

## *Chapter Fourteen*

### *The Rewritten Aqedah of Jewish Tradition*

The extraordinary prominence of the story of the binding of Isaac in Gen 22:1-19 in rabbinic Judaism stands in stark contrast to the utter absence of direct references to it anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. In part, the difference reflects the greater emphasis upon the Patriarchs in rabbinic theology than in the thinking of the prophets and the other non-Pentateuchal biblical authors. This explanation, in turn, reflects an even deeper difference between the forms of biblical religion and those of the rabbis: because in rabbinic theology the Pentateuch was preeminent over the rest of the Bible and prior to it not only in date of authorship but in value as well, even relatively brief and uneventful episodes in the Pentateuch can command more extensive attention in rabbinic literature than non-Pentateuchal passages that are longer and seemingly more momentous. The intensely exegetical character of rabbinic Judaism, which it inherited from its Second Temple forebears, ensured that the relative obscurity of the aqedah within the Hebrew Bible would not be the last word of Jewish tradition on the question of the righteous father's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son. That willingness, together with the son's glad and unqualified acceptance of his own divinely mandated death, became a theme of enormous import in Judaism in the Roman period, including the forms of Judaism that served as the matrix of Christianity.

A foretaste of the importance of the aqedah in post-biblical Judaism can be gotten, however, in the two biblical passages that betray exegetical interest in the episode even before the canon was closed or, for that matter, the Pentateuch completed. The first of these passages is Gen 22:15-18, the second angelic address at the aqedah, which we have examined in chapters 11 and 12. It converts the standing promise to Abraham of innumerable progeny into a consequence of the near-sacrifice of Isaac: "Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will

bestow My blessing upon you" (vv 16b-17). This is a transformation of enormous import. It renders the very existence of the Abrahamic peoples dependent upon their ancestor's obedience to the fearsome directive to make of his beloved son a burnt offering to his God. The aqedah, in short, has become a foundational act, and its consequences extend to every generation of those whose father is Abraham. Our people exists and perdures, the Israelite narrator seems to be saying, only because of the incomparable act of obedience and faith that the patriarch-to-be carried out on a certain unnamed mountain in the land of Moriah. In light of the interpretive move that the second angelic address evidences, it is hardly a source of wonderment that, at least since biblical times, Jewish thinkers have continually pondered the troubling story of the binding of Isaac. Nor is it surprising that the pondering is usually most intense when the existence of the Jews is threatened, and their survival, to all appearances, miraculous.

Our second passage betrays an exegetical interest in the aqedah in a manner less direct. This is the verse that denotes as "Mount Moriah" the mountain on which Solomon built his temple and which David had acquired from the Jebusites (2 Chr 3:1). As we have had occasion to observe,<sup>1</sup> there is an opinion among scholars that "the land of Moriah" in Gen 22:2 is not original to the narrative of the aqedah but was interpolated in Second Temple times in an effort to associate Abraham's altar with David and Solomon's foundation of the great shrine atop Zion, the Temple Mount here named Moriah. Whether or not this be so, we must see in the name "Moriah" an effort to endow Abraham's great act of obedience and faith with ongoing significance: the slaughter that he showed himself prepared to carry out was the first of innumerable sacrifices to be performed on that site. The hope accompanying this etiological move is the same whether "Moriah" is original to Gen 22:2 or to 2 Chr 3:1. It is the hope that just as Abraham's intention met with divine favor and secured a rich blessing on his descendants, so would their own acts of service in the Temple prove acceptable to God and merit his continued good will toward them. Here, too, the aqedah has become a foundational narrative. What rests upon it is the elaborate and incalculably important system of divine worship in the Temple on which the religious life of the people Israel increasingly centered. In the one word "Moriah" in 2 Chr 3:1 lies the germ of the rabbinic notion that the aqedah is the origin of the daily lamb offerings (the temulim) and, less directly but more portentously, of the passover sacrifice as well.

The paschal connection will prove central to the parallel Christian belief that the eucharist is a reenactment of Jesus' final meal before his sacrificial death. Both the Jewish and the Christian systems of sacrifice come to be seen

as founded upon a father's willingness to surrender his beloved son and the son's. unstinting acceptance of the sacrificial role he has been assigned in the great drama of redemption. Though this is more obviously and more centrally the case in Christianity, it holds for Judaism more than is generally recognized. The Christian doctrine is incomprehensible apart from the history of Jewish biblical interpretation.

These developments stand toward the end of a long history of exegesis of the life of Abraham. It is revealing that in the great liturgical composition that is Neh 9:5b-37, a text almost certainly from the fifth century B.C.E., there is still no mention of the binding of Isaac. What is there deemed memorable in Abraham's life is God's election of him, his exodus from Ur, his change of name, his proving faithful to YHWH (the beginning of v 8 being an interpretive paraphrase of Gen 15:6), and his receipt of a covenant promising the land to his descendants (vv 7-8). In the Wisdom of Joshua ben Sira, however, a Jewish book known in Christian circles as Ecclesiasticus and dating to the early second century B.C.E., we read of Abraham that "when tested he was found loyal" and therefore received God's promise by oath to provide blessing and countless progeny with vast holdings (Sir 44:20-21). The test in question, which is reported directly after Abraham's circumcision (v 20), is surely the aqedah (cf. Gen 22:1). Ben Sira's postponement of the blessing until after the test reflects the reinterpretation of the life of Abraham that first emerges in the second angelic address (Gen 22:15-18).

A century later, in 1 Maccabees (another book of what came to be known in some communities as the Apocrypha), when Mattathias, the patriarch of the Hasmonean clan, exhorts his sons on his deathbed to remain zealous for the Torah, his first exemplum is an earlier patriarch. "Was not Abraham found faithful in trial," he asks rhetorically, "and it was reputed to him as uprightness?" (1 Macc 2:52). The latter phrase is patently dependent on the assertion in Gen 15:6 that "because [Abram] put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit," or, more. literally, if less accurately, "reputed it to him as uprightness." This, in turn, raises the interesting possibility that the conjunction of testing and faithfulness in Sir 44:20 arises from the same application of Gen 15:6 to the aqedah: the binding of Isaac has supplanted Abraham's trust in the covenantal promise of Gen 15:4-5 as the supreme example of his faith in God. These two books of the Apocrypha, ben Sira and 1 Maccabees, attest to an exegetical tradition alive in the second and first centuries-B.C.E. according to which Abraham's faithfulness, altogether unmentioned in Gen 22:1-19, has become the central point of the aqedah.

One final passage in the Apocrypha deserves mention. This is the verse from the account of the manifestations of Wisdom in the history of redemption

in the Wisdom of Solomon, a book that seems to date from about the late first century B.C.E. or early first century C.E. It was Wisdom, the book relates, that "knew the just man, kept him blameless before God, and preserved him resolute against pity for his child" (Wis 10:5). This is one of only two points from the life of Abraham deemed worthy of mention, the other being Wisdom's rescue of the Patriarch from the destruction of the Cities of the Plain (v 6). It is in the Wisdom of Solomon that we find the most explicit reference to the aqedah in the Apocrypha, a point owing to the increasing interest in the episode in Judaism in the first century. This is an interest that is evident from a broad array of sources of various genres and different locales.<sup>2</sup>

But long before that momentous first century of the common era, a transformation of inestimable significance had come about in the interpretation of the aqedah. It is in the Book of Jubilees, which dates to the middle of the second century B.C.E., that we find the earliest evidence for the new thinking. To the account of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, Jubilees has prefixed a scene of the heavenly council in debate, and, as is the wont of this book so preoccupied with calendrical matters, it has even specified the date on which the scene took place:

<sup>15</sup> And it came to pass in the seventh week, in its first year, in the first month, in that jubilee, on the twelfth of that month, that words came in heaven concerning Abraham that he was faithful in everything which was told him and he loved the Lord and was faithful in all affliction. '6 And Prince Mastema came and he said before God, "Behold, Abraham loves Isaac, his son. And he is more pleased with him than everything. Tell him to offer him [as] a burnt offering upon the altar. And you will see whether he will do this thing. And you will know whether he is faithful in everything in which you test him." (Jub 17:15-16)<sup>3</sup>

The twelfth day of the first month is, of course, three days before the paschal lamb is to be offered, for that sacrifice took place at twilight after the fourteenth (Exod 12:6; Lev 23:5). It would seem that Jubilees has made the eminently reasonable assumption that Abraham bound Isaac over the altar immediately upon his arrival at the designated spot after his three-day journey (Gen 22:4; Jub 18:3). This, in turn, means that the aqedah has been transformed into an etiology of Passover, or, to be more precise, that Passover, like other Pentateuchal festivals in Jubilees, has acquired what Mircea Eliade calls "the prestige of origins"<sup>4</sup>. its root lies in the life of the very first Jew. That Jubilees interprets the aqedah as the etiology of a feast is made explicit at the conclusion of its retelling of Genesis 22:

<sup>17</sup>And Abraham went to his young men and they got up and went [to] Beer-sheba together. And Abraham dwelt by the Well of the Oath. <sup>18</sup>And he named it "the feast of the Lord" according to the seven days during which he went and returned in peace. <sup>19</sup>And thus it is ordained and written in the heavenly tablets concerning Israel and his seed to observe this festival seven days with festal joy. (Jub 18:17-19)

The only seven-day festival in the first month is, of course, Passover (Lev 23:5-8). Jubilees seems to derive its duration, for which the Hebrew Bible gives no etiology, from Abraham's journey—three days to the mountain, three to return, and one day (the Sabbath) without travel. The journey begins on the twelfth rather than on the evening after the fourteenth (i.e., the beginning of the fifteenth) precisely so that the binding of Isaac will coincide with the date on which the paschal lamb will be offered.<sup>5</sup> Isaac has become the lamb of God, as it were, and Passover, an implication of the aqedah, a commemoration of Abraham's refusal to spare his own son when God demanded he be sacrificed.<sup>6</sup> It is to be an annual week of rejoicing based on the happy fact that Isaac was not ultimately killed.

That the aqedah and Passover should have come into an inextricable association is hardly surprising. Indeed, one wonders why the association first appears only in the mid-second century B.C.E. and whether Jubilees does not depend here upon an older tradition still. For, as we have had occasion to observe, both the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 and the sparing of the Israelite first-born sons in the tenth plague upon Egypt in Exodus 12-13 reflect a cultic institution, pre-Israelite in origin and evident among the Phoenicians, which allows for the substitution of an animal for the child marked for sacred slaughter—*agnus pro vikario*, as a North African inscription puts it, "a lamb as a substitute."<sup>7</sup> Jubilees thus only makes textually explicit a relationship that had always lain in the deep structure of Israelite culture. This was a culture profoundly imbued with the conviction that the first-born son belonged to God and thus overjoyed that God might accept a sheep in the son's stead. This conviction and its attendant joy continue to live, in significantly different ways, in both the Jewish and the Christian traditions.

The motivation for the aqedah that Jubilees furnishes is the innuendo of Prince Mastema that Abraham's love for God and faithfulness to him are subordinate to his love for Isaac. The only way God can disprove Mastema's impugning of Abraham is to order the Patriarch to offer up his son. Only then will it become known which stands higher in Abraham's calculus of value, his love for God or his love for Isaac.

The scene in heaven that Jubilees prefixes to its retelling of Genesis 22 is

self-evidently an adaptation of the prologue of the Book of Job, in which a heavenly Adversary, or Satan, impugns Job's motivation for maintaining his blamelessness (Job 1-2). It is, Satan tells God, a matter of self-interest rather than authentic service, for blamelessness has always paid Job handsome dividends. "But lay Your hand upon all that he has and he will surely blaspheme You to Your face" (1:11). The effect of this transference of the motif of the prologue to Job to the aqedah is to provide a ready answer to a question that also bothered the rabbis of the midrash: what provoked this gruesome test, what could have been "these things" on which the aqedah logically followed (Gen 22:1; see Gen. Rab. 55:4)?<sup>8</sup> The answer of Jubilees has its own weighty midrashic logic and must not be judged arbitrary. For surely it is not unrelated that as a consequence of the heavenly Adversary's accusation, Job loses his children-but receives a new set in the end and lives "to see four generations of sons and grandsons" (Job 1:18-19; 42:13-16). This quite naturally suggests an analogy with the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his beloved son, a story that closes, revealingly, not with the son dead, but with his life spared and with a genealogy of the family from which his son's wife-and the mother of Abraham's prime lineage-derives (Gen 22:20-24). It also merits mention that among the many parallels between Abraham and Job is to be numbered the language that describes the spiritual posture of each upon his death. Despite the trials they had endured, both die "old and contented" (zaqen wesabea, Gen 25:8; zaqen useba yamim, Job 42:17). There is, in sum, abundant and potent midrashic logic behind Jubilees' interlacing of God's tests of his two faithful servants, Job and Abraham.

The name of the heavenly adversary in Jub 17:1 5-16 provides another clue as to the origin of this prologue to the aqedah and also another and subtler connection with Passover. The Hebrew word *mastema* derives from a root meaning "hostility, enmity." The prince with this name in Jubilees is one of a number of demonic figures prominent in the book (see, for example, 1:20). That the aqedah should have been a stinging rebuke to such a figure makes sense in terms of the worldview of Judaism in the late Second Temple period, a worldview with an acute sense of the factors impeding obedience and faithfulness and of the corollary necessity for herculean efforts at every level to overcome these impediments. Although the point is often missed, an analogous figure appears in the biblical account of the tenth plague upon the Egyptians. This is the mysterious "Destroyer" (*mashit*) who is deflected from the houses of the Israelites only because of their slaughter of the paschal lamb and their apotropaic manipulation of its blood (Exod 12:21-23). To be sure, the mission of the Destroyer originates more directly in the will of God than the mission of Prince Mastema, and once they have performed the paschal rites as in-

structed, the Israelites benefit from the Destroyer in a way that renders the term "demonic" somewhat problematic. It is the case, nonetheless, that Israel's scrupulous obedience to God's command concerning the yearling male lamb constitutes a setback, if not quite a stinging rebuke, to the Destroyer, whom it compels to abandon part of his mission of destruction-the part involving the Israelite first-born.

If an identification of the Destroyer with the Devil had been made by the time of Jubilees,<sup>9</sup> the application of the scene in heaven in job 1-2 to the prologue to the aqedah in Job 17:15-16 is readily understood. The test to which Abraham is subjected would then be the suggestion of the demonic figure defeated by the rites adumbrated in Abraham's obedient action-the slaughter of the paschal lamb and the placement of its blood on the doorposts and the lintels of the Israelites' houses in Egypt. Abraham pre-enacts his descendants' destiny, obeying God's command in a way that defeats the supernatural forces of destruction and, paradoxically, enables his first-born son to survive. We have had occasion to observe that some items in the story of Abraham in Genesis foreshadow the fate of the people Israel in Egypt (see chapter 10). Jubilees has made one of them explicit-his sacrifice of a sheep in place of his first-born and beloved son on the night after the fourteenth day of the first month. Abraham becomes the originator of Passover, and Passover becomes one massive footnote to the faithful obedience of the world's first Jew.

The idea that the salvation of the nation should hinge upon a father's willingness to surrender his son harks back to Canaanite and Israelite themes already of hoary antiquity by the time Jubilees was written. Most obviously, it recalls the story of Joseph, in which it is only Jacob's willingness to hand over his beloved son Benjamin that saves the family from starvation-and Simeon from lifelong imprisonment in Egypt (see chapter 13). But it also recalls the story of Mesha, king of Moab, who was able to break the deadly Israelite siege against him only by making his first-born son and heir apparent into a burnt offering (2 Kgs 3:24-27). It is this gruesome deed that causes a "great wrath" (qesep gadol) to fall upon Israel and thus forces their retreat (see chapter 1). By founding the story of Passover upon the aqedah, Jubilees makes a father's willingness to give up his son and heir a key ingredient of Israel's redemption from Egypt. Once again the wrath of God falls upon the enemy, this time in the form of the Destroyer's execution of the tenth and climactic plague upon the Egyptians. The functional equivalence of the Destroyer and the "great wrath" should not be missed, nor should the Canaanite affinities of the paschal theology and rites. A holiday whose origins

lie in a father's willingness to surrender his beloved son for a sacrificial death ends in the redemption of his descendants' first-born sons from the grip of death.

Jewish literature later than Jubilees continues the identification of Isaac and the paschal lamb that is there only implicit. Particularly noteworthy is a comment in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, a midrashic work redacted most likely about the end of the fourth century C.E., on Exod 12:13b: "When I see the blood [of the paschal lamb] I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt":

I see the blood of the binding of Isaac. For it is said, "And Abraham named that site Adonai-Yireh [the Lord will see]," etc. [Gen 22:14]. Further on it says, "[God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it,] but as he was about to wreak destruction, the Lord saw and renounced further punishment," etc. [1 Chr 21:15]. What did he see? He saw the blood of the binding of Isaac, as it is written, "God will see to the sheep," etc. [Gen 22:8]. (Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha' 7).

Here, the blood of Isaac has displaced the blood of the lamb that dies so that the Israelites may be freed from bondage in Egypt. As the biblical text itself would have it, there is, of course, an enormous difference between Abraham's beloved son and the paschal lamb he here replaces: unlike the blood of the lamb, Isaac's was never shed, for in his case, the sacrifice was called off in the nick of time (Gen 22:12). It may be, as some suggest," that our midrash simply assumes that because of Abraham and Isaac's willingness to go through with the offering, God views it as if it had taken place: where others see the blood of the paschal lamb, God alone sees the blood that would without question have been shed had he not canceled his gruesome command to Abraham. It is also possible and, in my judgment, more probable that, like some other rabbinic texts, this midrash assumes against the plain sense of Genesis 22 that some of Isaac's blood—perhaps even all of it was indeed shed at the aqedah. In either case, it is the blood of Isaac that procures deliverance for the Israelite first-born from the lethal plague that the Destroyer is about to unleash. The father's refusal to spare his son has become a paradigm of the saving act, and the paschal lamb has become a cipher for the beloved son.

The second text that the midrash in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael cites is in some respects even more revealing of the transformation that the aqedah has undergone. This is the passage that treats the great plague on Jerusalem in the time of David. As in the case of Gen 22:14 and 22:8, the immediate connection is the word "saw": "the Lord saw [ra'a] and renounced further punishment" (1 Chr 21:15). This rather naturally links with the words "when



I see [weraiti] the blood [I will pass over you]" in Exod 12:13 and suggests that it is blood that YHWH "saw" in 1 Chr 21:15, in which the direct object is oddly omitted. There are, however, further connections with the aqedah. One is the incident itself, which serves as the foundation legend for the Jerusalem Temple. For this is not only the spot at which the angel appeared, "standing between heaven and earth" (v 16), and where David at the angel's behest builds an altar (vv 18, 26). It is also the spot on which the Temple will stand (1 Chr 22:1). This is, it will be recalled, none other than the site that Chronicles calls "Mount Moriah" (2 Chr 3:1). The mountain on which the angel is seen is thus identified with the mountain named Adonai-Yireh ("The LORD will see") in Gen 22:14, playing on Gen 22:8: "God will see [yir'eh] to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." The oddly unspecified object of "saw" in 1 Chr 21:15 must then, by a strict but thoroughly midrashic logic, be none other than the blood of Isaac. And, once again, whether the son's blood was thought to have been literally shed or not, it is this blood that God sees when he renounces punishment and spares Israel from devastation. The aqedah/ passover sacrifice has become the efficient cause of Israel's rescue from affliction throughout history.

The identification of Isaac's blood with that of the paschal lamb made in the first observation of our midrash is also to be detected in its second observation, the explanation of God's mysterious decision to renounce the punishment that he had initiated. The key, as is usual in midrash, is the phrasing:

God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it [khaWtah], but as he was about to wreak destruction [kehashit] the LORD saw and renounced further punishment and said to the destroying [hammashit] angel, "Enough! Stay your hand." (1 Chr 21:15a)

The prominence of the verb *hishit* here is remarkable: three occurrences in one verse. The last of these, *hammashit*, is identical with the name of the obscure agent of destruction in the tenth plague (Exod 12:23); the only difference is that here the word modifies the noun "angel," a term that in the parlance of the Hebrew Bible encompasses agents of either benign or maleficent mission. Jerusalem, in short, was spared from the pestilence that befell it in the days of David only because of God's rebuke of the *mashit*. To the rabbinic midrashist, this means that the two rescues are of the same origin: what God "saw" in 1 Chr 21:15 is the blood that saved the Israelite first-born. The first observation of our midrash establishes this to have been "the blood of the binding of Isaac."

The attribution of Jerusalem's deliverance from plague to the blood of Isaac rests, however, upon more than just the midrashic comment on the clause

"when I see the blood" in Exod 12:13. It also rests upon the striking parallels between the aqedah and the story of the pestilence in Jerusalem in the time of David. Both stories are, or at least have become, etiologies of the Temple of Solomon. In each case, God halts a slaughter at the last moment, in the one instance through the angel's sudden order to Abraham, "Do not raise your hand against the boy" (Gen 22:12), in the other through God's order to the destroying angel after seventy thousand had fallen, "Enough! Stay your hand" (1 Chr 21:15). In each instance, the human protagonist builds an altar on the site known to both sources as Moriah (Gen 22:9; 1 Chr 21:26; 2 Chr 3:1). One key difference between the two narratives is that the motivation for the aqedah is unknown, whereas the pestilence in Jerusalem results from Satan's inciting David to conduct a census (1 Chr 21:1). Combined, these two related etiologies of the Jerusalem Temple result in something like Jub 17:1516: the aqedah originates in a challenge by a diabolical figure. Then identifying the "destroying angel" of 1 Chr 21:15 with the "Destroyer" of Exod 12:13, as the diction and the context readily allow, one has something like our midrash from the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ismael: what saved Jerusalem from the pestilence was the blood of the binding of Isaac. According to this text, a line runs from Abraham's great act of obedience to the deliverance of Jerusalem from pestilence in the days of King David. It must not be overlooked that this line runs through the tenth plague upon the Egyptians and the corollary sparing of the Israelite first-born. For, as the midrash would have it, where the text of Exodus speaks of the blood of the lamb, God saw the blood of Isaac. This piece of rabbinic exegesis makes a particularly direct use of the identification of Abraham's beloved son with the paschal lamb, an identification that first appears in jubilees-but there only obliquely, by implication alone.

Some will find this tight and enduring association of the aqedah with Passover, and of Isaac with the paschal lamb surprising, since Genesis 22 has long been read in synagogues not on Passover but on Rosh Hashanah, the great autumn New Year's festival, where since Amoraic times it has served as the Torah lection for the second day of the feast (h. Meg 31 a). The association of the aqedah with Rosh Hashanah underlies, for example, midrashim in which Abraham's vision of the ram "caught in the thicket by its horns" (v 13) is seen as the origin of the blowing of the shofar, the ram's horn solemnly sounded on New Year's Day.<sup>11</sup>As Rabbi Abbahu, who lived in the land of Israel in the third century C.E., put it:

Why do we blow the horn of a ram? The Holy One (blessed be he) said: "Blow the ram's horn before me so that I may remember for your benefit

the binding of Isaac, son of Abraham, and account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before me." (b. Rd. Has. 16a)

Rabbi Abbahu's assumption here is that acts of self-sacrifice in the imitation of Isaac will assist Jews in securing the gracious acquittal for which they petition God on Rosh Hashanah.

Despite this profound and increasingly central involvement with Rosh Hashanah, the story of the binding of Isaac never lost its ancient association with Passover even in rabbinic Judaism:

"This month shall mark for you [the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you]" [Exod 12:2]. "Happy the nation whose God is the LORD, / the people He has chosen to be His own" [Ps 33:12]. After the Holy One (blessed be he) had chosen his world, he established the order of the new moons and the new years. And when he chose Jacob and his sons, he established the new moon of redemption, in which Israel was redeemed from Egypt and in which they will in the future be redeemed, as it is said, "I will show him wondrous deeds / As in the days when you sallied forth from the land of Egypt" [Mic 7:15]. This is the month in which Isaac was born and in which he was bound. (Exod. Rab. 15:11)

This midrash does more than simply associate the aqedah with Passover after the manner of jubilees.<sup>12</sup> It also makes the binding of Isaac into an archetype of redemption and thus a foreshadowing of the eschatological deliverance, the new Exodus. Isaac's descendants will be redeemed in the same month in which he was bound over the altar, the month that is first not only in order of enumeration, but, more profoundly, in order of importance to the history of redemption.

The ongoing redemptive effects of the aqedah and its importance in Jewish worship underlie an illuminating, midrash on Lev 22:27. The verse itself deals with an item of cultic law, to all appearances of no special import:

When an ox or a sheep or a goat is born, it shall stay seven days with its mother, and from the eighth day on it shall be acceptable as an offering by fire to the LORD. (Lev 22:27)

In a tradition evident in Palestinian Targumim, or Aramaic biblical translations, the three animals mentioned here are understood to refer to events in the lives of the three Patriarchs. The ox is a commemoration of the calf that Abraham rushed to prepare for his three divine visitors (Gen 18:7-8). The goat, similarly, is associated with the kids with which Jacob deceived his

father and usurped his older brother's blessing (27:9, 14-16). In the explanation of the sheep, however, we find a midrashic comment most germane to our present investigation:

Immediately [after Abraham provided the meal to his visitors] it was announced about Sarah that she would give birth to Isaac. After this [i.e., Isaac's birth], the lamb was chosen in order to recall the merit of the special [yehida] man who was bound on one of the mountains like a lamb as a burnt offering upon the altar. [God] redeemed him in his goodness and mercy, and when his descendants shall pray, they shall say in their time of distress, "Answer us at this time and listen to the cry of our prayer and remember for our benefit the binding of Isaac our father." (Tg. Neof. to Lev 22:27)<sup>13</sup>

It is here that we have the tightest and most explicit identification of Isaac with the sacrificial lamb. The animal, in fact, has become the symbol of the "special," "favored," or "only" son (however one renders *yahid* in Gen 22:2, 12, and 16, reflected in *yehida'* in this Targum) who was bound on the altar. The continuing sign of Isaac's having become like a lamb is that the lamb becomes like Isaac—a symbol of God's merciful bounty for those in affliction. As God redeemed the lamb-like Isaac awaiting slaughter upon the altar, so might he redeem his descendants, the Jews, when they invoke the memory of Abraham and Isaac's superlative obedience.

It is interesting that in the formulation of the Targum Neofiti to Lev 22:27, the lamb in question is not distinctively paschal. Rather, the association of Isaac with the paschal lamb, first discernible (though in an oblique way) in Jubilees 17-18, has now been generalized to include all lambs that Israel is enjoined to offer upon the altar of their God. Since it is virtually certain that Jubilees predates this and related Targumim, it is safe to conclude that the origin of the lamb symbolism of Isaac lies in the *aqedah* as an etiology of Passover. In a sense, the tradition has come full circle. Originally, the *aqedah* had no connection to the Passover sacrifice, the two stories being, in fact, two variant historicizations of a long-standing and widespread Canaanite practice of child sacrifice potentially realized through an animal substitute. Then, at some point in the Second Temple period but, in any event, certainly by the time of Jubilees, the *aqedah* became a foundation story for Passover. Now, in midrashim like that on Lev 22:27, the *aqedah* is once again independent of paschal associations. It has become the basis of God's election of the sheep as a sacrificial animal, alongside the ox and the goat.

The generalization of the liturgical implications of the *aqedah* results in a

new etiology. The daily sheep offering, like the paschal sacrifice before it, comes to be seen as a kind of reenactment of the binding of Isaac:

In the case of a ram, it says, "[It shall be slaughtered] on the north side [of the altar] in the presence of the LORD" [Lev 1:11]. They said: When our father Abraham bound Isaac his son, the Holy One (blessed be he) established the institution of the two lambs, one in the morning and one in the evening. Why so much? Because when Israel would sacrifice the daily offering on the altar and recite this verse ("on the north side in the presence of the LORD"), the Holy One (blessed by he) would remember the binding of Isaac.

I call heaven and earth to witness against me: Whenever anyone Gentile or Jew, man or woman, male or female slave, reads this verse ("on the north side in the presence of the LORD"), the Holy One (blessed be he) remembers the binding of Isaac, as it is written: "on the north side in the presence of the LORD" (Lev. Rab. 2:11).<sup>14</sup>

In the first part of this midrash, the aqedah has become the origin of the daily offering of two yearling lambs, specified in Exod 29:38-42 and Num 28:3b8. The full effect of the sacrifice now depends, however, upon its accompaniment by the recitation of the words in Lev 1:11, "on the north side [sapona] in the presence of the LORD." The underlying assumption seems to be that sapona should be understood not only as a word for "north," but also as a form of the root spn, meaning to hide or store away. Indeed, the consonantal text, which is all that was written in rabbinic times, allows the word in question to be read as the feminine passive participle sepuna "hidden." The aqedah feminine noun-is hidden away in the presence of God but can be brought to his attention by imitating Abraham's sacrifice of a sheep and reciting the bivalent expression in Lev 1:11. On the basis of the overall rabbinic theology of the aqedah, it is certain that the effect of God's bringing the event to mind is an effluence of divine grace upon the worshipers and the establishment of reconciliation in place of estrangement. It is worthy of note that the second form of the midrash cited above goes out of its way to universalize the availability of this grace. So long as the key expression is recited, the personal status of the one doing so is of no consequence. This midrash is emphatic: the benefits won in the aqedah are open even to those who are not descended from Abraham.<sup>15</sup>

The emphasis in the midrash cited above upon the recitation of those words in Lev 1:11 tends to confirm what the overall context suggests: the text comes from an age in which animal sacrifice is no longer available and prayer (among

other spiritual practices) must substitute for it. For here the efficacy of the burnt offering is rendered dependent, at least in part, upon the recitation of the law prescribing the manner of its performance. In the second form of the midrash, the actual offering is unmentioned, and the theurgic practice is limited to the recitation alone.

In the Talmud, the idea occurs that certain statutory prayers derive their authority from the laws of sacrifice in the Torah. In the case of the "prayer" par excellence, the Shemoneh Esreh, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who lived in the land of Israel in the third century C.E., said, "The prayers were instituted to correspond to the daily offerings" (h. Ber. 26b). The offering of two lambs every day, one in the morning and one at twilight (Exod 29:39; Num 28:4), is replaced by the recitation of the Shemoneh Esreh as a statutory obligation during the hours that tradition had fixed as the period for the lamb offerings. If, in accordance with the midrash in Lev. Rah. 2:11, one were to see the daily lamb offering as an effective symbolic reenactment of the aqedah, then one would have to say that the recitation of the Shemoneh Esreh is, in turn, founded upon the binding of Isaac. This conclusion, though logical, goes beyond the data in our hands. It does, however, bring to light a certain overlooked continuity between Judaism and Christianity. For in some Christian communions, most conspicuously the Roman Catholic, the eucharist is seen not only as a commemoration of the Last Supper ("Do this in remembrance of me," 1 Cor 11:24), but as a ceremony of prayer and feasting that is also and most importantly sacrifice, an effective reenactment of Jesus' atoning death.<sup>16</sup> In their different ways, both the Shemoneh Esreh and the mass have roots in the sacrificial ordinances of the Torah and a substantial debt to post-biblical Jewish exegesis of the story of the binding of Isaac. The indisputable differences between the two great liturgical practices should not be allowed to obscure their profound commonalities.

From one perspective, the rabbinic extension of the etiological function of the aqedah to cover all lambs sacrificed and not merely the paschal offering returns the story to where it began: a narrative without a direct association with Passover but with a pointed etiological connection to the Temple in Jerusalem. Abraham's unequalled act of faithful obedience on Moriah/Zion validates and gives meaning to the worship that takes place on the mountain where God can be seen. From another point of view, the aqedah separated anew from Passover becomes, however, another narrative. For now the sheep is only a reminder of Abraham's great deed and no longer a substitute for the beloved son; the first-born who belongs to God, as it is in the Passover legend. When every sheep offered is a theurgic recollection of the binding of Isaac, it becomes easier to lose sight of the crucial point that the aqedah is a legacy

of a world in which God might choose to exercise his right to the first-born among a man's sons (see chapter 1).

Our conspectus of the transformation of the aqedah in its Second Temple and early rabbinic retelling requires us to qualify the identification of Isaac with the lamb, paschal and other, with material that moves in quite another direction. For one badly misunderstands the character of this transformation if one thinks that Isaac was imagined to have been willing to go to his appointed demise sheep-like, without awareness or choice. The truth is much the opposite. At the same time that Jewish writers and teachers were filling out the lines that run from Isaac to the paschal and daily lamb offerings, some of them were also subtly but steadily transforming the aqedah from the story of Abraham's offering of his son into one of Isaac's self-sacrifice in the service of the God of his father. His brush with death was increasingly viewed as self-conscious and freely chosen. The offered becomes the co-offerer of the near-sacrifice of the beloved son.

An early example of this extraordinary revisioning of the aqedah appears in 4 Maccabees, a profound work of Jewish philosophy in narrative form, of uncertain provenance and a likely date of composition between 18 and 55 C.E.<sup>17</sup> This book centers upon a decree of the Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes about 167 B.C. E. that every Jew must eat pork and meat sacrificed to idols. The Jews are, however, offered an alternative to these violations of their religion: they can be delivered into torture and then death (5:1-3). Antiochus' decree, in short, presents the Jews with the stark choice of a painful death in fidelity to the Torah or continued life granted them only because of their apostasy. It celebrates those who withstand horrific torture with astonishing bravery and choose death over faithlessness to the divine law. Among those who fall in this precious category are a certain mother and her seven sons, each of whom delivers himself, before his execution, of a highly polished oration on the demands of piety and the virtue of absolute loyalty to the law of God. At one illuminating point, the narrator of 4 Maccabees relates a scene in which the brothers call upon each other to stay the course and not buckle under the pressure of impending death:

<sup>10</sup>"Courage, brother!" said one, and another, <sup>11</sup>"Hold on nobly." <sup>12</sup>And another, recalling the past, said, "Remember whence you came and at the hand of what father Isaac gave himself to be sacrificed for piety's sake." (4 Macc 13:10-12)<sup>18</sup>

The allusion to the aqedah is hardly surprising in a work suffused with scriptural exempla and in which the Abrahamic origins of the Jews are prominently displayed. These are, after all, the "seven sons of the daughter of

Abraham" (18:20), that is, heroic Jews born of an equally heroic Jewess. What is especially worthy of note, however, is the way the context requires an identification of the sons not with Abraham but with Isaac. For they must confront the loss not only of those dearest to them, but of their own lives as well. In order to fit into the Abrahamic paradigm, their martyrdom requires a refocusing of the aqedah on Isaac rather than on his father and a reconception of Isaac's death as one he chooses in complete freedom, and not, as Genesis 22 allows one to think, one in which he is only a naive victim, a sheep led to the shambles. The seed of the all-important notion of Isaac's near-death as voluntary lies in the Jewish theology of martyrdom as it emerges in the aftermath of the Seleucid persecutions. It was a seed that would be watered by the blood of Jewish martyrs throughout the ages, from those dark days of the Second Temple to the time of the First Crusade, when devout Christians massacred Jewish communities in the Rhineland (1096 C.E.)--and beyond.

By recreating the aqedah as the story of Isaac as a prototype of the Jewish martyr, 4 Maccabees and literature like it have both undermined and reinforced the association of Abraham's beloved son with the sacrificial lamb. The undermining is obvious: the lamb has no understanding of what awaits it and no volition with which to choose a sanctifying death over an unholy life. The reinforcement, which is more subtle, derives from another essential aspect of the Jewish theology of martyrdom, the conception of the martyr's demise as sacrificial and redemptive. This is nowhere stated with more poignance than in the peroration on the seven sons that appears near the end of 4 Maccabees:

<sup>17</sup>The tyrant himself and his whole council were astonished at their endurance, <sup>18</sup>on account of which they now stand beside the divine throne and live the life of the age of blessing. <sup>19</sup>or Moses says, All the holy ones are under your bands [Deut 33:3]. <sup>20</sup>These then, having consecrated themselves for the sake of God, are now honored not only with this distinction but also by the fact that through them our enemies did not prevail against our nation, <sup>21</sup> and the tyrant was punished and our land purified, since they became, as it were, a ransom for the sin of our nation.

<sup>22</sup> Through the blood of these righteous ones and through the propitiation of their death the divine providence rescued Israel, which had been shamefully treated. (4 Macc 17:17-22)<sup>19</sup>

The affirmation that the endurance of the martyrs has exalted them into the upper world and granted them a position near the throne of glory is best understood as a logical development out of an older Israelite theology. This was a theology that promised blessing and success for those who, resisting



temptation, remained faithful to YHWH and obedient to his commandments (e.g., Lev 26:3-13). In the case of those who die the death of martyrs, the old theology had to undergo an adjustment, for their failure, in a worldly sense, is a consequence of the very behavior that the Torah commands and commends. The adjustment of 4 Maccabees is to call the worldly criteria of success into question. The passage 17:17-19 interprets the ostensible defeat of the martyrs as an actual victory: with their life's blood the martyrs have purchased their exalted place in the upper world where they enjoy the blessing that the tradition once promised them and cruel happenstance denied them on earth.<sup>20</sup>

If the martyrs' deaths had benefited only themselves, the full measure of self-sacrifice that is its distinguishing characteristic would, our text seems to suggest, be undermined. For 4 Macc 17:20-22 carries the interpretation of their deaths beyond the exploration of the consequence for the martyrs themselves. It was, these verses tell us, death on behalf of the rest of Israel, whom it benefited by eliciting God's compassion and ultimately his rescue of the downtrodden nation. The language in which this enormous benefit is described is unabashedly cultic. The term for "propitiation" (hilasterion) in v 22, for example, is the word that the Septuagint uses for the cover of the Ark of the Covenant (Hebrew, kapporet), on which the high priest sprinkles the blood of the bull as a sin offering (Lev 16:14). It is worthy of note that it is also the term that Paul was to use when he wrote that "God set Uesus] forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood" (Rom 3:25).

The book known as 4 Maccabees and the Jewish theology of martyrdom for which it is one of the earliest witnesses is more democratic than Paul. To all Jews who die the consecrated death it applies the language of propitiation or expiation that Paul was to apply to Jesus alone. Isaac, in 4 Maccabees, both is and is not thus a spiritual forebear of Jesus as reinterpreted by Paul and kindred Christians. Isaac is a forebear of Jesus in that, as a martyr, he helps bring reconciliation and redemption. He is not a forebear of Jesus, however, in that his death is not uniquely and exclusively redemptive: it is one scriptural example, albeit an especially poignant one, of the sort of death that the author asks of Jews facing the horrific choice of martyrdom or violation of the Torah. One other point of comparison must not go unmentioned here: the norms for which 4 Maccabees calls upon Jews to be willing to give their lives are the very ones that Paul believed to have been set aside by the new aeon inaugurated by the death and reported resurrection of Jesus.

The idea that Isaac was bound over the altar by his own free choice soon transcended the theology of martyrdom that most probably served as its matrix. A case in point is the *Biblical Antiquities*, a book ascribed to Philo of

Alexandria but not of his authorship, preserved in Latin but most likely composed in Hebrew some time in the first century C.E.<sup>21</sup> The Biblical Antiquities presents two texts relevant to our subject. The first directly recounts the conversation of Abraham and Isaac on their trek to Moriah:

But the son said to the father, "Hear me, father. If a lamb of the flock is accepted as sacrifice to the LORD with an odor of sweetness and if for the wicked deeds of men animals are appointed to be killed, but man is designed to inherit the world, how then do you now say to me, 'Come and inherit life without limit and time without measure'? Yet have I not been born into the world to be offered as a sacrifice to him who made me? 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." (Bib. Ant. 32:3)

Isaac's comments here show him overcoming the suspicion that his impending death at the hands of Abraham will reduce him to the level of an animal. On the contrary, he comes to see that his acceptability for sacrifice is a unique honor: it demonstrates the dignity of the human race for all future generations.

The other allusion to the aqedah in the Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo is even more explicit about Isaac's active role. It comes from the mouth of Jephthah's daughter (here given the name of Seilah), who, as we have seen,<sup>22</sup> has much in common with the intended victim of the aqedah:

<sup>2</sup>And Seilah his daughter said to him, "and who is there who would be sad in death, seeing the people freed? Or do you not remember what happened in the days of our fathers when the father placed the son as a holocaust, and he did not refuse him but gladly gave consent to him, and the one being offered was ready and the one who was offering was rejoicing? <sup>3</sup>And now do not annul everything you have vowed, but carry it out." (Bib. Ant. 40:2 - 3)<sup>23</sup>

The point could not be clearer: Isaac agreed to be sacrificed and contemplated with utter joy his transformation into a holocaust, that is, a burnt offering. It is worthy of note that by recounting the allusion to the aqedah in the mouth of Seilah rather than Jephthah, the narrator has also shifted the focus from Abraham, the hero of the biblical story, to Isaac, the son who with joy and equanimity now looks upon his impending immolation.

Before leaving the Jewish sources from the first century C.E. that emphasize Isaac's choice to be bound as a sacrifice, attention must be given to the retelling of the aqedah that appears in Flavius Josephus' Jewish Antiquities, a work

composed at the end of that century. Abraham loved Isaac passionately (*hyperegapa*), Josephus tells us, because he was his only son (*monogene*), granted him as a gift of God in his old age (JA 1:222). Ordered to sacrifice his beloved son, Abraham explains to the chosen victim his reason for compliance. It is obviously God's intention, he tells Isaac, that the son should die not as most people do, "by sickness or war or by any of the calamities that commonly befall mankind, but amid prayers and sacrificial ceremonies" will God receive the soul of the beloved son and keep it near himself. "And for me," Abraham concludes, "you shall be a protector and stay of my old age-to which end above all I nurtured you-by giving me God instead of yourself" (JA 1:230231).<sup>24</sup> Again, though martyrdom is not the context here, the cultic resonances should not be missed. The death that has been decreed for Isaac is sacrificial in character. It draws Abraham closer to God, for, by playing his assigned role in bringing it about, Abraham chooses God over what he otherwise most loves-his only son, Isaac.

Most germane to our present discussion is Isaac's response to his father's speech:

The son of such a father could not but be brave-hearted, and Isaac received these words with joy. He exclaimed that he deserved never to have been born at all, were he to reject the decision of God and of his father and not readily resign himself to what was the will of both, seeing that, were this the resolution of his father alone, it would have been impious to disobey; and with that he rushed to the altar and his doom. (JA 1:232)

The doom, of course, never comes to be, for God explains to Abraham that he felt "no craving for human blood," but only wanted to test his obedience (1:233). It is not hard to detect Josephus' apologetic intentions in his rewriting of the aqedah. He clearly wishes his cultured Greek-speaking readership to think of the aqedah in terms other than that of a child sacrifice narrowly averted and to view Judaism as a lofty philosophy rather than a barbarian cult founded by a man who would gladly kill his own son. Josephus accomplishes these goals by putting in Abraham's mouth a carefully reasoned explanation of his behavior and in Isaac's, a statement of unqualified assent. But the notion that Isaac (here presented as twenty-five years old in JA 1:227) gladly accepts his role in the aqedah is not exclusively a figment of Josephus' apologetic motives.<sup>25</sup> It is, as we have seen, a feature prominent in other Jewish retellings from the period, works composed for internal consumption and surely reflecting generations of midrashic development. One of the engines driving this development was the greater sense of the accountability of the

individual in Hellenistic Judaism as opposed to earlier periods in the history of the religion of Israel. This made it less feasible to retell the aqedah with Isaac as a mere appendage to Abraham, as the biblical narrative arguably suggests. When precisely this transformation of the story began is impossible to say. It may be implicit even in Jubilees, which seems to assign Isaac the age of fourteen at the time of his binding<sup>26</sup>--an age when he doubtless could have understood what was about to happen to him and escape if he chose to. In Genesis 22, his age is unspecified.

Isaac's glad and unstinting participation in the aqedah is a legacy of earlier forms of Judaism that the rabbinic movement developed further. Particularly illuminating is the comment of the Sifre Deuteronomy, a relatively early midrashic collection, on Deut 6:5: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." In the Sifre Deuteronomy, Rabbi Meir, a figure of the mid-second century C.E., applies the three common nouns in this verse to the three patriarchs. "With all your soul" thus recalls the patriarch of the middle generation: "[You shall love the LORD your God] with all your soul'-like Isaac, who bound himself upon the altar." (Sifre Deut. 32) In Rabbi Meir's retelling, Abraham's binding of Isaac as a sacrificial offering is transformed into Isaac's binding of himself. child sacrifice has been sublimated into self-sacrifice. And it is this note of self-sacrifice that God hears, according to Rabbi Abbahu in the third century, when Israel sounds the ram's horn in hopes of bringing the aqedah to God's remembrance (b. Ros. Has. 16a).<sup>27</sup> The Jew is enjoined to imitate not only Abraham, but Isaac as well.

We have already examined an exemplar of the last of the salient changes that the aqedah underwent in ancient Jewish tradition. This is the startling transformation by which a story in which the father is explicitly forbidden to "do anything to" his beloved son (Gen 22:12) metamorphosed into one in which he wounds or even kills the lad. "When I see the blood I will pass over you," God announces to Israel enslaved, with incontrovertible reference to the paschal lamb (Exod 12:13). But the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ismael glosses: "I see the blood of the binding of Isaac" (Pisha' 7). This notion that Isaac's blood was in some sense shed is not confined to rabbinic sources. The Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo also makes an allusion to the blood of Isaac, though hardly one that specifies just what happened at that all-important instant:

And he brought him to be placed on the altar, but I gave him back to his father and, because he did not refuse, his offering was acceptable before me, and on account of his blood, I chose them. (Bib. Ant. 18:5)

What this obscure text excludes is any possibility that Isaac was indeed slain. It remains unclear, nonetheless, exactly how far the new sacrifice of Isaac proceeded. A minimalist position both accords best with the plain sense of Genesis 22 and offends the modern sensibility least: though Abraham did nothing to his son bound upon the altar, God accounts his willingness to go through with the act as if he had, in fact, shed his blood. Abraham's binding his son and taking the butcher's knife in hand thus constitute, in God's eyes, the full equivalent of the sacrifice that, thankfully, never took place. Isaac's symbolic death at the hand of his loving father has the theological value of a real death.

Ancient midrash would not be ancient if it never offended modern sensibilities, nor would it be midrash if it always conformed to the plain sense of the biblical passage it interprets. The minimalist position, though it may indeed fit the two references to the blood of Isaac that have been mentioned, fails utterly when it confronts a passage like the following:

Rabbi Joshua says: "God spoke to Moses and said to him ['I am the LORD']" [Exod 6:2]. The Holy One (blessed be he) said to Moses, "I can be trusted to pay out the reward of Isaac son of Abraham, who gave a quarter of [a log of] blood upon the altar and to whom I said: [' Let the nations not say, "Where is their God?" Before our eyes let it be known among the nations that You avenge the spilled blood of Your servants. "Let the groans of the prisoners reach You;]

reprieve those condemned to death

as befits Your great strength. [Ps 79:10-11]

I am trying to bring them out of Egypt, and you say to me, "[Please, O Lord], make someone else Your agent"? [Exod 4:13] (Mekilta de Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai, Wa'era')<sup>28</sup>

This text suggests that a bolder reading of the other allusions to the blood of Isaac may be in order, for it makes clear that some of his vital fluid was indeed shed. The point of the quotation from Psalm 79 is to render the Exodus from Egypt a consequence of the aqedah. Because of the "spilled blood" of God's servant Isaac, the groan of the captive Israelites reaches God and induces him to grant them a reprieve. The term "prisoners" recalls the first of Pharaoh's schemes for dealing with the Israelite threat: enslavement. "Those condemned to death" suggests the second: genocide (Exod 1).<sup>29</sup> Both are reversed when God vindicates the blood shed by his faithful servant Isaac and liberates the people Israel from Egypt.

Underlying this powerful, multilayered midrash is, once again, a conception of Isaac as a martyr: he gives his blood so that God, in avenging him, may redeem his descendants from bondage and death. How much he gives remains unclear. A quarter log is a small amount and suggests a token donation. But a Talmudic text seems to say that the same measure is all the blood a person has (b. Sota 5a), and the possibility cannot be disallowed that our midrash portrays Isaac as a man who gave every ounce of his vital fluid—a true and not just a would-be martyr. The notion of a token donation of blood fits the context of Bib. Ant. 18:5 at least as well as the minimalist idea of God's accounting the near-sacrifice of Isaac to Abraham as if the deed had come to pass. In the case of the anonymous midrash on the words "when I see the blood" (Exod 12:13), here, too, it is eminently plausible that the underlying assumption is that Isaac really did give some of his blood at the aqedah—or even all of it.

We have seen that the possible interpretations of the midrashic allusions to the blood of Isaac are three. The first is the minimalist view: no blood was spilled, but God graciously reckoned Abraham's and Isaac's devout intention as the equivalent of the bloody deed. Next comes the intermediate position: Abraham drew a fraction of Isaac's lifeblood as a token of the sacrifice he was prepared to carry out. The third view is maximalist: the father slew his son, and the son gave up his life, in obedience to the command of God.

Some rabbinic texts speak not of Isaac's blood, but of his ashes, and it is here that the convenient intermediate interpretation seems quite forced. Either God views the aqedah as if Isaac had been reduced to ash in the sacrificial flames, though nothing of the sort actually transpired, or God sees the real ashes of Isaac as a poignant and potent testimony to the obedience of Abraham and his son—the latter an obedience even unto death. To be sure, some midrashim, usually found in late collections, do venture an intermediate position. They interpret "the ashes of Isaac" as referring to what remained of the ram sacrificed in his stead, which they sometimes report had itself always borne the name "Isaac."<sup>30</sup> Creative and charming though this interpretation be, it still bespeaks an anxiety to avoid associating Abraham with a human sacrifice—and with disobedience to the explicit and unambiguous prohibition delivered by none other than the angel of the LORD. It is, in short, probably only a pious harmonistic gloss on the eminently disquieting older phrase, "the ashes of Isaac."

As long as one restricts oneself to the wording of the passages themselves, the texts that speak of "the ashes of Isaac" are generally amenable to the minimalist reading. Our first example includes a close parallel to the passage in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ismael that tells of God's seeing the blood of Isaac

during the pestilence with which he afflicted Jerusalem in the days of King David:

"[The LORD] said to the angel who was destroying the people, 'Enough [rah]!' [2 Sam 24:16].

Said Rabbi Eleazar: The Holy One (blessed be he) said to the angel, "Take for me the greatest man [rah] among them, who is capable of expiating many sins." At that moment there died Abishai son of Zeruah, who alone was equal to the majority of the Sanhedrin.

"[But] as [the angel] was about to wreak destruction, the LORD saw and renounced further punishment" [1 Chr 21:15]. What did he see? Rav said: He saw our father Jacob, as it is written, "When he saw them Jacob said. . ." [Gen 32:3]. But Samuel said: It was the ashes of Isaac that he saw, as it is written, "God will see to the sheep [for His burnt offering, my son]" [Gen 22:8]. Rabbi Isaac Nappaha said: It was the money Of atonement that he saw, as it is written, "You shall take the expiation money from the Israelites [and assign it to the service Of the Tent of Meeting; it shall serve the Israelites as a reminder before the LORD, as expiation for your persons]" [Exod 30:16]. (b. Ber. 16b)

It is altogether unremarkable that most of the Talmudic figures quoted here understand the cessation Of the pestilence in terms of their own theology of atonement. Rabbi Eleazar's comment is premised upon the crucial rabbinic notion that the death Of the righteous atones for the sins of others. Rabbi Isaac Nappaha's assumes the equally traditional notion that a donation in substitution for death can have the same atoning effects. The comment of Samuel, head Of a Babylonian academy in the early third century C.E., is more ambiguous. In form, it is highly reminiscent of the statement in the Mekilta de-Rabbi Ismael that attributes both the salvific effect of the paschal lamb and the cessation of the pestilence in David's time to "the blood of the binding Of Isaac." Here, as there, it remains unclear in what sense God "saw" the results Of the aqedah. Perhaps God Only regards the event as if it produced the ashes that have the atoning effects of which Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Isaac Nappaha speak—the equivalent of a sacrifice but not a literal one. Samuel's resort to Gen 22:8 as his proof-text only adds to the ambiguity. The connection may be nothing more than the verb *yir'eh* ("[God] will see") to explain what God "saw" (*ra'a*) when he "renounced further punishment" (1 Chr 21:15). But it may also be that Samuel thinks that what God "saw" is what Gen 22:8 predicts he will see—the sacrificial sheep offered by Abraham as the equivalent of his beloved son (v 13), though without the late embellishment that the animal, too, bore the name Isaac. A third possibility is that Samuel, like some later Jewish commentators, understood the end of Gen 22:8 to indicate that

Abraham's son was to be the burnt offering. If so, then the phrase "ashes of Isaac" implies that Samuel, unlike those commentators, thought Isaac had actually been immolated. This last possibility departs from the plain sense of Genesis 22, but no more than the midrash in which Abraham draws blood from his son. In fact, a certain overly literal reading of the biblical chapter can be pressed into service in support of the contention that Isaac was sacrificed (and later resurrected). The angel, after all, "called to Abraham a second time" (v 15), an indication that the instruction in the first address, not to harm the boy (v 12), had proven ineffective. The second angelic address only specifies the bright consequences of Abraham's not withholding his son (vv 16-18), leaving us to wonder what he had done to the boy between the angel's two speeches.<sup>31</sup> But we need not wonder long, for the last verse, if read in the same overly literal fashion, hints at the gruesome answer:

Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba. (Gen 22:19)

But what of his son? Isaac is unmentioned here, writes Abraham ibn Ezra (c. 1092-1167), because he was under his father's custody, "and anyone who says that he slaughtered him and left him and that afterwards he came back to life has said the opposite of the Scripture."<sup>32</sup> But as ibn Ezra understood better than most Jews of his generation or ours, to say the opposite of the Scripture is often precisely what midrash does. His rejection of the notion that Isaac was slain and resurrected stands, as we shall soon see, in marked contrast to the views of some of his contemporaries.

The ambiguity we find in Samuel's allusion to the ashes of Isaac bedevils all the comparable rabbinic texts. None of them seems able to resolve our pressing question of whether the ashes exist outside the mind of God and whether they derive from Isaac or from the ram offered as his stand-in. It may well be that one cause of the ambiguity is that the difference between the three possibilities is less to the rabbinic than to the modern mind. To say that God accounts Isaac as having been sacrificed can be, in rabbinic thought, the equivalent of saying he was indeed sacrificed, though not necessarily in ordinary reality: he may have been sacrificed according to the reckoning of a higher and infinitely more important reality than that of mundane life. And to say that it was the ashes of the ram rather than the son that God beholds is not to say that Isaac was not sacrificed. It is merely to say that the realization of the sacrifice of Isaac through the instrumentality of the animal was fully acceptable to the God who issued the gruesome command to Abraham to incinerate his beloved son.

A new and unexpected light is shed on these questions when one shifts



the discussion from the texts about the ashes of Isaac to some other midrashim about the second patriarch, notably the following:

By the merit of Isaac who offered [biqrib] himself upon the altar, the Holy One (blessed be He) will in the future resurrect the dead, as it is written:

["For He looks down from His holy height; the LORD beholds the earth from heaven] z1 to hear the groans of the prisoner,

[to release those condemned to death.] [Ps 102:20-21] (Pesikta de-Rab Kabana, zo't babberaka)<sup>33</sup>

That Isaac should be described as one "who offered himself upon the altar" is not surprising in light of the longstanding tendency to present him as a willing, indeed active participant in the aqedah. The problematic element is the precise meaning of the verb *hiqrib*. The word, a causative from the root meaning "to be near, approach," is common in discussions of sacrifice in every period of the Hebrew language. Does it here mean that Isaac presented himself upon the altar for a sacrifice that was never consummated, at least in any mundane, empirical sense? Or does it mean that he sacrificed himself? In support of the latter interpretation, one can adduce the context. God's eschatological resurrection of the dead makes much sense as a consequence of the merit of one who put himself to death and was revived. It makes less sense as the consequence of the merit of one who only presented himself for a sacrifice that God called off in the nick of time. The prooftext from Psalm 102 can be made to speak for either understanding of *hiqrib*. The part of v 21 actually quoted suggests that God, in response to Isaac's cry of pain, let him free from the bonds into which, as this midrash would have it, he had put himself. But the second half of that verse, with its mention of "those condemned to death" (*bene temuta*, literally, "sons of death," "dead ones") suggests a true resurrection and better fits the overall context. It is most germane that this expression occurs in only one other place, Ps 79:11, which, as we saw earlier in this chapter, is a prooftext for the idea that Isaac shed blood in the aqedah. This, too, supports the interpretation of *hiqrib* as indicating a true sacrifice.

Sufficient ambiguity envelops the expression "the ashes of Isaac" as to permit a conjecture, but only a conjecture, about its meaning. It is reasonable to suspect that the pressure of Jewish martyrdom spawned the idea that Isaac, like the martyrs of a later age, went willingly to a death that was never called off but only miraculously reversed, a sign for the martyrs to follow who now sleep in the dust. Given the extreme precariousness in dating rabbinic liter-

ature, it is well-nigh impossible to say when this momentous and portentous transformation began. The absence of any evidence for it outside of rabbinic sources naturally suggests the lethal persecutions of Hadrian (c. 130 – 135 C.E.) as the terminus a quo, but the underlying exegetical moves may be older still. In any event, efforts were made to blunt the new idea that Isaac was immolated after all. This was an idea that clashed with Gen 22:12 – 13 but conformed to a certain reading not only of v 19 but also of v 15, in which the angel is constrained to call upon Abraham a second time, as if the first call had failed. That Isaac was indeed sacrificed was also an idea that may have stood too close to certain Christian narratives for the rabbis' comfort. These considerations may explain why "the ashes of Isaac" has been preserved as a set expression without the accompanying narrative that alone explains it. But the idea that Isaac underwent the same gruesome fate as his descendants, the Jewish martyrs, reappeared from time to time. Its most moving statement occurs in a poem by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, written some time after the Second Crusade (1146):

*He made haste, he pinned him down with his knees,  
He made his two arms strong.  
With steady hands he slaughtered him according to the rite,  
Full right was the slaughter.*

*Down upon him fell the resurrecting dew, and he revived  
(The father) seized him (then) to slaughter him once more.*

*Scripture, bear witness! Well-grounded is the fact:*

And the Lord called Abraham, even a second time from heaven.<sup>34</sup>

Ephraim's older contemporary, ibn Ezra, would have to counter that Scripture cannot bear witness, for these ideas are "the opposite of the Scripture." The retort is tragically simple: which better captures the reality of the Jewish martyrs of the twelfth or any other century, the plain sense of Genesis 22 beloved of ibn Ezra, or the rewritten aqedah of Jewish tradition?

Such, then, are the transformations that the episode in Gen 22:1 – 19 underwent in the periods of the late Second Temple and the Talmud. Never directly referred to within the Hebrew Bible, the aqedah had, by early in the second century B.C.E., emerged as a supreme moment in the life of Abraham. Soon thereafter it had already become a foundation story for the festival of Passover, with the near-sacrifice of Isaac foreshadowing the literal slaughter of the lamb. The association of Abraham's beloved son with the paschal lamb continued to grow in the rabbinic period, and eventually with the aqedah became an etiology even of lamb offerings that were not paschal. At the same time, Isaac's role

in the drama was becoming increasingly active. He was reconceived as a willing participant, freely and gladly choosing, like a martyr, to give up his life in obedience to the heavenly decree, and, again like a martyr, his choice was seen as effecting atonement for the many. This transformation, already in evidence in the first century C.E., gathered force in the rabbinic period. Eventually, it became possible to allude to the aqedah without mention of the hero of the biblical story, Abraham: Isaac bound himself and offered himself upon the alter. Moreover, the sacrifice to which he had given joyful assent was imagined, in contradiction to the biblical report, to have in some sense taken place – in the reckoning of God, through a token shedding of blood, or even literally, with Isaac reduced to ashes and then raised to life anew by the power of the God who is master over death as well as life.

Not all these transformations proceeded at the same pace, nor should the new conception that they yielded be thought to have been endowed with the normative force of dogma. Jewish tradition has always been too multifarious, argumentative, and decentralized for this to have been the case. Nor should our choice of topics mislead us into imagining that the aqedah alone occupied center stage in the theology of the periods discussed. This was, instead, an honor it shared with a number of other Pentateuchal episodes – the splitting of the sea, for example, or the revelation at Sinai, the incident of the golden calf, the report of the scouts, the rebellion of Korah, the prophecy of Balaam, the death of Moses. It is clear, nonetheless, that on any short list of the critical moments in the history of redemption according to the rabbis, the aqedah would merit a high rank, and certain key rabbinic conceptions of the episode are demonstrably pre-rabbinic. Notable among these are the associations with Passover and with martyrdom, both themes at the very center of the Christian adaptation of the aqedah that will occupy our attention in the following chapters.