



June 2003

A Response to Marc Bregman

Edward Kessler
Wolf Institute, University of Cambridge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr>



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kessler, Edward. "A Response to Marc Bregman." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 2, no. 1 (2003): 27-47.
<https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-4cq2-rr97>.

This Response Essay is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

A RESPONSE TO MARC BREGMAN

EDWARD KESSLER

Cambridge University

The *Akedah* (known in Christian tradition as “the Sacrifice of Isaac”) has been, and still is, the subject of much discussion in Jewish and Christian literature. It is a story, which intersects the two religions, linking them together. It is generally examined from a literary perspective but in response to Marc Bregman’s paper, *Midrash as Visualisation*, I will focus from the perspective of the artist. Bregman is right to argue that visualisation has been undervalued. I suggest this is also true of both Christian and Jewish studies of the artistic portrayal of the *Akedah*. This situation has arisen because of a mistaken emphasis on the written word, rather than on the image created by the word. The mistake arises from an over-reliance on the literary tradition — in other words, an understanding of artistic interpretation has generally begun with the word but should begin with the image. The image clarifies the word and not necessarily the other way around.¹

¹ This is illustrated by Jensen who suggests that, “homilies and liturgies were the most important sources from which early Christian imagery derives meaning for its audience”. (R. Jensen “The Offering,” *Interpretation* 2 (1994), p. 106.) Whilst I agree that it is important to evaluate the context of the image, I suggest that this is already the third stage. The first stage is to examine the image on its own; the second is with reference to the biblical story; the third is with reference to the literary context.

For many years, scholars of early Christian and Jewish art have been excessively influenced by trends in the *written* tradition. As a result, in Christian art images have been understood primarily in terms of the crucifixion of Christ and scholarly debates have centered on whether the artistic representations should be understood in terms of typology or deliverance.² From the Jewish perspective, artistic interpretations were understood in terms of literary interpretations of the text (e.g., from Genesis Rabbah) rather than in their own right.

I suggest in this paper that artistic interpretation must be taken seriously in its own right. Although artistic interpretation is bound to the biblical text it has developed its own rules of interpretation.

Scholars now accept that in ancient times the artist played a significant role in portraying the biblical story.³ The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

² Some scholars of Christian art suggest that because patristic writings do not offer a detailed typological understanding of the relationship between the figures of Isaac and Jesus until after the conversion of Constantine (312 CE), typological representations could not appear in art before then. They, therefore, place an emphasis on deliverance. I. van Woerden, followed by other scholars, argued that 'since the greater part of the early monuments has to do with death and burial the emphasis seems to lie on 'deliverance in need... From 313 onwards it appears transformed'. 'The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham', *Vigiliae Christianae* (VC) 15 (1961), pp. 214-55. More recently Jensen, who has offered a critique of the existing scholarship, has questioned the validity of arguments based on a few existing pre-Constantinian images and challenged the accuracy of their dating. Jensen emphasises the significance of typology in early Christian literature (cf. Melito, Tertullian, Origen). 'The Offering of Isaac in Jewish and Christian Tradition' *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994), p. 105.

³ Ex. 20:3 ff. has sometimes been interpreted to mean that Jews and Christians would automatically have opposed every form of figurative visual representation. Josephus, for his part, was clearly hostile to images (*War*, 2.195; *Jewish Antiquities*, 17.151). Tacitus, Pliny and others remarked about the absence of statues and images in Jewish cities and synagogues. Yet their writings were not necessarily typical. Even Josephus reported that there existed groups, such as the Hasmonean family in the first century BCE, who produced human representations. The rabbis, as might be expected, offered differing views. For instance, there is the well-known story about R. Gamaliel II, head of Yavneh, who was criticised for going into a bath-house which boasted a statue of Aphrodite (*Mishnah, Avodah Zarah* 3:4). Some passages make reference to the widespread existence of Jewish figurative art (JT, *Avodah Zarah* 3:3, 42d and JT, *Avodah Zarah* 3:2.) but opposing views existed (e.g., Mekhilta de Simeon bar Yochai, *Ki Tisei* 31). On the Christian side, Murray shows how later commentators misrepresented the church fathers by either ignoring or minimizing comments about the acceptability of figurative art ('Art and the Early Church', *JTS* 28 (1977), pp. 313-345.)

mentions that figurative art in synagogues was approved as long as it was used not for idolatrous purposes but only for decoration:

You shall not set up a figured stone in your land, to bow down to it, but a mosaic pavement of designs and forms you may set in the floor of your places of worship, so long as you do not do obeisance to it.⁴

Figurative art was also a significant part of everyday life in the early Church. Like the rabbis, the church fathers were concerned about the idolatrous nature of art in places of worship⁵ but they were not as hostile to art as was originally assumed. For example, Tertullian like Rabban Gamaliel II states that figurative representation was not forbidden because it was not idolatrous.⁶

The *Akedah* was one of a small number of popular biblical images (including *Noah*, *Daniel in the Lion's Den*, *the Twelve Tribes of Israel* and *King David*) and has been found on glass, jewelry, amulets, seals and even ivory. However, this article will focus on representations depicted on mosaics and frescoes, in synagogues and churches, in chapels and catacombs.

A. The *Sacrifice of Isaac* in Christian Art

The *Sacrifice of Isaac* was a very popular subject for early Christian art as illustrated by the church father, Gregory of Nyssa:

I have seen many times the likeness of this suffering in painting and not without tears have I come upon this sight, when art clearly led the story before the sight.⁷

Augustine also said:

⁴ Targum, *Pseudo-Jonathan* (to Lev. 26:11).

⁵ For example, at the Council of Elvira in approximately 300 CE, the thirty-sixth canon stated that there should be no pictures in a church in case the object of worship was depicted on the walls (*picturas in ecclesia non debere, ne quod colitur et adoratur in parietibus depingatur*).

⁶ Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 2.22.

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Son of God and the Holy Spirit*, (*Patrologiae Graecae* (PG) 46.573).

The deed is so famous that it recurs to the mind of itself without any study or reflection, and is in fact repeated by so many tongues, and portrayed in so many places, that no-one can pretend to shut his eyes or his ears from it.⁸

We begin with Christian funereal art, which generally proclaims that the deceased may find happiness beyond the grave. The earliest catacomb frescoes illustrate the theme of deliverance. For instance, in the third century CE Callixtus catacomb in Rome (**Plate No. 1**) Abraham and the child Isaac are offering thanks for their deliverance.

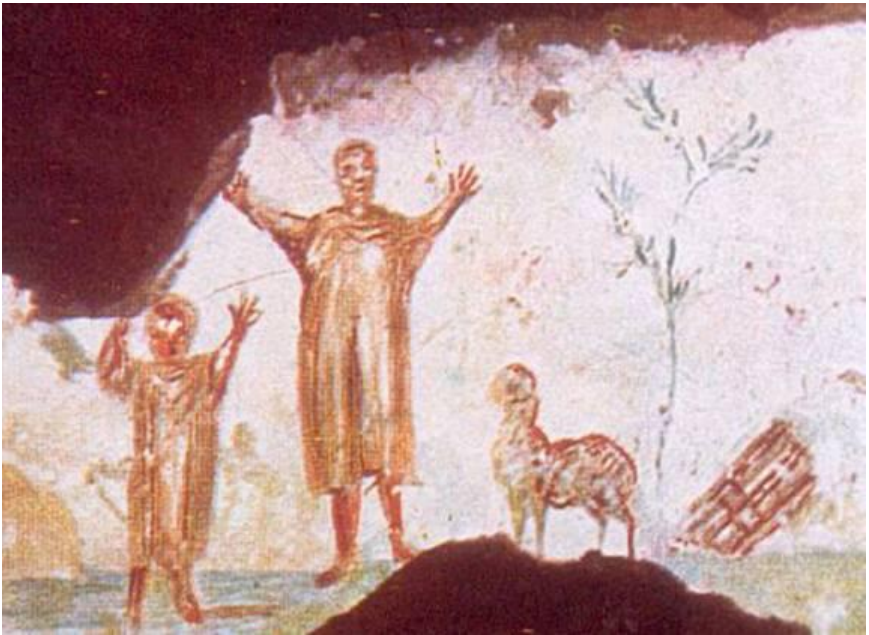


Plate No. 1

In the foreground, to their right stands the ram, erect and proud. Another (late) third century fresco located in the Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome illustrates the same theme. It shows the boy Isaac carrying wood and

⁸ Augustine, Reply to Faustus the Manichaean 22.73.

Abraham pointing to the fire on an altar or perhaps to a tree.⁹ Abraham is looking up to the heavens, perhaps hearing the word of God.



Plate No. 2

⁹ I. van Woerden, 'The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham', *VC* 15 (1961), p. 222.

Two other fourth-century frescoes have very similar images. In the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus Abraham holds a knife in his raised right hand and at his feet is the child Isaac – naked, kneeling and bound for the sacrifice. The ram appears on the far side of the altar, which is alight and the image is above a scene of the paralytic carrying his bed. Cubiculum C in the Via Latina (**Plate No. 2**), from the late 4th century, reproduces this image almost exactly. The altar has wood burning upon it; to the left is the ram, which appears to be looking for Abraham who has a sword in his hand. Abraham is looking at something (an angel? the voice of God?) while Isaac is kneeling with his hands behind his back. Below is a representation of a servant with a donkey, possibly at the foot of the mountain.

These examples of artistic interpretations in catacomb art emphasize the aspect of deliverance, which either parallels, or perhaps even precedes, the early Christian prayer for the dead, which contained a cycle of deliverance. In addition to frescoes, we commonly find images of the Sacrifice of Isaac in early Christian sarcophagi. The Mas d’Aire Sarcophagus from the third century is the earliest (**Plate No. 3**). It shows the child Isaac, bound and kneeling. Abraham grasps his hair from behind and raises the knife to strike. Abraham’s eyes are not on Isaac but the ram, which is standing at his side (almost nuzzling him). The ram appears eager to be sacrificed. It is noteworthy that the early Christian art shows little interest in typology (which is concerned with portraying biblical figures as prefiguring Jesus). For example, the sarcophagi fail to portray the ram caught by its horns or caught in a bush, suggesting that ram was not of christological importance to the artists. Nor do they show Isaac carrying wood as a model of Christ carrying the cross. The concerns of the artist appear significantly different to those of the literary exegete for the writings of the church fathers are full of typological interpretations.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Appendix.



Plate No. 3

Many of the sarcophagi also provide evidence of post-biblical interpretation which can not be found in contemporary Christian literature. For instance, a number depict two or three assistants or onlookers which implies that the Sacrifice of Isaac did not take place in secret. This may also indicate that artistic interpretations contain traditions, which would have otherwise been lost. For example, in a Luc-de-Bearn sixth-century sarcophagus, a man and woman are watching the sacrifice. The woman, who has her hand to her mouth to indicate dismay may be Sarah. The appearance of Sarah at the sacrifice is mentioned in the

poems of St Ephrem of Syria and other Syriac writings but rarely in the Greek or Latin fathers.

Sarah is also portrayed in the chapels of the El Bagawat (Egypt) necropolis, which are dated from the fourth century CE. The Sacrifice of Isaac is found in the chapel of Exodus where Abraham stands next to an altar, which is already alight. On the other side of the altar stands Isaac with his arms crossed while his mother Sarah stands at his side under a tree and lifts her arms to the sky in an act of prayer. The ram stands under a tree and the hand of God is seen to the right of the name Abraham.



Plate No. 4a



Plate No. 4b

In the chapel of Peace (**Plate No. 4 a & b**)¹¹ we see a hand (of an angel?) throwing two knives in the air (and another is held by Abraham). Isaac, a child, is unbound and his arms are outstretched, perhaps in supplication. Archaeologists have suggested that mother and son are holding incense.¹² Sarah has a halo around her head and Abraham, Isaac and Sarah are all identified. By including Sarah the artists of El Bagawat portray the significance of the biblical story for the whole family. They do not follow the biblical account, which depicts the story in terms of a father-son relationship but offer their own interpretation.

¹¹ Alongside the Sacrifice of Isaac are other images including the symbols of peace, justice, and prayer, alongside Adam and Eve, the ark with Noah and his family, Jacob, Daniel and the lions, the annunciation and Paul and Thecla (described in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* as a convert and companion of Paul).

¹² A. Fakhry, *The Necropolis of El Bagawat in Kharga Oasis*, (Paris: Services des Antiquités de l'Égypte, 1951) p. 73.

Let us briefly turn to church mosaics. The two sixth-century Byzantine mosaics from 6th century Ravenna both associate the Sacrifice of Isaac with the offerings of Abel and Melchizedek, which are linked to the liturgy of the Eucharist. For example, in San Vitale we find a portrayal of the mosaics of Cain and Melchizedek sharing a church altar near which are placed the bread and wine. Nearby appear the three angels announcing the promise of a son while Abraham offers them a calf and Sarah stands in the doorway of a tent. To the right is a representation of the Sacrifice of Isaac.

Isaac is kneeling on the altar and Abraham's sword is raised but the hand of God prevents the sacrifice. At Abraham's feet is the ram looking at Abraham, striking a christological pose. These mosaics flank the real church altar where the Eucharist was celebrated. The biblical figures are linked by the following prayer:

Be pleased to look upon these offerings with a gracious and favourable countenance, accept them even as you were pleased to accept the offerings of your just servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our patriarch and that of Melchizedek, your high priest – a holy sacrifice, a spotless victim.

This prayer and its reference to the Sacrifice of Isaac came into use by the fourth century CE and it is clear that artistic interpretation paralleled the liturgical development.¹³

The reading of Genesis 22, like the Jewish liturgical calendar, was also an important element of the lectionary cycle and was mentioned by a pilgrim during her visit to Jerusalem in the late fourth century CE. The Easter cycle was the major feature of the liturgical year and Genesis 22 was commonly read on the Thursday before Easter.¹⁴

¹³ In early Christian liturgy, the Sacrifice of Isaac is mentioned during the offertory prayers, associated with epiclesis (a petition for the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine), alongside Abel, Noah, Moses and Aaron, and Samuel.

¹⁴ J. Wilkinson, *Egeira's Travels* (London, SPCK, 1971). Note also that the homilies of Melito (*Peri Pascha*), as well as the interpretations of Gregory of Nyssa (*In Sanctum Pascha*) and Athanasius (*Epistle Six*), each of which discuss the Sacrifice of Isaac, were all composed at Easter.

Thus in early Christian art, artistic interpretations of the Sacrifice of Isaac illustrate deliverance (sometimes referring to the Eucharist). Images are found in funereal art because the story was understood in relation to death and resurrection. The ram is significant in artistic interpretation, not because of any christological significance, but because of its allusion to deliverance. Finally, it is worth noting that typology is rarely found in artistic interpretation during this period, and when it is found it is associated with liturgy, not literature.

B. The *Akedah* in Jewish Art

We begin with Dura-Europos, a third century city, which contained 16 temples catering to the needs of an eclectic pantheon of Roman, Greek and Persian gods. It also contained a modest Christian chapel and a synagogue in which there were more than 30 biblical scenes covering the four walls of a 40 ft room.

The image of the *Akedah* (**Plate No. 5**) is found over the opening for the ark, the Torah shrine. This was the most prominent feature of the synagogue and was always built on the Jerusalem orientated wall. On the left we see the menorah, the palm branch, (*lulav*) and citron (*etrog*). At the centre we see the Temple¹⁵ and to the right, the *Akedah*.¹⁶

¹⁵ The symbols of *Sukkot* and the Temple may suggest a vision of a future feast of Tabernacles to be celebrated in Jerusalem by all nations as described in Zechariah 14. The Temple could be viewed as much in terms of the future as well as the past and might represent a new Temple to be built on the site of the destroyed Temple. The synagogue building had been dedicated 170 years after the destruction of the Second Temple and restoration was a realistic dream as Julian the Apostate would make clear 120 years later.

¹⁶ The ark of the scrolls (*aron*) became so well known that John Chrysostom accused the Jews of exaggerated veneration for their "Holy Ark". In Dura-Europos the Torah shrine belonged to a phase of synagogue decoration that was distinct from and earlier to the other paintings and must therefore be examined separately. Unlike the other images, which were replaced during repainting, it was retained and not touched.



Plate No. 5

Examining the *Akedah* in more details (**Plate No. 6**) we see a primitively drawn Abraham, knife in hand, stands resolutely with his back to the onlooker, as does the little bundle of Isaac lying on the altar.

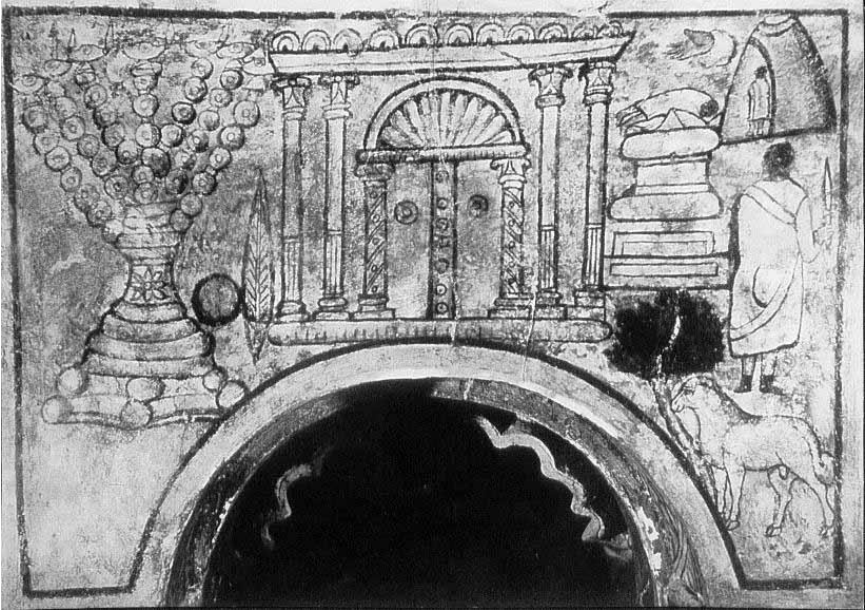


Plate No. 6

Isaac is clearly a child and appears unbound. In the distance a tiny figure, also with a shock of black hair, stands before a tent, with an opening on the top. This figure has been variously interpreted as Abraham's servant,¹⁷ Ishmael,¹⁸ Abraham himself in his house,¹⁹ Isaac²⁰ and Sarah.²¹ The open

¹⁷ C.H. Kraeling *The Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956) p. 343.

¹⁸ P. Prigent, *Le Judaïsme et l'Image* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991) p. 116.

¹⁹ Du Mesnil du Buisson, *Les Peintures de la Synagogue de Doura-Europos* (Rome, 1939) pp. 24-27.

²⁰ E. Kessler, "Art Leading the Story: the Akedah in the Early Synagogue" *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies in Jewish Art and Society in Late Antiquity* (L. I. Levine and Z. Weiss, eds.), (Journal of Roman Archaeology, Supplementary Series 40, 2000) p. 77.

²¹ E. Goodenough *Jewish Symbols*. 4. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) p. 189. Arguments are readily available to render each proposal unlikely. For instance, the figure appears to be wearing a man's clothing and is therefore unlikely to be Sarah; he is not wearing the same clothes as Abraham (and therefore unlikely to be Abraham); the traditions concerning hostility between Isaac and Ishmael were influenced by the rise of Islam (7th

hand of God appears beside the tent. This representation of the hand is the earliest surviving image.²²

Although there are a number of developments from and changes to the biblical story, (such as Isaac being unbound, the third character and the presence of the hand of God) the representation of the *Akedah* at Dura-Europos is closer to the biblical text than other Jewish representations. For instance, Isaac is lying on the altar. We should also notice that the ram is behind Abraham, waiting patiently, tethered to a tree. The Hebrew text is probably the source for this illustration for unlike the Septuagint and other translation, the text describes the ram as “behind” Abraham. Interestingly, although the rabbis suggested that the ram had been created on the sixth day of creation and was waiting since for its moment of destiny,²³ they did not give a great deal of attention to it nor did they describe it being tethered to a tree. Indeed, there appears no Jewish literary source for this artistic interpretation. However, the fourth-century Coptic Bible, mentions a “ram tied to a tree”²⁴ which may indicate the existence of a Jewish artistic interpretation retaining a tradition no longer found in Jewish literature. This suggestion is supported by artistic evidence elsewhere, both Jewish and Christian, which depict the ram tied to a tree.²⁵

In the 6th-century synagogue at Beit Alpha, (**Plate No. 7**) there are other intriguing artistic interpretations.

century) which rules out Ishmael. My own opinion is that the character is Isaac. The tent is touching the altar and is thus linked to Isaac. The figure is the same size as Isaac and both have black hair. We should also remember that Sarah died after the *Akedah* and that the first time Isaac was comforted was when Rebecca was brought to him and taken into his mother’s tent (Gen. 24:67).

²² The hand symbolising the *bat kol* is found in many literary works including both rabbinic and non-rabbinic writings e.g., Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.13; 4.233; Philo, *On Abraham* 32, 176; *Tanhuma Va- Yera* 23; *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* chp. 31.

²³ Tg Ps. Jon, *Mishnah, Pirkei Avot* 5.6; *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* chp. 31.

²⁴ A. Ciasca (ed.), *Sacrorum Bibliorum: Fragmenta Copto-Sahidica*. I. (Rome: Musei Borgiani, 1885) p. 22.

²⁵ See discussion below on Beit Alpha and Sepphoris.

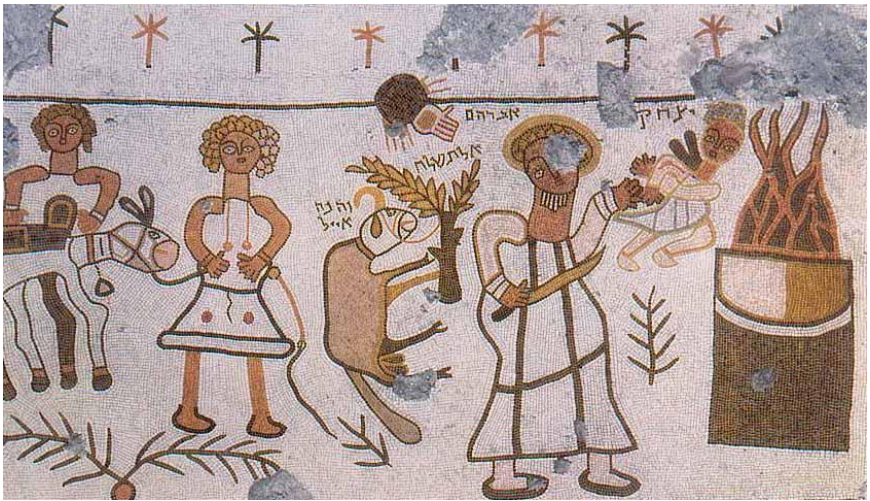


Plate No. 7

For example, Abraham throws Isaac into the fire on the altar while the hand of God prevents the sacrifice. A large ram, which is tied to a tree stands erect. The ram, following the biblical story, is caught by one horn and tied to a tree.

The ram is significant to the artist because it is even bigger than the tree! The fact that early Jewish literary tradition, except in a few instances, does not refer to the role of ram, is especially noteworthy when we see that later rabbinic writings such as *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* of the eighth century discuss the ram in detail. This development might be viewed as having been influenced by artistic interpretations such as depictions of the ram looking for Abraham (see below). Since this literary development occurred much later than the artistic representations we could justly argue that the literary interpretation is based upon the artistic. This reinforces Bregman's argument about the importance of visualization in Midrash. In this example, I suggest that the artistic interpretation preceded the literary interpretation and was its source.

In the mosaic, two servants, one of whom has a whip in his hand, hold the ass which has a bell around its neck. Above is the hand of God and perhaps the most remarkable figure is the child Isaac, floating beyond

Abraham's fingertips. Does Abraham hold him close, or at arm's length in preparation for the loss? Isaac is suspended and his arms are crossed but not bound, swinging precariously between the flames of the sacrifice and his obedient father. The trial is still Abraham's – but not unequivocally for we focus on the helpless, dangling figure of the son.

The ambiguity of the mosaic raises the question of Isaac's willingness. It is well known that the rabbis emphasize Isaac's voluntary obedience by describing his maturity and giving his age as 37 years.²⁶ The artistic portrayal of Isaac as a child suggests that he has little active role in the sacrifice. It is even possible to view him as a reluctant participant. Once again, we can see that artistic interpretation possesses its own emphasis, significantly different from the literary interpretation.

The final example I will consider is the early 5th century synagogue at Sepphoris. The mosaic floor is the most important part of the synagogue that has survived, covering the building's entire floor and consisting of 14 panels. The *Akedah* is depicted in two panels and the Archaeologists, Weiss and Netzer, suggest that the first panel (**Plate No. 8**) shows the two servants who remain at the bottom of the mountain with the ass. One holds a spear while his other hand is raised slightly in an apparently unusual gesture. The other servant sits under a tree, at the foot of the mountain holding the ass.²⁷

²⁶ Genesis Rabbah 56:8.

²⁷ Z. Weiss and E. Netzer, *Promise and Redemption: A Synagogue Mosaic from Sepphoris*, (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1996) pp. 30-31. This panel also has a Greek inscription, "be remembered for good, Boethos (son) of Aemilius with his children. He made this panel. A blessing upon them. Amen." The word "amen", written in Hebrew, ends the benediction.



Plate No. 8

There is no other instance of a servant making the special sign and I would suggest an alternative explanation is required. Rather than a servant, I propose that the figure is Abraham instructing the servant to remain behind. The shoes of Abraham appear to be exactly the same as those portrayed in the right hand panel. Examining the gesture of Abraham's right hand we see that the palm is turned outward and the second and third fingers are held extended while the thumb, the fourth and fifth fingers are doubled back against the palm. The most familiar

analogy is the Christian gesture of benediction, found commonly in Byzantine art. If this suggestion is correct, we have discovered another example of the transfer of ideas and images between Jewish and Christian art.

The right hand panel is badly damaged and depicts the head of an animal tethered to the tree by its left horn; below are two upturned pairs of shoes – a small pair for Isaac and a large pair for Abraham. The small pair of shoes again emphasizes that, for the Jewish artistic exegetes, Isaac was neither the young man of the biblical story nor the adult of rabbinic literary interpretation. His shoes indicate that he was a boy. The idea of removing shoes is probably derived from other biblical passages such as Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3.5). The artist has clearly decided that when Abraham and Isaac reached the sacred spot they would have removed their shoes out of respect for the sanctity of the site.

Once again we notice a conflict with the literary interpretation. In *Genesis Rabbah*, Abraham is compared favourably to Moses. One of the reasons why he was superior to Moses was because he was not asked by God to remove his shoes at Mount Moriah.²⁸ The artistic interpreter provides evidence for an alternative tradition, perhaps in a debate about the significance of the removal or non-removal of shoes.

In conclusion, the first point to make is that that artistic interpretation (far more than in literary), the *Akedah* is linked to the Torah possibly reminding God of His promise to Abraham and his children. Secondly, Isaac is always portrayed as a child. Artistic interpretation does not follow literary interpretation but remains consistent with the biblical story; it emphasizes the helplessness of the child and not the voluntary self-offering found in literary exegesis. Thirdly, artistic interpretation expands the role of the ram. Whereas in the biblical story the ram appears to have been on Mount Moriah by chance, the artistic representation emphasizes the significance of the ram through its size and prominent position. Artistic interpretation offers its own insight into the development of the *Akedah* in Jewish thought. An examination of the literary interpretation on

²⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 55:6

its own, although illustrative of the diversity of literary tradition, does not tell the whole story.

Jewish and Christian artistic interpretation shares a striking amount in common. Images such as the portrayal of the childlike Isaac, the hand of God and the centrality of the ram all indicate interaction between the artistic exegetes. An investigation of the biblical story from the perspective of the artist also shows interpretations, which vary from the biblical text such as the ram being tied to a tree (rather than caught by its horns in a bush). We should not be surprised to discover that Christian artistic interpretation sometimes follows the same pattern as Jewish (and *vice versa*). This indicates a positive interaction between Jew and Christian and, as such, provides a good example of Jews and Christians working together in ancient times.

The biblical story should not be viewed solely from a literary perspective. Artists who created images based on the biblical story should be viewed as exegetes in their own right and their interpretations sometimes vary considerably from the better-known interpretations found in the writings of the church fathers or the rabbis.

Some scholars and religious leaders have criticized these artistic representations, seeing in their diversity the possibility of danger and error.²⁹ In fact, the artistic portrayal of the *Akedah* exhibits not errors but **interpretations** of the biblical text. Sometimes artistic interpretation mirrors liturgical or literary developments; on other occasions, they are not found elsewhere. Artistic interpretation is one form of biblical exegesis and critical to the study of biblical interpretation. In the words of the church father, Gregory of Nyssa, and valid for Jewish as well as Christian

²⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works: Lectures on Genesis* (St Louis, Missouri, 1964) p 110 points to Jean D'Espagne, a 17th century French Protestant theologian was annoyed that in the contemporary Bible, "Isaac is here painted on his knees before an altar and Abraham behind him holding a knife in his hand, which is lifted up to give the blow. But this picture is false and doth bely the holy History." Martin Luther also complained that "the picture commonly painted about Abraham about to kill his son is incorrect."

art, there are occasions when “art clearly led the story”.³⁰ For this, students of biblical interpretation should be truly grateful.

Appendix: Christian literary interpretations of the *Sacrifice of Isaac*

It may be useful to summarize the views expressed in the writings of the church fathers. Firstly, there are only a few explicit references to the story in the New Testament, suggesting that it does not play an important role. Abraham’s faith is seen in terms of obedience and trust in response to suffering; the significance of the *Sacrifice of Isaac* lies in supporting the authors’ exhortations to remain faithful to the Christian Gospel. From the end of the first century CE onward, we find the development of a typology. Beginning with the Epistle of Barnabas, developed in detail by Melito (Bishop of Sardis 160-170 CE) and Origen (185-251 CE), the story of Isaac was compared to the story of Jesus. Typology was used by Christians to support a number of assertions such as the view that biblical events foretold the coming of Christ. Similarities between Isaac and Jesus were highlighted; both carry wood to the place of slaughter; both assent to the will of God; both are led to the sacrifice by their fathers.

In Christian literary tradition, there is an emphasis on the fact that Jesus did die while Isaac did not. The Sacrifice of Isaac was itself a model of the sacrifice to come, a pale shadow of the future event. Jesus died; Isaac was saved. This type of exegesis emphasised the efficacy of the Christian Gospel and, at the same time, replied to Jews who emphasised the Sacrifice of Isaac as atoning in its own right. In addition, the Sacrifice of Isaac became bound up with early Christian liturgy. It was (and still is) used in the Eucharist ceremony, in the Easter liturgy and in the prayer for the dying. Finally, there exists a modest literary tradition, which portrays Sarah playing a more significant role. This tradition is found primarily in Syriac writings where she is described by Ephrem, for example, as willing to give up her son. Ephrem compares Sarah to Mary and points to a

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Son of God and the Holy Spirit*, (PG 46.573).

number of parallels including both questioning God, both having miraculous births and both giving up their son.