

10 Reading Between the Lines: Sarah and the Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis, Chapter 22)

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The episode of the near-sacrifice of Isaac at the hands of his father Abraham, as recorded in Genesis 22, has elicited an immense variety of responses from readers and commentators over the centuries. Modern reactions to the biblical narrative are for the most part very different from those of the past, and indeed one can almost use the exegesis of this chapter as a mirror in which to discover the differing sensibilities of different ages reflected. This is possible largely thanks to the laconic starkness of the biblical narrative, admirably brought out in a famous passage by Erich Auerbach in his *Mimesis*,¹ where he contrasts the technique of the biblical narrator with that of Homer in the recognition scene in Book 19 of the *Odyssey*: in Homer we have ‘externalised, uniformly illuminated phenomena . . . connected together, . . . thoughts and feelings completely expressed, events taking place in leisurely fashion, and with very little of suspense’. By contrast in Genesis we find ‘the externalisation of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative . . . all else is left in obscurity; . . . thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole . . . remains mysterious and fraught with background’.

In such a passage, then, silence may well be significant. Does this also apply to the narrator’s complete silence concerning Isaac’s mother? This question, very rarely asked by modern commentators, was one in which both Jewish and (especially) Christian writers of the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries AD took a considerable interest, coming up in a few cases with a remarkably feminist interpretation.

The sources for the fourth to sixth centuries with which we shall be concerned are written in three different languages and they all come from the eastern Mediterranean littoral, modern Syria, Lebanon and Israel. All the texts are homiletic in character, and witness to a lively tradition of preaching in both synagogues and churches at that time;² those of Jewish

provenance are written in Hebrew, while the Christian ones are either in Greek or in Syriac.³ Several of the Christian texts are in verse, but it is probable that they were all used in a liturgical context. In the course of their homiletic retelling of the dramatic narrative they may introduce Sarah either at the departure of Abraham and Isaac, or at their return. Christian tradition tends to be more interested in the former, and Jewish in the latter. Reference to Sarah may also be made by Isaac at the site of the sacrifice. Why, during this particular period, there should have been a particular interest in the role of Sarah, is unclear, although once the topic had been introduced it clearly caught the imagination of preachers of both faiths (especially in fourth-century Syria there seems to have been considerable interaction between Synagogue and Church in matters of biblical interpretation).

The narrative of Genesis 22 hangs in the air, not obviously connected either with the events of Genesis 21 (the birth of Isaac), or with those of Genesis 23, which opens with the death of Sarah. Jewish exegetical tradition normally saw a close connection in time – and sometimes a causal connection as well – between the ‘binding’ (*Akedah*) of Isaac and the death of Sarah, and this explains why the Jewish homilists who introduce Sarah do so at the moment of Abraham and Isaac’s return home. Connecting Sarah’s death chronologically with the *Akedah* has a further exegetical consequence, for it allows the reader to deduce (by combining the data in Genesis 17:17 and 23:1) that Isaac was no child at the time of the *Akedah*, but was aged 37. On this understanding, no particular problem is raised about his leaving home with his father without his mother’s notice, a matter which exercised the imagination of the many Christian (and a few Jewish) homilists who preferred to link the events of Genesis 22 with those of the preceding chapter (the birth of Isaac), and for whom, consequently, Isaac was still a young child.

THE DEPARTURE SCENE⁴

How then do these homilists portray Sarah? As far as the departure of Abraham and Isaac is concerned, the younger that Isaac is envisaged, the greater the problem posed: how did Abraham manage to extract him from his mother’s care without the latter realising what he was about to do? A variety of different possibilities were envisaged:

- Abraham tells Sarah nothing, and the reason for this is given by the fourth-century Syriac poet Ephrem as follows: ‘he did not reveal it to Sarah since he had not been ordered to reveal it’.⁵

- Abraham again tells Sarah nothing, but the reasons for this are put into

Abraham's own mouth. Thus an anonymous Syriac prose homily⁶ from about the end of the fourth century has:

So Abraham rose early and took his only-begotten son to set off, whither he did not know. He hid the secret from Sarah his wife. And why did he hide it from her, if not because he saw that God, who had told him, had not told her? Thus he perceived, discerning man that he was, that 'What God has kept hidden from her, it is not proper that I should reveal to her, lest I become someone who discloses his master's secrets. If God had known that it would have been advantageous to her to hear, then he would have told her in the same way as he told me; for he who revealed the matter to her when Isaac was given to us would have known to tell her now as well when he is being taken away from us. If God has not done anything about her now, then I am not going to cast vexation into her mind; for if I should reveal it while my Lord hides it, then I would be acting contrary to his will.

– Abraham once again tells Sarah nothing, but this time the homilist puts hypothetical words into Sarah's mouth in order to illustrate what she might have said, had her husband told her. This was a favourite device of the Greek homilists of the fourth and fifth centuries AD, and it is often linked with hypothetical speeches which the homilist also introduces so as to indicate what Abraham might have replied to God's seemingly outrageous command, had his faith and love of God not been so strong. In the unknown Greek author (fifth century?) designated today as Ephrem Graecus, Abraham considers it best not to tell Sarah since she would only raise a hullabaloo and try to hide her son; this writer then goes on to give the lament that Sarah might have uttered, if Abraham had told her:⁷

Do not cut off this single bunch of grapes
the only fruit that we have produced . . .
do not harvest the single sheaf that we have borne . . .
do not break the staff
upon which we support ourselves

More often the homilist explains Abraham's action by attributing to him considerations such as in the following by Basil, bishop of Seleucia in Syria, who died c.459:⁸ 'Though she is god-fearing, she is a mother: she might hide the child, or spoil the offering with her lamentations and tears. I'll comfort her afterwards.' Some writers of course cannot resist the opportunity to attribute to the patriarch a display of typical male chauvinism, alleging female weakness, and so on.

– A conversation between Sarah and Abraham may be introduced. Where this is the case, there are two radically different ways in which the scenario was handled: either Abraham resolutely conceals from Sarah his real intentions, or Sarah manages to extract from her husband his true purpose in taking off her child. The first of these scenarios is the more common, and is found in both Jewish and Christian sources, though handled in different ways. Thus in a number of medieval Jewish writings (*Midrash ha-Gadol*, *Sepher ha-Yashar*, etc., perhaps based on older sources) Abraham tells Sarah that he is taking Isaac off to school, to study with Melkizedek, who is identified as Shem. Isaac's education is at stake, Abraham tells Sarah:⁹

How long is your son going to be tied to your apron strings? He is already thirty seven years old and he has not been to school yet. Let him go off with me, and do you get together some provisions for the journey.

In the Christian homiletic tradition of the fifth and sixth centuries the emphasis is rather different. An anonymous Syriac Dialogue Poem (*Soghitha*) from this period introduces a lively altercation between husband and wife, with Sarah suspicious from the outset:¹⁰

Sarah says, 'What are you doing there,
splitting that wood which you have in your hands?
Might it be that you are going to sacrifice our son
with that knife which you are sharpening?'

Abram says, 'Sarah, be quiet,
you are already upset, and you are vexing me;
this is a hidden mystery
which those who love only human kind cannot perceive.'

[Sarah] 'You are not aware of how much I bore –
the pains and birth pangs that accompanied his birth.
Swear to me on him that he will not come to any harm,
for he is my hope. Then take him and go.'

[Abraham] 'The mighty God, in whom I believe,
will act as a pledge to you for me, if you will believe it,
that Isaac your son will quickly return
and you will be comforted by his youthfulness.'

In the first of two anonymous verse homilies on Genesis 22 in Syriac,¹¹ the long exchange between Sarah and Abraham at this point takes up over a fifth of the entire poem. As Sarah sees Abraham and Isaac set off

terror seized her, and she spoke as follows:

‘Where are you taking my only-begotten? Where is the child of my vows going?

Reveal to me the secret of your intention, and show me the journey on which you are both going . . .

Why are you not revealing your secret to Sarah your faithful wife who in all the hardships of exile has borne trials along with you?’

(lines 14–17).

Abraham tries to fob her off with an evasive reply,

‘I wish to slaughter a lamb and offer a sacrifice to God.

At the fleece¹² which will come back with us you will give praise to God all the more . . .’.

(lines 28–9).

If it is just a sheep that Abraham wants to sacrifice, Sarah retorts, then why does he have to take off Isaac:

‘. . . Leave the child behind, lest something happen, and untimely death meet him,

for I am being unjustly deprived of the single son to whom I have given birth.

Let not the eye of his mother be darkened, seeing that after one hundred years light has shone out for me.

You are drunk with the love of God – who is your God and my God – and if he so bids you concerning the child, you would kill him without hesitation.’

(lines 34–38).

Abraham’s final speech eventually manages to persuade Sarah to let Isaac go, despite all her forebodings.

The only text of Greek origin to adopt this scenario is a homily of uncertain date which survives only in Coptic translation, where it is attributed to Amphilochius, bishop of Iconium (died c.395).¹³ Here Sarah overhears Abraham’s instructions to the two young men who are to accompany him. Unaware of the intended victim, Sarah begs to be allowed to join in with the sacrifice. Abraham is put into a quandary: he imagines what Sarah would say if he told her the truth, and so decides to keep his mouth shut. Sarah then turns to Isaac and utters the following words, loaded with prophetic irony:

Go, my beloved son, go with your father who has begotten you, and learn to make offerings to God in this way Forthwith, you will bend your knees to him and will throw yourself down on your face to the ground;

put your hands behind you, be as one who is bound, until the Good One may see you from heaven. And you will utter cries to God like a sheep that is to be led to the slaughter . . . And now greet your mother and give a kiss on my mouth. Go with your father and return also with him in peace. For I trust that God will guard you and will also bring you both to me again. He who has given you to me as a present in hope, and who has called you in hope, will also return you to me. (lines 87–107)

In this homily Sarah remains to the last ignorant of Abraham's true intentions, but great emphasis is given to her own profound faith in God. Sarah's faith is brought out even more dramatically in the rare texts where she is portrayed as both aware of, and consenting to, God's bidding to Abraham. The seeds for this particular development were in fact sown in Ephrem's Commentary where he adds to the passage quoted above the following words:¹⁴ '(Had Abraham told her) she would have been beseeching him that she might go and share in his sacrifice, just as he had made her share in the promise of his birth'. The possibilities raised by such an approach were taken up in the second of the two Syriac verse homilies on Genesis 22;¹⁵ this is intriguingly a work for which there is some evidence, unfortunately ambiguous, that its author was a woman.¹⁶ The writer, who clearly draws in places on the first verse homily (*Memra* I) and probably knows the *Soghitha* or dialogue poem, has Sarah question her husband suspiciously as he makes preparations:

Why are you sharpening your knife? What do you intend to slaughter with it?

This secret today – why have you hidden it from me?

(lines 15–16).

To which Abraham replies with characteristic male condescension:

This secret today – women cannot be aware of.

(line 18).

Sarah's reply is at first heavily dependent on *Memra* I but towards the end it develops in an entirely different way:

You are drunk with the love of God, who is the God of gods,
and if he so bids you concerning the child, you will kill him without
hesitation:

let me go up with you to the burnt offering, and let me see my only child
being sacrificed;

if you are going to bury him in the ground, I will dig the hole with my
own hands,

and if you are going to build up stones, I will carry them on my shoulders;
 the lock of my white hairs in old age will I provide for his bonds.
 But if I cannot go up to see my only son being sacrificed
 I will remain at the foot of the mountain until you have sacrificed him
 and come back.

(lines 23–30)

Sarah then proceeds to instruct Isaac how to act as the victim; unlike the situation in the homily attributed to Amphilochius, she is perfectly aware of what is to happen:

And if Abraham should actually sacrifice you, stretch out your neck
 before his knife;
 stretch out your neck like a lamb, like a kid before the shearer.

(lines 35–6)

Having embraced her son, Sarah hands him over to Abraham, and the pair set out on their awesome journey.

In the homiletic tradition as described thus far we have two antithetical attitudes towards Sarah, the one (characteristic of most of the Greek sources) portraying her in an entirely unsympathetic way and from a purely male perspective, while the other (found notably in some of the Syriac texts) shows much more sympathy for her, depicting her faith as at least on a par with that of Abraham. A single Greek text, the hymn (*kontakion*) on Abraham and Isaac by the great Byzantine poet Romanos (early sixth century), remarkably combines both approaches.¹⁷ First Romanos puts into Abraham's mouth a hypothetical speech to illustrate what Abraham might have said, had he not acted immediately in obedience to God's command; in the course of this he introduces a second hypothetical speech, to illustrate how Sarah, as a loving mother, might have reacted if she were told of Abraham's true intentions. Then, in the middle of the poem, imagined speeches dramatically turn into reality, as Abraham suddenly rebukes Sarah:

Do not use words like that, woman, or you will anger God:
 he is not asking us for anything that does not belong to him,
 for he is simply taking what he earlier gave us.
 Do not spoil the sacrificial offering with your lamentations;
 do not weep, otherwise you will put a blemish on my sacrifice.

(verse 12)

Sarah's subsequent reply, addressed to Isaac rather than to her husband, is in a vein which shows that all the imaginary speeches which have previ-

ously been put in her mouth are entirely unjustified: she assents to the sacrifice and thereby demonstrates that her faith in God and love for God are equal to Abraham's:

If God desires you for life, he will give orders that you live;
 he who is the immortal Lord will not kill you.
 Now I shall boast: having offered you as a gift
 from my womb to him who gave you to me, I shall be blessed.¹⁸
 Go then, my child, and be a sacrifice to God,
 go with your father – or rather your slayer.
 But I have faith that your father will not become your slayer,
 for the Saviour of our souls alone is good.

(verse 14)

ON THE MOUNTAIN

The second point in the narrative of Genesis 22 at which Sarah sometimes receives (indirect) mention is at the scene of the sacrifice itself. Here the homily attributed to Amphilochius is the only Greek text to introduce her, and this comes in God's words to Abraham: 'You indeed have brought the boy to me here; for her part, Sarah has not ceased to beseech me about him. So it is you whom I have honoured, and as for her, I have listened to her, I have saved the boy in order to return him to both of you as a gift' (lines 277–81). Some of the Syriac texts, however, have Isaac speak of his mother. Thus in the extended dialogue between Isaac and Abraham at the site of the sacrifice in the *Soghitha*, Isaac is made to introduce Sarah four separate times; first Isaac demands,

Show me and explain – if that is possible –
 why you did not reveal to Sarah my mother
 the secret between you and the Lord,
 and why did you not take a lamb with us?

(verse 19)

Then six stanzas later he comes back to this theme:

If a miracle is about to be accomplished
 one at which angels and men will be amazed,
 what wrong did my aged mother do you,
 seeing that you did not tell her what you were going to do?

(verse 25)

A little further on he stresses that he has come with Abraham only because Sarah's compassion has entrusted him to the Lord, and he returns to the thought of her again near the end of his long dialogue with Abraham:

For three days now Sarah has been sitting
in grief, looking out for us;
offer up the sacrifice as you have been bidden:
why are you doing nothing, but are gazing at me?
(verse 33)

In the second Syriac verse homily (*Memra* II), by contrast, Isaac reminds his father:

Sarah was wanting to see me when I was bound like a lamb,
and she would have wept beside me with laments, and by her tears I
would have received comfort.
O my mother Sarah, I wish I could see you, and then be sacrificed!
(lines 68–70)

THE RETURN HOME

The third place where Sarah may be introduced is at the homecoming. Once again the biblical narrative is entirely silent on this point, and the majority of the Christian homilists show no interest in remedying this silence. It is only some Jewish texts belonging to our general period of the fourth to sixth centuries, and the two Syriac *Memre* that take up this challenge. Jewish interest in this episode is readily explainable, given the connection in time which was seen between it and the death of Sarah. In some sources Sammael (Satan) arrives at Sarah's door before father and son can get there, and he maliciously informs Sarah that her husband has sacrificed her only son – whereupon she expires from shock.¹⁹ In another account, in the Jewish homiletic collection known as *Pesikta de-Rab Kahana*, Sarah also dies from shock, but this time as a result of Isaac relating to her what had happened:

When Isaac got back to his mother, she asked him: 'My son, what did your father do to you?' He replied, 'My father took me and led me up mountains and down the hills below them until he brought me finally to the top of one mountain where he built an altar, set up a pile of wood, arranged the kindling, bound me upon the altar, and took the knife into his hand to slay me. Had not the Holy One said to him "Lay not your hand upon the lad", I would have been slain.' His mother then said: 'Alas for

you, son of a mother so hapless that if the Holy One had not said "Lay not your hand upon the lad", you would have been slain.' Scarcely had she finished speaking when her soul left her. (26:3)²⁰

A remarkably similar scenario appears in the Syriac *Memra* I, where Isaac replies to Sarah's questions about what had occurred as follows:

Why does your mind trouble you?

God indeed sent the lamb, and Abraham offered it to God in my place. He stretched out his hand to the knife, and it reached the very neck of your darling

and had there not been the voice saying 'Abraham, raise your hand from the child',

I would yesterday have been killed, and they would have been looking for my bones in the fire.

So come now, give glory to him who kept your only son alive for you. (lines 166–71)

In *Memra* I Sarah only faints from shock at what her son tells her. Eventually she recovers herself and gives Isaac a proper welcome home.

Memra II introduces a quite extraordinary new twist to the episode of the homecoming whereby Sarah's faith is tested a second time in a horrific way. The highly-charged passage deserves quoting at length:

Once he had arrived and reached home Abraham said to his son:

'O my son, please stay back for a little: I will go in and return to your mother,

and I will see how she receives me; I will spy out her mind and her thought.'

The old man returned and entered in peace: Sarah rose up to receive him, she brought him a bowl to wash his feet and she began to say as follows:

'Welcome, blessed old man, husband who has loved God;

welcome, O happy one, who has sacrificed my child on the pyre;

welcome, O slaughterer, who did not spare the body of my only child

...

May the soul of my only child be accepted, for he hearkened to the words of his mother.

If only I were an eagle, or had the speed of a turtle-dove,

so that I might go and behold that place where my only child, my beloved, was sacrificed,

that I might see the place of his ashes, and see the site of his binding,

and bring back a little of his blood to be comforted by its smell.

I had some of his hair to place somewhere inside my clothes, and when grief overcame me I placed it over my eyes.

I had some of his clothes, so that I might imagine him, putting them in front of my eyes,

and when suffering sorrow overcame me I gained relief through gazing upon them.

If only I could behold his pyre, and the place where his bones were burnt, and could bring a little of his ashes, and gaze on them always and be comforted.'

And as she stood, her heart mourning, her mind and thought intent, greatly upset with emotion, her mind dazed as she grieved,

the child suddenly returned, entering safe and sound. Sarah arose to receive him,

she embraced him and kissed him amid tears, and began to address him as follows:

'Welcome, my son, my beloved, welcome, child of my vows,
welcome, o corpse come to life . . . '

(lines 94–128)

The author of this remarkable verse homily has, through her or his highly imaginative treatment of the theme, successfully made Sarah – who never receives a single mention in the biblical account – the true heroine of the *Akedah*. Abraham's faith is indeed tested, but Sarah's is tested twice over, and each time she emerges from the ordeal with immense dignity. Although the person of Sarah is introduced into a number of much later literary treatments of this biblical episode,²¹ none of them, to my knowledge, depicts her with such boldness, insight and sympathy.

The primary concern of this essay has been simply to present some unusual perceptions of a prominent biblical figure, taken from a little-known area of early Jewish and Christian literature. Their interest lies in the sharp contrast we discover here between the essentially male-oriented portrayal of Sarah that is found in the Jewish and the early Greek Christian homiletic traditions and the much more sensitive handling of her character in the Syriac writers (and above all in second of the two verse homilies, *Memra* II). Do these unusual perceptions reflect a more affirmative attitude to women within the early Syriac Christian society? Certainly there are some indications that women may have played a more prominent role in church life in the earliest (but alas extremely obscure) period, and in some early Syriac literature we encounter an astonishing profusion of feminine imagery, but by the fifth century (from when the texts presented here probably date), the situation had changed, and women had become largely

marginalised in this society²² – which makes the treatment of Sarah in *Memra* II all the more remarkable.

NOTES

1. Auerbach (1953), p. 9.
2. For the Jewish interpretation of Genesis 22, Spiegel (1969) provides an excellent introduction. For early Christian authors writing in Greek and Latin, the standard work is Lerch (1950); for Syriac writers, besides the references given below, see Brock (1981).
3. A detailed list of early Greek and Syriac texts can be found in Brock (1986), pp. 66–7.
4. Some of the materials presented here can also be found in Brock (1974), written without knowledge of the two Syriac verse homilies, and in Brock (1984, 1986).
5. Tonneau (1955), Section XX.
6. Edition and English translation in *Orientalia Lovanensia Periodica* 12 (1981), pp. 225–60.
7. Ed. S. I. Mercati (1915), verses 78, 80.
8. *Patrologia Graeca* 85, cols 107–8.
9. I borrow this delightful translation from J. Goldin's English translation of Spiegel (1969), pp. 48–9 (originally written in Hebrew).
10. Verses 5–8. Edition and German translation by B. Kirschner (1906), pp. 44–69.
11. This is *Memra* (= Verse Homily) I, edited and translated in Brock (1986).
12. The fleece is a feature confined to the two Syriac *memre*: perhaps the motif represents a distant reflection of the Greek legend of the Golden Fleece.
13. Edition and English translation by Van Rompay (1978), pp. 274–303.
14. For Ephrem's sympathy for Biblical women, see Brock (1985), pp. 140–4.
15. This is *Memra* II, edited and translated in Brock (1986).
16. For the technical evidence (which concerns a particular grammatical feature which, in its unvocalised form in the unique manuscript, is capable of being taken as either the normal feminine, or a rather rare masculine form), see Brock (1986), pp. 98–9.
17. It is likely that Romanos (who was from Homs in Syria) was bilingual in Greek and Syriac, and there are some indications that he may actually have known *Memra* II: see Brock (1986), pp. 91–6, and (1989).
18. The poet deliberately has Sarah anticipate Mary's words in Luke 1:48.
19. *Genesis Rabbah* 56:11; English translation in Freeman and Simon (1951), Vol. I.
20. English translation in Braude and Kapstein (1975).
21. E.g. in some Renaissance plays on the biblical theme (some references are given in Brock (1986), p. 99). For the role of Sarah in the Cretan play of that period entitled 'The Sacrifice of Abraham', see Alexiou (1989).
22. See Harvey (1983).