

The Trial of Abraham in Syriac, Jewish and Islamic tradition

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The narrative of the ‘binding’ (עֲקֵדָה, ‘*āqēdā*¹) of Isaac, the ‘trial’ (ܢܝܫܘܢܐ, *nesyonā*) of Abraham or the ‘sacrifice’ (ܕܒܝܗ, *dabiḥ*) of Isaac/Ishmael is a story (found in Genesis 22 and Qur’an 37.100–113) shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims, that has been owned and embroidered to suit the needs of successive generations. It may have originally been a legend about the abandonment of the ancient, if rare, practice of child sacrifice. Through millennia it has inspired the religious and confounded the level-headed. Interestingly, the transmission of the narrative shows a surprising unity in its core development by different groups, even when it has been adapted to meet specific religious and cultural needs. Around the core transmission interesting embellishments have come and gone — including the knife being stopped by the miraculous appearance of a sheet of copper around Isaac’s neck (in Arabic *ahadith*²) and the miraculous, rather than circumstantial, creation of the tree with the ram caught up in it (in Syriac tradition). Most of the major writers in the Syriac tradition have written on Genesis 22. Ephrem’s *Commentary on Genesis* is the earliest (and he touches on it again in his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*). Also of note is the fourth- or fifth-century anonymous prose homily *On Abraham* (British Library Add. 14616), and the fifth- or sixth-century dialogue poem, *Soghiṯha on Abraham and Isaac*. Jacob of Serugh’s two *mēmre* on the subject are of note, as is the account in the sixth- or seventh-century *Cave of Treasures*. This essay is a survey of the themes of transmission within the Syriac tradition and their relation to Jewish and Muslim traditions.

In the Peshitta, Genesis 22 is entitled “The trial of Abraham” (ܢܝܫܘܢܐ ܕܐܒܪܗܡܐ, *nesyoneḥ d-Abrāḥām*). It is a fairly close and literal translation of something close to the Masoretic Text. For example, the MT describes Isaac as יְחִידְכָּא (yəḥīḏkā), and the Peshitta follows it with ܝܚܝܕܝܟܐ (*iḥīḏaik*) — ‘the only one’ — where the Septuagint has the description of Isaac as τὸν ἀγαπητὸν (*tòn agapētòn*). However, in a few small areas it departs from the MT. For example,

¹I shall transliterate all non-Latin words for the ease of those who do not know the languages.

²I use the plural *ahadith* throughout this work, rather than the more usual singular *hadith*, to emphasise the plurality of traditions being surveyed.

whereas the MT places the sacrifice in “the land of Moriah”, the Peshitta places it the “land of the Amorites”, perhaps indicating that somewhere the text has become corrupt. However, the LXX and the Vulgate have completely different readings here too. Aphrahat and the *Cave of Treasures* link the place of sacrifice with the future Temple location, and the latter with the Golgotha. Later Syriac exegetes follow the *Cave of Treasures* in identifying it as the place of crucifixion, which serves the typological theology well. One of the perceived problems with the biblical text is that it appears that God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in order to know whether he is faithful. This is fully met in verse 12 where God declares that he now knows (ܝܕܥܬܝ, *yāda‘ti*) that Abraham is faithful. The Peshitta renders this with the causative stem of the same root (ܐܘܕܥܬܝ, *aud‘et*) so that now it reads that God is letting it be known that Abraham is faithful, and from the earliest period the verb has been read as second person rather than first: that Abraham, through his deeds, has made known his faithfulness. Jewish tradition, followed by Syriac exegesis, then declared that God ordered the sacrifice of Isaac in order that the angels (and humanity, adds Barhebraeus) might see that it was on the merit of faith and not pure favouritism that God had chosen Abraham. In verses 5 and 12, Isaac is described as ܬܠܐܝܐ (*tellāyā*), a word that denotes a younger age than that in rabbinic literature, which generally ages him at 37. Thus, the Jewish tradition links the *Aqedah* with Sarah’s death in the following passage, and embellishes it with Satan bringing misinformation of Isaac’s death to his mother. Syriac tradition, lacking this embellishment, sometimes considered Isaac to be a baby, and thus his carrying of the wood is seen as miraculous. Barhebraeus suggests that Abraham used play-acting to bind Isaac as if showing him how sacrifices are performed. Isho‘dad of Merv rejected this thinking and aged Isaac at 16; others aged him at eight, and the *Cave of Treasures*, perhaps following a minority Jewish tradition (as found in Ibn Ezra) aged him at 13. Sarah’s role is mostly ignored in the various traditions, particularly in the Islamic *ahadith*, where she is not part of the Qur’an’s account, and particularly where Ishmael is considered the victim. Where she is mentioned, her exclusion from the narrative is often given as due to weakness of her sex. Ephrem gives the fullest and yet least sexist account of Sarah: that Abraham did not tell her because he was not commanded to, and if he had she would have wanted to come to offer the sacrifice and their neighbours would have been in uproar. The *Soghitha* puts words into Sarah’s mouth as she becomes suspicious about what Abraham is doing as he prepares for the sacrifice. She asks him to swear that no harm will come to her son. Abraham’s reply is that God stands pledge for the safe return of Isaac, which suggests that there is no way that he believed Isaac could actually be taken from them.

The theme of Abraham as priest can be seen throughout the three religious traditions. In Jewish understanding the sacrifice had to be perfect. Thus, Isaac is shown to be a willing victim and that he asks to be bound tightly so as not to disturb the sacrificial act. Jacob of Serugh specifically mentions that Abraham was wearing priestly vestments, and the *Soghitha* mentions that Abraham is to build the altar “as a priest”. At first, it seems that the Abraham-as-priest motif is a simple echo of the Jewish telling of the story. However, throughout Syriac thought the eucharistic offering (ܩܘܪܒܢܐ, *qorbānā*) and its priest (ܟܗܢܐ, *kāhnā*) are the fulfilment of Jewish sacrificial typology. Although this stream of typology is not as strong as that of the sacrifice as a foreshadowing of the crucifixion, it is certainly another layer of meaning perceived by the

Syriac exegetes. Ephrem links this narrative with Jesus' saying "Abraham saw my day and rejoiced" (John 8.56), showing that Abraham joyfully carried out God's command because its antitype in the cross and resurrection were revealed to him. The specific reference to garments also appears in a few early Islamic *ahadith* — that the son asks Abraham turns back the hem of his garment that it might not be splattered with blood. The priestly role is emphasized also in the Islamic *ahadith* that set the narrative in Mecca with the building of the Ka'ba.

The earlier traditions emphasize the role of Abraham, and this is for good reason: for all three religious traditions, he is the symbol of righteous and obedient faith. However, once scriptural needs have been met the traditions grew to focus more on the dramatic anguish of intended victim, and identification with him. Firstly, in Jewish thought the role of Isaac was embroidered in such a way as to become discursive of theology of atonement and redemption. As such, this became for Jews a type of the redemption of the first-born, and that in him the Chosen People are redeemed. Naturally, this understanding of the story had profound impact on Christian understanding of it. Once Isaac is seen as a type of Christ, his role is ready for embellishment with the themes of Christian atonement theology. Therefore, the three-day journey to the place of sacrifice is linked with the time that Christ was in the tomb, and Jacob of Serugh and the *Soghitha* elaborate that Isaac was effectively dead from the moment his father promised him in sacrifice. The Qur'an does not mention the name of the child Abraham takes as a sacrifice; an omission that has called into question whether it was Isaac or Ishmael who was to be sacrificed. Early *ahadith* name the victim as Isaac, and appear to be borrowing general narrative embellishments from both Jews and Christians. Although Isaac is mentioned immediately after the sacrifice narrative in Qur'an 37.112, the majority of Muslims believe this to be the announcement of Isaac's birth, which would clearly make Ishmael the object of the sacrifice. From this stance, the later Islamic *ahadith* meet the needs of their audience by making the People of Ishmael those who fully submit to God, and thus are true Muslims. Thus, although the respective scriptures focus on Abraham's example of faith, the narrative traditions focus on the victim's role in the redemption, or its typological representation, of those who would be incorporated into his heritage.

The ram and the bush/tree is an important theme in the Syriac tradition that does not get the same amount of attention in the other traditions. The Peshitta following the MT has the ram caught by his horns in a bush (ܪܒܥܘܨܐ, *b-sauktā*). However, in much of the exegetical tradition, the bush becomes a tree (ܪܒܪܐ, *b-ilānā*), following a similar transformation in targumic literature. As the tradition held that the place of sacrifice was barren (although later both Dionysius bar Šalibi and Isho'dad of Merv commented that the place was well wooded and Abraham merely took two pieces of wood to start the fire), the tree must have had a miraculous creation. Likewise, as Isaac asked where the sacrificial victim was, the ram could not have been present until the moment it was needed. Such reasoning appears in Ephrem's commentary and is followed by Jacob of Serugh and the *Soghitha*. This led to an understanding of four things that had unnatural birth: the tree that gave birth to the ram, Aaron's rod that sprouted, the spring from the stricken rock and the Virgin who gave birth without sexual intercourse. Although rather tenuous, there is some similarity here with the Zoroastrian concept of primordial beings: a primordial man, tree and bull. The presence of the miraculous tree rather than a circumstantial

bush helped strengthen the typology of the cross, and perhaps vice versa. Later theological reflection on the typological ramifications of this theology led its abandonment, particularly by the East Syrians. A further development, fully expressed by Theodore bar Koni but partially present elsewhere, is that the ram is the type of the human nature of Christ while Isaac is the type of the divine. This, naturally, had its own theological problems, particularly among miaphysites.

Syriac Christianity has preserved an ancient Semitic tradition of transmission of the narrative of Abraham and Isaac that goes beyond the textual study of other branches of the church. In this transmission, Syriac Christians have brought unique insights into the depths of ancient meaning and layers of new typology belonging to the narrative. Although not a proven case, Syriac Christianity may have been responsible for the transmission of the story to the Arabic world.