herr, "Genesis Rabbah" in Encyclopedia Judaica. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 399 - 401.

[16]M. R. Niehoff, "The Return of Myth in Genesis Rabbah on the Akeda." Journal of Jewish Studies, Vol. XLVI, Nos. 1-2, Spring-Autumn 1995, 72.

units are strung together intuitively following the order of the biblical text. Thus, it is difficult to read GR as a unified text with a theological point of view, since it is a series of only loosely related mini-texts.

Even given that disclaimer, it is hard to ignore the theological implications of the apparent editing of GR. It is equally fascinating for the modern reader to examine GR as a whole, even if the conclusions don't reflect editorial intent. Therefore, we will confront the mini-texts themselves, as well as attempt to discover the theological implications of their overall inter-play.

In this account of the *akeida*, it is Abraham who brings Sarah into the story. The text fills in the spaces within God's command in Genesis 22 verse 2, "take your son, your only son, that you love, Isaac." Rewritten as a dialogue, the midrash reads:

> He said to him: "Take, I pray you, your son."
> He said to him: "Which son?"
> He said to him: "Your only son."
> "This one is the only son of his mother, and that one the only one of his mother."
> "...whom you love."
> "Where are the dividing walls in the womb?"
> "Isaac."
>
> (Genesis Rabbah 55)

Here, the text acknowledges the depth of Sarah's connection to her son, as well as Hagar's to hers. Abraham has two sons, where the two mothers only have one each. Though Sarah is not implicitly written into the trial, the effect of this text is to acknowledge her absence to the reader. The very

next line of the midrash asks why God didn't tell Abraham to take Isaac immediately. The answer given: "It was so as to make Isaac still more precious in his view..." (Genesis Rabbah 55). It is as though Abraham didn't have the same appreciation of the invaluableness of Isaac, in the way that Sarah (and Hagar of Ishmael) clearly did. If anything, until now, Abraham has prized Ishmael. He was the first born (Gen. (16:15-16), he was circumcised before Isaac (Gen. 17:23-27), and Abraham agonized over casting him out to his death (Gen. 21:11). GR recognizes Sarah's appreciation of Isaac as inheritor and guarantor of the covenant. For this trial to succeed, Abraham had to become aware of Isaac's centrality. The text supports the notion that the trial ought to have been Sarah's, since it was she who was so deeply attached to her son. The midrash solves this problem by having God guide Abraham to the recognition of the preciousness of his son Isaac.

The next reminder of Sarah's absence from the biblical text comes with the appearance of Samael, later to be known as Satan.[17] In GR 56, he first attempts (and fails) to dissuade Abraham from carrying out God's command. Then Samael turns to Isaac and successfully causes him to waver by recalling Sarah. Samael calls out to Isaac, "Oh son of a miserable mother. He is going to slaughter you." It is as

[17]Mastema in Jubilees, Samael here, and Satan in other texts are all the same character. See Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, "Satan", in Encyclopedia Judaica. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 902 - 905.

surprising that Samael chooses to seduce Isaac by reminding him of his mother's pain, as it is that he succeeds. It is not Isaac's fear of dying so much as his guilt of what his mother will experience that causes him to waver. Samael goes on to say, "all those lovely cloaks which your mother made will be the inheritance of Ishmael, the hated one of her house." (GR 56) Not only does Samael play on the rivalry between the two half-brothers, he also taunts Isaac with the image of the dashing of Sarah's hope for the future. Again, it is his mother's pain that successfully distracts Isaac, causing him to cry out in confusion, "Father!" (Gen. 22:7)

Here again, the text recognizes the attachment between this mother and son. Samael's is the voice of the arguments against the sacrifice, and it speaks on Sarah's behalf. Niehoff reads this element of GR as part of a broader return to certain myths "overcome" by the biblical text, including in this case, the Oedipal myth.[18] In the biblical text, the Oedipal myth is shattered, when the father did no harm to the son, and the son marries the mother substitute (Rebecca). For Niehoff, Sarah's absence and then sudden death after the *akeida* is an aspect of the shattering of the Oedipal myth. She is not present as a rival for the affection of her son. In this midrashic account, however, the Oedipal myth returns as Samael reminds us of the tension between the will of the father to do violence to the son, and the desire of the son

[18]Niehoff, 86-87.

to satisfy the mother.[19]

One could also read this midrash of GR as less about the Oedipal rivalry between Abraham and Isaac, than as an acknowledgment of Sarah's absence from the biblical text. Samael's skeptical voice become's the reader's, asking what this act will do to the loving mother, so deeply attached to her son. The midrash draws on Sarah's rivalry with Hagar, and her protection of Isaac's inheritance seen in Genesis 21 to create the painful image of Sarah's suffering seeing Ishmael wear "those lovely cloaks which your mother made."

The next reference to Sarah in the GR account comes at her death, in GR 58. A *petichta* connects the report of her death (Gen. 23:1) with Psalms 37:18: "The Lord knows the days of those who without blemish, and their inheritance shall be forever." The midrash asserts Sarah's righteousness, relating the lack of blemish on the person to the years of the person. Certainly, the rabbinic agenda of the midrash here is to glorify a matriarch. Sarah's faults are ignored, especially the last image of her in the biblical text, casting out Ishmael and Hagar. Also ignored is her previous mention in GR as the miserable mother, jealous that the robes she wove for her son were being worn by the hated one of her household (Ishmael).

The next section of GR 58 contains a more extensive *petichta*, connecting Ecclesiastes 1:5 "The sun rises and the

[19]Niehoff, 72.

sun goes down" to Sarah's death. The text offers a long list of righteous men who died, but were followed by other righteous men, about whom the Ecclesiastes verse was recited. The *petichta* culminates with the explicit connection between Sarah's death and the announcement of Rebecca's birth (Gen. 22:20). Earlier in the midrash, GR 57, Abraham is reassured on Mt. Moriah that Isaac will have a wife, preserving the covenant. Thus Rebecca's birth bridges the *akeida* and Sarah's death. Just as Sarah was the sacred vessel to fulfill God's promise to Abraham of a great nation, her role is filled by Rebecca. After the *akeida*, God renews the covenant with a new blessing, and Isaac and Rebecca emerge as the new parents of the promise.

Genesis Rabbah does attempt to answer the question of why Sarah and Abraham were apart at the time of her death. Commenting on Genesis 23:2 "...and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah" R. Levi asserts he came from the grave of Terah to that of Sarah. R. Yose however, noting the chronological gap of two years in Levi's reading, claims that he came directly from Mount Moriah. Neither rabbi deals with the problem that Abraham went to Ber Sheba (Gen. 22:19) and Sarah died in Hebron (Gen. 23:2). Levi's reading raises the possibility that the trauma of the *akeida* and Sarah's death may have been related, but it is left unexplored in any detailed way.

Thus Sarah is never mentioned directly in the GR account of the *akeida*. However, twice the text reminds the reader of

her absence with references to Isaac's mother. These references serve to dramatically return the reader to the pained perspective of the loving mother, absent from the biblical text.

Though Genesis Rabbah never explicitly connects Sarah to Mary, is does relate Isaac to Jesus and contains other Christological imagery. The most startling example is found in GR 56, commenting on Genesis 22:6 "And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac, his son" the midrash states: "It is like one who carries his own cross." This image reinforces the view of Isaac as the willing sacrifice which flourishes in the midrashic tradition. But is also clearly depicts Isaac as a Jesus-figure about to be sacrificed. Within its context, this image seems even stronger as a christological parallel.

One of the dominant themes of GR 56 is resurrection, a notion absent in the Bible and increasingly found in Jewish sources, perhaps as a response to Christianity. The section opens by associating a series of important events to the third day, as in Genesis 22:4 "On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off." Twice, the text refers to resurrection, once at its opening and again toward the end. Here, resurrection is a thematic bookend, creating a context for the narrative. The groundwork is laid here to see Isaac as safe, since he (like Jesus) would be resurrected after the sacrifice.

The text then goes on to assert that merit is attained through the act of worship, prostration in particular. Abraham is said to have merited returning in peace because he promised to go to the mountain to worship, in prostration. Listing a group of acts merited by worship in prostration, the midrash culminates again with the merit of resurrection. The very next line of the midrash depicts Isaac as carrying his own cross. The text seems to be hinting that Isaac, like Jesus, would rise after the sacrifice, due to his merit.

The problem with such a reading returns us to Niehoff's "associative thinking" and the theological incoherence of the midrashic text. Taken alone, the mere association of a resurrection motif with one Jesus image is not enough to prove that the rabbis were concerned with reading Isaac as a Jesus figure, or even writing a polemic against Christianity. There is no direct parallel between Sarah and Mary, and little indirect evidence that such a parallel was part of the authors' point of view. Regardless, it is clear that Genesis Rabbah rose in a time when martyrdom, resurrection, and sacrifice were compelling issues of the day.

In summary, Genesis Rabbah contains the earliest direct references to a role for Sarah in the *akeida*. She is mentioned by Abraham as Isaac's mother, and by Samael to distract Isaac. However, it is difficult to draw any broad theological conclusions because of the editorial nature of the text. At minimum, it seems clear that the editor of

Genesis Rabbah was concerned with reminding the reader that Sarah's figure is relevant to a discussion of the *akeida* narrative.

CHAPTER EIGHT: LEVITICUS RABBAH

Leviticus Rabbah's (LR) account of the *akeida* is more straightforward and complete a narrative than Genesis Rabbah's, though it was composed contemporaneously. It becomes easier to analyze LR's theological view of the *akeida*, since it offers a more coherent version of the story. However, it is not at all clear whether the midrashim found in LR are theologically related to each other, so it is harder to see an overriding point of view. The midrash will first be analyzed as a complete unit, and then its relationship to the wider context of LR will be addressed.

Sarah takes a more central role in the LR version of the *akeida*. Initially, she serves as a vehicle to prove that Abraham was truly ready to sacrifice his own son. The midrash states:

> Had not an angel from heaven called him, Isaac would already have been slain. There is proof that this is so, for Isaac returned to his mother and she said to him: 'Where have you been, my son?' Said he to her: 'My father took me and led me up mountains and down hills,' etc. 'Alas,' she said, 'for the son of a hapless woman! Had it not been for the angel you would by now have been slain!' 'Yes,' he said to her. Thereupon she uttered six cries, corresponding to six blasts. It has been said: She scarcely finished speaking when she died. Hence it is written, *And Abraham came to mourn for*

Sarah, and to weep for her (Genesis 23:2).[20]

The theological starting point for this midrash is Abraham's determination to follow God's instructions. In the end, the text is actually about Sarah, bringing her perspective into focus, moving her to the theological center of the narrative. By relating her six cries to the blasts of the shofar heard on the High Holidays, the rabbinic author is contradicting an aggadic tradition that usually associates Isaac on Moriah with the shofar.[21] The latter tradition arose from the recurring motif already seen in the targumim and Genesis Rabbah of Abraham's plea to God to be merciful with future generations due to Isaac's merit. However, Leviticus Rabbah shifts the source of merit away from Isaac the willing sacrifice. Instead, God's mercy on the High Holidays comes from Sarah, the "hapless" mother who was the innocent victim of the *akeida*.

These two midrashic traditions, one associating God's mercy with Isaac's merit and the other with Sarah's, have competing theological consequences. The notion that Isaac's deed merited mercy implies that future Jews are saved by the willingness of the son to be sacrificed. This view not only reflects Christian traditions, it also supports martyrdom in general. The latter motif, in which Sarah's death merited God's future mercy, contradicts the very notion of martyrdom.

[20]Leviticus Rabbah, 20:2.

[21]See S.Y. Agnon, The Days of Awe. (New York: Shocken Books, 1948).

In this case, it was the pointless death of an innocent bystander that yields merit. Sarah was the 'hapless' or 'wretched' mother, rather than the noble, willing sacrifice. This tradition seems to include a subtle polemic against martyrdom, in which there is only the pain of the hapless mother who witnesses such events. It may be that these two competing midrashic traditions arose in response to increasing Roman and then Christian persecution. There may have been debates as to whether the victims were dying as martyrs for the Jewish people, or as innocent victims whose deaths were needless.

A second possible source of the competing midrashic traditions of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah regarding whose merit would be recalled for mercy on the High Holidays may have been a debate about resurrection. With the rise of Christianity, the claim that God was able to raise the dead and Jesus in particular, became a flashpoint for the rabbis. It may be that some rabbis used Isaac's midrashic figure to include the Christian notion of resurrection in Judaism, while others responded by focusing on Sarah's figure, who as the 'wretched mother' represented the argument against the sacrifice and the possibility of resurrection, and for whom death was final.

Both traditions refer to Sarah as the "wretched", "hapless", or "miserable mother," depending upon the translation of the words *aluvata* and *ravata*, as they appear

in GR and LR respectively. The two words are related, and several editions of LR actually substitute the latter. In explicating the origin of these words, Margulies notes that many commentators read this word as meaning "drunk from grief." Building from the root, he suggests that the phrase more appropriately implies "sick from grief or worry."[22] There seems to have been a common tradition to read Sarah as the "miserable mother" that both midrashim used, despite their vast differences. This figure may have transcended Sarah (her actual name is rarely mentioned) and become a common motif. It may be that the 4 Maccabees text depicting the mother of the seven martyrs drew on or helped develop this motif.

On a simple, textual level, the midrash solves several problems raised in the biblical account. Most primarily, the midrash fills the gap between the *akeida* and Sarah's death by directly connecting them. The suddenness of Sarah's death in the Bible is captured by the image of her dying before she could even finish speaking. The problem of why Abraham and Sarah are separate at the time of her death is solved by having him come to her directly from Moriah upon hearing the news (R. Levi's tradition in GR). The midrash also acknowledges the deep mother-son bond between Sarah and Isaac, depicting Sarah as unable to bear even the thought of her son's death. The text never actually uses Sarah's name,

[22]Leviticus Rabbah 20:2.

except when quoting biblical verses. Rather, it refers to her as 'his mother', emphasized their relationship. This midrash further supports the notion that Sarah's relationship to Isaac seems more fitting for this terrible trial than Abraham's; so much so, she dies from the burden. Perhaps, then, the midrashic author is acknowledging Sarah's absence from the trial, and explaining it by depicting her as unable to withstand the pain it would bring her.

The Leviticus Rabbah account teases out an element of alienation between Abraham and Sarah only hinted at in the biblical story. In the Torah, the modern reader perceives their alienation from Sarah's absence from this story, and their strange separation at the time of her death. In this midrashic version, the distance between Sarah and Abraham is emphasized. Sarah asks Isaac where he has been, indicating that Abraham went off with his son for days without telling her where they were going and what they were doing. Later midrashim solve this tension by having Abraham lie to Sarah, telling her that he is taking their son to study.

Also, this version is unequivocal in presenting Abraham directly to Sarah as a man willing to kill their only son. Though the reader expects Sarah to rejoice at the news that Isaac is alive and well, standing before her, she dies. Her death comes from the pain of knowing that only an angel saved her son from her husband, the willing executioner. Even at the news of Sarah's death, this midrash depicts the couple as

deeply estranged. The account reads:

> He came from Mount Moriah. Now Abraham harbored doubts in his heart and thought: Perhaps, heaven forfend, some disqualifying blemish has been found in him and his offering has not been accepted...
> Leviticus Rabbah 20:2

Even after his wife has actually died, his mind is still riveted on the sacrifice. The ram is more important to Abraham than Sarah. Clearly, the Leviticus Rabbah author was troubled by the severe alienation between the patriarch and matriarch as a result of the *akeida*.

One final aspect of Leviticus Rabbah worthy of review here is its juxtaposition of the *akeida* and *aharei mot*. In the latter Torah portion, Aaron sons are instantly killed when they attempt to offer 'strange fire' as a sacrifice to God. The midrash connects the two different episodes' common motifs describing the cyclical nature of achieving great joy and experiencing deep sorrow. In both stories, the characters' circumstances change dramatically. Still, it seems impossible to ignore the other thematic connection between *aharei mot* and the *akeida*. In both episodes an sacrificial offering is made to God that turns out to be different than what God actually desired. According to the midrash, in both stories death is the result. Just as Nadav and Abihu are instantly killed by their strange fire, Sarah dies instantly at the news. Even if the parallel was unintended by the Leviticus Rabbah author, it is impossible to ignore. The subtle warning of the text seems to be that

there is often a price for even well-intentioned sacrifice. With these two sacrifices, the stakes were high enough to be life and death.

In summary, the coherent version of the *akeida* found in LR shifts Sarah squarely to the theological center of the story. In this version, her death is to be recalled every year with the blast of the shofar. Her isolated point of view and alienation from Abraham is emphasized. Several problems in the biblical text are solved by the text. Finally, there may be significance to the juxtaposition of this midrash with the episode of *aharei mot*.

CHAPTER NINE: PESIKTA DE-RAV KAHANA

The account of the *akeida* found in the midrashic compilation of Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (PRK) is markedly similar to Leviticus Rabbah, which preceded it by a relatively short time.[23] The scene in which Isaac appears before Sarah and reveals the events that took place on Mount Moriah occurs here intact, though it grows out of a slightly different context. Rather than offered as a proof that Abraham would have done the deed, it comes as an epilogue, after the events on the mountain, "When Isaac got back to his mother..." (Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 26)

The next difference between the two accounts involves Sarah's question to Isaac. While in LR she asks "Where have you been, my son?" (LR 20:2), in the PRK she asks "My son, what did your father do to you?" (PRK 26). The latter text brings the alienation between husband and wife further into focus. Here, Sarah already assumes that Abraham has done something wrong to her son, even before having any concrete information. In addition, PRK has Isaac introduce the notion

[23]Perhaps a century. See Moshe DavidHerr, "Midrash", in Encyclopedia Judaica. (Jeruselem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 1511.

that he would have been killed, were it not for divine intervention, and then Sarah repeats it. LR, however, has Sarah make the realization on her own and then Isaac affirms it. Here Isaac is more involved in the conflict between his parents. In this version, he seems more reckless with his words, almost as if he were provoking parental discord. The PRK version seems even more troubled by the dysfunctional family relationships in the *akeida* story than the LR version.

Another difference between the two versions seems minor. Where LR reflects the biblical text in attributing the divine intervention to an angel of God, PRK actually depicts God as intervening to stop the sacrifice. Perhaps the PRK author sought to dispel any question of what God's real desire was by having God speak the final words of the story, rather than through a messenger.

Though PRK draws directly from the LR version in connecting Sarah's death to the *akeida*, it parallels the GR and targumic versions in attributing the merit for God's mercy to future generations. In a direct parallel, PRK states:

> Hence, when Isaac's children put their hands to transgressions and evil deeds, remember for their sake their father's being bound on the altar and be Thou filled with mercy for them; have Thou mercy upon them and turn for their sake the measure of justice into the measure of mercy. (PRK 23)

PRK, like GR and the targumim use this speech by Abraham to associate the plea for mercy embodied in the Day of Atonement with Isaac's merit. PRK eliminates the section found in LR

that describes Sarah's six gasps and their relationship to the shofar blasts. Instead, this version moves directly from her sudden death to Abraham's coming to mourn her.

It is possible that the PRK author took a compromise position within a theological debate over martyrdom. In this text, Sarah is still an innocent victim. It is she, not Isaac who has died. Yet Isaac brings God's future mercy by his merit. He is not seen as an actual sacrifice, nor as a martyr. By juxtaposing Sarah's death with Abraham's plea for future mercy, the reader no longer connects sacrifice and martyrdom to merit and mercy. The issues are separated by this text, and remain distinct.

Sarah is credited, however, as being the source of merit for women's fertility, as well as a litany of other gifts. The text states:

> The verse *Sarah said: God has given me occasion for laughter; everyone that hears will laugh in joy with me* (Gen. 21:6) teaches, however, that when our mother Sarah gave birth to Isaac, at the same time all barren women were remembered by God, all the deaf were given hearing, all the blind were given sight, all the mute were given speech, all the madmen restored to soundness of mind. And so all said: Would that Sarah had been remembered a second time, so that we, too, could have been remembered with her!
>
> (PRK 22)

Unlike LR, which places Sarah's merit in her death, this text places it with her fertility and laughter. The entire motif of martyrdom is absent, as Sarah is viewed as the source of life rather than as a victim in death. PRK even goes so far as to connect the creation of the sun and the moon to God's

remembrance of Sarah (PRK 22).

In summary, PRK directly parallels the version of the *akeida* found in LR, though it removes the connection between Sarah's cries and the shofar blasts. PRK also seems to magnify the family's dysfunction and alienation. Finally, PRK adds an additional element of Sarah's merit, coming from her deeds in life rather than her death.

CHAPTER TEN: MIDRASH TANHUMA

The story of the *akeida* found in Midrash Tanhuma builds on the traditions that preceded it, weaving them into a new, more complete narrative. However, there are several alternative Tanhuma texts, that contain different versions of the story.[24] In addition, the Tanhuma version introduces several new elements that have varying literary and theological effects on the story.

The Tanhuma introduces Satan to the narrative in the most complete way so far. His character, as an adversarial member of God's court of angels[25], challenges God over the depth of Abraham's loyalty. Though the impetus for the trial comes from Satan, it is God who suggests the sacrifice of the son. The trial that follows is the result of Satan's challenge.

After pleading with Abraham to stand up to this test, greater than all the previous trials combined, God tells

[24]The dating and composition of the Tanhuma midrashim is extremely problematic. See Moshe David Herr, "Tanhuma Yelamdenu" in Encyclopedia Judaica. (Jeruselem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 794 - 796.

[25]Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 16b. See also Ephraim E. Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs. (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975), 169-170.

Abraham to take his only son. Here Tanhuma draws on the conversation found in Genesis Rabbah, in which Abraham forces God to specify Isaac by saying he has two sons whom he loves, each the only child of his mother. One subtle distinction that could easily be a product of scribal error, is a slight difference in the Hebrew. In the Genesis Rabbah account, Abraham asks: אית תחומין במיעה? (GR 52) "Are there walls in the womb?" However, Tanhuma records Abraham's question as: וכי יש גבול במעים? (Tanhuma Vayera) "Is there a boundary in the guts?" Aside from the obvious change from תחומין to גבול, there is the more subtle shift that becomes prominent in translation. The root of both במיעה and במעים is related to human innards, whether that means the womb, the guts, or the intestines. The Genesis Rabbah seems to imply womb by adding the ה' suffix, as in "her womb". Yet the Tanhuma version makes them plural, implying "guts" or "loins". In effect, the image shifts from there being no walls in the womb (a maternal image) to there being no boundary in the loins (a paternal image). The focus on the mother figure found in GR shifts however slightly to the father figure in Tanhuma.

Once Abraham has received the command to sacrifice his son, Tanhuma introduces a completely new element into the story. The text states:

> Abraham meditated in his heart, saying: What am I to do? Shall I tell Sarah? Women tend to think lightly of God's commands. If I do not tell her and simply take off with him - afterward, when she does not see him, she will strangle herself. What did he do? He said to Sarah, "Prepare food and

> drink for us, and we will rejoice today." She asked, "Why today more than other days? Besides, what is the rejoicing about?" Abraham: "Old people like ourselves, to whom a son is born in our old age - have we not cause to rejoice? So she went and prepared the food. During the meal, Abraham said to Sarah, "You know, when I was already three years old, I became aware of my Maker, but this lad, growing up, has not yet been taught. Now there is a place far away where youngsters are taught. Let me take him there." Sarah: "Take him in peace."
>
> Tanhuma Vayera

Abraham's thoughts reflect the thoughts of the reader, who has been wondering how it could be that Sarah wouldn't notice her missing son. The Tanhuma solves the problem drawing on the interpretation offered earlier by Josephus, that Abraham concealed his plan from Sarah to keep her from interfering. Here, the midrash's solution to the problem in the biblical text serves it's deeper point: that women think lightly of God's commands. Niehoff has dismissed this text as a "naive and even misogynist" story, noting that:

> Abraham had to make a speedy departure in order to avoid Sarah noticing and opposing the project of the Akeda. Abraham had to be concerned about this - according to *Tanhuma* - because women are lightminded and cannot be trusted with important issues.[26]

Niehoff's claim is that the argument in Genesis Rabbah is much more complex, acknowledging the thin line between acts done in haste out of love and out of hate. In the Genesis Rabbah text, it is possible to see in Abraham's haste some of the same murderous intent as with that of Israel's enemies (Pharoah and Balaam). To that extent, the Tanhuma account

[26]Niehoff, 78.

strips Abraham's haste to fulfill God's command of its full complexity. By making a misogynist point about women and commandments, the drama of the moment is deflated.

On the other hand, Tanhuma successfully heightens the family drama of the story by overtly raising the question of Sarah's awareness of the act. The Oedipal myth teased out by GR (in Niehoff's analysis) may be shrunken down in Tanhuma to the size of a minor family conflict rather than a mythical tragedy. Still, Tanhuma raises the themes of alienation between husband and wife in its version of the story.

The Tanhuma text further acknowledges the depth of Sarah's connection to Isaac. Abraham admits in his meditation that when Isaac does not return, she will "strangle herself." The image is chilling, as a foreshadow of her death that actually will occur. Though Abraham seems to know what the consequences of his actions will be, he is still unable to prevent her tragic death.

Abraham continues to remind the reader of Sarah's special love for Isaac. Though he intended the banquet in honor of Isaac's birth to distract Sarah and ready her to obey his wishes, it also serves as a reminder to the reader of the joy of these elderly parents at the birth of their child, and the pain of Sarah before she conceived him. Even after Abraham successfully persuades Sarah, he still recognizes how attached to Isaac she is. Thus he rises early in the morning, lest she change her mind.

Tanhuma's version of this episode has some glaring gaps in logic. Abraham's plan to keep his project from Sarah never had any real chance of succeeding. How long could he have kept his son's death a secret? Surely, the charade of sending Isaac off to study could only last so long. Did he think he would be able to convince Sarah that the sacrifice was right, after the fact? Similarly, the banquet in celebration of Isaac's birth seems absurd at this time, so much later than his actual birth. A final gap in the plan's logic is the blatant rabbinic insertion of the yeshiva, into a time long before any such school existed.

It seems that the agenda of this part of the Tanhuma was a poorly veiled attempt to make several points that were probably popular to the rabbis of the time. These points were that commandments are for men, not women; that fathers know what's best for their sons; that every Jewish child should study at yeshiva; and that women are capricious.

Later in the story, the Tanhuma repeats the established motif in which Satan visits first Abraham and then Isaac in the hope of derailing their project. Satan's speech to Isaac is more elaborate than those found in Genesis Rabbah, especially in relation to Sarah. He says:

> Oh hapless son of a hapless mother! How many fasts did your mother fast, how many prayers did she utter until at last you were born! And now this old man has gone mad in his old age and is about to slit your throat.
>
> (Tanhuma Vayera)

Repeating the phrase "hapless mother", now the text applies

it to Isaac as well, as the "hapless son." The word in the text is *aluva*, which also appears in Genesis Rabbah about Sarah. In one phrase, Satan is able to embody the deep bond between mother and son, now threatened by God's command to the father. Satan expresses the rage of the reader, pitying the mother and son joined in misery.

Satan also adds the motif of prayer and fasting. The text refocuses the reader on the urgency with which Sarah wished for this child. Satan uses the very argument to sway Isaac that convinces the reader that it is Sarah who will be sacrificed, when she thinks the most precious person in her world is gone. Ironically, biblical Sarah wasn't particularly pious, prayerful, or fasting, when she tried to have a child. Instead, she laughed at the promise of the angels and schemed with Abraham to sleep with her maid, giving him a child. The rabbis here are building on the image of Sarah the matriarch as a model of piety. In doing so, however, they effectively return Sarah's loss in the *akeida* to the focus of the story.

Satan also expresses the worst fear of the reader, that Abraham has gone mad and is hearing voices in his head rather than God's actual word. Isaac withstands the first argument by Satan, and refuses to deviate from God's will or that of his father. The tension in the story only increases here, since Isaac only knows God's will through his father. God doesn't speaks directly to Isaac, though Satan does.

Satan has attempted to sway Isaac by driving a wedge between the two parents, but the argument fails, and Isaac remains steadfast in following his father's will.

Satan's second attempt comes in the following speech: "If so, shall all those fine tunics your mother made become a legacy for Ishmael, for him who hates your family? Apparently, you give no thought..." (Tanhuma Vayera) Satan repeats the phrase first found in Genesis Rabbah, warning against losing his legacy to Ishmael. Here, Ishmael is the one who hates, however, where he is "the hated of her household" in GR. Ishmael's figure representing an enemy of the Jews seems to be fortifying.

While the guilt over his mother's pain failed to shake Isaac, it is the fear of losing his inheritance to Ishmael that makes him waver. After Satan's second speech, he calls out to Abraham, "Father, listen to what this one is saying to me!" By placing these speeches one after the other, it is clear that Isaac is depicted as placing his trust in his father over his love for his mother; yet his rivalry with Ishmael is able to overcome them both, if only for a moment until Abraham reassures him. Perhaps the rabbinic author wanted to depict Isaac as the willing sacrifice, unrelenting in the face of family guilt, but willing to stand against Israel's enemies.

Though Isaac withstands Satan's speech about Sarah's pain, throughout the rest of the Tanhuma version, the text

has Isaac continually expressing concern for her. After Abraham reveals to Isaac that he is the chosen one for the sacrifice, he says "If He has so chosen, my life is given to Him, but I grieve for my mother" (Tanhuma Vayera). Both men are silent, and they continue on together. The reader can only imagine Isaac's goal. Was he trying to dissuade his father? Was he simply expressing the sorrow of his mother? Whatever Isaac's intent, the author has chosen to remind the reader in no uncertain terms of the cost of this sacrifice to Sarah.

Isaac again brings Sarah into the story when he says:

> Father, hurry, do the will of your Maker, burn me into a fine ash, then take the ash to my mother and leave it with her, and whenever she looks at it she will say, 'This is my son, whom his father has slaughtered'. (Tanhuma Vayera)

Certainly Isaac is trying to stop his father from carrying out the sacrifice by challenging him with the sorrow Sarah will surely feel. He expressed the terror of the reader, who knew of the tragedy to come, even while Abraham lied to Sarah. Here, Isaac refers to God as "*your* Maker". The son is no longer the willing sacrifice as much as the innocent victim of what one man does to his son out of religious conviction. The fact that God has not spoken to Isaac returns at this moment. Only Abraham, the seeming madman, has heard God's words. At this moment, from Isaac's point of view, the story is once again a family trauma rather than a religious trial. He goes on to say:

> "Father, what will you do in you old age?" Abraham replied, "My son, we know that we can survive you for but a short time. He who comforted us in the past will comfort us until the day we die.
> (Tanhuma Vayera)

Isaac is deeply troubled by his parent's fate after his death. Perhaps it is the father's admission to the son that the parents can not long survive after him that enables him to then ask to be bound tightly, lest he resist and spoil the sacrifice.

At the same moment as Isaac is bound, Tanhuma reports, Satan appears a third time, now before Sarah. Now the text weaves together the earlier Satan stories found in Jubilees and Genesis Rabbah (in which Satan appears to Abraham and Isaac) with the versions of Leviticus Rabbah and Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (in which Sarah dies after Isaac tells her what Abraham has done). In the newer, hybrid version found in Tanhuma, after appearing to Abraham and Isaac, Satan appears to Sarah disguised as Isaac. Their dialogue parallels the LR and PRK completely.

It may be that the editor of Tanhuma made the switch to smooth over the stories, making Satan's three appearances consistent. It may also be that the tradition in which Isaac caused his own mother's death was too negative for the rabbinic editors, who tended to glorify the patriarchs. Substituting Satan for Isaac relieved the son from the duty of appearing before his own mother, reporting on the brutality of his own father, and causing her death. The

literary cost of the substitution is diminished dramatic tension, that had been so palpable in the earlier versions.

Though the Tanhuma version largely relies on earlier literary traditions upon which it embellishes, the text does introduce some new images, as with Isaac's request to have his ash presented to his mother in an urn. Another startling motif brought by this midrash is a wedding image. Commenting on the verse "And they came to the place" (Gen. 22:9) the text relates:

> both carrying stones [for the altar], both carrying the fire, both carrying the wood. For all that, Abraham acted like one making wedding preparations for his son, and Isaac like one making a wedding bower for himself.
>
> (Tanhuma Vayera)

The point of the text here seems to be to show the joyful, if anxious determination with which father and son cooperated in preparation for what would be a slaughter. The author uses the wedding motif precisely because it is so antithetical a project to that of the sacrifice. While the former is the hope for life and children, the latter implies death, and the end of the lineage. The wedding image is even more ironic, since Isaac embodies the promise by God to make Abraham a great nation, and without a wedding and children that promise is impossible. Abraham prepares for the sacrifice that will destroy the promise, as if it would fulfill it.

The wedding image further reflects the midrashic tradition drawing a fine line between joy and sorrow. In this image, the wedding bower becomes altar and then wedding

bower again (with the birth of Rebecca). Earlier, we saw several other examples. In Genesis Rabbah, Niehoff noted the striking similarity raised by the midrash between Abraham's haste in preparing the sacrifice, and the swiftness of Israel's enemies in readying their murderous plans against her. Similarly, Philo in On Abraham compared the pained laughter with which Sarah received the news of Isaac's birth with the joyous laughter with which Isaac and Abraham went off to fulfill God's demand of sacrifice. PRK also associates laughter with both joy and pain, quoting the verse: "I said of laughter, it is mingled [with grief]" (Ecclesiastes 2:2)[27]. Finally, the underlying theme of Leviticus Rabbah is that joy swiftly turns to pain, and back to joy again. Though Abraham rejoices that his son his saved, he then mourns the loss of his wife. In each instance, the midrash sounds a theme common in Jewish history: joy and sorrow are like two sides of one coin.

An alternative Tanhuma version adds an additional speech, depicting Isaac's concern for the plight of his mother. He asks: "Father, do not tell my mother about this while she is standing at the edge of a pit or a roof lest she hurl herself down and die" (Tanhuma Yelamdenu Vayera). In this version, Isaac is deeply concerned with his mother's learning of his death in as safe a way as possible. His plea here stands in direct contrast to his request in the other

[27]Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 26.

Tanhuma version to be presented to his mother in an urn after his death.

The author of this version seems to be making Isaac's character more righteous for the sake of the reader. Just as the earlier Tanhuma text substituted Satan for Isaac to remove the blame for Sarah's death from upon her son, here too the rabbinic author seems concerned with upholding the meritorious image of a righteous patriarch.

On a literary level, the substitution makes the drama less interesting. Seeing Isaac confront his father in so urgent a way as to offer himself in ash to his mother demonstrates the desperation and complexity of the situation. This Isaac isn't single-minded in walking toward his own death. He is tortured and confused, and the Tanhuma version raises those mixed emotions to the surface for the reader. The Tanhuma Yelamdenu version, however, glosses over the complexity of Isaac's tortured response, and depicts him as a righteous, if one-dimensional, character.

Another effect of Isaac's plea in this version is to call attention to the foolishness of Abraham's plan to deceive Sarah. Isaac says out loud the thoughts of the reader, who knows that Abraham will eventually have to confront Sarah with the truth. Ironically, Isaac foreshadows the truth for Abraham. The mere knowledge of what Abraham intended to do to Isaac will ultimately kill Sarah, even though Abraham never actually carried it out.

The Buber recension of the Tanhuma midrash draws on some of the same elements, but leaves many more out. There are only two direct references to Sarah in this version, both found in the Tanhuma, but with subtle differences. The first reference repeats Abraham's statement that "this one is the only one of his mother, and that one the only one of his mother" (Tanhuma Vayera - Buber), in a virtually identical response to God's request.

The second reference repeats Satan's appearance before Isaac, calling out to the "miserable son of a miserable mother." In this version, Satan only tells Isaac of his mother's fasting and claims Abraham is mad. That is enough to cause Isaac to waver and call out to his father "See what he is saying to me!" (Tanhuma Vayera - Buber). Satan's reference to Ishmael's receiving Isaac's inheritance found in some versions of the Tanhuma and originally in Genesis Rabbah is eliminated here. Given that some traditions include Satan's first attempt, others just the second, and still others include both, there may be no more historical significance to their inclusion or exclusion than the particular circumstances of individual editors. On a literary level, however, we have already seen the implications of various versions.

In summary, the Tanhuma further expands Sarah's role. The texts adds the motif of Abraham's plan to deceive Sarah as well as several new speeches by Isaac about her. In

addition, Tanhuma weaves earlier traditions together, expanding Satan's role so that he appears to all three characters. There are several different texts of Midrash Tanhuma, each with different versions of the *akeida*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: PIRKEI DE-RABBI ELIEZER

The aggadic work of Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer (PRE), like the Tanhuma, combines existing traditions, weaves them together, adds significant embellishment, and offers a new version of the *akeida*.[28] Building on the existing midrashim, PRE continues to explore Sarah's role in the story. Though this version does not mention her until after the events on Mount Moriah are finished, at that point, Sarah is brought thoroughly into focus.

In this version, as in the Tanhuma, Samael's (Satan) role is expanded and he is given the blame for Sarah's sudden death. He does not appear to Abraham and Isaac on their way to the mountain to dissuade them, as he did in the Tanhuma. He makes a brief attempt to foil the plan by distracting the ram at the time of the sacrifice. Aside from that moment, he is largely absent from the midrash. As an appendix to the story, out of frustration that he failed to foil Abraham's act, he appears to Sarah and says:

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[28]Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, composed around the eighth-century, is an *aggadic* narrative rather than a collection of midrashim relating to biblical verses. See Moshe David Herr, "Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer" in Encyclopedia Judaica. (Jeruselem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 558 - 560.

> Hast thou not heard what has happened in the world? She said to him: No. He said to her, Thy husband, Abraham, has taken thy son Isaac and slain him and offered him up as a burnt offering upon the altar. She began to weep and to cry aloud three times, corresponding to the three sustained notes (of the Shophar), and (she gave forth) three howlings corresponding to the three disconnected short notes (of the Shophar), and her soul fled, and she died. (PRE 32)

Satan's appearance here is unlike that in any other midrash. He does not arrive disguised as Isaac, as he does in the Tanhuma version. Consequently, Sarah does not ask him what Abraham did to him, as she asked Isaac in the LR and PRK version, and as she asked the disguised Satan in the Tanhuma. In the PRE version, she receives the news much as gossip is overheard. Satan asks: "haven't you heard what's going on in the world?" It is unclear whether she knows who this messenger is or how reliable he is, but she listens to his report. The text forcefully reminds the reader of Sarah's agonizing ignorance. She has had no role in this family trauma, and hearing the news from a total stranger exacerbates her tragic isolation and death.

This version of Satan's speech is also different because he lies to Sarah. He tells her that Abraham has succeeded in slaying him and burning him as an offering to God. In the earlier versions of LR and PRK, Sarah dies from Isaac's report of what Abraham would have done, had God not intervened. Similarly, in the Tanhuma's version Satan poses as Isaac revealing what Abraham would have done. The PRE text is introducing the new element that Sarah died from the

grief of her son's actual death, rather than the thought of it.

In this version, Sarah's death can be blamed completely on Satan, a safe character to take the blame. One can see a progression in the various midrashim. At first, the connection between Sarah's death and the *akeida* was made through Isaac's relating the story to her. Later authors sought to shift responsibility away from Isaac, so the report came through Satan, posing as Isaac. Now, finally, it is Satan who is totally responsible, for he lies, convincing Sarah that her son has actually died. Thus Sarah's death can be explained, and the blame can rest with an appropriate character.

The PRE version restores the earlier motif of Sarah's cries and their correspondence to the blasts of the Shofar, found in LR. Here they are further developed to more specifically reflect the actual blasts (i.e. *tekiot* and *teruot*). PRE seems to connect Sarah's death to the merit of future generations, just as LR does. In the present text, there is no plea by Abraham to remember future generations due to Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed. The only connection in PRE between the Day of Atonement and the events of the *akeida* is found in Sarah's six cries.

After Sarah's death, PRE echoes earlier midrashim by having Abraham come directly from the mountain to mourn for her. Then PRE adds a new element:

> Rabbi Jose said: Isaac observed mourning during three years for his mother. After three years, he married Rebecca, and forgot the mourning of his mother. (PRE 32)

The midrash recalls Genesis 24:67, in which Isaac marries Rebecca and is "comforted after his mother." It also implicitly acknowledges that Genesis 22:20-24, which describes Rebecca's genealogy, acts as a bridge between the *akeida*, the death of Sarah, and the resolution of Isaac's love of Rebecca. In continuing, the PRE text teases out further the Oedipal issues in the story:

> Hence thou mayest learn that until a man marries a wife, his love is for his parents. When he marries a wife, his love is bestowed upon his wife, as it is said, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and he shall cleave unto his wife" (Gen. 2:24). Does a man then *leave* (or "*forsake*") his father and mother with reference to the precept, "Honor"? But the love of his soul cleaves unto his wife, as it is said, "And his soul clave (unto Dinah)" (Gen. 34:3); and it says, "And he shall cleave unto his wife" (Gen. 2:24).[29]

Whether the editor of PRE intended to, or not, this insertion reminds the reader of the challenge to Isaac of honoring his father's will. With the added Oedipal layer of Isaac and Sarah's love, this text brings to the surface the implicit intra-family struggle. It is only with the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca that there is resolution within the family.

Perhaps Isaac's mourning was exacerbated by an additional assertion of PRE: Abraham remarries Hagar after Sarah's death. The text reports:

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[29]Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 32.

> After the death of Sarah, Abraham again took (Hagar) his divorced (wife), as it is said, "And Abraham again took a wife, and her name was Keturah" (Gen. 25:1). Why does it say "and he *again*"? Because on the first occasion she was his wife, and he *again* betook himself to her. Her name was Keturah because she was perfumed with all kinds of scents.[30]

Why would PRE bring Hagar back now, after Sarah's death? Its especially troubling after the extent to which the text has gone to discredit her. Elaborating on the Genesis account, PRE adds that Ishmael shot an arrow at Isaac, leading Sarah to fear Abraham's other son. God's words to Abraham in the midrash are unequivocal in placing Sarah above Hagar. God says:

> Abraham! Dost thou not know that Sarah was appointed to the for a wife from her mother's womb? She is thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant; Sarah is not called thy handmaid, but thy wife; neither is Hagar called thy wife, but thy handmaid; and all that Sarah has spoken she uttered truthfully.[31]

It seems clear that PRE considers Isaac the sole heir to the covenant, and Sarah the only true matriarch of the future generations. Yet, after Abraham casts out Ishmael, PRE also depicts him constantly going out to meet him, despite his oath to Sarah not to "descend from the camel in the place where Ishmael dwelt." In this version, as in other midrashim and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Ishmael accompanies Abraham to the mountain, and still considers himself a candidate for the inheritance after the sacrifice.

[30]Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 30.

[31]Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 30.

PRE seems to be walking a fine line between casting out Hagar and Ishmael completely while still preserving a privileged place for them. Composed during the rise of Islam, it seems reasonable to conclude that the rabbis had to tread delicately with their powerful neighbors. They had to preserve their own authenticity, and uphold Sarah and Isaac as the only legitimate source of God's covenant. On the other hand, they may have had to acknowledge to their Muslim neighbors the shared ancestry with Abraham, and preserve the legitimacy of their fellow religion. It might have been a concession to Muslims that Hagar wasn't really cast out, and that Ishmael remained beloved by Abraham.

Finally, PRE is definitely concerned with resurrection. Perhaps solidifying the rabbinic view hinted at earlier in Genesis Rabbah, here the text is explicit:

> Rabbi Jehudah said: When the blade touched his neck, the soul of Isaac fled and departed, (but) when he heard His voice from between the two Cherubim, saying (to Abraham), "Lay not thine hand upon the lad" (Gen. 22:12), his soul returned to his body, and (Abraham) set him free, and Isaac stood upon his feet. And Isaac knew that in this manner the dead in the future would be quickened. He opened (his mouth), and said: Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickeneth the dead."[32]

In this instance, there seems to be a rabbinic argument in favor of God's power to raise the dead. The blessing was placed in the mouth of the patriarch in order to justify it as a blessing that should be said. However, this polemic seems to have little to do with the Christian motif of

[32]Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 31.

resurrection found in Genesis Rabbah, and Sarah in PRE has no resemblance to Mary.

In summary, PRE does not mention Sarah until after the events on Moriah are finished. At that time, adding a new layer to previous midrashim, in this version Satan appears without disguise to Sarah, and claims Isaac is actually dead. PRE also raises more family conflicts as well as preserving roles for Hagar and Ishmael.

CHAPTER TWELVE: Sefer ha-Yashar

Sefer ha-Yashar attempts throughout its version of the biblical text to offer a smooth, consistent narrative.[33] It tries to retell the Torah stories so that they make sense to the reader. Additionally, the midrash attempts to present the various characters in the best possible light, removing any basis for criticism. The midrash draws on earlier midrashic traditions, weaving them together and adding new details to make the story into one, logically continuous narrative. The added details serve both ends, to smooth out the stories and to glorify the characters. Consequently, the *akeida* receives new treatment, including older traditions, but offering a distinct version.

In developing the source of Sarah's resentment of Ishmael and Hagar, Sefer ha-Yashar repeats the motif in which the elder son aims an arrow at Isaac in Sarah's presence. In this version, however, Ishmael's character is treated more kindly. He never releases his shot, as in PRE. Here, Sarah

[33]Sefer ha-Yashar, composed in the thirteenth-century, is a book of Jewish ethics. It begins by retelling the story of the world, beginning with Adam and including this account of the *akeida*. See Joseph Dan, "Sefer Ha-yashar" in Encyclopedia Judaica. (Jeruselem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 1099.

is able to stop him in time. This version succeeds both in justifying Sarah's hostility, and lessening the negative view of Ishmael.

Sefer ha-Yashar goes even further than PRE in softening the negative treatment of Ishmael. After being cast out, Ishmael recovers and marries. The midrash repeats the motifs of PRE in which Abraham longs to see his son, and tries to visit him where he dwelt. This version adds another new layer, culminating with the words:

> Then Yishmael took his wife and children and travelled to the land of the Philistines to join his father, Abraham. Yishmael remained with his father for a long period of time.[34]

This version completes the story, tying up loose ends, as well as adding an ending in which essentially everyone lives happily ever after.

In a significant departure from the order of the biblical text, Sefer ha-Yashar places the announcement of Rebecca's birth before the *akeida*, rather than after. It comes in a section that embellishes on Abraham's family tree and acts as an etiology for the city of Alepo. The genealogy acts as an introduction for or prelude to the *akeida*. The next section describes Ishmael's argument with Isaac over the merit of their circumcisions and the subsequent challenge by Satan to test his servant, Abraham.

By announcing Rebecca's birth before the *akeida*, she becomes a thematic frame for the episode. The reader, who is

[34]Sefer ha-Yashar, 51.

well aware that she is the matriarch who will continue the lineage, is reminded before the story that it will work out in the end. God's promise is secure despite the trial, because we know that Rebecca is in place, and she will serve as Isaac's partner. On a more subtle level, her birth foreshadows Sarah's death. Rebecca, who will fill Sarah's role, is present at the outset. She is a reminder that though the covenant will endure, Sarah will not survive this trial of Abraham.

Once God begins to try him, Abraham's first thought is of Sarah. Unlike the Tanhuma, in which Abraham schemes to deceive Sarah simply to keep her from interfering, in this version he asks himself how he can do this to the boy's mother. The passage states:

> ויאמר אברהם בלבו איך אעשה עד אשר אפריד את יצחק בני משרה אמו להעלותו לפני ה׳ לעולה: ויבא אברהם האהלה וישב לפני שרה אשתו וידבר אליה כדברים האלה: בננו יצחק גדל ולא למד עבודת אלהיו זה ימים עתה אלך לי למחר ואביאנו אל שם ועבר בנו ושם ילמד את דרכי ה׳: כי ילמדוהו לדעת את ה׳ ולדעת כאשר יתפלל לפני ה׳ בכל עת ויענהו ולדעת שם את דרך עבודת ה׳ אלהיו: ותאמר שרה טוב דברת לך אדוני ועשה לו כאשר דברת: ואולם אל תרחיק את בני מעלי ולא ישב שם ימים רבים כי נפשי קשורה בנפשו מאד:
>
> ספר הישר - פרשת וירא

This version adds a heartbreaking new element to the motif of Abraham's deception to Sarah. She pleads with him not to take the boy far away or for very long, since her soul is so deeply attached to his. Her plea is a direct foreshadow of her coming death. Her soul can not withstand the shock of the news about her beloved son. Her soul is so bound up in her son as to die along with him. Thus this version links

Sarah to the *akeida* in the most fundamental way. Her very soul is at stake in the life and death of her only son.

After Sarah's plea, Abraham responds to his wife asking that she pray to God. The new narrative continues:

> ויאמר אברהם אל שרה בתי חלה נא את פני ה' אלהינו אשר יעשה עמנו טובה: ותקח שרה את יצחק בנה וילן אתה בלילה ההוא ותשקהו ותחבקהו ותצוהו עד הבקר: ותאמר לו בני איך תוכל נפשי להפרד ממך ותשקהו ותחבקהו עוד ותבך עמו ותצוה את אברהם אביו עליו: ותאמר שרה לאברהם בי אדוני השמר נא בבנך ושים את עינך עליו כי אין לי בן אחר ולא בת כי אם הוא: אל נא תעזבנו אם ירעיב האכילהו לחם ואם יצמא השקהו מים ואל תניחהו ללכת ברגליו ולא לישב בשמש: וגם אל תעזבהו ללכת בדרך לבדו ולא תאנסהו מכל אשר ידבר ועשית לו ככל אשר יאמר אליך: ותבך שרה עוד בכי גדול אל יצחק בלילה ההוא ותצוהו עד הבקר: ויהי בבקר ותקח שרה בגד טוב ונאה מאד מן הבגדים אשר אתה בבית מאשר נתן לה אבימלך: ותלבש את יצחק בנה ותשם לו מצנפת על ראשו ותשם אבן יקרה על המצנפת: ותתן להם צידה לדרך ויצהו וילכו יצחק ואברהם אביו וילכו עמהם מעבדיהם לשלחם בדרך: ותצא גם שרה עמהם ותלך בדרך אתם לשלחם ויאמרו לה שוב לך האהלה: ותשמע שרה את דברי יצחק בנה ותבך בכי גדול ויבך גם אברהם אישה עמה: ויבך גם יצחק בנה עמה בכי גדול מאד וגם אשר הלכו לשלחם בכו בכי גדול עד מאד: ותחזק שרה ביצחק בנה ותאחזהו בין זרועותיה ותחבקהו ותשקהו ותוסף עוד לבכות עמו: ותאמר שרה מי יודע אם אראה אותך עוד בני מהיום הזה: ויבכו עוד בכי גדול ואברהם ושרה ויצחק וגם אשר הלכו עמהם בדרך לשלחם בכו בכי גדול עמהם: ותשב לה אחרי כן שרה מעל יצחק בבכיה רבה וישובו כל שפחותיה ועבדיה עמה האהלה:
>
> ספר הישר - פרשת וירא

There are several significant elements in this new midrashic tradition. Though Abraham asks Sarah to pray to God for their good, she speaks to Isaac all night long. This image confirms the nature of Sarah and Abraham's respective relationships to God and to each other. While he has active and regular communication with God, Sarah has none. It is therefore not surprising that Abraham would suggest prayer, while Sarah would have no connection to prayer. God neither speaks to her, nor communicates with her in any way. The

only evidence of God's presence to Sarah is the birth of Isaac. Thus she reacts in the most logical way under the circumstances: clinging to her beloved son. The midrash reminds the reader of the profound connection of this mother to this child. It additionally confirms her lack of relationship to God. Abraham has a strong, communicative relationship to God, so he reacts with the idea of prayer, a notion irrelevant to Sarah. Here, even more than in earlier midrashim, Sarah's alienation from Abraham and his God is depicted, as is her profound connection to her son.

Sarah makes a series of mundane requests for Isaac's care while he's gone that are deeply profound given the reality of his fate. She makes demands that any mother would make, almost as literary cliches. She could be sending him off to his first time on the school bus, reminding him to eat enough and stay out of the sun. Yet her simple pleas are heartbreaking to the reader who is well aware that he is not off to school for the first time, but to his own slaughter. Her urgency that he stay healthy is tragic in its futility. She further foreshadows the coming tragedy, by asking whether she will ever see him again. In the ultimate irony, she won't; not because the sacrifice succeeds, however, but because she is the one who will die.

Sarah also explicitly reminds her husband that she has no other son than Isaac. Her statement is particularly resonant since he does have another son. In this version,

Sarah goes so far as to remind Abraham that she has no daughter either. Yet again, the midrash is able to acknowledge the problem that this trial is so much more painful for the mother of the one son, than the father of the two. Sarah's plea culminates in the request that Abraham grant his son whatever he needs. Abraham fulfills her request, though ironically, not the way she could ever have intended. Isaac asks to be restrained lest he ruin the sacrifice, and Abraham grants his request, as Sarah had asked he do.

Sarah's great sobbing in this section takes the place of the six cries that other versions attribute at her death. This text makes no connection between Sarah's crying and the blast of the shofar. Additionally, her death is stated simply, her soul having left her. Before Isaac's departure, she cries almost uncontrollably. Though no harm has come to the son, the mother's mourning is unrestrained. It is hard to know whether the midrash is simply depicting Sarah as a weak, stereotypical woman who can't stop crying, or a devoted mother who is also an alienated wife. It may be that she realizes what is really happening, despite the deception, and the midrash intends the reader to perceive Sarah as knowing the truth. Regardless, her uncontrolled mourning serves to frame this entire episode in the context of the mother's deep devotion to her son.

Sarah's tears are not alone in the Sefer ha-Yashar

version, however. After wondering aloud whether or not she will ever see her son again, Abraham and Isaac also become overwhelmed in their weeping. The tragic irony of her question is not lost on Abraham, who is well aware that she will never see her son again. It is not as clear why Isaac, however, weeps. Perhaps he is simply attached to his mother, and can not bear to say good-bye. Perhaps he has an awareness of the truth of his fate. Whichever, the midrash seems to be trying to remove the troubling family alienation present in the biblical and earlier midrashic texts. By depicting the entire family in mourning because of their parting, the midrash implies that they were a healthy, loving unit despite the tragic circumstances. This is not an Abraham who cruelly ignores his wife's perspective or his son's needs. Rather he is the suffering servant who righteously carries out his duty, as much as it causes him pain.

Even the servants can not control their weeping at the sadness of the scene. Surely, they do not realize the truth of Sarah's prediction that they may never see Isaac again. Perhaps the midrash's author was trying to glorify the patriarchs by depicting how much love there was in the household. It may also be that the author was speaking to an audience of Jews who were aware of suffering, having lost many sons to pogroms. Sending off a son to study in yeshiva may have been a risky proposition at the time, and the

midrash may have validated the pain of that experience for families.

One final aspect of Isaac's farewell scene is its parallel to Abraham's casting out of Ishmael. Just as Abraham sent of his son with his mother and provisions for their journey, here Sarah sends her son out with his father and provisions for their journey. Both accompany them part of the way, only to have to say good-bye, not knowing whether they will ever see each other again. Finally, both Abraham and Sarah are seeing off their sons in each scene because the other parent demanded it.

Once Abraham and Isaac leave Sarah behind and are on their way, Satan appears to them as in earlier midrashim. In this version, he does not attempt to influence Isaac by recalling Sarah. He simply asserts that Abraham is mad, and Abraham assures Isaac. Sarah is not mentioned until Isaac is aware that he is to be sacrificed. Here, the Sefer Hayshar version repeats the motif in which Isaac asks to have his ashes placed in an urn and presented to Sarah after his death. His request is combined with the repetition of the other motif, in which Isaac asks Abraham not to tell Sarah while she is standing near a high place. The only original element that Sefer ha-Yashar adds to this section is consistent with the earlier image of weeping. After Isaac makes his request to Abraham, the two begin crying uncontrollably. Here again, the text seems deeply concerned

with reassuring the reader that the patriarchs were acting out of duty to God. Their murderous deed came out of no dysfunction or alienation between them. The section culminates with Isaac's final request to his father, not to delay obeying God's command.

Sefer ha-Yashar ends the retelling of the *akeida* by repeating the tradition of Satan's visit to Sarah. This version adds a range of new elements, changing the motif in several significant ways. The text relates:

וילך השטן אל שרה וידמה אליה כתואר איש זקן שפל ועניו מאד: ואברהם עודנו מקריב העולה לה': ויאמר אליה הלא ידעת את כל המעשה אשר עשה אברהם ליצחק בנך היום: כי לקח את יצחק ויבן מזבח וישחטהו ויקריב אותו על המזבח ויהי יצחק צועק ובוכה לפני אביו ואין מביט אליו ואין מרחם עליו: וידבר השטן את הדברים האלה עוד לשרה פעמים וילך לו מלפניה: ותשמע שרה את כל דברי השטן ותחשוב כי איש זקן הוא מבני האדם אשר היה אצל בנה ויבא ויגד לה כדברים האלה: ותשא שרה את קולה ותבך ותצעק צעקה גדולה ומרה על בנה ותפל את נפשה לארץ ותזרוק עפר על ראשה: ותאמר בני יצחק בני מי יתן מותי אני תחתיך היום הזה: ותוסף עוד לבכות ותאמר צר לי עליך כי גדלתיך וטפחתיך ויהפך ששוני עליך לאבל: מה היתה תאותי אליך לצעקה ותפלה עד אשר ילדתיך לתשעים שנה: ועתה היית למאכלת ולאש היום הזה למנחה: אך מתנחמת אנכי עליך בדבר ה' בני כי מצות אלהיך עשית כי מי יוכל לעבור את דבר אלהינו אשר נפש כל חי בידו: צדיק אתה ה' אלהחנו כי כל מעשיך טובים וישרים כי שמחתי גם אני בדבריך אשר ציות אך עיני במר תבכה ולב שמח: ותתן שרה את ראשה בחיק אחת משפחותיה אחר כן ותדום כאבן: ותקם אחרי כן ותלך הלוך ושאלה ותלך עד חברון ותשאל את כל הולכי הדרך אשר תפגע בדרך ואין דובר אליה דבר לאמר מה נעשה בבנה: ותבוא עם שפחותיה ועבדיה בקרית ארבע היא חברון: ותשאל על בנה ותשב שמה ותשלח מעבדיה לבקש אנה הלכו אברהם ויצחק: וילכו לבקש אותם בית שם ועבר ולא מצאו ויבקשו בכל הארץ ואין: והנה השטן בא אל שרה בדמות איש ויבא ויעמוד לפניה ויאמר אליה שקר דברתי אליך כי לא שחט אברהם את יצחק בנו ולא מת: ויהי כשמעה הדבר ותשמח מאד מאד על בנה ותצא נפשה משמהתה ותמת ותאסף אל עמיה: ואברהם ככלותו את עבודתו וישב עם יצחק בנו אל נעריו ויקומו וילכו יחדיו בארה שבע אל ביתם: ויבקשו את שרה ולא מצאוה וישאל עליה ויאמרו אליהם הלוך הלכה עד חברון לבקש אתכם אנה הלכתם כי כזה וכזה הוגד לה: וילכו אברהם ויצחק אליה חברונה וימצאוה כי מתה וישאו כלם את קולם ויבכו עליה בכי גדול: ויפול יצחק על פני אמו ויבך עליה ויאמר אמי אמי איך

עזבתני ותלך אנה ואנה ואיכה עזבתני: ויבכו אברהם ויצחק בכי גדול וכל עבדיהם בכו אתם אל שרה ויספדו עליה מספד גדול וכבד:

ספר הישר - פרשה וירא

The first new element is that the text specifies that Satan appears to Sarah as an old man. The questions raised by earlier midrashim as to how Sarah reacted to the appearance of Satan, and why she would trust him at all, are solved. In this version, Sarah trusts Satan's report because he appears in the most reliable possible form, a kindly old man who couldn't possibly mean any harm.

This version of Satan contrasts the earlier ones in which caused Sarah's death by lying to her with the claim that Abraham had already sacrificed Isaac. Here, Satan appears at first as a kindly old man who seems to have been warning Sarah, before the deed was done. This Satan wasn't trying to cause her death, simply to foil the sacrifice. Were Sarah able to reach them in time, she might stop Abraham, and Satan would win his bet with God. Sarah does not immediately rush to stop the sacrifice, however. Sefer ha-Yashar is the first midrash to depict Sarah as a willing participant in the sacrifice. Rather than go straight to find her husband and disrupt the sacrifice, she first places ashes on her head, and offers that she would have taken her son's place as the sacrifice. This version of Sarah is a pious woman who believes that the sacrifice should be carried out, with her as the offering instead of Isaac. The key to this version, is Sarah's explicit willingness to satisfy the

God she has never personally known, even with her own body. Her willingness to die comes primarily from her desire that the son live on.

The midrash depicts Sarah as particularly pious. Her pain at the loss of her son, and her inability to stand in his place is mitigated by the pride that he has fulfilled God's desire. This is a picture of Sarah that is unique in her explicit acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. The text is deeply concerned with glorifying Sarah the matriarch, not only as a devoted mother, but also as a pious Jew.

In this version, Satan's lies are even more complicated than earlier versions. Here, for the first time, Satan claims that Isaac pleaded with his father not to carry out the sacrifice. The assertion directly contradicts this version of the *akeida*, and almost every other, in which Isaac is the willing sacrifice. The effect of Satan's lie is to enrage the reader, who knows that Sarah is being manipulated. She is shown a pathetic picture in which her innocent son is being slaughtered against his will, and so her pain is exacerbated. What she doesn't know is that Isaac encouraged his father to carry out the deed. Satan makes the lie even more cruel by claiming that Abraham had no pity, as if his sacrifice of Isaac was carried out vengefully rather than out of pious obligation.

It is unclear why Sarah pursues her husband and son to Hebron. The text leaves the question ambiguous, so that the

reader may wonder whether she is going to stop Abraham or simply to be with them. After her speech, in which she expresses her pride in her son, perhaps she is going to find him just to see him one last time, but then support the sacrifice. Sarah never finds her family, and the Sefer ha-Yashar version takes a truly tragic turn. Satan appears again, this time to tell her the truth. Learning that Isaac is alive, the joy and shock are too much for Sarah, and suddenly she dies. How cruelly ironic, that the happy news is the source of Sarah's death. It is questionable as to what Satan's intentions were. Was he trying to make up for his earlier lying, out of genuine regret? It hardly seems in character for Satan. Yet this depiction of him further smooths over the story so that there really is no one to blame. Sarah is a victim of cruel circumstance as much as anything else. Still, this text, perhaps more than any other before it, most directly and tragically links the events on Moriah with Sarah's death.

This version culminates in a tragic crescendo in which the players are all star-crossed victims of bad luck. Sarah couldn't find her family, having mistakenly looked for them in Hebron. Now, having returned home to Ber Sheba, they learn that she has gone off to Hebron to find them. Before they can meet her, she died. On a textual level, this version effectively answers the question of why Abraham went to Ber Sheba though Sarah died in Hebron. Rather than

attribute their distance to estrangement as in earlier texts, this version blames cruel luck. The effect is to relieve all the players, even Satan, from the guilt of Sarah's death. She is seen here as a victim of cruel circumstance, rather than of a willful act.

Thus the Sefer ha-Yashar version of the *akeida* is presented as a smooth, internally consistent narrative. The reputations of the patriarchs are upheld. Sarah's death, though linked resoundingly to the *akeida*, came about most of all because of tragic circumstances out of anyone's control. The entire household is seen as a pious, loving family, simply seeking to honor each other and still fulfill God's will.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Yalkut Shimoni

Yalkut Shimoni is a compilation of earlier midrashic traditions arranged by verse. It was probably composed in Germany in the fourteenth-century.[35] To that extent, it offers almost no new motifs and lacks the narrative continuity of Sefer ha-Yashar. Thus, almost all of the references to Sarah and the *akeida* are repetitions of earlier traditions.

This text repeats the motif found first in the Tanhuma, in which Abraham deceives Sarah in order to keep her from interfering with his plan. Here too, he argues at a festive meal that Isaac should be sent off to study, and she agrees.[36] Once on their journey, the Yalkut Shimoni version repeats the Tanhuma image of the father and son preparing for the son's wedding.[37] This text explains Sarah's death by repeating the LR and PRK versions' account in which Isaac goes to Sarah

[35]Jacob Elbaum, "Yalkut Shimoni" in Encyclopedia Judaica. (Jeruselem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 707 - 709.

[36]Yalkut Shimoni, 438.

[37]Yalkut Shimoni, 445.

after the episode is over and reports his experience.[38] Yalkut Shimoni also repeats the motif of Abraham being told of Rebecca's birth and her destiny to marry Isaac.[39] Finally, this version repeats the traditions in GR, describing Sarah's purity, and relating her death and Rebecca's birth through the Ecclesiastes text, "the sun also rises."[40]

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[38]Yalkut Shimoni, 450.

[39]Yalkut Shimoni, 456.

[40]Yalkut Shimoni, 463.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: MIDRASH HA-GADOL

Like Yalkut Shimoni, Midrash ha-Gadol essentially collects and repeats earlier midrashic traditions. The latter text was composed in a similar period, but in Yemen.[41] In this version, Abraham also convinces Sarah that he should take Isaac to study.[42] Later, as in other versions, Isaac asks Abraham not to tell Sarah while she's near a high place.[43] The text repeats the appearance of Satan whose false announcement of Isaac's slaughter results in Sarah's death.[44]

In a startling original addition, Midrash ha-Gadol later contradicts the latter version of Sarah's death, offering the following statement:

> וכיון שבא אברהם אבינו לבדו ראת שרה ואמרה עכשו דבר השטן אמת שאמר שנהרג יצחק ופרחה נשמתה ומתה. ויש אומרין הלך לו אצל שם בן נח ללמוד תורה.
>
> מדרש הגדול כב-יט

Now, the midrash is asserting that Sarah's death occurred only when she saw Abraham return alone, confirming the truth

[41]Solomon Fisch, Midrash Ha-gadol" in Encyclopedia Judaica. (Jeruselem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 1515 - 1516.

[42]Midrash ha-Gadol, 22:3.

[43]Midrash ha-Gadol, 22:10.

[44]Midrash ha-Gadol, 22:13.

of Satan's announcement. Attributing Isaac's absence to Torah study, the text echoes the Sefer ha-Yashar account in which Sarah's death is the tragic result of coincidence. Here, her incorrect assumption leads to her death. Finally, Midrash ha-Gadol repeats the various traditions connecting Sarah's death to Rebecca's birth.[45]

[45]Midrash ha-Gadol, 22:22.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE MODERN MIDRASHIM AND COMMENTARIES

The contemporary Jewish community has been deeply influenced by the feminist revolution of the last thirty years. Just as feminists in secular life have challenged conventional literary and cultural assumptions, Jewish feminists (male and female alike) have sought to discover anew the role of women in Jewish life and literature. Simultaneously, the process of writing midrash has been renewed, with modern writers composing new midrashim on the biblical text. These two trends have led a number of contemporary writers to develop modern midrashim about the role of Sarah in the *akeida*. In many cases, they begin with similar questions as do the classical midrashim that came before them. On the whole, their perspectives are deeply modern, attempting to speak as parables to relevant issues.

Ellen Umansky includes an original midrash that she wrote in her sourcebook for Jewish women, Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality. Her version of the *akeida* is written as a prose account, beginning at the moment when Sarah awakens and discovers that Abraham is gone. From the opening image, Umansky teases out the theme of Sarah's

isolation from Abraham. She writes, "Sarah had just awakened and reached over to touch her husband, Abraham, to caress him, but Abraham wasn't there."[46] This Sarah is a woman who longs to be intimate with her husband, to make physical contact. Yet she is denied, as Abraham is absent.

More than Abraham himself, the author tells us, Sarah loves her son Isaac. The texts says that after seeing that Abraham was not present, Sarah realized "neither... was Isaac, her only son, whom she loved more than anyone or anything in the world."[47] The language clearly echoes the biblical text of Genesis 22. The repetition of the name recalls God's calling out Abraham's name two times. The phrase "her only son", echoes the biblical call to Abraham to "take your son, your only son..." (Gen. 22) and the phrase "whom she loved more than anyone..." recalls the biblical phrase "whom you love" (Gen. 22). Umansky uses the language of the biblical text to show how much stronger the parental bond is for Sarah than for Abraham. She uses the words of Genesis, reminding the reader that it truly is Sarah who has only one son, and then elaborates on the original words, adding "whom she loved more than anyone, more than anything in the world."[48]

Sarah's isolated world is further developed by Umansky,

[46]Ellen Umansky, Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality. (Beacon Press: Boston, 1992), 235.

[47]Umansky, 235.

[48]Umansky, 235.

describing that Sarah "quickly dressed and went outside hoping they would be nearby. But they were gone..."[49] In this version, Sarah is left home, alone, isolated from her family, and lacking any knowledge of their whereabouts. Sarah is used to Abraham's trips with Isaac. "It wasn't unusual for Abraham to take Isaac somewhere, but never without saying good-bye. And so she waited, and wept, and screamed."[50] This particular event for Sarah is so desperate because she has been left in utter ignorance. Her physical isolation is exacerbated by Abraham and Isaac's having left her with no explanation. As she waits, she begins to weep and scream. The lack of Sarah's words in Genesis 22 is explained by Umansky as not being silence, but rather as the wordless cries of a mother's pain. This motif may reflect the centuries earlier tradition of associating Sarah's cries with the blasts of the shofar.

Sarah's vigil is so pained in this version that she chooses to wait outside in the heat of the sun for their return, lest she miss their them. She thinks, "I want to make sure that I catch the first glimpse of them, even if they're far away."[51] Her isolation continues, as her own thoughts echo the motif of her standing a great distance from her son and husband. Her thoughts become more desperate, as

[49]Umansky, 235.

[50]Umansky, 235.

[51]Umansky, 235.

she wonders, "Where could they be? Where has Abraham taken my son?"[52] Again, the texts tells us, she begins to cry, weep, and moan. Her isolation reaches a pitch.

At the peak of Sarah's worry, and just before the son and husband return from the mountain, Umansky shares the fundamental theological position of the midrash. She writes,

> Isaac had been God's gift to her, a sign of His love and a continuing bond between them. She had laughed when God told her she was pregnant. She was old and no longer able to bear a child. But God had given her Isaac and filled her breasts with milk and for the first time in her life Sarah was happy.[53]

As much as this version of Sarah is alienated from her husband, she has a relationship to God. Her only happiness in life has come from the son her God has provided her. She has had no joy from her husband. Here the reader is reminded of the unexplained journey on which Abraham has taken Sarah, the episodes with Abimilech, and the trial of Hagar. While Abraham has been a source of pain in Sarah's life, God has brought her joy. In a way, this midrash describes the pain in which two individuals have radically different relationships to God. That they are a married couple makes their pain all the more troubling. Umansky is reminding us that though the (male) biblical editor may have been mostly concerned with Abraham's experience of God, of equal importance for Jews is Sarah's own relationship with God.

[52]Umansky, 235.

[53]Umansky, 235.

Suddenly the midrash concludes as Sarah sees them in the distance,

> Abraham walking with his ass and his servants and Isaac far behind, walking slowly, his head turning from side to side, his hands oddly moving as though he were trying to make sense of something, and Sarah knew in that instant where Abraham and Isaac had been and why they had gone.[54]

Now it is Isaac as well as Sarah who is alienated from Abraham. This is not the willing sacrifice depicted in earlier midrashim. Rather, he echoes the son who rushed home from the mountain to tell his mother what his father did to him atop the mountain. Isaac is a son who is deeply troubled by the near sacrifice by his father.

However, Isaac does not speak to Sarah. In this version, we never learn what the son tells his mother. There is no explanation of the events on the mountain by Isaac or Satan. This Sarah knows what has taken place as soon as she sees her husband descend from the mountain with the visibly disturbed son trailing behind. How did Sarah know? Perhaps child sacrifice was common enough at the time that the circumstantial evidence was sufficient to give Abraham away. Or perhaps it was the extent of Isaac's alienation from Abraham that made it clear to Sarah. Regardless, in this version, the mother sees clearly the pain of the son. The text continues:

> Though she could barely make out the features of Isaac's face, she could tell from his movements and his gestures that he was angry, and he wanted

[54]Umansky, 235.

> nothing to do with the father who had tried to kill him.[55]

Now all three members of this family are alienated, one from the other. No words are spoken, as each returns home alone and in silence.

Umansky concludes by describing Sarah's thoughts as Abraham approaches the tent. She knows what he will say, as if she has heard his theological speeches over and over again. The text conveys her thoughts:

> He'd try to explain, to make her understand *his* side of the story. But Sarah wanted no part of it. She was tired of hearing Abraham's excuses and even more tired of hearing what *he* thought God demanded. And so Sarah turned and went inside and prayed that if only for one night, Abraham would leave her alone.[56]

Once again, Umansky describes the theological gap between the husband and wife. While each has a relationship to God, it is Sarah who has had to acquiesce to Abraham's will throughout their journey. Abraham has been the primary interpreter of God's will. At this moment, Sarah's isolation is at its peak. Abraham's notions of God's will have gone so far as to threaten the one thing Sarah could claim as her own: her son Isaac. Insofar as Isaac is the fundamental expression of God's relationship to Sarah, Abraham's act is a direct prioritizing of his relationship to God over Sarah's. Thus Sarah's exasperation at the end grows out of her exhausted frustration over Abraham's constant theological

[55]Umansky, 235.

[56]Umansky, 235.

control over her and their family.

Umansky's midrash seems to act as a vehicle to express a modern Jewish woman's frustration with a tradition that has in many ways silenced the voices of women. In her essay "Reclaiming the Covenant: A Jewish Feminist's Search for Meaning" and in the works of others like Judith Plaskow, Jewish women have expressed the need to reclaim the voices of women left out by the male authors of Jewish texts.[57] Umansky's midrash is a classic example of this process. In no way does she change the actual biblical text. In fact, in some ways she takes fewer liberties than the classical midrashim. She seems to purposefully preserve Sarah's silence. Just as she speaks no words in Genesis 22, so too in the midrash she is silent. What Umansky provides is an imagined inner monologue expressing Sarah's view of the events of the *akeida*. She is able to describe the themes of Sarah's alienation from her husband and his religious experience; Sarah's deep bond with Isaac; and her unique relationship to God.

By presenting Sarah as a woman who seeks a respected place in her family and a personal connection to God, Umansky effectively speaks to a generation of Jewish women who came of age after the feminist revolution. Her Sarah is a

[57]see Ellen Umansky, "Reclaiming the Covenant: A Jewish Feminist's Search for Meaning" in Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality, 230-234 and Judith Plaskow, Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective. (New York: Harper & Row, 1990).

metaphor for all Jewish women in modernity. These women wish to take their place as equals in Jewish family and communal life. They want the tradition and practice of Judaism to reflect their own experience as well as that of the men's. Perhaps most important, Jewish women long for an affirmation of the reality of their own relationships to God.

Umansky's midrash ends with Sarah's prayer that if only for this one night, Abraham will leave her alone. This Sarah reflects the exhausted frustration of generations of women who have been forced to understand God and to know God's will through the experience of Jewish men. Sarah's isolation is now self-imposed, as she seeks a retreat from Abraham's domineering religious presence. Umansky's midrash is a reminder that the Judaism which has been a largely male invention must now make room for women who may sometimes need Jewish men to leave them alone.

Rabbi B. Elka Abrahamson has also written a modern midrash retelling the *akeida* story.[58] Her version is similar to Umansky's in that both figures of Sarah describe a woman who is theologically marginalized from Abraham's relationship to God. In Abrahamson's world as in Umansky's, Sarah is used to Abraham and Isaac's regular journeys. She begins the midrash by writing: "Sarah had grown used to days spent waiting for her cherished son Isaac and her life partner

[58]B. Elka Abrahamson, "Sarah's Fire: A Modern Midrash on the Life of Sarah." Unpublished.

Abraham to return from sacrificial journeys."[59]

From the outset, Abrahamson's version depicts Sarah's isolation from Abraham's theology. Here, "Sarah kept locked in her heart her own skepticism." Like Umansky's Sarah, Abrahamson's also questions Abraham's interpretation of God's will. Later in the text, as Abraham cuts the wood for the sacrifice, Sarah "managed a meager laugh to herself as she thought, "the old fool."[60] Her laugh here recalls her laughter at the news of Isaac's conception. Sarah is skeptical of this God who seems to communicate with Abraham, commanding strange sacrifices. Yet, from the very title, "Sarah's Fire", the reader knows that the text will not only explore Sarah's point of view, but also her own religious practice. Sarah's fire implies her own form of sacrifice.

This Sarah is less alienated from her husband than Umansky's. Though she is skeptical of his religious practice, "watching her husband and son prepare for the sacrifice moved her in a private and personal way."[61] Though she may not share Abraham's understanding of God's will, she seems to appreciate his faith, and is moved by the shared burden of father and son.

Abrahamson's Sarah would like to share Abraham's sacrifice, but she seems to understand that this role is his.

[59]Abrahamson, 1.

[60]Abrahamson, 1.

[61]Abrahamson, 1.

"Sarah reached for her wrap, as she considered joining him, but no -- Abraham needed to be alone."[62] Sarah respects Abraham's religious needs as his unique relationship to God, as skeptical as she may be.

As her husband and son depart on their journey, Sarah seems to know the true gravity of the moment. "Sarah desperately wanted to embrace her son before he departed. Their quiet told her to remain the same."[63] Her deep love for Isaac is felt, as is her isolation from the father and son. Yet unlike Umansky's version, in which the isolation is tinged with resentment and alienation, Abrahamson's version contains understanding. Sarah expresses no anger at their departure.

Sarah does have another moment of longing to connect to her husband and son. "From her knees she called out to her family, 'Good bye.' Her voice did not carry above the suddenly deafening calls of the herd."[64] As in Umansky's midrash, Sarah's silence is preserved. No words of hers are heard, as her one verbal expression is lost in the din. Though Sarah is silent in the biblical text, here her silence is understood through the image of the loving mother left behind whose call to her love is lost in the wind.

Once they are gone, Sarah realizes she has cut her palm

[62]Abrahamson, 1.

[63]Abrahamson, 1.

[64]Abrahamson, 1.

on a rock while crouched in hiding, watching her family depart. Finally alone, "did she notice the wound and alone upon the ground she began to cry."[65] Her tears are not the same as Sarah's tears in Umansky's version. In the latter, she rages against the father who has left her with no explanation. Her tears reflect the worry of a mother who has no idea was has become of her only son. Sarah's tears in Abrahamson's version, however, reflect the pain of a mother who can not share the ritual experience of her husband and son. This is a woman who longs to be a part of her family's religious life, though she stands alone, respecting the needs she perceives to restrain herself. Here, Sarah crouched in hiding, is an isolated observer on the outside looking in, relegated to a marginalized religious status. Still, she expresses no anger, simply sadness.

While Sarah in Umansky's version waited in a pained state of anger and weeping, Abrahamson's Sarah fills the time with the routine of chores. After a time, she turns to the clothes and jewels acquired on her journeys with Abraham. Abrahamson describes a scene in which Sarah dresses up in fine robes and jewels, until she finds herself dancing and singing the songs of her youth.[66] This Sarah is a woman finding her own ritual expression. Her dancing and singing, though they have grown out of the pain of isolation, reflect

[65]Abrahamson, 1.

[66]Abrahamson, 2.

Sarah's ability to fill her life with rite and ritual. Though her acts are hardly similar to Abraham's religious expression, they reflect Sarah's position and the resources available to her. She would like to share in Abraham and Isaac's religious experience, but she can not. Thus she finds a way in her own environment to express her own spiritual needs.

As her fire begins to die down, Sarah's maid moves to gather more wood and renew the fire. Sarah stops her and begins the task herself, speaking her only audible words in the entire narrative: "I build fires too."[67] Her words are a metaphor for Sarah's entire experience. Though Abraham directs the affairs of their family and determines their religious behavior, Sarah too has the desire to share in the experience. She too wants to light the fires of ritual.

In her next act, she struggles to assert herself as a member of their family. She bakes loaves of bread for her family, to be eaten upon their return.[68] The act of preparing food, however seemingly mundane, carries deep significance for Sarah, as did her songs and dances. They embody a means to become relevant in the life of her family. The meaning she places in the simple loaves of bread can be seen in her desperation as day breaks, and she sees that they have not yet returned. The text relates:

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[67]Abrahamson, 2.

[68]Abrahamson, 2.

> Just before the first crack of light, she counted the loaves. "Bring him home to eat," she prayed. Holding her fresh baked offering into the air she looked to the clouds overhead and through sudden uncontrollable sobs she desperately cried aloud, "who will eat what I have prepared?"

Clearly, her loaves are offerings, standing in contrast to Abraham's offerings to God. Sarah's plea reflects her much deeper desire to be able to have her own way to have a relationship with God. At the very least, hers is the pain of radical isolation from Abraham and Isaac's religious experience.

In Abrahamson's version, Sarah never explicitly learns what Abraham has done to her son. When Abraham returns home, Sarah has finally fallen asleep, and hardly has the strength to open her eyes. She manages to take his hand to kiss him, and the text states: "And on her husband's fingertips she could smell the scent of her only son whom she loved."[69] Like Umansky, Abrahamson echoes the language of Genesis 22, recalling the phrases "your only son" and "whom you love," applying them to Sarah, rather than Abraham.

Though the reader does not learn whether Sarah knows what Abraham has done, or even if Isaac is still alive, the text simply concludes: "She closed her eyes. There, in the land of Canaan, Sarah died. Abraham wept as the smell of burned bread filled the morning air."[70] Suddenly, it is Sarah herself who is the sacrifice. While Abraham and Isaac were

[69]Abrahamson, 2.

[70]Abrahamson, 3.

off satisfying God's will, Sarah was left alone. So removed from the life of her family, Sarah performs the ultimate sacrifice. She has given up her own life to enable her husband and son to live theirs.

Mark Kaiserman, a rabbinic student at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion has written a modern midrash retelling the *akeida* from Isaac's point of view.[71] In it, he makes several notable references to Sarah. Where Abrahamson relates the *akeida* to the death of Sarah, Kaiserman's version does not connect the two events. Rather, he asserts that the effect of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Isaac is the estrangement of Abraham and Sarah. Kaiserman's version is similar to Umansky's in this way.

In Kaiserman's version, Abraham keeps his mission a secret from Sarah. Additionally, he lies and tells Isaac that she does know where they are going.[72] From the outset, Kaiserman sees the family as dysfunctional, with Abraham a dishonest husband who manipulates his son. He also recognizes the deep love of Sarah for Isaac, having him say, "...most of the time I spent with either my mother Sarah, or by myself."[73] Kaiserman's Abraham is a distant father and husband, much more concerned with his affairs (including satisfying God's will) than with Sarah or Isaac. Thus,

[71]Mark Kaiserman, "Isaac's Story". Unpublished.

[72]Kaiserman, 1.

[73]Kaiserman, 2.

Kaiserman explains Isaac's initial excitement over their journey with his thoughts,

> I was ecstatic! I was finally going to play a role in one of my father's missions from Adonai. I had almost never spent time alone with him, and now we are fulfilling a command from the one God together![74]

The family's religious distance and alienation described by both Umansky and Abrahamson is even stronger here, and is shared equally by Isaac and Sarah.

In Kaiserman's version, the events on the mountain only make the family more deeply dysfunctional. As they begin to return home, Isaac rages in hatred against his father. He goes on to say: "And when I tell mother... I know she'll hate you too!" Abraham responds, saying, "Well, why don't we let me explain this to mother."[75] However, Isaac does not give Abraham the chance, rushing home to tell Sarah what has taken place (echoing some of the classical midrashim).

The family slips into complete alienation. Kaiserman uses the fact in Genesis 22 that Abraham returns to Ber Sheba though Sarah is in Hebron as a basis for his assertion that Abraham and Sarah separate. Sarah makes it clear that Abraham is no longer welcome in their home, after what he has done to Isaac.[76] Because Abraham has followed God's instructions, he has destroyed his family. Kaiserman uses

[74]Kaiserman, 2.

[75]Kaiserman, 5.

[76]Kaiserman, 6.

the apparent gap in time between Genesis 22 and 23 to elaborate on the biblical version, inventing the new motif of Abraham and Sarah's separation as well as Isaac's estrangement from his father.

Kaiserman's version, like Umansky and Abrahamson's, contains parables for modern Jewish experiences. His, however, is not a statement about modern Jewish feminism and does not see Sarah as a metaphor for women left out of Jewish tradition. Kaiserman describes the *akeida* as a metaphor for the disintegration of the modern family. He tells a cautionary tale of what can happen when men sacrifice their families for what they think is a higher purpose. His version speaks to modern rabbis who sacrifice the needs of their families by spending all of their time and energy working with their congregations. For that matter, Kaiserman's version contains a lesson for anyone who sacrifices their family for the sake of career.

Dvora Yanow has contributed a clever modern midrash about Sarah's role in the *akeida*, presented in the form of an (invented) "lost commentary" by the "sister" of the great medieval commentator, Rashi.[77] Yanow engages in a similar process to Umansky and Plaskow, taken one step further. Not only does she read Sarah, a forgotten woman character, back into the biblical text, she also invents a female counterpart

[77]Dvora Yanow, "Sarah's Silence: A Newly Discovered Commentary on Genesis 22 by Rashi's Sister." Judaism, Issue No. 172, vol. 43, no. 4, Fall 1994. Pp. 398 - 399.

to the greatest of all classical commentators. She is attempting to rediscover women's voices in the commentaries as well as in the Bible.

"Rashi's sister" begins by raising several compelling questions posed by difficulties in the text of Genesis 22. She argues:

> ...would a mother, knowing that her husband was about to lead their son to the sacrificial altar not get up in the morning to say good-bye - let alone plead or argue with her husband about the foolishness of such a plan? Not to mention that this son was so long in coming, and at such potential cost to the physical health of a 90-year-old woman. Are we to understand that Abraham didn't tell her his plans? If so, what model of marital relations does this present for us?[78]

Yanow points to several difficulties raised by the other midrashim, both classical and modern. She realizes the isolation of Sarah from her husband, who must have been left out of Abraham's plan. He couldn't possibly have told her, or she would have protested. Similarly, she recognizes Sarah's deep maternal bond to her only son, since he was born to her at such cost, so late in life.

The rest of Yanow's midrash is framed as an attempt by "Rashi's sister" to determine the source of Sarah's silence in Genesis 22. She dismisses the explanations offered by classical midrashim. Sarah couldn't have remained asleep while Abraham arose early in the morning since:

> the noise of saddling his donkey, calling to his two helpers, splitting the wood for the sacrifice, and riding out of the camp would have awakened her,

[78]Yanow, 400.

even if she were sleeping in a separate tent.[79]

Similarly, she rejects the possibility that Sarah was silent out of shock over Abraham's intention.[80]

"Rashi's sister" argues in Yanow's midrash that it is impossible that Sarah would actually be silent. She asserts that as in the episodes of Abimilech, the three visitors, and the Hagar, she speaks her mind.[81] Sarah, as "Rashi's sister" sees her, doesn't generally remain silent, especially at moments of crisis or challenge to her authority. Therefore, she explains the silence here by arguing that:

> ...the reason Sarah is silent in chapter 22, the sacrifice story, is because the events are unfolding in her dream as a delayed reaction to the circumcision - a dream spawned perhaps by drinking too much at the "drinking-feast" (*mishteh*) that Abraham made on the day of his son's weaning (v.8)... or simply by her maternal response to the circumcision, which she felt as the sacrifice of her son.[82]

Yanow's midrash certainly offers a novel explanation to Sarah's absence. The entire story, according to this version, is actually Sarah's story. She is silent because it is her own dream, realized inside her subconscious as a reaction to the trauma of ritual circumcision.

Yanow is actually presenting a parable for the archetypal Jewish mother who must experience the difficult

[79]Yanow, 402.

[80]Yanow, 402.

[81]Yanow, pp. 400 - 401.

[82]Yanow, 403.

ceremony of brit mila. She describes the ritual this way:

> ...the 8-day-old son's journey from the bedroom, from the crib, from the arms of his mother, to the sandak in the living room who holds his legs down, awaiting the mohel's knife. How many mothers, waiting nervously, anxiously, angrily in a back room, have experienced this act as the binding and sacrifice of their sons?![83]

Thus, the attempted sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham is recontextualized as the act of ritual circumcision. The story is seen as a nightmare of Sarah's, in which she is the silent observer of the horrifying act. Just as every Jewish mother must stand in isolation, unable to stop the cutting of a beloved infant boy, Sarah watches in her nightmare, unable to act.

In his work on Genesis, Zackovitch notes the important parallels between Hagar's expulsion and the *akeida*. Both stories begin with Abraham rising up early in the morning, include the intervention of a divine messenger, describe the opening of the parent's eyes, and conclude with a divine blessing.[84] In addition, in both stories, Abraham places his sons in grave danger. Zackovitch uses the parallels to confirm what the later midrashim will assert: that both were trials of Abraham. A different biblical critic, Phyllis Trible, will reach a vastly different conclusions from the Hagar expulsion/*akeida* parallels. Rather than look at both stories as Abraham narratives, she will analyze them from

[83]Yanow, 404.

[84]Zackovitch, 519.

Hagar and Sarah's points of view.

Still, Trible similarly reads the significance of Sarah's absence from the *akeida*, by looking at the wider context. She notes that this narrative is generally read as the binding of Isaac or as the trial of Abraham. Rereading the text through a feminist hermeneutic, she discovers a third reading: the sacrifice of Sarah.[85] Like Zackovitch, she reads the stories of Sarah and Hagar as parallel. Both women are deeply attached to their sons, and yet Hagar endures a difficult trial (her cruel treatment by Sarah, expulsion, and the near loss of Ishmael) and reconciliation (God's promise). In contrast, Sarah is denied such reconciliation. Though she has endured the trial (infertility, the rivalry with Hagar, and then childbirth in her old age) her journey never culminates in the ultimate trial, reconciliation, and healing like Hagar. In fact, Trible claims that Genesis 22 should have been Sarah's story, were it not for the "patriarchal" narrative's substitution of Abraham in the story. Thus Sarah is sacrificed and denied her blessing narrative.[86]

Trible's method is self-consciously eisogetical and feminist. Yet her claim rests on a rhetorical textual analysis that is helpful in further explicating the aspects of the narrative that point toward Sarah's role. The opening

[85]Phyllis Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah" in Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, eds., "Not in Heaven: Coherence and complexity in Biblical Narrative. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 170.

[86]Trible, 188.

formula, "ויהי אחר הדברים האלה" (Gen. 22:1) requires the reader to include all that has occurred up to this point. The *akeida* takes place after these things: the barrenness and then fertility of Sarah and the rivalry with Hagar.

Sarah's barrenness is the first thing we learn about her from the text (Gen. 11:30). This fact will frame her entire story. Not only does her infertility reflect a common biblical motif depicting the high stakes of fertility in women (Rachel, Rebecca, and Hanah), but threatens the central aspect of the narrative: God's promise to Abraham. There can be no great nation or descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky if Sarah can not provide them. Even Hagar's child with Abraham will not do. Thus the stakes for Sarah's fertility are incredibly high. Not only does she, like all women of the ancient near east, define her own womanhood through childbirth, she also has the entire covenant on her shoulders. Her pain is reflected in her one direct contact with God: bitter laughter.

It is no surprise, then, that she is so protective of Isaac and threatened by Ishmael. Her cruelty to Hagar seems proportionate to the intense connection Sarah feels to her only child. Trible goes so far as to point out that Sarah's connection to Isaac is much deeper than Abraham's.[87] In fact, Isaac is Sarah's "only son", while he is not Abraham's. Genesis 22:2 presents a problem, in which God tells Abraham

[87]Trible, 187.

to take "your only son." The rabbis and commentators have historically wrestled with this incongruity, as we have seen. It seems clear that Isaac is established as Sarah's only child, with whom she is deeply attached, in contrast with Abraham. He has another child, and lacks the deep attachment of Sarah.

Yet Genesis 22 is what Trible calls an "attachment" narrative.[88] In her reading, the trial's goal is to break Abraham from idolatrous attachment to his beloved son Isaac through service to God. The outcome is to set both men free, within a healing and reconciliation. Trible notes, however, that the journey ought to have been Sarah's. As we saw above, it was she whose attachment to Isaac was so great, not Abraham. It was Sarah who was in need of reconciliation. The text supports Trible to the extent that the previous narrative sets Sarah up as the parent with a stronger connection to the child. She calls him "my son" (Gen. 21:10) where Abraham initially calls him "the lad" (Gen. 22:5), and then only calls him "my son" when he must convince him that God will see to the sacrifice (Gen. 22:8). The biblical author seems to note this irony by referring to Isaac as Abraham's son, saying, "his son" or "your son" over and over (Gen. 22:3,6,9,10). We return to the confusion of "take your son, your only son, Isaac" which should indicate Sarah, not Abraham.

[88]Trible, 187.

In summary, each of the modern midrashim and commentaries discussed above have distinctly modern perspectives. They attempt to rediscover the silent voice of a female biblical character, as well as offer a relevant message for the contemporary reader. In most cases, they still draw on the same questions and problems in the biblical text originally raised by the classical midrashim. Therefore, the contemporary authors of modern midrash are maintaining the chain of midrashic tradition, linking one generation of biblical reader to the next.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: CONCLUSION

Almost from the very moment the biblical text was canonized, the *akeida* has challenged its readers and inspired additional writing in response to its theological questions. From the time the earliest texts composed after the Bible was finished through modernity, writers composed new texts to advance their own theological agendas. The narrative of the *akeida* and the characters within it, were used time and again by a variety of writers advancing a range of religious positions.

The interpretive process surrounding the *akeida* was influenced by a considerably troubling aspect of the biblical story: Sarah's absence. Though she is deeply attached to Isaac, her only son, she is not even mentioned in this story of his near sacrifice. In fact, her death is described in one verse, just after the *akeida* narrative. Generations of writers and commentators have offered a broad range of responses to Sarah's puzzling absence. In many cases, their compositions reflected the theological agendas they hoped to advance.

The early Christian literature used the *akeida* as a

pre-figuring of Jesus, understanding Sarah as the proto-Mary. Perhaps in response, or independently, Jewish texts emerged that similarly grappled with themes of resurrection and martyrdom. Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah's roles in the narrative expanded as the theological compositions developed.

Gradually, as the classical midrashim emerged, a rabbinic agenda took over in Jewish texts on the *akeida*. Sarah's role in the story grew as the rabbis began to develop their midrashic techniques. They were troubled by her absence from the story, and composed a range of literary solutions. Their compositions dealt with rabbinic themes of the historical context: family relationships, the meaning of death, martyrdom, and Israel's merit. Sarah received new life through the midrashic explorations of the rabbis.

With modernity, the midrashic process gained new life, and a wave of new creative interpretations of Sarah's role in the *akeida* emerged. Many of these modern midrashim reflected the desire of Jewish feminists to rediscover the sometimes forgotten women of the Bible. Sometimes, they used the classical midrashic material that preceded them. Almost always, their new works reflected important issues of their day: Jewish women's prayer, their role in ritual life, and family relationships.

The power of the *akeida* is so strong, and the absence of Sarah so troubling, that it is not surprising that generations of writers have composed midrashim to gain new

insight. It would also be surprising if the creative process stopped now. Perhaps we have only scratched the surface of the many depths of interpretations of where Sarah was while Abraham tried to sacrifice her only son.

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