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# Satan at the Sacrifices of Isaac and Jesus<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

The account of the binding of Isaac (henceforth referred to as the Akedah) in Genesis 22 is among those narratives whose postbiblical influence far outweighs its importance within the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> Despite the centrality of this event in both Judaism and Christianity, the Hebrew Bible never refers to the sacrifice outside of this terse narrative. The Akedah is also infrequently mentioned in the New Testament. Only Heb 11:17-20 and Jas 2:21 explicitly refer to the sacrifice of Isaac. Given the paucity of evidence in the canonical books of Christians and Jews, it is surprising that the Akedah became a foundational event for both religions after the first century. Early Christians saw the sacrifice of Isaac as prefiguring Jesus' death on the cross (for example, *Barn.* 7), while Jews saw Abraham's obedience and Isaac's submission as the basis for patriarchal merit that protected the Israelites from danger at later stages in the nation's history, notably during the Exodus (for example, *Mekilta. de-R. Ishmael, Pisha* 7). These two traditions differ notably from the approach to the Akedah in *4 Maccabees*, where Isaac's resolve in the face of death is cited as an example to be followed, rather than as a unique event that could procure redemption (*4 Macc.* 7:14; 13:12; 16:20; 18:11). Early rabbinic texts go so far as to refer to the shed blood of Isaac as the basis for the merit,<sup>3</sup> while Christians pointed to Isaac's lack of suffering in the biblical text in order to show the inherent superiority of Jesus' sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

The scattered references to Isaac's suffering in rabbinic writings have elicited the hypothesis, first posed by Abraham Geiger,<sup>5</sup> that rabbinic ideas about the Akedah were inspired by Christian theology. This thesis has met resistance from several quarters.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Geza Vermes has argued that the entire Akedah theology, including the notion of merit, already existed in the first century C.E.<sup>7</sup> Although he establishes that the Akedah was significant for Jews during this early period, he does not cite any pre-Christian text that speaks of Isaac's bloodshed or the accrual of merit. A century after Geiger's hypothesis, Philip Davies and Bruce Chilton argued that the meritorious suffering of Isaac is both definitively post-Christian and a polemic against Christian claims.<sup>8</sup> In a response to their paper, Robert Hayward acknowledges that the blood of Isaac is a post-Christian motif but argues that it does not derive from Christian theology.<sup>9</sup> The publication of the Qumran text 4Q225, which narrates the Akedah, reignited this debate in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Vermes saw this text as validation of his original hypothesis.<sup>11</sup> Joseph Fitzmeyer, on the other hand, demonstrated that the text does not

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, Akedah refers to any telling of the events of Gen 22.

<sup>3</sup> See Urbach 1987, 502–4.

<sup>4</sup> Notably in the Passover homily attributed to Melito of Sardis. See Wilken 1976, 53–69.

<sup>5</sup> Geiger 1872, 166–71.

<sup>6</sup> A history of the debate can be found in Kundert 1998, 7–28.

<sup>7</sup> Vermes 1961, 193–227.

<sup>8</sup> Davies and Chilton 1978, 514–46. Isaac's merit and his suffering are, in fact, two different themes that are treated as one by Davies and Chilton. See the critique in Hayward 1981, 127–50.

<sup>9</sup> Hayward 1981, 127–50. See also Hayward 1990, 292–306.

<sup>10</sup> VanderKam and Milik 1994, 141–55.

<sup>11</sup> Vermes 1996, 140–6.

support this conclusion. Many of the elements Vermes presumed to be in the text, such as the notion of Isaac's meritorious sacrifice, are absent in the extant fragments.<sup>12</sup>

Almost every academic contribution to this debate, which has spanned two centuries, overlooks a peculiar shared factor between retellings of the Akedah and the Passion Narrative: the presence of Satan.<sup>13</sup> A notable exception is Shalom Spiegel, who mentions the shared tradition in his book *The Last Trial*, but Spiegel is content to trace all Christian and Jewish variations back to the pre-Christian Akedah in the book of *Jubilees*.<sup>14</sup> These traditions about Satan are not static, however, but developed in both religious traditions in a parallel fashion. Earlier forms of both the Akedah and the Passion Narrative refer to Satan, or one of his known aliases (such as Mastema, the Devil, and Samael) *instigating* the death of the "beloved son,"<sup>15</sup> but in later narratives of both, Satan attempts to *prevent* the same sacrifice.<sup>16</sup> This paper posits that the similarity is not coincidental and represents an example of Judaism borrowing a narrative motif from Christianity; that is, exegesis of the Passion Narrative influences the retelling of the Akedah.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Pre-Christian Texts: Jubilees and 4Q225 (psJub<sup>a</sup>)

As noted above, the tradition of Satan at the Akedah appears already in the book of *Jubilees*, which likely dates from the middle of the second century B.C.E. *Jubilees* 17-18 closely follow Genesis 22 with a few exceptions,<sup>18</sup> such as a curious detail at the beginning of the narrative: *Jubilees* 17:15–18 (which corresponds to Gen 22:1, "After these words") relates a prologue in heaven where a demonic figure, Prince Mastema, challenges God to put Abraham to the test.<sup>19</sup> This prologue explains God's surprising decision to tempt Abraham at the opening of the biblical episode, which comes without warning and seems to contradict the earlier promises God had made to Abraham regarding a son.

The contents of the prologue in heaven call to mind the heavenly council from the beginning of the book of Job. In Job, the narrative that brackets the long poetic section describes God's testing of a patriarchal figure similar to Abraham (Job 1-2; 42). Although the resemblances between the biblical stories of Job and Abraham are broad—both characters are rich, fear God, suffer for their piety, and are finally vindicated—they were sufficient for inviting closer comparisons between the two in later literature.<sup>20</sup> While the character of Job is not mentioned in *Jubilees*, the episode resembles the dialogue between God and "the *satan*" from the prologue of the book of Job.<sup>21</sup> Such a borrowing would explain the presence of Mastema at

<sup>12</sup> Fitzmeyer 2002, 211–29.

<sup>13</sup> "Satan" is here used as a neutral term for the adversarial figure in both Christianity and Judaism. When discussing specific texts, I use the name given in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Spiegel 1993, 104–7

<sup>15</sup> I have adopted this term from Levenson 1993 as a way of simultaneously referring to Isaac and Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> It would be imprecise to say that all of these figures represent the same character, but they do represent the same *type* of character: an adversarial supernatural power. Although the Akedah stories shed light on the historical development of this figure, this paper does not attempt to recount a full-fledged history of Satan.

<sup>17</sup> Hayward (1990, 305–6) has also noticed both motifs, although he is dismissive of any connection.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of the differences see Fitzmeyer 2002, 214–5.

<sup>19</sup> "Mastema" as a noun means "hatred." In Qumran texts, "the Prince of Mastema" is an epithet, not a personal name, though it has become one in the versions of *Jubilees*. See Dimant 2011, 235–56. Throughout this paper, for both consistency and aesthetic reasons, I retain the name Mastema.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see *b. B. Bat* 15b. Additionally, Japhet 1994, 153–72, provides an insightful account of the many similarities and differences between the two figures.

<sup>21</sup> VanderKam 1997, 241–61, simply assumes the literary debt. However, this identification is not uncontested. For a counterpoint, see Ruiten 2012, 212–4.

the Akedah: the author of *Jubilees* identified Abraham's trial with Job's suffering and imported the device of the heavenly council—along with the *satan*—into the book of *Jubilees* in order to explain the trial.<sup>22</sup>

The presentation of Mastema's character in other sections of *Jubilees* helps explain his actions in the Akedah. As chief of the demons, he attempts to frustrate God's plans and God's creation. For example, he pleads with God to retain a number of demons in order to spread disease (*Jub.* 10:4–14), he disperses demons to spread corruption and bloodshed on the earth (*Jub.* 11:5–7), he sends a famine in the days of Terah (*Jub.* 11:11–12), he attempts to kill Moses (*Jub.* 48:2–3), he aids the Egyptian sorcerers against Moses (*Jub.* 48:9), and he incites Pharaoh to pursue the Israelites (*Jub.* 48:12,17). Likewise, by provoking God to put Abraham to the test, Mastema hopes to nullify God's covenant with Abraham by killing the promised son. If this understanding is correct, then Mastema's plot depends on Abraham's fidelity to God. In other words, if Abraham is indeed God-fearing, then he will kill his son. This creates a paradox: Mastema triumphs *if Abraham passes the test*. Despite this, the test is still framed as an examination of Abraham's fidelity to God, notwithstanding the many prior tests that already demonstrated his faith (*Jub.* 17:17). Therefore, Mastema will be triumphant regardless of what Abraham does: if he passes the test, he has killed the son of the promise; if he fails, he has shown himself to be unfaithful to God. The key moment, then, is the preservation of Isaac. When God halts the sacrifice and judges Abraham worthy, Mastema is shamed (*Jub.* 18:12).

The Qumran text 4Q225 retells the Akedah along the lines of the book of *Jubilees*, including the presence of Prince Mastema. Again, Mastema incites God to test Abraham with the ultimate aim of negating God's promises. The nature of Mastema's accusation is undisclosed until the decisive moment. First, while the holy angels cry, Mastema and his evil angels rejoice that Abraham will kill his son (4Q225 2 ii, 5–7). These lines highlight what is only implicit in *Jubilees*: Mastema's true objective is not to test Abraham but to kill Isaac. However, the very next line refers to the test of faithfulness. The editors of 4Q225 suggest that Mastema and his angels are waiting to find Abraham faithless in the test, though this seems to be at odds with their rejoicing over the imminent death of Isaac.<sup>23</sup> The book of *Jubilees* has the same problem, which is that Mastema's precise motivations are unclear, though it seems that either outcome would result in a victory for the powers of darkness. The end of 4Q225's version of the Akedah has another addition regarding Mastema in which he is *bound* (4Q225 2 ii, 13). Although 4Q225 is too fragmentary to make a proper assessment, the binding of Mastema could be a replacement for his shaming in *Jubilees*. In both instances, Mastema is defeated at the moment of his apparent triumph.

### 3. The Babylonian Talmud

After the Second Temple period, the motif of Satan's presence at the Akedah disappears from extant written sources until the Babylonian Talmud, or Bavli, which contains traditions as early as the second century but as late as the eighth century.<sup>24</sup> A brief reference to the Akedah is found in *b. Sanh.* 89b, where the rabbis discuss how to distinguish a false prophet from a true one. A true prophet, they say, will produce a sign unless his authority is already

<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Zech 3:1—when the *satan* and the Angel of the Lord surround the high priest Joshua while waiting for God's judgment—seems to inform *Jub.* 18:9.

<sup>23</sup> Vanderkam and Milik 1994, 153.

<sup>24</sup> The Babylonian Talmud contains rabbinic traditions from 200–500 C.E., but the work was not “closed” until the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or even 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. See Ben-Eliyahu, Cohn, and Millar 2012, 33–4.

established, as was the case with Abraham. If Abraham did not have the authority of a prophet, Isaac would not have obeyed him. This leads to an interpretation of the opening words of Genesis 22, written in Hebrew and attributed to R. Yohanan b. Nappaha on the authority of R. Jose b. Zimra (both Palestinian rabbis of the third century). Therefore, the tradition about Satan at the Akedah recorded in the Bavli—probably the oldest in rabbinic literature—shares the same geographical and linguistic background as *Jubilees*. It also happens that R. Yohanan’s interpretation of Gen 22:1 is the same as the one found in *Jubilees*. In both cases, the phrase “After these things” refers to a conversation between God and an adversarial figure, which in this case has reverted to his biblical name: Satan. Aside from this similarity, the stories of *Jubilees* and the Talmud diverge considerably. The actual narrative is concerned solely with Abraham’s resolve on the road to Moriah and is not, properly speaking, a retelling of the Akedah, since the binding of Isaac is never described.

Satan plays a role in two different episodes in the Bavli, first in a prologue in heaven like the one in *Jubilees* and then in a new episode, a confrontation with Abraham on the road to Moriah. In the Prologue in Heaven, Satan, unlike Mastema, voices a formal accusation against Abraham, namely, that he forgot to offer God even a tiny sacrifice of thanksgiving in return for the long-awaited birth of Isaac. God—not Satan—proposes the sacrifice of Isaac in order for Abraham to demonstrate the strength of his fidelity, a significant contrast with Mastema’s proposal in *Jubilees* and 4Q225. Satan, then, cannot be said to be plotting the death of Isaac; rather, he is trying to prevent it. In the second passage, Satan engages Abraham in a dialogue consisting almost entirely of biblical quotations. Satan’s attempts to discourage Abraham include the following objections. First, Abraham has sufficiently proven his fidelity to God. Second, Abraham should fear that by sacrificing his son he is sinning. Third and finally, God has already decreed that an animal will be sacrificed in Isaac’s place.<sup>25</sup> Satan’s last objection is also true, and he quotes Genesis in order to prove it! Abraham, however, has already stopped listening to him. The Talmud shows some continuity with *Jubilees*, but something has changed. Namely, the paradox disappears. God, not Satan, proposes the test. Abraham is only fulfilling a divine decree. Satan’s obstruction makes sense in context: he is trying to save face after questioning the depth of Abraham’s fidelity.

#### **4. Palestinian Midrashim: *Genesis Rabbah*, *Tanhuma*, and *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer***

In Palestine, at about the same time as the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, retellings of the Akedah appeared in various homiletic expositions of Scripture: the midrashim. Three major collections, *Genesis Rabbah* (fifth to sixth century), *Midrash Tanhuma*, and *Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer* (both eighth to ninth century)<sup>26</sup> incorporate the theme of Satan at the Akedah, although each treats the episode differently. All of them, however, portray Satan interfering with Abraham in order to prevent the sacrifice.

*Genesis Rabbah* is an exegetical midrash that assembles a number of rabbinic interpretations on practically every verse of the book of Genesis. The work offers multiple interpretations of each verse, many of them irreconcilable. For instance, only one of three expositions of Gen 22:1 recounts a “Prologue in Heaven” (*Gen. Rab.* 55:4),<sup>27</sup> although it is radically different from the one in *Jubilees* and the Talmud in that God’s interlocutor is not Satan but the other

<sup>25</sup> These interpretations are offered in Shachter and Freedman 1935, 596.

<sup>26</sup> For the dating and provenances of these midrashim, see Lerner 2006, 133–230.

<sup>27</sup> The other interpretations are Abraham’s misgivings regarding a thanksgiving sacrifice and an argument between Isaac and Ishmael.

angels.<sup>28</sup> Despite this fundamental difference, the complaint of the angels is the same as Satan's complaint in the Talmud: Abraham has been ungrateful after Isaac's birth.

When Satan does appear, as Samael,<sup>29</sup> he attempts to stop the sacrifice by tempting *both* Abraham and Isaac (*Gen. Rab.* 56:4). He reproaches Abraham three times—this time without any biblical citation—for wanting to kill the son of his old age, for being emotionally unprepared for such a sacrifice, and for being guilty of murder. Then, he approaches Isaac and tells him that his father will kill him. Isaac remains firm, but he wavers when Samael reminds him that if he dies, Ishmael will be the one to inherit. The biblical text that prompts this story is Isaac's address to his father, "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (*Gen* 22:7). The midrash understands this verse as Isaac trying to dissuade his father. Abraham's response explains that if God does not provide the sacrifice, then Isaac himself will be the sacrifice. The end of *Gen* 22:8, "and they both walked on together," is understood as Isaac's compliance (*Gen. Rab.* 56:4). Isaac's willingness to be sacrificed is an ancient exegetical motif found in the *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus and *4 Maccabees* as well as the Palestinian Targumim (*4 Macc.* 16:20; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.225–36; *Tg. Ps.-J., Frg. Tg.*, and *Tg. Neof.* to *Gen* 22:10).<sup>30</sup> The Talmud also hints that Isaac knew of his fate and complied. *Genesis Rabbah* actually distances itself from this interpretation. Not only does Isaac incline to temptation, but Abraham also hides him in order to prevent Samael from injuring him and rendering him unfit for sacrifice (*Gen. Rab.* 56:5). Isaac may give his consent, but Abraham is the hero.

Samael's function, though similar to the role of Satan in the Babylonian Talmud, has also changed. Samael is not putting Abraham and Isaac through a test of faithfulness. He is impeding their progress because he does not want the sacrifice completed. In both cases, the motivation of Satan/Samael is incompatible with Mastema in the earlier literature. Abraham's fear in *Genesis Rabbah* confirms this: he is not concerned whether Samael will kill Isaac, but he does suspect the adversary will render the sacrifice null by blemishing the intended victim. The sacrifice has thus changed in importance. In fact, the sacrifice has replaced the test of faith as the center of interest. The question is no longer just Abraham's fidelity, but whether or not the sacrifice will be carried out.

*Midrash Tanhuma*, a collection of homiletic interpretations organized according to the weekly Torah readings, is also a witness to the interpretation found in *Genesis Rabbah* and also appears to know the talmudic tradition.<sup>31</sup> Of the three, *Tanhuma* presents the most detailed account of Satan's attempts to prevent the sacrifice (*Tanh. Vayyera* 22–3). It begins with Satan, disguised as an old man, appearing to Abraham and asking him where he is going. He reminds Abraham that he will be guilty according to the law if he slays his son, but Abraham pays him no heed. He then appears to Isaac as a young boy and, appealing to the suffering of his mother, informs him that his father intends to kill him. Isaac, who already knows what his father will do and that it is God-ordained, remains resolute. Satan then abandons persuasion

<sup>28</sup> The jealousy of the angels seems to belong to a different tradition altogether, one that appears several times within rabbinic literature and, in the context of the Akedah, in *L.A.B.* 32:1–2. See Bernstein 2000, 263–91.

<sup>29</sup> This name, also found in some of the Pseudepigrapha (for example, *3 Baruch* and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*) and in several works from the Nag Hammadi codices (for example, II.1 *Apocryphon of John* and II.4 *Hypostasis of the Archons*), appears only once in the Talmud (*b. Sotah* 10b). However, it became a more common name for Satan in post-talmudic Jewish literature. See Stemberger 2003, 636–61.

<sup>30</sup> Vermes 1961, 197–8.

<sup>31</sup> The name *Tanhuma* refers to several midrash collections. The one of interest for this essay is the standard printed edition. Another version, the edition of Buber, is an earlier collection which does not mention Satan in the context of the Akedah. See Bregman 2003 for a full description of this complex group of texts.

and, instead, puts a natural obstacle in the way of Abraham and Isaac in the form of a river. When Abraham is up to his neck in water, he prays to God for deliverance. After the river dries up, Satan reveals that a heavenly voice told him Isaac will be substituted—as in the Talmud—and Abraham responds the same way: a liar is disbelieved even when he speaks the truth. When Abraham puts the knife to Isaac, he manages to shed a quarter of Isaac’s blood before Satan knocks the knife out of Abraham’s hand. Satan then appears to Sarah and tells her what exactly Abraham has been up to. The shock kills Sarah.

Satan’s hostility is more pronounced in *Midrash Tanhuma* than in the other two narratives. While the Talmud at least explains the antagonism through the wager made in the prologue in heaven, this feature of the story is missing in *Genesis Rabbah* and *Midrash Tanhuma*. Satan’s hatred lacks explanation, and it is also unclear why he would want to prevent Isaac’s sacrifice. *Midrash Tanhuma*, against the other two narratives, does introduce the notion that blood was shed at the Akedah.<sup>32</sup> This follows a line of thought already introduced in two third-century works, the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (Pisha 7)* and the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai (Sanya II:II)*, that the Exodus was merited by the blood of Isaac.<sup>33</sup> This explains Satan’s malice: the sacrifice, in the end, would have positive benefits for Israel. *Midrash Tanhuma* puts into narrative form the notion introduced in the two *Mekiltas*.

*Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*, a narrative retelling of the Torah that was written not long after the advent of Islam, represents yet another tradition. The adversary’s name is again Samael, a possible link with *Genesis Rabbah*. Samael’s attempts to frustrate Abraham, however, are notably limited compared to the other narratives. In fact, Samael does not enter *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*’s telling of the Akedah until after the trial (*Pirqe R. El.* 31). That is, Samael does not wager with God in heaven, interrupt Abraham on the road, put rivers in his path, or knock the knife out of his hand. In fact, Samael does not interfere with the sacrifice of Isaac at all, and neither does God, since Abraham actually carries out the killing of Isaac. Isaac’s soul briefly leaves his body before returning, demonstrating the resurrection of the dead.<sup>34</sup> However, Samael’s attention is drawn elsewhere: “The very ram that was created on the eve of the first Sabbath ran and came to be sacrificed in place of Isaac, but Samael was standing in its way and impeding it in order to cancel the sacrifice of our father Abraham.”<sup>35</sup> Thus Samael, less interested in destroying Isaac than in preventing the *real* sacrifice, enters the narrative only after the moment when Mastema is shamed in the book of *Jubilees*.

The enormous shift that has transpired between *Jubilees* in the second century B.C.E. and *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* roughly a thousand years later is the result of, first, interpreting the sacrifice rather than the test of faith as the central point of the narrative and, second, finding in the actual shedding of blood the origin of the blessings that accrue to Israel in later generations. *Midrash Tanhuma* considers the shedding of Isaac’s blood to be the key moment. *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*, on the other hand, sees the ram’s death as more important.<sup>36</sup> *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* emphasizes that the ram’s body parts will play a role throughout Israel’s history: its ashes are in the holy of holies, its sinews are the strings of David’s harp, its pelt is Elijah’s

<sup>32</sup> *Gen. Rab.* 56:7 is insistent that no blood was shed, an indication that it is reacting to a tradition where the blood *is* shed. See Himmelfarb 2008, 289–310.

<sup>33</sup> For the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai*, which is a reconstructed text, see Nelson 2006, 6. This *Mekilta*, like *Tanhuma*, specifically mentions that Isaac shed a quarter of his blood.

<sup>34</sup> According to Kessler 2004, 129, this text is the first time in Jewish literature that Isaac dies at the Akedah. *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* explicitly connects this theme with the second benediction of the Amidah.

<sup>35</sup> Translation based on the Hebrew text of Börner-Klein 2004, 181.

<sup>36</sup> God, however, regards the sacrifice as if it were Isaac.

girdle, and its horns will be blown at Sinai at the redemption. The horns and the holy of holies recall the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, both linked to the judgment and forgiveness of sins. David and Elijah are forerunners of the Messiah, and the blowing of the horn also signifies the beginning of the messianic era. Therefore, the ram's death is a foundational moment, which anticipates the time of the redemption.

### 5. *The New Testament*

Unlike in the Akedah, Satan is already a part of the canonical story of the crucifixion of Jesus. His presence, however, is not very prominent in the Passion Narrative. Two of the canonical Gospels, Luke and John, depict Judas as being possessed by Satan while betraying Jesus, either at the moment when he first approaches the temple authorities (Luke 22:3) or when he leaves the Last Supper (John 13:27). In Luke, this possession is supplemented by a peculiar verse at the end of his version of Jesus' temptation, in which Satan departs from Jesus until an opportune moment (Luke 4:13). Presumably, this opportune moment comes in the form of Judas' betrayal. This paltry evidence at least demonstrates Satan's intention to kill Jesus, which is the logical outcome of Judas' betrayal. At the actual moment of the crucifixion, however, Satan is nowhere to be seen.<sup>37</sup> The specific idea of the crucifixion of Jesus as the defeat of Satan only appears in the Gospel of John, where Jesus, speaking of the passion, proclaims that the ruler of the world will be cast out (12:31). Despite Jesus' statement that his death will mean the downfall of Satan, the very same gospel portrays Satan enticing Judas to betray Jesus (13:2). This, once again, presents a paradox, which became more pronounced only after the canonization of the New Testament writings. The crucifixion can be read as both a satanic plot and yet also a victory over sin, death, and the devil.

### 6. *Early Christian Writings*

An enormous lacuna in the New Testament is any accounting for Jesus' whereabouts during the period between his death and resurrection. The idea thus developed that Jesus' soul was in Underworld, defeating Satan and restoring the righteous dead to life, based on such verses such as Acts 2:31, "He was not abandoned to Hades" (quoting LXX Ps 15:10) and especially Heb 2:14, "that through death he might overthrow him who has the power of death, that is, the devil." Gustaf Aulen called this the "classic theory" of atonement, where redemption is secured through Christ's total victory over Satan rather than through the payment of a ransom or the satisfaction of an unpaid debt.<sup>38</sup> Although this simple idea is in no way a systematic explanation of the atonement, it is indeed early and appears in a diverse array of early Christian texts.<sup>39</sup> This theme became especially prominent in the Latin West, where it took the form of the *Descensus Christi ad Inferos* ("The Descent of Christ into Hell," also known as the "Harrowing of Hell").

An implication of this theme is that it was foolish of Satan to kill Jesus and thereby grant him access to the Underworld. The idea manifests itself explicitly in the chapter 20 of the Latin *Gospel of Nicodemus*, where Hades, the personification of death, upbraids Satan for failing to

<sup>37</sup> Hayward 1990, 305, understands Jesus' rebuke of Peter in Matt 16:23 and Mark 8:33 ("Get behind me, Satan!") as evidence that Satan tries to prevent the crucifixion in the canonical Gospels. This interpretation is not evident from the New Testament texts, nor did the church fathers interpret the saying in this way. Luke does not include this rebuke. Therefore, it does not have any relation to Luke 4:13.

<sup>38</sup> Aulen 2003

<sup>39</sup> Murray 2006, 324–29, cites: *Odes Sol.* 17:8–9 and 42:10–20; Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha* 102.780–5; *Gos. Bart.* 16–20 (Greek); *Acts Thom.* 156 (Greek); Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* 14.652.6–10 and 22.996.22–1000.17; and Ephrem's *Hymns of Nisibis* 35–42, 43–9, and 52–68.

recognize that the man who could bring Lazarus back from the dead was also capable of wreaking much more havoc should he himself enter the Underworld. Though this addition to *Nicodemus* is attested only in the ninth century,<sup>40</sup> the tradition of the debate between Satan and Death is earlier. It appears, for example, in the *Hymns of Nisibis* 52–9 of Ephrem the Syrian (306–373)<sup>41</sup> and a series of anonymous fifth or sixth century homilies attributed to Eusebius of Alexandria.<sup>42</sup> These homilies were soon translated from Greek into Latin, Old Slavonic, Arabic, and Armenian.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, this theme was prevalent across several Christian communities before the composition of the Latin *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Death's rebuke of Satan provides a counterpoint to Luke and John's treatment of Satan in the events leading up to the passion. Although Satan did not try to prevent the crucifixion, he certainly should have. His failure to recognize the threat Jesus posed to his kingdom raises the question of whether Satan even knew who Jesus was. From this paradox developed the patristic motif of the deception of the devil.

According to a number of prominent Greek and Latin church fathers, Jesus' divinity was intentionally concealed as part of a ruse.<sup>44</sup> The miraculous birth of Jesus was hidden from Satan by the marriage of Mary and Joseph, a motif that appears as early as the beginning of the second century in an epistle of Ignatius of Antioch (*Eph.* 19). After the baptism of Jesus, Satan becomes suspicious and subjects him to the temptation in the wilderness as a way to discern his true identity (*cf.* Matthew 4 *parr.*). The temptation proves inconclusive and so Satan remains hostile to Jesus, finally inducing the Jews to kill him on account of his many miracles, especially his exorcism of demons. The death of Jesus, however, subverts the plan and defeats Satan. The reason for this defeat differs among the church fathers. One interpretation, which presumes that Satan had rightful dominion over humanity on account of Adam's sin, sees Satan's killing of Jesus as abusing this right because Jesus was sinless. This does not presuppose Satan's ignorance; Augustine discusses this abuse of power theory without referring to the deception of the devil.<sup>45</sup> Other church fathers employed the image of the bait and hook, which is Jesus' divinity cloaked in his humanity.<sup>46</sup> Satan would not have approached Jesus if he had recognized that he was the Son of God, but he was tricked. Satan's instigation of the crucifixion is a tactical mistake; he should have obstructed it instead.

The deception of the devil narrative eventually included the motif of Satan's attempting to prevent the crucifixion. As before, Satan instigates the passion, but as the trial proceeds, he gradually realizes that he has made a terrible mistake and takes steps to prevent Jesus' death at two different points.<sup>47</sup> The first attempt is exegetically linked to the dream of Pilate's wife, who reports to her husband that he should have nothing to do with Jesus (Matt 27:19). The dream, which in Matthew seems to be a sign from God, is reinterpreted in the deception tradition as a message from Satan. The second attempt is derived from the events at the foot of the cross, where the crowd asks Jesus to save himself, if he is able (Matt 27:40; Mark 15:30; Luke 23:37). In the original context, the crowd is mocking Jesus, but in the deception

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<sup>40</sup> Izydorczyk 1997, 46–8.

<sup>41</sup> See Murray 2006, 338–40.

<sup>42</sup> Marx 1995, 54.

<sup>43</sup> Izydorczyk 1997, 48 n.23. Marx 1995, 54–5, discusses at some length the Latin translation, *Sermo de Confusione Diaboli*, published in Rand 1904.

<sup>44</sup> The account is based on Marx 1995, 7–17.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 13.12–5 (PL 42:1026–9).

<sup>46</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio Catechetica Magna* 24 (PG 45.65–6); Gregory the Great, *Moral.* 33.7 (PL 76:680–1).

<sup>47</sup> Marx 1995, 50–52, briefly discusses the history of this motif.

tradition, Satan is inducing the crowd to beg Jesus to come down from the cross. The words of mockery have become a genuine plea.

The reinterpretation of the mockery is the older of these two traditions, dating back to Jerome (347–420) in his commentary on Matthew.<sup>48</sup> The reinterpretation of the dream of Pilate's wife is at least as old as Bede (673–735), who refers to it in his own commentary on the same Gospel.<sup>49</sup> The two traditions are found together in the commentary of Paschasius Radbertus (790–865),<sup>50</sup> and both were adopted by two widely diffused twelfth century theological textbooks, the *Glossa ordinaria*,<sup>51</sup> which is a running commentary on the Vulgate, and Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica*,<sup>52</sup> a biblical paraphrase that was composed in Latin and subsequently translated into many vernacular languages. The latter work even supplies an explanation for Satan's about-face: the pre-Christian saints had begun celebrating in Hades, alerting Satan to the gravity of the situation. This tradition also spread into vernacular literature. For example, the Middle English allegorical poem *Piers Plowman* (B.18.297–301) and the Cornish mystery play *Passio Christi* (1907–68; 2193–18), both from the fourteenth century, use the tradition about the dream of Pilate's wife.<sup>53</sup> Although most of these writings are late, the tradition itself is older than most of the Jewish sources cited. The popularity of the tradition in the later Middle Ages attests to the vitality of the tradition over the course of many centuries.

### 7. The Question of Influence

In both Judaism and Christianity, early versions of the beloved son's sacrifice, such as those found in the book of *Jubilees* or the New Testament, present Satan (or a cognate figure) as the instigator, while later versions in patristic and rabbinic literature have Satan trying to prevent the same sacrifice. The two themes are compatible. In the Talmud, Satan both provokes God to instigate the trial and obstructs Abraham's path. Likewise, in Christian narratives, Satan is always the instigator of the passion, even in later narratives where he attempts to reverse this plan. Moreover, in both religions Satan's obstruction is an addition that becomes a fixture of later retellings, as reflected in the deception of the devil narrative and in the midrashim. Out of this evidence, some crucial questions arise: What was the cause of these parallel developments? Did the two traditions influence each other, or was the transmission unilateral?

With respect to the first question, one can posit that Satan's role changed in response to developing theological reflection about the Akedah and the Passion Narrative. Satan was first imported into the Akedah from the book of Job. The desire to make the Akedah a satanic trial, like Job's sufferings, is sufficient to explain the depiction of Mastema in pre-Christian writings. The hostility of Satan in the later midrashim is not explicable from the texts themselves, but they do become comprehensible when paired with the notion of the merit accrued from the sacrifice of Isaac, which Satan is trying to prevent. The midrashim seem designed to put the much older idea of the sacrifice's merit into narrative form. On the Christian side, the theme of Satan's ignorance explains why he would instigate an event that proved his own undoing. It is a product of New Testament exegesis.

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<sup>48</sup> *Comm. Matt. 27* (PL 26:211).

<sup>49</sup> *In Matthaei Evangelium Expositio* 4 (PL 92:121).

<sup>50</sup> *Expositio in Evangelium Matthaei* 12 (PL 120:937–8).

<sup>51</sup> *Textus Biblie cum Glossa Ordinaria et Nicolai de Lyra Postilla*, 5 84r–85r.

<sup>52</sup> *Historia Scholastica* 167–72 (PL 198:1628–30).

<sup>53</sup> Citations from Meldrum 1992, 615.

Did the narratives influence each other? On the one hand, both the presence of Satan and the efficacious sacrifice of the beloved son are essential features of the Christian narrative since they are in the canonical texts of the New Testament, while neither is a feature of Genesis 22. Satan as instigator seems like a variation of the tradition from the book of *Jubilees*, since both *Jubilees* and the New Testament turn on the paradox that the Satan's victory is ultimately his undoing. However, there is nothing specifically Jewish about the deception of the devil narrative. It is thoroughly Christian in origin.

On the other hand, all four of the Jewish narratives betray some Christian influence. The second part of the talmudic narrative parallels Jesus' temptation in the New Testament (Matt 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). In both temptation narratives, Satan offers a series of increasingly forceful arguments, resorting to scriptural proofs that the hero rebuffs with his own citations. The comparison may seem general, but the parallels between the two stories are more pronounced when one observes the absence of these features in the temptation narratives of *Genesis Rabbah* and *Midrash Tanhuma*. The Babylonian Talmud, however, does not necessarily reflect post-New Testament developments of Satan's attempt to prevent the crucifixion. Knowledge of the Gospels suffices for the parallels between the temptation stories, although the juxtaposition of temptation and sacrifice—an important part of the patristic narrative—is implicit in the text.<sup>54</sup>

The Palestinian midrashim also display some knowledge of Christian tradition. *Genesis Rabbah* compares Isaac's shouldering of the wood for the sacrifice to a man taking up his cross, echoing a phrase in the synoptic Gospels (*Gen. Rab.* 56:3; Matt 16:24; Mark 8:24; Luke 9:23). In *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*, Isaac literally dies and comes back to life, which not only suggests the death and resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels, but also reflects a passing comment about Isaac in Heb 11:19. This verse could be taken to mean that Abraham actually killed Isaac because he knew God could resurrect the dead. In addition, both works contain an anti-Christian polemic. *Genesis Rabbah* states that Isaac's sacrifice, while bloodless, was still meritorious, while in *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*, Isaac's death and resurrection have no effect at all. Instead, the ram's death counts, and he does not come back to life. *Midrash Tanhuma* refers to Isaac's merit through his bloodshed, an older tradition found in the *Mekiltas*. The influence of Christianity on the *Mekiltas* is, of course, part of the question at stake and cannot be used as evidence. *Midrash Tanhuma*, however, comes closest of any Jewish source to the patristic narrative: Satan examines the beloved son with a series of initial temptations before making a failed last ditch effort to frustrate the efficacious and bloody sacrifice.

The presence of Satan at the beloved son's sacrifice is undoubtedly of Jewish origin. However, Satan is an essential part of the Christian narrative, his desire to impede the sacrifice is a Christian invention, and later Jewish texts reflecting this theme all show additional Christian influence. Given this evidence, it seems unlikely that the Jewish tradition of Satan impeding the Akedah is an independent parallel development.

## 8. Conclusion

Satan's obstruction of the beloved son's sacrifice is a Christian narrative that was adopted by Jews. The Babylonian Talmud is an ambiguous case that is halfway between the pre-Christian and Christian traditions, since it reflects both the prologue in heaven from *Jubilees* and Jesus'

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<sup>54</sup> R. Yohanan possibly knew of Origen, who was among the first to juxtapose the temptation with the crucifixion. Both men lived in the third century, before any known written attestation of Satan's obstruction of the passion. For a discussion of Origen's influence on R. Yohanan, see Dorival and Naiweld 2013, 121–38.

temptation from the Gospels. The midrashim, however, do not represent any pre-Christian tradition concerning Satan at the Akedah. It is important to note that Mastema, once he instigates the trial, watches from the sidelines, while Satan and Samael constantly interfere with the biblical heroes. The method of transmission remains a mystery for the moment, though the first Christian witness to the idea of the obstruction could not be more apt. Jerome, in addition to being a Hebraist, lived in Palestine and consulted with Jews.

If the motif is indeed of Christian origin, then what does this say about Christian influence on the Jewish Akedah? First, it shows that Jews did adopt aspects of Christian narratives. This opens the possibility to claim that the shedding of Isaac's blood from the *Mekiltas* also derives from Christian influence as an apology against the claim that Isaac did not suffer. Satan's presence, however, does not have any polemic or apologetic function. He is not necessarily connected to the idea of Isaac's meritorious sacrifice, since the rendition of Genesis 22 in the Palestinian Targumim feature Isaac's merit but not Satan. By including Satan, the three midrashic treatments emphasize the importance of this sacrifice for Israel. Like the Passion Narrative, the Akedah was considered an event of cosmic proportions, but Isaac's willingness to die undercut some of the dramatic conflict of the original biblical story. Satan, then, was adopted for *aesthetic* reasons, as a way of turning the Akedah into the "Greatest Story Ever Told."

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