

## RASHI'S READING OF THE AKEDAH

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Professor Bregman's paper on visualization in the rabbinic approach to the Akedah offers a perspective into early Jewish scriptural interpretation that sharpens and augments our understanding of Rashi's task as a biblical exegete. Bregman's approach is a creative synthesis of narrative theory, theology, and film metaphor. The basis of his argument is that the Biblical text provided the compilers of Midrash with a series of verbal markers that allowed them to open up biblical narratives by means of a series of interrogatives statements. On the basis of these questions to the Rabbis could respond and re-weave the bare skein of the biblical narrative into text than could be "envisioned" by its later readers.

One of the primary resources for the transmission of rabbinic exposition and expansion of the Bible was the literary work of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes, known also as Rashi. The originality of Rashi's exegesis rests upon his unique ability to create a continuous narrative of Scriptural passages that have been fused with a careful selection of passages from rabbinic literature. This fusion of biblical and rabbinic texts permits the reader to read passages from the Pentateuch and discern a unique reading of Scripture that presents a unity of Written and Oral Torah.

Reading the narrative of Genesis 22, the Akedah, provides an occasion to observe Rashi weave together three elements: 1] The overarching narrative of God's continuing nurture of Israel in the exile; 2] The demonstration of the unity of thought in the Akedah passages; 3] The use of the linguistic elements in the biblical text to demonstrate the link between the Scripture and the interpretive community which continues to be drawn into the biblical text.

At the core of Rashi's fusion of these three elements into his commentary is the reality that the narrative of the Akedah was linked from a very early period in rabbinic literature to the Holy Day of Rosh Hashanah. From a careful reading of his commentary on the Akedah we can observe how carefully Rashi focuses on the elements of the biblical story. At a specific point in that narrative, Rashi makes a subtle shift from the biblical characters Abraham and Isaac to future generations of the people Israel who read the account of the Akedah.

## **I. Framing the Narrative**

Rashi begins his commentary on the narrative of Genesis 22 with careful attention to the order of events. He supplies both an external causality and an internal causality at the outset of the "Akedah" The initial comment on v. 1 is an abbreviation of Talmud Sanhedrin 89b that argues the word *devarim* refers to the "words" of Satan who challenges God about whether or not Abraham is capable of making a great sacrifice in gratitude for the fulfillment of the divine promise that Abraham will indeed have a son. Drawing Satan into the account of the Akedah here may well allude to the liturgy of the New Year where the idea that Satanic forces are broken by the sound of the ram's horn [yet another allusion to the rabbinic traditions on the Akedah].

Rashi provides another narrative point of entry when his commentary raises the possibility that the "words" at the beginning of the narrative allude to a conflict between Isaac and his half-brother Ishmael. Ishmael claims the superiority of his circumcision to that of Isaac. The retort of Isaac is that he would not only offer one member of his body to God, but

his entire body as a sacrifice. As well shall observe, Rashi does not follow this Ishmael/Isaac exchange, but focuses on the interaction between Abraham and Isaac.<sup>1</sup>

After the conclusion of the events described in the binding of Isaac Rashi describes the thoughts of Abraham as if he were reflecting upon what had transpired. This reflection takes place even before Abraham returns to learn the news of Sarah's death—the point at which the classical rabbinic literature demarcated the next Sabbath lection. Immediately after the Akedah Abraham considers the possibilities of marriage for Isaac. This marital union would confirm the divine promise that Abraham would have a continuity of his line. The reader discerns from Rashi's comment that Abraham's consideration of a proper mate for Isaac occurs as a reward for his obedience to the divine command.<sup>2</sup>

Within the framework of these two comments that are placed at the beginning and the end of the narrative Rashi describes the inner qualities that constitute the character of Abraham. This character development conforms with the framing of the narrative in terms of a conflict between God and the angels in some of the Midrash literature or as Rashi has chosen here the Midrash which relates the entire passage to a "testing" of Abraham as suggested by Satan.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen.22:1 *after these things* Some of our Sages say (*Sanh.* 89b) [that this happened]: after the words [translating "devarim" as "words"] of Satan, who was accusing and saying, "Of every feast that Abraham made, he did not sacrifice before You one bull or one ram!" He [God] said to him, "Does he do anything but for his son? Yet, if I were to say to him, 'Sacrifice him before Me,' he would not withhold [him]." And some say," after the words of Ishmael," who was boasting to Isaac that he was circumcised at the age of thirteen, and he did not protest. Isaac said to him," With one organ you intimidate me? If the Holy One, blessed be He, said to me, 'Sacrifice yourself before Me,' I would not hold back." - Cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 55:4.

<sup>2</sup> Gen.22:20 *after these matters that it was told, etc.* When he returned from Mount Moriah, Abraham was thinking and saying, "Had my son been slaughtered, he would have died without children. I should have married him to a woman of the daughters of Aner, Eshkol, or Mamre. The Holy One, blessed be He, announced to him that Rebecca, his mate, had been born, and that is the meaning of after these matters."

The virtue of humility is ascribed to Abraham when he responds to the divine call.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the virtue of humility Abraham is described as "righteous" who experience the quality of wonder or waiting before their reward is disclosed to them.<sup>4</sup> To the virtues of humility and righteousness the disposition of "zeal for the commandments" is demonstrated by Abraham's early awakening to set forth on the journey.<sup>5</sup>

By describing the inner qualities of Abraham the commentary by Rashi provides the readers an occasion for reflection on the relationship between God and humanity. As the paradigmatic ancestor of the Jewish people all of Abraham's conduct is a roadmap for the behavior of future generations. In particular, Rashi's commentary almost at the outset demonstrates a concern for the divine benevolence toward Abraham. If God were to "test" Abraham with a capricious request, it would diminish both the virtue of Abraham and the benevolence of God toward Abraham and his descendants. To underscore the tension between Abraham's eagerness to obey God's command and divine favor towards him, Rashi indicates that God revealed the location of the mountain only after three days so that one could not claim that God "confused" or "confounded" him. After due consideration on the journey, Abraham moved on toward the mountain.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gen. 22:2 *Here I am* This is the reply of the pious. It is an expression of humility and an expression of readiness.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 22:2 *one of the mountains* The Holy One, blessed be He, makes the righteous wonder (other editions: makes the righteous wait), and only afterwards discloses to them [His intentions], and all this is in order to increase their reward. Likewise, (above 12:1): "to the land that I will show you," and likewise, concerning Jonah (3:2): "and proclaim upon it the proclamation." - [from *Gen. Rabbah* 55:7]

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 22:3 *And... arose early* He hastened to [perform] the commandment (Pes. 4a).

<sup>6</sup> Gen. 22:4 *On the third day* Why did He delay from showing it to him immediately? So that people should not say that He confused him and confounded him suddenly and deranged his mind, and if he had had time to think it over, he would not have done it. - [from *Gen. Rabbah* 55:6]

## II. The Dialectical Conversations

The concern that the events of Gen. 22 are entirely the result of Abraham's free will is re-enforced by Rashi's commentary by the strategic placement of two "conversations" between Abraham and the realm of the divine at the beginning of the narrative and in the denouement. The commentary, drawing upon rabbinic Midrashim, reveals Abraham is one who questions the requests made by the heavenly realm. After his initial questions, however, he submits to the divine request.

Erich Auerbach's essay on Odysseus' Scar has drawn attention to the "discussion" between the lines of Gen.22:2. Rashi's commentary summarizes the statements from TB Sanhedrin 89b that indicate that God implores Abraham to pass the test imposed upon him.<sup>7</sup> The commentary than continues with the phrases from the biblical text combined with glosses from Genesis Rabbah. From this combination of text and commentary Abraham attempts to diffuse the command from God by indicating the ambiguity in each phrase such as **your son** He [Abraham] said to Him, "I have two sons." He [God] said to him, "**Your only one.**" He said to Him, "This one is the only son of his mother, and that one is the only son of his mother." He said to him, "**Whom you love.**" He said to Him, "I love them both." He said to him, "**Isaac.**" The concluding statement of the Midrash author now underscores the importance of the divine benevolence toward Abraham. God did not give Abraham the direct commandment at the beginning "in order not to confuse him." Furthermore, the command was shape to make it more "endearing" for Abraham and so that God could increase the reward that would be bestowed upon him.

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<sup>7</sup> Gen.22:2 *Please take* is only an expression of a request. He [God] said to him, "I beg of you, pass this test for Me, so that people will not say that the first ones [tests] had no substance." - [from *Sanh.* ad loc.]

"endearing" for Abraham and so that God could increase the reward that would be bestowed upon him.<sup>8</sup>

Another dialogue between Abraham and the heavenly realm appears in Rashi's commentary to 22:12. The angel acknowledges Abraham's fidelity to the divine command. Abraham is one who "fears God" because he did not withhold his son. Rashi's commentary summarizes Genesis Rabbah 56:8. It explicitly states that Abraham complains to God that the divine will has oscillated: God had previously promised Abraham progeny in 21:12 and retracted this promise by requesting the "taking" of Isaac. The call by the angel to withhold his hand [22:11] now appears to be another change of mind. The dialogue concludes with a quotation from Ps. 89:35, "I shall not profane my covenant, neither shall I alter the utterance of my lips." God demonstrates to Abraham that his command was not to slaughter Isaac, but only to "Bring him up." The nuance of "bringing him up" means that God can demand of Abraham at this moment in the narrative, "Take him down."<sup>9</sup>

We should note here that this passage from Genesis Rabbah was marked by Abraham Berliner who produced the critical edition of Rashi's commentary as part of Munich Ms. 5, the oldest Rashi text. However, it does not appear in the Reggio di Calabria first printed edition or in the Alkabetz text of Rashi. Despite its absence from these two significant witnesses to the manuscript tradition or Rashi's commentary, the structure of the commentary would demand giving it careful attention as

<sup>8</sup> Gen. 22:2 Now why did He not disclose this to him at the beginning? In order not to confuse him suddenly, lest his mind become distracted and bewildered, and also to endear the commandment to him and to reward him for each and every expression. - [from *Sanh.* 89b, *Gen. Rabbah* 39:9, 55:7]

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 22:12 *for now I know* Said Rabbi Abba: Abraham said to Him, "I will explain my complaint before You. Yesterday, You said to me (above 21:12): 'for in Isaac will be called your seed,' and You retracted and said (above verse 2): 'Take now your son.' Now You say to me, 'Do not stretch forth your hand to the lad.'" The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him (Ps. 89:35): "I shall not profane My covenant, neither shall I alter the utterance of My lips." When I said to you, "Take," I was not altering the utterance of My lips. I did not say to you, "Slaughter him," but, "Bring him up." You have brought him up; [now] take him down. - [from *Gen. Rabbah* 56:8]

it raises the significant issue of whether or not there is caprice with respect to God's promises, especially the election of the Jewish people as Israel who are descendants through the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

### III. The Theme of Divine Affection and Nations of the World

Why did the idea of God changing his mind so occupy Rashi? Perhaps the answer is to be discovered in the following passage that links directly with this dialogue affirming the consistency of the divine mind and the affection or "love" that God has for Abraham. If we turn to v. 11 where the angel calls out Abraham's name twice, Rashi states that the double use of Abraham's name is an "expression of affection."

However, in v. 12 this idea is extended beyond those mentioned directly in the biblical text, Abraham and God, to the larger narrative framework that Rashi constructed in v. 1, the problem of Satan's accusation against Abraham.

**for now I know** From now on, I have a response to Satan and the nations who wonder what is My love towards you.

The term *Âhibbah*' or affection is repeated from v. 11 and then Rashi's commentary offers a further explanation for Abraham's reward. Abraham's obedience to God and the divine decision to withhold the sacrifice permits God to respond to both Satan and the nations of the world.

We should call attention to the juxtaposition of Satan and "nations of the world" with the notion of divine *Hibbah* or love for Abraham. The late eleventh century context of Rashi's commentary in the Christian world draws a focus toward Christian expositors that affirmed a consistent reading of the Hebrew Bible as the growing love and consciousness of God for the Church. The Christian typology of Isaac as Christ bound on the altar posed a direct challenge to the Jewish reading of the Akedah. Rashi subtly indicates that the nations will be "astounded" at God's continuing love for Abraham.

The literary move in v. 12 from a specific incident in the text of Scripture to the nations of the world parallels the exegetical pattern of

Rashi on Ps. 2 where the psalm is inserted into the narrative from II Samuel about the Davidic coronation and the attack by the Philistines on David moves to an application of the Psalm in v. 10 to the nations of the world.

Rashi's commentary continues his expanded temporal framework for the narrative of the Akedah into the life of Israel in succeeding generations in his comment on verses 13 and 14. In verse 13 we read:

**instead of his son** Since it is written: "and offered it up for a burnt offering," nothing is missing in the text. Why then [does it say]: "instead of his son"? Over every sacrificial act that he performed, he prayed, "May it be [Your] will that this should be deemed as if it were being done to my son: as if my son were slaughtered, as if his blood were sprinkled, as if my son were flayed, as if he were burnt and reduced to ashes." [from Tan. Shelach 14]

Rashi indicates here that the words "instead of his son" does not indicate something missing in the text—i.e. that there was a substitute or vicarious offering—but that in addition to the ram, Abraham offered a prayer. Here Rashi draws upon Tanchuma Shelach 14 with parallels in Num. R. 17:2. R. 56:9 and Pesikta Rabbati 40 and his petition is for God to look upon the sacrifice of the ram as if he had performed all the physical actions of sacrifice on the ram upon his son Isaac. The rabbinic idea that sacrifice and prayer are linked is thus demonstrated within the context of the biblical narrative itself.

However, the commentary on this verse adumbrates Rashi's exposition of the following verse where he asserts that the biblical text itself foreshadows the response of the Jewish people for all future generations.

The commentary begins by formulating lexical foundation for his expanded interpretation of the verse.

**14 The Lord will see** Its plain or lexical meaning can be explained according to the *Targum* that renders the words as follows: The Lord will choose and see for Himself this place, to cause His Divine Presence to rest therein and for offering sacrifices here.

What lies behind this linguistic explanation is a bridge between the event of the Akedah and the place where future generations of Israelites will bring their sacrifices. Indeed, the Divine presence is to be discovered in that place. Bregman's idea of "visualization" may be appropriate to note here. God will look at the place where Isaac was sacrificed and deem it the place of the indwelling presence where sacrifices will be offered.

The commentary moves to bridge the temporal gap between the events in the narrative of Scripture and the future actions of the people of Israel by expounding the phrase, *as it is said to this day*: "the days of when future generations will say about it," *On this mountain, the Holy One, blessed be He, appears to His people.* "

The shift of the biblical word *yea'mer* from the Hebrew *yir'u* allows for the generalization from the biblical text about where God will appear. Note that Rashi simply quotes the biblical verse about God's appearance on the mountain. This allows for the next comment that focuses directly upon the meaning of "this day." Rashi immediately sets a rendering of "this day" as "the days in the future." This explanation supports the translation with a "general rule" in Scripture that the use of "until this day" refers to future generations.

On the basis of the future orientation of "this day" Rashi asserts that it is the reading of this verse by future generations on behalf of all the future generations of Israel who will read this verse refer the biblical text of Gen. 22:14 as the time in which they live.

What is noteworthy in Rashi's exposition here is the assumption that Scripture incorporates within itself the concept of those who read the verse *qor'im Miqra zeh* will understand that it refers specifically to the time in which they are living. On the basis of this linguistic foundation, Rashi advances to his final point in the exposition of the Akedah. [God will look upon the Akedah every year to forgive Israel and save them from punishment.] Based on the premise that "this very day" is the occasion for future generations to recite these Scriptural verses the act of reading the narrative of the Akedah will move God to forgive Israel and save them from divine punishment. This theurgic reading of the Akedah opens the

possibility for Rashi to offer an even more radical image of what moves God toward mercy,

in order that it will be said "on this day" in all generations to come: "On the mountain God will look upon Isaac's ashes heaped up and standing for atonement.

My own reading of the passage here shifts the biblical phrase for Rashi's comment to simply "mountain of God" and reads a *qal* imperfect of *yireh* instead of *ye'ar'eh* in the biblical text. I offer this re-reading because it is supported by the argument Rashi offers. The idea that God looks upon the ashes of Isaac to atone for the people of Israel is known from the later piyyut of Ephraim b. Jacob of Bonn (b. 1132) with the rabbinic background explained by Shalom Spiegel in *The Last Trial* on pp. 38-44. However, the Midrashim cited by Spiegel all indicate a reticence to make the claim that Isaac was reduced to ashes. They use the rabbinic euphemism "as if they were reduced to ashes." Tanchuma vayera 23 uses the phrase "as if they were heaped up on the altar."

Although it is clear that Rashi's commentary has its roots in the words that earlier Midrashim such as Pesikta Rabbati 40 and Tanchuma Vayera compose as Abraham's petition to God, Rashi's version offers no hesitation and refers directly to the ashes of Isaac as heaped up and standing before God calling forth the divine mercy. If we look at Professor Bregman's idea that the biblical text of the Akedah evoked various perspectives of visualization in the rabbinic imagination, we can discern that Rashi continued in the tradition of the Rabbis. However, his commentary called upon God to look upon the ashes of Isaac heaped on the altar. If the divine eye were cast upon this pile of ashes it would surely evoke mercy for Israel, the children of Abraham—who was beloved of God.