

EPHRAIM OF BONN AND THE SLAUGHTER OF ISAAC*

by
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1. Introduction

The 12th century was not a very happy period for European Jewry. On the one hand, there were the Crusades and the ideology that partly inspired these ventures, partly derived from them; here, the Muslim 'infidels' were seen as unlawful occupants of the Holy Places. On the other hand, concomitantly as well as a bit illogically, the ensuing rage was extended in particular to comprise the Jews as the killers of Christ, the *perfidii Judaei*, as they used to be called in the Roman Catholic Easter liturgy all the way up to the middle of the 20th century.¹ In this view of the world, the Jews had gotten their come-uppance by having their temple destroyed, by being chased out of the Holy Land (or *Eretz Yisrael*, its equivalent in Hebrew), and by being game for any greedy despot or populistic instigator who needed a suitable target for avenging actual or imagined wrongdoings (attributed to Jews, but mostly due to others).

Against this backdrop, and against that of the frequent pogroms and massacres, the persona of Ephraim ben Jacob, the poet-rabbi-scholar from Bonn (born 1132, died between 1197 and 1200; Spiegel 1967:138), stands out as one who sought to comfort his people in the midst of their tribulations. He is famous for his *Memoirs*, describing the Jews' tribulations and their persecution; to his brother, Rabbi Hillel, is ascribed a long poem describing and lamenting the massacres of the Jews at Blois (France) in 1171 and at York (England) in 1198-99, and there is no doubt that Rabbi Ephraim's poem entitled "The Slaughter of Isaac and His Revival"² was born in the same tradition, where the Jews sought to derive consolation and hope from their holy Scriptures, as these were interpreted by their scholars, poets, and rabbis, often in a rather non-orthodox form of textual analysis.

Here, I want to concentrate on Ephraim of Bonn's rendition of the biblical story of Abraham, who was summoned by God to sacrifice

his first-born son Isaac, in a final test of obedience and submission to the Divine Will.³ The point R. Ephraim is making here (implicitly) is that obeying the will of the Lord will always in the end turn out to be the right thing to do. As an earlier Talmudic scholar has remarked (Rabbi Gamliel), the reward for such obedience is that 'God will do your will as though it were His' (*ya'aseh retsonakeh retsono*; *Pirque Avot* II, 4); the reward for the Righteous is not given in this world, on the contrary, it may be a sign of their election that they are beaten, thrown in jail, molested, and even killed (a theme also taken up with regard to our modern times by the French writer André Schwarz-Bart in his historio-biographic novel *Le dernier des justes*, 1959).

2. *The 'Slaughter and Revival of Isaac'*⁴

The poem by R. Ephraim of Bonn consists of 4-line rhyming stanzas of the mostly iambic meter, four feet to the line; as to the exact quantities, however, they do not seem to matter too much to Ephraim: he may replace a iambic foot by a spondaic or trochaic one, as long as he can keep the rhythm. The rhyme is a a b b (except for the last stanza, which has the same rhyme for all lines; Spiegel 1967:141). The feet are pretty roughly-shod sometimes, with a lot of syncope and diaeresis. There is, thus, a great difference between this 'teutonic' rhythm-and-rhyming scheme and the earlier, classical-inspired and quantity-based versification of poets such as Ibn Gabirol or Yehuda Ha-Levi, who lived in an environment where classical culture still was alive and respected.⁵

The poem itself consists of 26 stanzas, where the last line of each stanza is a verbatim quote from the Bible (Spiegel 1967:141); the text paraphrases the well-known story from *Gen. 22*, where Abraham and Isaac are going up to Mount Moriah to fulfill God's commandment, with Isaac in the role of the ignorant and innocent victim, to be slaughtered in the service of a higher Order (the sacrificial lamb, a well-known theme also in other ethnic traditions, and also familiar to the Jewish mind: cf. the chasing away of the expiatory ram to the desert cliff of Azazel; *Lev. 16:8*).⁶ However, while in the Bible, the story is stopped at its most critical moment, with Abraham already having his

slaughtering knife high above the boy's bound body, when an Angel commands him not to lift that hand (*Gen. 22:12*), in Ephraim's version, Isaac is actually killed, but then revived by the 'dew of resurrection' (*tal texi[yah]*, stanza 16) and spirited away (in stanza 18) to the Garden of Eden, from where he returns safe and sound, to Abraham's great bewilderment.

The final happy ending is the same in both stories: Abraham finds the ram, and sacrifices it instead of his son, so that some measure of harmony is reestablished: God's will has been fulfilled, and Isaac's human rights have not been violated to the extreme. Furthermore, as it turns out, this 'change of venue' (Moriah to Eden) is significant also with regard to the message that this poem carries for the contemporary readers (see below, section 6).

3. Three stanzas of 'Isaac' translated

In this section, I will translate three selected consecutive stanzas from Rabbi Ephraim ben Jacob's poem. They have to do with the moment just before the sacrifice is to be implemented: the binding of Isaac and the final embrace of father and son, followed by Isaac's 'last words' – apocryphal, of course, just as is the sequel in Ephraim's version. (Stanzas 12-14; the appropriate Biblical sources are given in square parentheses).

When [Abraham] heard this, he who was bound to his [Isaac's] soul
like a clasp,
He bound [Isaac's] hands and feet as if for a permanent offering
Arranging fire and wood he put it on [the altar]
And made on top of it a burnt offering. [*Exod. 40:29*]

Then father and son embraced
They met, justice and peace kissed each other.
'Let your mouth, father, be filled with praise
Because He will bless the sacrifice. [*I Sam. 9:13*]

My wish [is] to open my mouth to say a blessing:

"Blessed be God for ever, amen".
Let my ash be gathered and brought to town
To the tent, to Sarah' [*Gen.* 18:6].

(Carmi 1982:381-382; my translation and additions)

As we see, the passage of the poem cited here mentions the name of Sarah, Isaac's mother, and her tent. Interestingly, the Biblical narration does not name this connection at all: Abraham, it is said, 'got up early in the morning, readied his mule, and took his two servants and Isaac with him' (*Gen.* 22:3), presumably without having told Sarah anything about what was going to happen. As to 'Sarah's tent', it is a well-known component of another, earlier story in *Genesis*, chapter 18: 'What Happened In Mamre', to which I also will return below, in section 6.

So, when Isaac, according to Ephraim, asks his father to recover his ashes and bring them to Sarah, he at the same time enjoins his father to explain the circumstances of his death to his mother (and implicitly, have his father bury him in his own territory).

All of this would of course have been unnecessary, had Ephraim let Abraham stick to the text of the Scripture. But in Ephraim's version, 'our father' (*avinu*) does not do this, but effectively kills Isaac, and even prepares to kill him the second time around, upon the boy's miraculous resurrection and prior to his abrupt departure for the Garden of Eden. I will come back to this aspect of Abraham's behavior below; but first, let me connect to the Talmudic commentary on the 'binding of Isaac'.

4. Rabbi Zekharyah and Isaac's binding

Here, I will concentrate especially on the section of the Talmud, ascribed to Rabbi Zekharyah, where Sarah appears on the scene, as it happens towards the end of the section 'The Binding of Isaac' (p. 32 of *Ma'ase Avot* ('The Deeds of the Fathers'), left column, paragraph 46, right before the section called 'The passing of Abraham'; Bialik & Ravnitzky 1992:39ff). Here is the text (in my translation):

At the time of Isaac's binding, the devil came to Sarah and appeared to her in the likeness of Isaac. When she saw him, she said to him: 'My son! What has your father done to you?' He said to her: 'My father got me up and made me climb mountains and made me go down valleys, until he had me climb to the top of one high, steep mountain, and he built an altar and set up a [sacrificial] arrangement and bound me to the back sides of the altar and lifted the butcher knife to slaughter me – and hadn't it been for the Holy-Blessed-He, who said "Don't put out your hand [i.e. don't lay your hands on the boy]", I would already have been slaughtered.' He [i.e. Satan] didn't manage to finish his speech before her [Sarah's] soul had departed.

The section of the Talmud concludes by telling us that 'Abraham had to be tested in ten temptations, but he withstood them all' (*ibid.*, paragraph 47; presumably a comment by the same Rabbi Zekharyah to whom we owe the story. See note 3).

All this is of course extra-Biblical, but what is the point of these extrapolations? Before I answer that question, I want to remark on some mutual dependencies and divergences between the three texts before us: the Bible (*Gen. 22*), R. Ephraim's tale in 'The Slaughter of Isaac', and R. Zekharyah's supplementary observations in 'The Deeds of the Fathers' (chapter 3 in Bialik & Ravnitzky 1992).

5. Comparing Scripture and Talmud, based on R. Ephraim's text

The curious thing about the Talmudic tale is that when Satan (in the shape of Isaac) relates to Sarah what actually happened on that mountain (recall that most likely, she had not been told by Abraham what he had in mind – male stuff, that), he actually is much closer to the sacred text than is R. Ephraim. However, as usual, Satan is able to 'transform himself into an angel of light' (*2 Cor. 11:14*) – in addition, he certainly knows his Scripture. So he quotes the words of *Gen. 22:12*: *al tishlax yadekha* 'don't lift your hand', just as the real angel had told Abraham (except that R. Zekharyah puts the words in the mouth of the Holy-One Himself). But the most interesting thing is that the story in R. Ephraim's rendition is totally altered from the one in the Bible,

where Isaac is saved at the last moment by divine intercession, rather than being first killed and subsequently revived.

Rabbi Zekharyah and Rabbi Ephraim apparently have quite different agendas. If one is allowed to speculate a bit, it could be that R. Zekharyah wants to provide us with an account of Sarah's death, which is sadly missing in the Bible (in *Gen.* 23:1-2, we are laconically told her age, 127 years, at the time of her death in Qiryat Arba', 'which is Hebron', but nothing about how and why she passed away). Most of the relevant chapter 23 is taken up by the (often quite entertaining) negotiations between Abraham and 'Ephron, the Hittite from Hebron, who owned the piece of land, Makhpelah near Mamre, that Abraham wanted to buy for Sarah's grave and finally managed to acquire, after a bout of very Middle Eastern haggling, for 400 silver *sheqalim* ('four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant'; *Gen.* 23:16). In the Talmudic narrative, Sarah's death is given a very natural cause: what wife wouldn't be ready to die when confronted with such secretive stubbornness of a domineering husband, resulting in the near-demise of a firstborn, beloved son?⁷

But what about R. Ephraim? Here, I want to return to what I said earlier about the role of his poem in the troubled times when it was written.

6. *Rabbi Ephraim the Consoler*

As in his other works (see Spiegel 1967:137 for references), R. Ephraim is concerned here about the happenings of the times, especially where they run counter to Jewish interests. And there was a lot to worry about, and a great many people to console for the loss of relatives and friends; in fact, the invocations at the end of the poem, stanzas 24-26, make explicit reference to the many *xasidim waxasidot*, 'pious men and women' that have been slaughtered for God's sake (stanza 25). I see the story of Isaac *redivivus* as an attempt to reconcile the fact that good Jews were being massacred left, right, and center of R. Ephraim, with the 'justice and peace' that he also invokes.⁸

The story of Isaac, as retold in the poem, gives us a fresh look at the unfortunate events that had befallen the Jews. If Isaac's life, once

lost, could be retrieved by supernatural means (even without having to access God directly: just leave it to the Angels and their tears), then the Jews could rest their case with God: even if they perished in the massacres, He would be able to bring them back to life if He so wished in His Grace (*xesed*) – if not, one still had to observe the Faith (*emet*), and keep the Peace (*shalom*), as Righteousness (*tsedeq*) always would prevail, even if the righteous PEOPLE were to perish (compare again the leitmotiv of André Schwarz-Bart's book, quoted earlier). As Spiegel explains the tenor of the implicit homily, 'Let no man despair of the Compassion even in the moment when the point of the sword is on his throat, and only the final thrust is next' (1967:31).

Another point that could be made here is that R. Ephraim, through his perhaps somewhat cavalier disregard for the facts as recounted in the Bible and his manipulation of the Biblical storyline, achieves something close to what in today's parlance is called 'making Scripture relevant'. Taking liberties with the sacred text in order to obtain a salutary effect is certainly not a practice that is unknown in our days, witness the various attempts at 'humanizing' the Bible by dressing it up in accessible, everyday language.⁹

Another way of making the text more familiar to one's contemporary readers is to endow the characters with properties that one can recognize as similar to one's own. A splendid example of this is provided by R. Ephraim, when he lets the Angels protest the impending second killing of Isaac: the righteous Abraham, having received orders, believes that he has to accomplish the slaughter and sets out to massacre the newly reborn son. The Angels appeal to him (in stanza 17) and beseech him to not apply less clemency to a human being than to an animal: '[even] an animal one does not put down [practicing] double slaughter', and they further (in stanza 18) refer to the fact that the Angels themselves, in human shape, have been guests in Abraham's and Sarah's tent, that day in Mamre's oak groves, when they brought the message to Abraham that Sarah would conceive, and when Sarah greeted this news with understandable skepticism and even laughter (*Gen.* 18:12). Tying this piece of historical evidence together with the purported angelic protests in the *Aqedah* is not just a cheap trick on the part of the author; it creates a bond between what humans do and what Angels are supposed to do, displaying good human

manners when they interact as messengers from the Divine, thus gaining a lot of goodwill from their potential destinees.

Overall, R. Ephraim's poem is what I would call 'comfort literature': writings that are destined to encourage those who suffer, by both giving them some spiritual subsistence material, and instilling in them hopes for a future retribution and redressing of the injustices perpetrated against them. Another, maybe more implicit motivation could be a desire to show that the Jews, by accepting their sufferings, could make it clearer to themselves, and to the world, that they were in truth God's elected people, a theme that often recurs in the Psalms and in the writings of the major Prophets: God, the stern father, having to chastise his children in order to remind them of His love and their special status as His chosen people (cf. the reference to the condemned Jews' singing of the '*alenu*, mentioned earlier). But to pursue this line of thought would probably require another paper, and much more study.

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Notes

- * The author is greatly indebted to Professor Esther Raizen, The University of Texas at Austin, for her inspiring lectures on the Bible and for her comments on an earlier version of the present paper. Likewise, I want to thank Professor Joseph Stern, The University of Chicago, who first pointed me towards the *Aqedah* in Shalom Spiegel's vision. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for any remaining errors.
- 1. Cf. the prayer *Pro conversione Judæorum*, from the Good Friday afternoon liturgy: 'Let us also pray for the perfidious Jews: that our God and Lord remove the veil from their hearts; and they too may recognize Jesus Christ as our Lord.
[Officiant] Let us pray.
[Deacon] Let us bend our knees.
[Deacon] Rise up.

Almighty eternal God, who not even excludes the Jewish perfidy from your forgiveness: hear our prayers, the ones we offer for the blindedness of that people, so that they, having recognized the light of Your truth, which is Christ, may be brought out of their darkness. Through the same our Lord. *All. Amen.*'

Anon., *Liber usualis Missæ et Officii* (1960), p. 734 (Feria VI in Passione et Morte Domini, Liturgica postmeridiana; my translation).

2. This is the 'title' often given the poem in Western references. In the tradition of Hebrew writing, works are mostly referred to by the first word(s) of the text; e.g. the book of Genesis is called *Beresbit*, the Lamentations are called *Ekbab*, and so on. Similarly, the poem discussed here is also referred to by its first line, *Et avotai ani mazkir* 'Of my fathers I will remind [you, scil. God]'
3. Cf. the title of the English translation of R. Ephraim's poem *The Last Trial*. On this, the translator remarks: '... As to the title, *The Last Trial*, he [scil. Shalom Spiegel] had nothing to do with it. The title itself is intended as midrashic comment on the haggadic statement that God put Abraham to the test ten times and in all of them he proved steadfast.' (Judah Goldin, 'Introduction' to Spiegel 1967, p. xxv)
4. As said above, this is how Western translations name this poem. The Talmudic tradition refers to 'the binding of Isaac', '*aqedat yitsxaq*. It is from the rabbinic commentary on the text (Bialik & Ravnitzky (eds.) 1992:30-32) that the quotes below are taken.
5. One can observe a similar development in the hymnology of the Catholic Church, where the earlier elegant hymns, done in the classical meter of Horace and the lyrical poets, were replaced by ictus-based poetry where only the words were Latin. As two extreme examples, compare the famous hymn for St. John the Baptist *Ut queant laxis resonare fibris* (from which our names for the eight tones are derived; a 'sapphicum minus' of the kind much loved by Horace, e.g. in *Odes* I:2; *Lib. Us.* pp. 1504-1505) with the considerably less elegant, strictly trochaic hymn *Pange lingua gloriosi* (ascribed to St. Thomas Aquinas, and used in the same liturgy as the prayer quoted in footnote 1; *Lib. Us.* pp.742-745).
6. In Mod. Heb., *sa'ir le'azazel* still means 'scapegoat'. The offering of a lamb (or other animal) as a substitute for a human sacrifice is well-documented also from earlier times and other places. Cf.:
'... every first issue of the womb is sacred to the gods, and even the human first born is theirs by right. Nevertheless, for practical purposes, the celestial ones are prepared to be satisfied with a substitution for the human offering, a lamb sacrifice.' (Spiegel 1967:62-63)

7. I'm not defending Satan: he had no business telling Sarah all that. But we know that he's always the guy that messes things up, as also confirmed etymologically: *diá-bolos*, as he is called in Greek.
8. Again, Ephraim loses out to Satan in matters of Scriptural correctness: in the stanzas translated above, the Biblical allusion is actually a (partial) misquote. Ephraim recombines the two parts of the verse in question:
xesed weemeth nijgashu, tsedeq weshalom nashaqu
'grace and truth have met, justice and peace have kissed' (Psalm 85:11)
and writes:
emeth weshalom nashaqu
'truth and peace have kissed'
– maybe because he wants to identify father and son with respectively 'truth' (faithfulness to God's command, *emeth*) and 'peace' (peaceful submission to the inevitable, *shalom*), both qualities that would come in useful in times of anti-Semitic persecutions: 'Keep the faith and bow your necks to the slaughter knife', or: 'Sing the *'alenu leshabe'ax* ('It is for us to praise'), even as you are marched off to the place of slaughtering', as did the Jews in Blois, according to Ephraim's brother and other Jewish historiographers (Spiegel 1967:136).
9. As does, incidentally, the Talmud itself (as pointed out to me by Esther Raizen). Cf. also the language of the *Good News Bible*, published by the American Bible Society, as 'The Bible in Today's English Version' (New York: ABS, 1976).

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