

## נתן נפשו: *Paradigms of Self-Sacrifice in Early Judaism and Christianity*

ELAINE A. PHILLIPS  
GORDON COLLEGE

*Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael presents Moses and David as key figures whose willingness to sacrifice themselves on behalf of Torah, Israel, the Temple, and justice was exemplary. Attaching their names to these symbols ensured memory and continuity in the face of difficult circumstances. The Sages further suggested that being faithful meant all Israelites' willingness likewise to give themselves. This may have been a subtle response to the Christian communities who were appropriating the symbols of Torah associated with the redemptive process.*

*Key words:* aqedah, sacrifice, Moses, David, Passover, Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael, midrash

### INTRODUCTION

The phrase נתן נפשו literally means "he gave himself." It may connote anything from "he gave his very life (נפש)" to "he denied himself" or "he devoted himself." The expression also appears in the plural (נתנו or נתנים נפשם). A paradigm is a pattern and, in this case, a pattern of exemplary behavior, one which was set by noteworthy individuals who were recognized by Sages of Late Antiquity as having been distinctly self-sacrificing.<sup>1</sup> These exemplars, drawn from the

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1. Susan Niditch has suggested that, in a period of "broken myths" for the people of Israel and apparent absence of communication with God, the willingness to give one's life was a "means of effecting mediation between God and Israel" ("Merits, Martyrs, and 'Your Life as Booty': An Exegesis of *Mekilta Pisha* 1," *JSJ* 13 [1982] 166). See also Henry Fischel, "Martyr and Prophet," *JQR* 37 (1946-47) 371-82, on the apparent relationship of divine communication with those who voluntarily gave themselves.

biblical narratives, appear in selected texts from Early Judaism.<sup>2</sup> The pattern also is at the heart of Christian theology. The presentations of these paradigmatic figures from both communities' texts are illustrative of a paradox of biblical interpretation. Continuity was established with the canonical text and thus there are profound similarities between the world views of the communities. At the same time, the canonical text was re-presented for the contemporary circumstances of each community, and the divergences are radical.<sup>3</sup>

### TEXTS, THEMES, AND COMMUNITIES

Foundational to the presentations of both communities were the persons, events, and institutions in the Hebrew Bible. Because this was true and because the church had claimed the history and symbols of that text as its own and read them christologically, how to interpret the key figures and events described particularly in Genesis and Exodus was an ongoing bone of contention between the two groups.<sup>4</sup> These were the narratives that described various aspects of Israel's becoming the people of God. The texts from each community demonstrate that they are infused with the world view of the Torah and its timeless significance, but they read it through different lenses.

*Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, an early rabbinic commentary on Exodus, presents significant paradigms of self-sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the recurrence and development of this theme of self-sacrifice throughout

2. It is necessary to state that rabbinic thought, always complex and rich, does not reflect a monolithic attitude about the self-sacrifice of martyrdom. In fact, because of the extreme value of human life, there are outcries against passivity in the talmudic teachings. Just as they are noted for their self-sacrifice, Abraham and Moses are recognized by the rabbis as paradigmatic in the moral courage that prompts them to contend with God on the basis of His justice. See *b. Ber.* 32a; and other texts cited in Abraham E. Millgram, *Great Jewish Ideas* (B'nai B'rith Department of Jewish Education, 1964) 201-2.

3. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 23-24.

4. It is reflected in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* 29, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1957) 208-9. See also Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight—The Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991) 14-15; and Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (2d ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1952) 2.136.

5. This text was likely compiled in the second half of the third century CE. See Herman L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich: Beck, 1982); Eng. trans.: M. Bockmuehl, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992 [T. & T. Clark, 1991]) 273, 278-79. Citations from the *Mekilta* will be according to the volume and page numbers in the edition of Jacob Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America,

the text text of the *Mekilta* is one possible reason for suggesting that this text was a composition that reflects intentionality on the part of its authorship.<sup>6</sup> The midrash explores the most salient of the exodus themes, revelation, redemption, and relationship. A brief section from *Sipre Deuteronomy* (Finkelstein 344),<sup>7</sup> the commentary on Deuteronomy, reiterates the basic theme that Israel's major figures were prepared to give themselves, and there is a passing reference in *Sipre Numbers* in conjunction with the action of Pinhas (Num 25:13).<sup>8</sup>

Because the *Mekilta* at one point mentions briefly the significance of the *aqedah* in conjunction with the passover sacrifice, the Abraham and Isaac narrative is also drawn into the network of texts regarding the exodus. The midrash on Genesis, *Genesis Rabba*,<sup>9</sup> explores the compelling drama that unfolded as Abraham resolutely obeyed the command of his God to take his only son, his beloved son, Isaac, preparing to offer him as a burnt offering. In this case, it was not a matter of one individual who is described as willing to "give his life" but two who engaged in the mind-boggling preparation for literal human sacrifice. It is this scenario and its implications that suggest complex linkages, subsequently assumed in many sources ancient and modern, between the role of a prophet who sustains communication with the

1935). See also H. S. Horowitz and I. A. Rabin (eds.), *Mekilta d'Rabbi Ismael* (Frankfurt am Main: Bamberg, 1928-31; repr. Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1960).

6. That *Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael* was an intentional composition is not by any means a widely held opinion. Representative of a considerable portion of scholarship, J. N. Epstein (*Mevo 'ot leSifrut HaTannaim* [Jerusalem, 1957] 565, 572-84) viewed it as a collection of independent segments. More recently, Jacob Neusner has characterized it as solely an "encyclopedia" serving as a repository for the conventions of the faith. As such it was a compilation with no distinct viewpoint (*Mekhilta according to Rabbi Ishmael: An Introduction to Judaism's First Scriptural Encyclopedia* [Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1988] 118, 133-43). For both sociohistorical and literary reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper, I suggest that there may have been deliberation behind the selection and shaping of the material such that it addressed in a subtle manner the claims made by the Christian community on the biblical text.

7. According to Strack and Stemberger (*Introduction*, 272-73), the likely final redaction of this text that includes both a central halakhic section as well as an aggadic frame, took place in the late third century CE. Citations from the *Sipre Deuteronomy* will be according to the edition by L. Finkelstein, *Siphre ad Deuteronomium H. S. Horovitzii schedis usis cum variis lectionibus et adnotationibus* (Berlin: Society for Judaic Culture in Germany, 1939; repr. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1969).

8. This text was also likely compiled sometime after the middle of the third century CE (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 267). Citations from *Sipre Numbers* will be according to the edition by H. S. Horowitz, *Sifre debe Rav: Sifre al Sepher BaMidbar ve Sifre Zutta* (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1966).

9. *Genesis Rabba* is likely a fifth-century composition (Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 279). Citation from *Genesis Rabba* will be according to the edition by J. Theodor and C. Albeck, *Bereshit Rabba* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965).

divine, willingness to give one's life, merit of the fathers (זכות אבות), and atonement.<sup>10</sup> The question arises as to the origin and contexts of these values in rabbinic texts.<sup>11</sup>

The perspectives of the Christian communities presented below are drawn primarily from the Gospels, parallel passages in the Synoptics as well as John, and several of the letters of St. Paul, with occasional reference to the early Church Fathers. Although there is debate in academic circles over the dates of the NT texts, it is not unreasonable to address them as first-century compositions, each designed to meet specific needs of given Christian communities.

### KEY THEMES OF EXODUS

The book of Exodus reports unquestionably the most dramatic events in all of the Hebrew Bible. This is, in Michael Goldberg's terms, the "master story" for the Jews; it was also foundational to the Christians' own "master story" of the passion of Christ.<sup>12</sup> In Exodus, we have the birth, preservation, and call of Moses; his nearly jeopardizing his mission several times over; the contest at ever-higher stakes between the God of Israel and Pharaoh with his gods, culminating in the sacrifice of the Passover lamb; the blood on the lintels and doorposts to protect God's firstborn, Israel, against the destroyer; the exit in haste; and the crossing of the Sea of Reeds in triumph while the hosts of Pharaoh swirled to the depths. The song of victory is followed by yet more harrowing episodes—shortages of water and food, attack from enemies, and finally the very descent of the Presence of God Himself on Mt. Sinai. This last is the transition to the instructions regarding the tabernacle and priesthood that compose the rest of the book, with the brief exception of chaps. 32-34, the travesty of the golden calf.

The starting point for the *Mekilta* is Exodus 12, the instructions for the Passover, where the people of Israel received communication

10. See Niditch, "Merits, Martyrs," 166-68; Fischel, "Martyr and Prophet," 371-82; Geza Vermes, "The Binding of Isaac and the Sacrifice of Jesus," in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 193-227; and Baron, *A Social and Religious History*, 138. Among the early midrashic passages that make the connection are *Sipre Numbers* (Horowitz 131) and *Sipre Deuteronomy* (Finkelstein 32).

11. Vermes (*Scripture and Tradition*) suggested that the basic conceptual linkage between Isaac and an atoning, meritorious work was already present in nascent form in pre-Christian literary formulations. Philip R. Davies and Bruce D. Chilton ("The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History," *CBQ* 40 [1978] 514-46) countered this proposal, claiming that there was not a pre-Christian Jewish presentation of the *aqedah* as atoning. Their work has been criticized in turn by Alan F. Segal, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Judaism and Christianity," in *The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity* (BJS 127; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987) 109-30.

12. Goldberg, *Jews and Christians*, 14-15.

directly from God. Thus, the Sages focused initially on revelation and then on redemption, two concepts of tremendous significance for communities claiming a relationship with the God of Israel and each claiming Torah as its own. The text of the *Mekilta* then presents continuous commentary on the events in Exodus through the giving of Torah at Sinai. It closes with the commands to keep the Sabbath. It does not deal with the Tabernacle instructions, perhaps a tacit response to the absence of the Temple. What does appear at key points throughout the text are allusions to paradigmatic figures who expressed their willingness to sacrifice themselves for Israel and the major institutions symbolizing their relationship with their God.

#### RE-PRESENTING BIBLICAL PARADIGMS OF SELF-SACRIFICE

The introduction to the midrash<sup>13</sup> indicates a concern about conditions for divine revelation. These have to do with both persons and places. In particular, prophets who received revelation outside the land were of interest because the Passover instructions took place outside Eretz Israel, in the land of Egypt (Exod 12:1). It was clear to the Sages that there must have been accompanying conditions, and they suggested that these included זְכוּת אֲבוֹת and the presence of water. Even so, the prospect that the Shekhinah would be revealed outside the Land continued to engage them. The case of Jonah was cited; he fled to Tarshish "from the presence of the Lord" (Jonah 1:3).

After demonstrating from multiple biblical texts that הַמְקוֹם is, however, indeed omnipresent, the Sages declared that Jonah chose to leave and not fulfill his prophetic office because the Gentiles were close to repentance and their doing so would bring condemnation on Israel. Thus, he fled. Almost as an aside, Rabbi Nathan declared that Jonah took his sea voyage only in order to drown himself (לֵאמֹר אֶת נַפְשִׁי) in the sea, saying: "Pick me up and cast me into the sea" (Jonah 1:12). There is no further explicit word of explanation from the midrash but an important connection was made. Here was a prophet willing to perish. Why? Perhaps there are two possibilities. First, to preserve Israel and allow them to escape the condemnation that the divine Presence would have meant at that time, he would die—in their place. Second, perhaps his willingness to die was so that the sailors on the ship, foreigners, might live. The midrash does not articulate either one or the other. Instead, it presses the lesson further.

And, just like Jonah, "the אֲבוֹת (the patriarchs) and the prophets offered their lives for the sake of Israel. Concerning Moses what does it say (Exod 32:32)? 'But now, if you will forgive their sin. . . . But if not, erase me from your book which you have written,' (*Mek.* [ed.

13. This is *Pisqa* 1 in the Lauterbach edition.

Lauterbach] 1.10). Even the grammar suggests that Moses may have been uncertain about the extent of God's mercy; there is no completion to the preceding condition.<sup>14</sup> There is no further elucidation of this text in the midrash. Did Moses intend this as a substitute? Did he want to be erased in their place or along with them? Why this dramatic declaration? Perhaps it is important to note that he said this directly after the horrifying debacle of the golden calf, which followed so soon after the astounding revelation of the divine Presence at Sinai. This was an incident that the Church used polemically, declaring that God had cause to reject Israel.<sup>15</sup> In that context the Sages pointed out that Moses, who had been on the mountain in the very presence of God receiving the Torah inscribed on tablets, was willing to give his life—perhaps with Israel, or perhaps to preserve Israel and preserve revelation (Torah) for Israel.

The midrash continues with another biblical text demonstrating that Moses was willing literally to give his life. The text was Num 11:5, and the incident had to do with quail. "And if it is thus that you are going to deal with me, please just kill me, if I have found favor in your sight, and don't let me see my distress." This time, the people had become too much for Moses to bear. In fact, the sign that he had found favor with God would be a merciful death at the hand of God and his death would be because of Israel! At the same time, revelation was again a significant feature in the wider story: the seventy elders would soon be given the Spirit and they would prophesy. Thus the rabbis spotlighted Moses, in contexts of communication of the divine Word, declaring his willingness to give up his life for, or along with, *or* to escape the rigors of leading Israel.

Recall the initial statement: "Patriarchs and prophets gave their lives. . . ." Within the Exodus context, Moses was the expected prophetic figure. Who would be the exemplary patriarch? Abraham? Surprisingly, no. He would appear later. Instead, it was David, the king.<sup>16</sup>

Why not Abraham? Why not Isaac? Exegetically, it is likely because there is no biblical text in which either explicitly articulated his willingness to give his life. As will become evident below, however, the parallel that had been drawn between Abraham and Isaac, God and Jesus was noted by the rabbinic community.

14. On the suppression of the entire clause of the condition, see GKC, §§159dd, 167a.

15. L. Smolar and M. Aberbach, "The Golden Calf Episode in Postbiblical Literature," *HUCA* 39 (1968) 91-116.

16. While this sounds surprising, note Acts 2:29-30, which alludes to David as both patriarch and prophet. See later rabbinic texts cited in Lauterbach, *Mekilta*, 1.10 n. 15, that refer to David as the fourth patriarch.

"What did [David] say? 'And David said to God: It is I who have sinned and I who committed iniquity but these, the flock, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me' (2 Sam 24:17). And thus in every place you will find that the patriarchs and the prophets gave their lives for Israel" (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 1.10-11). To be sure, that biblical passage is also much more complicated than this citation suggests. In fact, the first verse of that very chapter indicates that God was angry with Israel (not such an innocent flock after all, although we are not told precisely the cause) and God incited David to number the people, thus incurring *God's* wrath. This is a thorny issue.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the point for the rabbis was that David as king identified with the people's sin, took it upon himself, and asked that the punishment be his.

Moses and David, introduced at the very outset of the *Mekilta* in the context of God's revelation to Israel and at the threshold of redemption, were presented as stating their willingness to give their lives for Israel. Moses was in the spotlight. The cameo appearance of David seems to be an adumbration of his more extensive role later in the *Mekilta*, one that will focus on his devotion to the Temple. In fact, the scenario behind this biblical text, occurring near the end of David's reign when the plague was unleashed against the people (2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21), perfectly set the stage for the selection of the Temple site. In the meantime, there is the possibility that this brief appearance of David reflects a more extensive dialogue between these teachers and those of the Christian communities, for whom the Son of David was the redemptive sacrifice.

The issue surfaces again in *Pisqa* 7 and becomes increasingly complex. Although the expression נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ is not used, the midrash mentions Abraham and Isaac and makes a connection between the blood of the passover sacrifice and the *aqedah*. "[What does Exodus 12:13 mean?] 'And when I see the blood. . .'. [It means] I see the blood of the binding of Isaac as it is said: 'And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-Yireh [the Lord will see]'" (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 1.57).<sup>18</sup> Not once but twice in this context, the blood of Isaac is noted as the blood that was seen and was meritorious on behalf of Israel. What is the second instance? None other than the incident with David and the plague. "Further it says: 'And when he was about to destroy, the Lord *saw* and he relented. . . .' (1 Chr 21:15). What did He see? He saw the blood of the binding of Isaac as it is said: 'God will

17. In fact, 1 Chr 21:1 introduces the figure of Satan to remove God from the appearance of evil intent.

18. While English translations customarily render this "the Lord will provide," the Hebrew root is נָתַן and, as it is used throughout this chapter, the visual aspect is significant. It is seen—and therefore provided.

see for Himself the Lamb' (Gen 22:8)" (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 1.57). This latter text is Abraham's response to the question of Isaac about the whereabouts of "the lamb" (לֶמְבֶלֶת) and it serves as yet another verbal link to the Passover sacrifice for which the lamb was the animal of choice.

How could the Sages make such a bold claim about the blood of Isaac? In Genesis, Abraham was specifically prevented from harming Isaac. Yet, contrary to the explicit biblical record, there was a persisting legend from at least the second century that the blood of Isaac was shed,<sup>19</sup> that his ashes were on the altar. Why? One suggestion: perhaps in the second century, the many instances of true martyrdom compelled the exegetes to suggest that the patriarch Abraham's test was as severe as those undergone in their own day. He and Isaac were not spared this horror after all. And, of course, that is why the legend persisted; the children of Abraham were constantly hounded and persecuted; theirs has been the blood of martyrs.<sup>20</sup>

Another interpretation (דבר אחר): not only would the rabbis address their own communities' stresses; they may also have responded obliquely to the adjacent Christian communities as the latter preached the message of the sacrifice of Jesus who was, in their understanding, the Son of God. Gen 22:2, "take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac" was reflected back in the Gospel of John (3:16) "[God] gave His son, the only begotten one." It also may resonate behind Rom 8:32a, "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all."<sup>21</sup> The early Church continued to emphasize the theme.<sup>22</sup>

19. This appears already in J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamud (eds.) *Mekilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* (Jerusalem: Hillel, 1955): "Rabbi Yehoshua says: 'The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Moses, I am obligated to pay the reward of Isaac, son of Abraham, from whom a fourth of blood came out on the altar'" (Epstein and Melamud 4).

20. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice—The Akedah* (New York: Schocken, 1967) 17-27

21. In his introduction to the English translation of Spiegel's *Last Trial*, Judah Goldin suggested that perhaps the event on Golgotha prompted the rabbis to indicate that something more had happened to Isaac as well. Isaac's *aqedah* through the centuries of interpretation came to represent *martyrs*, not survivors. See also Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). Vermes (*Scripture and Tradition*, 193-227) explored the potential connection between Isaac and the Passover lamb, suggesting that the meritorious nature of the *aqedah* and its linkage with the blood of the Passover were already part of the understanding of atonement in first-century Judaism.

22. See the patristic sources cited in Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 84-85. Among the earliest texts are the *Epistle of Barnabas* 7:3 and Tertullian's *Answer to the Jews* 10, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3; *Latin Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950) 3.141, 165.

Not only was Abraham willing to sacrifice Isaac; Isaac himself was a willing party to the proceedings. Their unity of purpose is the subject of a poignant comment in *Genesis Rabba*. Responding to "and the two of them went together" (Gen 22:6, 8), the midrash reads: "This one to bind and that one to be bound; this one to slaughter and that one to be slaughtered" (*Gen. Rab. 56:3–4*). Why was Isaac bound? Later rabbinic texts indicate that he was fearful he might twitch and inadvertently cause the knife to wound him, thus defiling the sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the texts of the Gospels record Jesus' knowledge of the impending sacrifice and His willingness to undergo it. In addition, he viewed it as purposeful: "Whoever wants to become great must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28; see also Mark 10:45).

Wherever it originated, the dialogue between church and synagogue may have gone even further regarding the scene with Abraham and Isaac. John the Evangelist, concerned throughout his Gospel with the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, took pains to establish that the death of the Son of God was symbolically the death of this Passover Lamb.<sup>24</sup> This connection was not lost; the apostolic writings of Paul and Peter continued it,<sup>25</sup> as did the writings of the Church Fathers.<sup>26</sup> The Sages also clearly established the linkage, based on corresponding uses of the word "to see," between the blood of the Passover lamb and that of the *aqedah*. God *saw* both and, for the rabbis, that anthropomorphism was sufficient to draw these two symbols together in a profound way. Both were meritorious; both effected deliverance from destruction. Perhaps because the Passover and the near sacrifice of

23. *Tanḥuma VaYera 23; Pesiq. de Rabbi Eliezer 31; Pesiq. R. 40, 170.*

24. John 1:29 ("behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world") may allude to the Passover lamb, although Vermes identified five possible referents among the institutions of Israelite religion (*Scripture and Tradition*, 224). The description of the crucifixion at the time of Passover in John 19 and the connection established with the Passover lamb (19:36, "not one of his bones will be broken") are clear indicators.

25. See 1 Cor 5:7 ("for Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed") and 1 Pet 1:19 ("[you were redeemed] . . . with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect").

26. Justin Martyr made the connection and stated that the lamb prefigured the cross in that it was roasted on spits in the shape of a cross (*Dialogue with Trypho* 40, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1.213-14). Note also Tertullian *Against Marcion* 5.7:9-10, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3.443. For presentations and analyses of the early Church literature, see S. G. Wilson, "Passover, Easter, and Anti-Judaism: Melito of Sardis and Others," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us* (ed. E. S. Frerichs and J. Neusner; Scholars Press Studies in the Humanities; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985) 337-55; and R. S. MacLennan, *Early Christian Texts on Jews and Judaism* (BJS 194; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) chap. 3.

Isaac, both rich with meaning, had been adopted by the Church as symbolic of the voluntary passion of Christ, the rabbis reclaimed them by the very process of exegesis of Torah. This was, after all, their master story.<sup>27</sup>

More subtle are two allusions to resurrection in *Gen. Rab.* 56:2 in the context of discussing Isaac and the *aqedah*.<sup>28</sup> Why did this sense of death and resurrection for Isaac persist? The answer may be a complex combination of the following factors. In every historical context of martyrdom and persecution, the extant written records express more extensively the hope of a resurrection.<sup>29</sup> In addition, this may have been a response to the force of the apostolic preaching and writing the primary focus of which was the resurrection. On the wider fringes of the culture that the Sages encountered, there may have been a pagan myth about the dying and rising of the gods that they felt constrained to address.<sup>30</sup>

The last snatch of dialogue may have been potentially the most troubling. At some point, a compelling issue for the Sages was Abraham's willing sacrifice of himself. How and why did they come to this understanding of Abraham? In response to Gen 22:16, "you have not withheld your son, your only one," we read in *Gen. Rab.* 56:7, "It is as if I [God] had said to you [Abraham] that you must offer to me yourself and you did not delay. . . ." Later texts have provided a further

27. Davies and Chilton ("The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History," 538–40) claim that the rabbinic material of the second century reflects a new development in the way Judaism treated this theme. Recalling the *aqedah* at Passover was a way to counter the passion claims of Christ. The details of the Abraham and Isaac narrative, carrying the wood, the blood, Isaac's youth, weeping and crying in agony, were shown to match what happened to Jesus.

28. The first occurs in a typical rabbinic list of passages that share the theme of something occurring on the third day *as did the test of Abraham*. One of them is Hos 6:2 ("He will revive us after two days; on the third day He will make us rise and we will live in His presence"), interpreted as resurrection. The second appears in a similar list, this one built around instances where worship is demonstrated to be meritorious. Why was this an issue? Because the text of Genesis says: "The young man and I will go there, we will worship and we will return to you." The midrash indicates that Abraham returned in peace only on account of the *זְבוּחַ* of worship. Likewise, Israel was not redeemed, Torah was not given, Hannah was not visited, the exiles will not be re-gathered, the Temple was not built, and the dead will not be raised except for the merit of worship (*Gen. Rab.* 56:2). In subsequent rabbinic texts, this theme grows increasingly emphatic (Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 28-57).

29. See brief comments of Alan Segal, "Outlining the Question: From Christ to God," in *Jews and Christians Speak of Jesus* (ed. Arthur Zannoni; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 131.

30. See Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 83-86, as well as Paula Fredriksen, "From Jesus to Christ: The Contribution of the Apostle Paul," in *Jews and Christians Speak of Jesus*, 81-83.

commentary: "Your only one [ך'יך'] = your own life [נפשו]." <sup>31</sup> In sum, both Isaac *and* Abraham were prepared to sacrifice themselves. How old was the tradition and why would it develop? Was it another part in an ongoing dialogue of which only fragments remain? From the Church was coming the dramatic claim that, in the Person of Jesus, God indeed did give himself. Paul claimed a fundamental unity of person and purpose between God and Jesus (Phil 2:6; Col 2:9). Addressing the role of Jesus and the love of God, he said: "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:7-8). In connection with this last point, it is significant that for the rabbis, David was a paradigm of one who identified with the people's sins and took them upon himself. The point of view from each tradition was that the self-sacrifice was truly necessary because the recipients were unworthy.

These lines in the potential dialogue are complex, often difficult to untangle, and they weave together many additional issues. The identity of God's firstborn, Israel, and the payment of redemption are part of a much larger drama. They move beyond the specific indications of נפשו נתן. To that topic it is necessary to return.

The third tractate of the *Mekilta*, entitled *Širta* (the Song), responds to the Song in Exodus 15, celebrating victory and redemption at the Sea of Reeds. In the first chapter, we read: "Then Moses and the children of Israel sang 'this song'. Which song? Aren't there ten songs?" (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.2). And the Sages began to enumerate ten songs noted in scripture most of which celebrate joyous occasions in the history of Israel. <sup>32</sup> At the eighth, however, there was a question.

"The eighth (song) which Solomon recited, as it is said: 'A psalm, a song for the dedication of the house of David' (Ps 20:1). <sup>33</sup> But did David build it? Was it not Solomon who built it? [citation of 1 Kgs 6:14] . . . And so why does Scripture say 'a psalm a song for the dedication of the house of David'? Because David gave himself (נתן נפשו)

31. Cited in *Genesis Rabba* (Theodor and Albeck, 603; see also p. 133). The correspondence is based on several parallel uses of the terms in Psalms.

32. On the complications in this rabbinic list, see Goldin, "This Song," in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem, 1974) 2.539-54; and J. Kugel, "Is There but One Song?" *Bib* 63 (1982) 329-50. The latter assessed the various versions of the list in conjunction with lists of songs from Christian liturgy. He studied particularly the structure and content of Origen's list of songs because of Origen's knowledge of and access to Jewish midrash. Kugel discovered that Origen's list consisted of seven items and presented the high points in Israel's history, starting with the Exodus and culminating with the ultimate in symbolic relationships, the Song of Songs.

33. The Sages chose to read לך'ך' in the psalm title as referring to the house rather than the *mizmor*.

for it to build it, it was called by his name" (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.2-3). And to drive the point home, the midrash includes a long segment of Ps 132:1-6, which notes the affliction of David and his vow to God that he would not come to his own tent until he found a place for the Lord. "And what (else) does it say? 'Now see to your own house, David' (1 Kgs 12:16).<sup>34</sup> Thus, because David gave himself for it, it was called by his name" (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.3).

Because the psalm title could be read as attributing the Temple to David, his devotion to its construction is highlighted, perhaps exaggerated. Although he did not literally give up his life to build the Temple, his declaration of self-denial for the sake of the fundamental symbol of God's Presence had, as the Sages construed it, a stunning reward. His name was joined with the Temple, a conjunction ensuring memory and therefore continuity, of tremendous significance in the aftermath of the traumatic destruction of the Second Temple.

The text continues.

And thus you find that everything for which a person נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ is called by his name. Moses gave himself for three things and they were called by his name. He gave himself for the Torah and it was called by his name as it is said: "Remember the Torah of Moses, My servant" (Mal 3:22). Now was it not the Torah of God as it is said: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul" (Ps 19:8)? So why does Scripture call it the Torah of Moses, My servant? Because he gave himself for it, it was called by his name. But where have we found that he gave himself for the Torah? It is said: "He was there with the Lord [forty days and forty nights] . . ." (Exod 34:28) and "Then I stayed on the mountain forty days . . ." (Deut 9:9). Thus because he gave himself for the Torah, it was called by his name. (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.3-4)

The midrash has an elaborate structure. Every part of the claim is supported with a text, and there are *two textual witnesses* to the fact that Moses gave himself for Torah!

He gave himself for Israel and it was called by his name as it is said: "Go, descend, because your people have become corrupt . . ." (Exod 32:7). But were they not the people of the Lord? [Two proof texts, Deut 9:29 and Ezek 36:20, are brought at this point.] Why does Scripture say: "Go, descend, because your people have become corrupt . . ."? Because he gave himself for Israel, they were called by his name. And from where have we found that he gave himself for Israel? It is said: "In those days, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his brothers,

34. The latter passage is in the context of the rebellion of the Northern tribes under Jeroboam son of Nebat after the death of Solomon. They expressed their disaffection with the house of David as represented by his descendant, Rehoboam. At the same time, their rejection was read by the rabbis as rejection of the Temple, David's "house," in light of the subsequent establishment of places of worship in the Northern Kingdom.

and he saw their burdens . . ." (Exod 2:11) and it is written: ". . . and he turned this way and that [and when he saw no one, he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand]" (Exod 2:12). Thus, because he gave himself for Israel, it was called by his name. (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.4)

"He gave himself for justice and the judges were called by his name. . . ." And the whole process of proof was again engaged with the same rhetorical features. Very possibly, this third item was included for a typically rabbinic reason. The next song in the scheme of ten is that of Jehoshaphat. His name means "the Lord judges," and it was an intricate exegetical maneuver to link the *נְתַן נִפְשׁוֹ* tangent back to the text with a play on justice and judges.

It is no accident that the spotlight would rest on David and Moses, key covenant figures whose names were attached to equally important symbols; the Temple, Torah, people, and justice. Even though the Second Temple was gone, the three things for which Moses, the more significant figure, had given himself were said to remain.<sup>35</sup> In fact, the very process of midrash in all its intertextual intricacies was a "reclaiming" of the Torah that the Church had adopted for its own history and use. While the Church christologized the text, the comprehensive facility of the rabbis with Torah was a clear and compelling sign that it indeed was "theirs."

*Širta* begins and ends with the idea of naming in conjunction with giving oneself. Both the composition of a song and intentional naming served as memory devices. In response to the close of the song in Exodus 15, we are told that Miriam, the sister of Aaron, taught the song to the women. Now wait, said the rabbis, "was she not also the sister of Moses? Why call her the sister of Aaron? Because Aaron gave himself for his sister, she was called by his name" (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.82). No proof text is adduced here, but we might guess that the Sages had in mind the incident in Numbers 12 where Aaron interceded for Miriam after she became leprous as a punishment for their having challenged the authority of Moses.<sup>36</sup>

And likewise you say, "Simeon and Levi, the brothers of Dinah . . ." (Gen 34:25). But was she not the sister of all the tribes? Why does Scripture say the brothers of Dinah? Because they gave themselves for their sister, she was called their sister by their names.<sup>37</sup> Likewise you say:

35. This pericope recurs multiple times in later midrashim, indicating its perceived importance. See *Mid. Tanna'im Shoptim*, *Exod. Rab.* 30:4, *Num. Rab.* 12:10, *Tanhuma* on Exod 15:1, *Pesiq.* R. 5:14.

36. It is worth noting that the midrash on Numbers (*Sipre Numbers* 105:1) suggests that Aaron too was stricken with leprosy, but it was only momentary. The parallel in *Sipre Zutta* on Num 12:9 is even more direct in this regard.

37. The vengeance of Simeon and Levi was not viewed positively in the rest of the biblical text. Nevertheless, the rabbis saw in it an instance of risk-taking and naming,

"Concerning Cozbi, the daughter of the prince of Midian, their sister . . ." (Num 25:18). And was she their sister? Was she not the head (זָרָה) of the people as it is said: "s/he (זָרָה) was head of the people, the clan (בֵּית אֲסִי) in Midian" (Num 25:15).<sup>38</sup> Why does Scripture call her their sister? Because she gave herself for the people, the people were called by her name. (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.82)

This midrash is a syntactical stretch but again indicative of the facility of the rabbis with the biblical text. What did they need? A woman's name related to someone else in the context of self-sacrifice. Cozbi was the name of a Midianite woman who was speared to death as a result of her having enticed the Israelites into sin at Baal Peor. She clearly gave her life on behalf of Midian, the people who were so terrified of the advancing Israelites that they hired Balaam to come and curse them!<sup>39</sup>

A subtle switch has occurred in this text. Naming, a significant issue in memory, has now been associated not only with the major figures in the text such as Moses and David but also includes marginal sorts as well, notably women, one of whom was a foreigner. This may be an important subtext for the fairly explicit application that is yet to come.

The most telling use of נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ in the *Mekilta* appears in *Bahodeš* 6, in response to God's declaration in Exod 20:5-6 that He is "a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments."

"Of them that love me"—this is Abraham our father and those like him.  
 "Of those who keep my commandments"—these are the prophets and the elders. Rabbi Nathan says: "Of those who love me and keep my commandments"—these are those who are dwelling in the land of Israel and giving their lives (נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ)—present tense) for the com-

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this time on behalf of a woman, all of which fit the exegetical need. Note the change of syntax in this second exegesis. Even though the grammatical position of the woman's name was switched, in both cases it was the woman who prompted the self-sacrificing act on the part of the men, and they were commended for it!

38. The rendition of the midrash necessitates the omission of "daughter of Zur" in v. 15.

39. In *Sipre Numbers* 131, we find the "other side" of this narrative and it also highlights the theme of self-sacrifice even though it does not use the expression נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ. Commenting on Num 25:13 and the role of Pinhas "because he was jealous for his God," the Sages cited Isa 53:12: "because he extended himself (נָפַשׁ) to death, he shall divide the plunder." A further explicit connection is made between this evident self-sacrifice, atonement, and resurrection. Num 25:13 says: "And he atoned for the children of Israel" to which the midrash responds: "Up to this point he did not move but he was standing and providing atonement until the dead were made alive."

mandments. Why are you led out to be killed? Because I circumcised my son, Israel. Why are you led out to be burned? Because I read Torah. Why are you led out to be crucified? Because I ate the unleavened bread. Why have you taken 100 lashes? Because I took the Lulav. And it says: "[These are wounds] which I received in the house of my friends" (Zech 13:6). These wounds caused me to be beloved by my Father in heaven. (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 2.247)

Joining Moses, David, and Abraham are the Sages' own brave contemporaries, named as beloved of God, those who in the face of the horrors of the destruction in the second century were giving their lives to keep the commandments. The punishable offenses were circumcision, study of Torah, and observance of the festivals. It is worth noting that the punishment matched with Passover in this vignette was crucifixion. The cross was the contemporary instrument of humiliation, torture, and death. In Christian texts, the image of the cross was understandably a powerful one, initially because of the passion<sup>40</sup> and subsequently because followers of Christ were exhorted to have the same attitude of self-denial. Each of the Synoptic Gospels records the words of Jesus to the effect that those who would follow Him must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Him, for those who wanted to save their lives would lose them but those who lost their lives for His sake would find life (Matt 16:24-25; parallels in Mark 8:34-35 and Luke 9:23-24). Just as significantly, the Sages used this figure. A brief comment in *Gen. Rab.* 56:3 on Gen 22:6 ("And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and he placed it on Isaac his son") reads as follows: "like one who puts his cross on his shoulder." The parallel is striking. The paradigmatic figure for the rabbis was again Isaac, carrying the wood and bound by Abraham as the potential sacrifice. Those who were descendants of Abraham followed his pattern as they gave their lives to keep the commandments. Obedience was literally self-sacrifice.

The phrase **נתנו נפשם** appears once more near the end of the text of the *Mekilta* (*Šabta* 1). The context is keeping the Sabbath, the sign of the Sinai covenant. The midrash closes with commentary on the injunctions regarding the Sabbath and the unique relationship between God and Israel that this observance marks.

40. The early Church Fathers searched the Hebrew Bible for events and objects that prefigured the passion of Christ on the cross. Tertullian gathered the prominent ones in his *Answer to the Jews* 10 and 13 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3.164-67, 169-70). Justin Martyr cited the rod of Moses and also connected the tree of life with the crucifixion (*Dialogue with Trypho* 86, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1.242). The most frequently cited event was Moses' outstretched hands in the war with the Amalekites. *The Epistle of Barnabas* 12 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1.144-45) indicates that Moses made "a figure of the cross, and of Him about to suffer thereon."

"Between Me and the children of Israel"; not between me and the nations of the world. "It is a sign forever"; this tells that the sabbath will never cease from Israel. Thus you find that everything for which Israel has given its life has been preserved in their possession but everything for which they did not give their lives was not preserved in their possession. Thus, the sabbath, circumcision, study of Torah, and immersion, for which Israel gave themselves, were preserved in their possession. The temple, the justice system, the seventh year and jubilee practices, for which Israel did not give themselves were not preserved in their possession. (*Mek.* [ed. Lauterbach] 3.204)

It is a perfect closure, drawing together the themes associated with נתן נפשו. Being faithful meant all Israelites' willingness to give themselves just as Moses and David had done for them. This self-sacrifice meant preservation and continuity of *identity*, since the four symbols listed were foundational to their being part of the community for which Moses had given himself. To be sure, those symbols and practices that were linked to the spatial dimensions of the land and Temple had ceased. Nevertheless, the midrash may suggest, perhaps in response to Christian polemic,<sup>41</sup> that the loss of these symbols was the result of an intentional choice on the part of Israel to focus on what were after all the most vital parts of their heritage.

### CONCLUSION

If indeed the *Mekilta* is a composition rather than a haphazard collection of exegetical remarks, and if the fundamental messages of the portions of Exodus that were selected for commentary are revelation, redemption, and relationship, then it is stunning to see what the Sages of blessed memory have done. As the Christian communities were appropriating Torah (revelation) and the symbols of Torah associated with the redemptive process for themselves, and as they preached the message that Jesus had given himself which, in the Church's theological understanding, meant that God had given Himself, the rabbis responded in very significant ways. By virtue of their exegetical skills, they consistently demonstrated that Torah was their domain and that it actively addressed their circumstances. Second, those paradigmatic figures associated with giving of Torah and with the establishment of the kingdom, Moses and David, had also given themselves and had done so for Israel. Third, the blood of Isaac was said to be meritorious in accomplishing the redemption of Israel, and

41. The destruction of the land and the devastation of Jerusalem were presented as the fulfillment of prophecies regarding the punishment of Israel for rejecting God and, in the christological reading of the text, Jesus. See Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 108, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1.253.

his was a willing and humble sacrifice. Finally, individual children of the covenant had faithfully followed the paradigms and, as a result, the fundamental symbols of Judaism had been and would continue to be preserved. Because זְכוּת אֲבוֹת was still a vital concept, their relationship as children would be preserved.