

MELITO, THE JEWISH COMMUNITY AT SARDIS, AND THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

ROBERT L. WILKEN

University of Notre Dame

SINCE THE PUBLICATION of Melito of Sardis' *Paschal Homily (PH)* in 1940, an enormous literature has grown up around a man known previously only through a few fragments. Though the *PH* has merited the greater attention in recent years, and rightly so, the fragments are still important for an understanding of Melito. Three of the fragments which have come down to us in the catenae deal with the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22, a text of some significance for Judaism during the period. These fragments are particularly interesting when viewed in the light of the *Paschal Homily* and the situation in Sardis at the time Melito was bishop; for equally if not more important than the discovery of the *PH* has been the excavation of an enormous Jewish synagogue in Sardis in the last decade. The excavation of this synagogue has given us a new perspective on the religious complexion of Sardis during the second and third centuries.¹ In the following I should like to examine Melito's fragments on the sacrifice of Isaac (*Akedah Isaac*) in light of the Jewish interpretation of the *Akedah* in the early centuries of the common era.

JEWS IN SARDIS

Sardis was the chief city of the province of Lydia, near the junction of the roads from Ephesus, Pergamum, and Smyrna and the main road leading into central Asia Minor. Originally the capital of the ancient Lydian kingdom, Sardis became a Greek city during the Hellenistic period and was later annexed by Rome in 133 B.C.E. The city flourished under Rome, but in 17 C.E. it suffered a severe earthquake. Emperor Tiberius granted Sardis 10,000,000 sesterces to assist in rebuilding, and the city entered upon a new phase of prosperity. New buildings were constructed, among which were an immense gymnasium with two halls, each 100 meters long and walls a meter thick, a large basilica, a majestic colonnaded street, and a row of shops and stores. At this time the population numbered some 100,000, a very respectable size for a Greek

¹ For the importance of the Jewish community in Sardis for understanding Melito, see A. T. Kraabel, "Melito the Bishop and the Synagogue at Sardis: Text and Context," *Studies Presented to George M. A. Hanfmann*, ed. D. G. Mitten, J. G. Pedley, and J. A. Scott (Cambridge, 1971) pp. 77-85; and *Judaism in Western Asia Minor* (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1968); also Sherman E. Johnson, "Christianity in Sardis," in *Early Christian Origins: Studies in Honor of H. Willoughby*, ed. A. Wikgren (Chicago, 1961) pp. 81-90.

city. As a sign of its fondness for the benevolence of Rome, the city fathers erected a statue to Lucius Verus (coemperor 161–69 C.E.).²

Jews first settled in Sardis as early as the sixth or fifth century B.C.E. according to Obadiah 20: "Exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad (*SPRD*) shall possess the cities of the Negeb." A bilingual Aramaic-Lydia inscription discovered in 1916 indicates that the term Sepharad is the Aramaic name for Sardis in Asia Minor.³ We hear nothing further of Jews in the area until Josephus' report of the transportation of two thousand Jewish families from Mesopotamia and Babylonia to Lydia and Phrygia in the third century B.C.E. by Antiochus III. Presumably he hoped the Jews would be loyal supporters of his rule in a turbulent area. The decree makes provision for the Jews to practice their own customs and keep their laws. Sardis, which was the central city of Lydia, was no doubt the headquarters of Zeuxis, Antiochus' satrap in Lydia, and it is probable that some of the Jews settled in Sardis or its vicinity.⁴ From the first century C.E. Josephus records a number of other decrees indicating that the Jews were well established in the area and were able to follow their ancestral ways. A decree of the people of Sardis⁵ assures the Jews of the right to gather together, adjudicate suits among themselves, gather on holy days, have their own "building" (*topos*),⁶ and even that suitable foods be available in the market.

Sardis was only one among many settlements of Jews in the area.⁷ Archeological evidence testifies to the presence of Jews in Smyrna, Ephesus, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Thyatira, Apamea, Miletus, Acmonia, and other cities. In some cases Jews had their own buildings; in Miletus there are special seats in the theater marked for Jews; and other inscriptions indicate the visibility of the Jewish communities. Cicero, in his defense of Flaccus, propraetor of Asia (26 B.C.E.), praised Flaccus

²For the city's history, see G. M. A. Hanfmann, "Sardis und Lydien," *Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften Klasse, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz*, no. 6 (Mainz, 1960) 497–536. For the excavations see the continuing reports in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research (BASOR)* beginning in 1959. Dedication to Lucius Verus in *BASOR* 158 (1960) 9–10.

³H. Donner and W. Roellig, *Kanaanische und Aramaeische Inschriften* (Wiesbaden, 1962) 1, no. 260; 2, pp. 305–9.

⁴Josephus, *Antiquities* 12,147–53. On the authenticity of the decree, A. Schlalit, "Jewish Military Colonies in Phrygia and Lydia," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 59 (1960) 298–318.

⁵Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14, 259; and another decree of the Roman quaestor and propraetor to magistrates of Sardis, *Ant.* 12, 253.

⁶C. Robert, T. G. Skeat, and A. D. Nock, "The Guild of Zeus Hypsistos," *Harvard Theological Review* 29 (1936) 46.

⁷For a survey of the evidence, see Kraabel, *Judaism, passim*; and more recently, S. Safrai and M. Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Philadelphia, 1974) pp. 143–55.

because he would not allow Jewish contributions to leave Asia for Jerusalem. The amount of money to be sent from Apamea to Jerusalem was 100 pounds and from Laodicea, a short distance away, 20 pounds, and from two other cities a smaller amount. Even if the money from Apamea was collected from the whole area, that amount is impressive and reflects a sizable Jewish population.⁸ Even though these Jews had been in the area for a long time and were well integrated into the life of the cities, they maintained their ancestral customs. In Hierapolis, for example, an inscription mentions the feast of unleavened bread and the feast of weeks. They had not lost their identity as Jews.⁹

The excavation of the synagogue at Sardis corroborates our earlier information about Jews in the area.¹⁰ The synagogue, a large basilica some ninety meters long, includes an assembly hall 18 × 59.65 meters, to which is attached a forecourt with a larger *krater*. The roof was supported by six massive piers. Inside is a marble table 2.43 × 1.23 meters, flanked on either side by two eagles. Among the decorations are reliefs with a Menorah, Lulab and Shofar. The building is situated among the public buildings in Sardis and was erected after the earthquake in 17 C.E. It was not built by the Jews but was acquired by them sometime in the second century and served as their place of worship and instruction. Epigraphic evidence from the site indicates that some of the members of the Jewish community held prominent civic positions; nine out of twenty-seven males have the title *Bouleutēs*, three use *Sardianos*, three were members of the provincial administration, and one a financial officer of the imperial administration. The inscriptions are in Greek and the names are Greek, except for one with the letters *BYRS*. Some have suggested that this be read *BEROS*, i.e., Verus. If so, it may refer to Lucius Verus, who visited the city in 169 C.E. On the occasion of the Emperor's visit the Jews of Sardis may have presented their tribute to him.¹¹

CHRISTIANITY IN SARDIS

Christianity first came to western Asia Minor through the efforts of Jewish-Christian teachers such as Paul. He passed directly through Phrygia, Lydia, and Asia and may have stopped in Sardis, though there is no evidence of this. He did establish Christian groups in neighboring cities such as Laodicea, Ephesus, and Colossae. By the beginning of the second century Christians could be found in many cities of the area: Pergamum, Thyatira, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Ephesus, Tralles, Hierapo-

⁸ Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 67-68.

⁹ *Corpus inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, no. 777; Kraabel, *Judaism*, p. 125.

¹⁰ For the synagogue see *BASOR* 170 (1963), 174 (1964), 187 (1967); also Louis Robert, *Nouvelles inscriptions de Sardes* (Paris, 1964).

¹¹ Specific references in this paragraph from *BASOR* 187 (1967) 32, 27, 25, 29.

lis, Magnesia, Laodicea, Colossae, Miletus. These groups were probably composed of converts from Judaism, because the cities in which Christians are found are often the same ones where we know of Jewish communities. Indeed, the correspondence is impressive.

The actual number of Christians in Asia Minor must have been small when compared to the number of Jews. In Sardis itself there is no evidence until the time of Melito except the "letter" in the Apocalypse (3:1) addressed to the church at Sardis.¹² Presumably in Sardis the Christians lived in the shadow of the large and influential Jewish community. The Jewish community had deep roots in the city; the Christians were newcomers. Jews held prominent positions, as attested by inscriptions; what we know of Christians comes through their own literature and the evidence is meager. The Jews had their own building; Christians had none.¹³ The Jews were granted toleration to practice their religion; the Christians had no such right. Christianity was a new and relatively unknown sect with little tradition, no sacred book, no claim to antiquity, and it had to make its way in the face of an established and imposing Jewish community.¹⁴

The situation in Sardis bred hostility on the part of the Christians to the Jews, as the writings of Melito testify. Melito's *Paschal Homily* is preoccupied with Judaism. He bitterly assails the Jews for their treatment of Jesus, for their stubbornness, and their inability to understand whom they killed in Jerusalem.

Why, O Israel, did you commit this new wrong? You have dishonored the one who honored you . . . The withered hand restored to the body did not convince you, nor did the eyes of the blind opened by his hand . . . You, however, disregarded these things, and, on the evening of the slaughter of the Lord, you prepared for him sharp nails and false witnesses and snares and scourges and vinegar and gall and sword and affliction, as though for a murderous robber . . . O lawless Israel, why did you commit this new wrong, bringing new sufferings upon the Lord, your master?¹⁵

¹²See Johnson, "Christianity in Sardis," pp. 81-87.

¹³The community may have grown as a result of the general well-being of the Jews in the late second century; see S. Liebermann, "Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 36 (1946) 329-70; John Gager, "The Dialogue of Paganism with Judaism: Bar Kochba to Julian," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 (1973) 89-96.

¹⁴Christian writings reflect the presence of Jews: e.g., Ap 2:9, 3:9, Ignatius, *Magn.* 8; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 12-13, 17-18; also the *Acts of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonica*, and the later *Canons of Laodicea*. The importance of the paschal controversy in Asia Minor in the second century is another indication of the way Christianity in the area was shaped by the presence of strong Jewish communities; (see Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica (HE)* 5, 23-24).

¹⁵*PH* 73-81 (Perler, pp. 100 ff.); see Kraabel, "Melito the Bishop," pp. 78 ff.

Melito's emphasis on the culpability of Israel is not unusual among early Christian writings, but his caustic, satirical style and his preoccupation with Israel's "crime" are striking. Even for an Asianist writer, his language is excessive.

Listen, all families of nations and observe! A new murder has been committed in the midst of Jerusalem, in a law-abiding city, in a Hebrew city, in a prophetic city, in a city considered righteous If the murder had been committed at night or he had been slaughtered in a desert place, it would be advantageous to keep silent, but it was in the midst of the street and of the city, in the midst of the city with everyone looking on¹⁶

The theological argument of the homily centers on the superiority of Christianity to Judaism. "The law is old, but the Logos is new. The prototype is temporal, grace is eternal For in place of the lamb there was God, and in place of the sheep a man The law became Logos and the old became new" ¹⁷ The contrast between the old way and the new way, characteristic of the early Christian writings against the Jews, accented the continuity between Israel and the Church, but in such a way that the Church took the place of Israel. The language supported the Christians in their conviction that their way of life, which derived from Israel, was preferable to Israel itself. Not surprisingly, Melito's homily could become the basis of later works by Christians against the Jews.¹⁸

Though Melito's other writings are known to us only in fragments and by the titles given in later Christian writers, what we do know of them indicates that his preoccupation with Judaism was not limited to the *PH*. He traveled to Palestine to obtain an accurate list of the Jewish Scriptures and on the basis of this list he put together a collection of excerpts comprising six books.¹⁹ Melito's list is the earliest Christian canon and resembles what we know of the Jewish canon. He also wrote a book on the Pasch which is not the same as the *PH*.²⁰ A work *On Suffering*, known to Anastasius of Sinai, includes the sentence "God suffered at the hand of Israel."²¹ He wrote a book *On Politeia* whose

¹⁶ *PH* 94 (Perler, p. 116).

¹⁷ *PH* 3-7. R. Cantalamessa, "Méliton de Sardes, une christologie antignostique du II^e siècle," *Revue de science religieuse* 37 (1963) 1-26, sees the homily directed at Gnostic opponents, but this seems unlikely.

¹⁸ See E. Peterson, "Ps-Cyprian Adversus Iudaeos und Meliton von Sardes," *Vigiliae christianae* 6 (1952) 33-43.

¹⁹ Frg. 3. See A. Sundberg, *The Old Testament of the Early Church* (Cambridge, 1964), p. 56.

²⁰ For this and other titles, see Eusebius, *HE* 4, 26.

²¹ Frg. 7 (Perler, p. 226).

content is unknown, but the term *politeia* was used by Christians to contrast the Jewish way with the Christian way of life. Justin, for example, contrasts the “*politeia* according to the law” with the “*politeia* according to the gospel.”²² Melito’s book may have discussed the same topic. He wrote works on the prophets, on the Church, and on the Lord’s day, all of which could be concerned with Christianity and Judaism. Another title, *On Truth*, occurs in the listings of his work, and the same title is used by Apollinaris in Laodicea in the second century (*HE* 4, 27). In the *PH* Melito uses the term “truth” to refer to the new way as contrasted with the old, i.e., the truth in the sense of reality or finished product as distinguished from type or model: “The old became new . . . the type truth.” The text from Jn 4:23–24 which speaks of “worship in spirit and in truth” was used by Christian writers to contrast the Christian and the Jewish way of life.²³ *On Truth* may be a book on Christianity and Judaism. He also wrote a book *On Washing* and another *On Prophecy*.

Finally, we possess three fragments from Melito dealing with the sacrifice of Isaac.²⁴ These fragments come down to us in the exegetical catenae and it is not possible to determine whether they come from a work devoted exclusively to the sacrifice of Isaac, from another homily, or from another work. They may come from a work on the Pasch,²⁵ since the *Akedah* is linked to the Passover in Judaism, but the fragments give no indication of their original setting. Nevertheless, whatever their context, they are highly significant, because Melito is the first Christian writer to give more than passing notice to the sacrifice of Isaac. Why should Melito give special attention to the sacrifice of Isaac?

THE AKEDAH IN JUDAISM

The *Akedah Isaac* was a prominent motif in Jewish piety during the first centuries of the Common Era. In the synagogue at Dura Europos it

²² Justin, *Dial* 47, 4, Eusebius, *Praep evang* 7, 8, 39, *Demon* 1 2 12, Chrysostom, *Ad Iud* 4, 5, Cyril of Alexandria, *In Isaiam* 43, 25–26 (PG 70, 912 a–b)

²³ See the texts collected in Robert L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (New Haven, 1971) pp 69–92. Cyril of Alexandria entitled an exegetical work on the Pentateuch *On the Adoration and Worship of God in Spirit and in Truth*, a book designed to show the superiority of the Christian way of life over the Jewish way (PG 68, 133–1125)

²⁴ Most editions list four fragments (9–12) but the fourth (12) comes from Eusebius of Emesa, not Melito. See Robert L. Wilken, “The Authenticity of the Fragments of Melito on Sardis on the Sacrifice of Isaac. Comments on Perler’s Edition,” in *Studien zur Kodikologie, Palaeographie und Überlieferungsgeschichte* (Festschrift für Marcel Richard), in *Texte und Untersuchungen*, forthcoming. I cite from O. Perler, *Meliton de Sardes Sur la pâque*, in *Sources chrétiennes* 123 (Paris, 1966) 234–37

²⁵ On the possible connection between the *PH* and the Jewish Haggadah see S. G. Hall, “Melito in the Light of the Passover Haggadah,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 22 (1971) 29–46, also R. Cantalamessa, *L’Omelia “in s Pascha” dello Pseudo-Ippolito di Roma* (Milan, 1967) pp 428 ff

is the only biblical scene to appear on the Torah shrine.²⁶ Other biblical events are portrayed in wall paintings, but the *Akedah* appears on the right side of the Torah shrine. In the center and on the left side there is a representation of the temple and cult symbols, the Ethrog, Lulab, and Menorah. In the synagogue at Beth Alpha, built at a somewhat later date, the *Akedah* appears in a magnificent floor mosaic which dominates the entrance and covers a large part of the floor.²⁷ In several of the Targums on Exodus 12 the *Akedah* is mentioned in the "poem of the four nights," which recalls the four great moments in the history of Israel: creation, *Akedah*, Exodus, and the eschaton. In Jewish tradition the *Akedah* is usually associated with the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah, but in ancient times it may also have been associated with the Passover.²⁸

Perhaps the best place to capture the Jewish view of the *Akedah* from our period is to turn to the interpretative translation of Genesis 22 found in the Targums. The account in *Neofiti* reads (in part) as follows:

5. And Abraham took the wood of the holocaust and placed them upon his son Isaac and took in his hand the fire and the knife and they walked, the two of them together, with a perfect heart. 7. And Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said: Father! And he said: Behold, here I am, my son. And he said: Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for the holocaust? 8. And Abraham said: From before the Lord a lamb will be prepared for the holocaust. And both of them went together with a perfect heart . . . 10. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to sacrifice his son Isaac. Isaac answered and said to his father Abraham: Father, tie me well lest I kick you and your sacrifice be rendered useless and I be pushed down into the pit of destruction in the world to come. The eyes of Abraham were on the eyes of Isaac and the eyes of Isaac were scanning the angels on high. Abraham did not see them. In that hour a voice came forth from the heavens and said: Come see two singular persons which are in my world: one sacrifices and the other is sacrificed; he who sacrifices does not falter and he who is sacrificed stretches forth his neck . . . 14. And Abraham worshipped and prayed in the name of the Word of the Lord and said: I beseech by the mercy that is before you, O Lord. All things are manifest and known before you; that there was no division in my heart the first time that you said to me to sacrifice my son Isaac, to make him dust and ashes before you, but that I immediately arose early in the morning and diligently put your words into practice with gladness and fulfilled your decree. And now when his sons are in the hour of affliction, remember the Aqedah of their father Isaac and listen to the voice of their

²⁶ Carl Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura Europas: The Synagogue* (New Haven, 1956) pp. 56-59.

²⁷ Eleazar Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha* (Jerusalem, 1932).

²⁸ For the Jewish interpretation of the *Akedah* during this period, see Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden, 1961) pp. 134-227; R. Le Déaut, *La nuit pascale* (Rome, 1963) pp. 121-22. For the rabbinical interpretation and a translation of the twelfth century poem by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn on the *Akedah*, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York, 1970).

supplication and hear them and deliver them from all tribulation, because the generations to arise after him shall say: On the mountain of the sanctuary of the Lord, where Abraham offered his son Isaac, on this mountain the Glory of the Shekinah of the Lord was revealed.²⁹

As presented in the book of Genesis, the story in chapter 22 is part of the Abraham saga and is therefore chiefly a story about Abraham. In the account in the Targum, the accent has shifted away from Abraham to Isaac, specifically to the participation of Isaac in his own sacrifice. Whereas in the Genesis account the sacrifice is secondary to the actions and thoughts of Abraham, in the Targum the sacrificial character of the story is highlighted. Isaac is no longer a passive victim but an active participant who voluntarily joins in Abraham's act of obedience. He even asks that he be tied firmly so that the offering will be without blemish. Isaac knows what is to happen, speaks to Abraham, and gives his consent. Isaac also has a vision as he gazes into the heaven, but Abraham only looks into the eyes of Isaac. The Targum says explicitly that Abraham did not see the angels. Finally, and perhaps most important, the Targum appends a prayer which gives the meaning of the *Akedah* for later generations. When later generations suffer and face affliction, they are to pray to God reminding Him of the *Akedah Isaac* and the glory that was revealed on the mountain. The binding of Isaac becomes the basis of God's mercy to Israel.

The interpretation of the *Akedah* as reflected in the *Neofiti* Targum was taking shape during the end of the Second Temple period and the beginning of the tannaitic period.³⁰ It differs significantly from earlier views. Indeed, the *Akedah* does not play a major role in Jewish thought or piety until this period. Prior to this time it was associated not so much with sacrifice as with the virtues of courage and fortitude in the face of persecution and evil. In 4 Maccabees, for example, Abraham is held up as an example: "But she, the mother of those young men, with a soul like Abraham, was not moved from her purpose by her affection for her children." And later in the same book: "She regarded not the saving of her seven sons for a little time, but as a true daughter of Abraham called to mind his God-fearing courage." In these two instances it is Abraham who is held up as example. In another place in 4 Maccabees Isaac as well as other great men from the past are cited as examples of fortitude:

Remember that for the sake of God you have come into the world, and have enjoyed life, and that therefore you owe it to God to endure all pain for His sake; for whom also our father made haste to sacrifice his son Isaac, the ancestor of our

²⁹ A. Diez Macho, *Neophyti 1: Targum Palestinense Ms. de la Bibliotheca Vaticana 1* (Madrid, 1968) 551-52.

³⁰ Vermes and Le Déaut, *passim*.

nation; and Isaac, seeing his father's hand lifting the knife against him, did not shrink. And Daniel . . . was cast to the lions, and Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael were flung into the furnace of fire, and they endured for God's sake.³¹

The author mentions Isaac's willingness to die, thereby giving him an active role in the story, but there is no mention of the sacrificial efficacy of Isaac's death. The stress is on courage in the face of martyrdom.

Although the Targums are the most dramatic evidence of a sacrificial interpretation of the story, other works from the period reflect a similar view. Josephus stresses Isaac's voluntary participation and his account is permeated with sacrificial terminology.³² Philo, sensing that the account in Genesis does not actually describe a sacrifice because Abraham did not complete the act, argues that the sacrifice was nevertheless "complete and perfect" though it was not carried to its intended ending.³³ As the sacrificial character of the story became more central, this problem became more acute and, as we shall see, both Jewish and Christian writers deal with it. Another Jewish work from this same period, the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo, also presents the account as a sacrifice and adds the further point that the *Akedah* was the basis of Israel's election. Abraham, says Pseudo-Philo, "brought him [Isaac] and placed him on the altar, but I [Yahweh] restored him to his father, and because he did not object, the offering was made acceptable in my sight and for the sake of his blood I chose them."³⁴

Rabbinic sources dating from a later period reiterate the views worked out during the early centuries of the Common Era. Here, too, the *Akedah* was understood as a sacrificial offering which became the basis of God's mercy to Israel. In Tr. Rosh Hashanah, R. Abbahu (Amoraic) asks: "Why is a ram's horn used for the trumpeting? So that I might recall for your sake the *Akedah* of Isaac son of Abraham, and account it to your credit as though you bound yourselves on the altar before me."³⁵ Although the precise language of the prayer for Rosh Hashanah cannot be found in the earliest text, Spiegel has shown that in at least four different works, *Genesis Rabbah*, Jerusalem Talmud *Taanit*, *Leviticus Rabbah*, and *Pesikta Rabbati*, similar ideas are expressed, suggesting that they belong to a common ancient tradition. One example:

³¹ 4 Mac 14:20; 15:28; 16; 16:18-23. See also Sir 44:20; 1 Mac 2:52; Jud 8:24-27, and the somewhat unique view of Jubilees 17:15-18. In this connection see O. Schmitz, "Abraham im Spätjudentum und im Urchristentum," in *Aus Schrift und Geschichte: Theologische Abhandlungen A. Schlatter dargebracht* (Stuttgart, 1922), pp. 99-123.

³² *Antiquities* 1, 13, 1-4.

³³ Philo, *De Abrahamo* 177.

³⁴ *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* 18, 5 (ed. Kisch, p. 159); also 23, 2-4 (Kisch, pp. 174-75).

³⁵ Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 16a: see Spiegel, p. 76.

R. Bibi Rubbah in the name of R. Johanan: Father Abraham said before the Holy One, blessed be He; Master of the Universe, it is manifest and known before you that the moment you said to me to offer up my son Isaac on the altar, I had to retort ready, to wit, yesterday you said to me, "For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you," and now you say to me, "And offer him there as a burnt offering." But heaven forbid, I did not act that way; on the contrary, I suppressed my impulse and did your will. So may it be your will, O Lord our God, whenever Isaac's children enter into distress, and there is no one to speak up as their advocate, do you speak up as their advocate, "Adonai yireh," do you in their behalf be mindful of the Akedah of their Father Isaac and be filled with compassion for them.³⁶

The ideas here are quite close to those in the Targums, which come from a much earlier period. Spiegel, whose study was based chiefly on rabbinic documents and not the Targums, confirms the views of Vermes and Le Déaut that the ideas represented in the rabbinic texts go back to the tannaitic period and that they are not unique to one geographical area but were widespread within Judaism.³⁷ We are dealing, then, with an interpretation of the *Akedah* which was current in Judaism by the second century of the Common Era. To the Jew the *Akedah* was a primary symbol of God's mercy and goodness toward Israel. In prayers it was recalled to remind God of His love for Israel and to plead for His mercy during affliction. As such, it was a symbol of comfort and hope for the Jews.

Now it is obvious that we cannot say what the *Akedah* meant for the Jews in Sardis, because it has not appeared in any of the inscriptions or in the synagogue decorations. The Lulab and Menorah which appear on the Torah shrine in Dura Europos do occur at Sardis, but not the *Akedah*. Yet it is reasonable to assume that the Jews knew the *Akedah*, because it occurs in the Septuagint, and that it was as important for them as for Jews elsewhere. Conceivably, the refugees from Palestine after the Bar Kochba rebellion and the fall of the second temple had occasion to reflect on it and find comfort in the prayer of Abraham when they heard tales of the suffering of the Jews at the hands of the Romans. My suggestion is that Melito was aware of the Jewish interpretation and that his own interpretation is an attempt to rescue Isaac for the Christians.

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC IN CHRISTIANITY

Melito was not the first Christian writer to comment on the *Akedah*.³⁸ Earlier writers mention it, but usually only in passing. In Hebrews 11, for

³⁶ *Genesis Rabbah* 56:10; also Jerusalem Talmud, *Taanit* 2:4, 65d, *Leviticus Rabbah* 29:9 and *Pesikta Rabbati* 40.6; Spiegel, pp. 90-91.

³⁷ Spiegel, pp. 95-98.

³⁸ For the Christian interpretation, see David Lerch, *Isaacs Opferung christlich gedeutet*

example, the *Akedah* is mentioned in the catalogue of faithful witnesses who trusted in God's promise. "By faith Abraham, when the test came, offered up Isaac; he had received the promises, and yet he was on the point of offering his only son, of whom he had been told 'Through the line of Isaac your descendants shall be traced.' For he reckoned that God had power even to raise from the dead—and from the dead he did, in a sense, receive him back." The accent here is on Abraham's faith, not on the sacrificial offering of Isaac. James also mentions the account in Genesis 22 but he, too, places the stress on Abraham, not on Isaac. "Was it not by his action, in offering his son Isaac upon the altar, that our father Abraham was justified?" Neither Hebrews nor James takes the *Akedah* to be a type of Jesus.

Although Isaac is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, there is a possibility that certain texts reflect the influence of the *Akedah*.³⁹ The language of Rom 8:32, "God did not spare His son," may reflect the terminology of Genesis 22, a similarity noted by Origen already in the third century,⁴⁰ and Paul's discussion of "expiation" in Rom 3:24–25 may employ sacrificial terminology associated with the offering of Isaac. The phrase "gave His only son" in Jn 3:16 may also be reminiscent of Genesis 22. If the language and ideas surrounding the *Akedah* play a role in Paul's understanding of the death of Jesus, he does not make the parallel explicit. Paul offers no typology of Isaac and Jesus.

The first indication of Isaac as a type of Jesus appears in the *Epistle of Barnabas* in connection with a discussion of fasting. "The Lord gave such a commandment [to fast], since he was destined to offer the vessel of the spirit as a sacrifice for our sins, so that the 'type' which is based on Isaac's having been offered up on the altar also might be fulfilled" (7, 3). The typological possibilities of the *Akedah* are mentioned, but *Barnabas'* comment is quite peripheral to his main argument and it is not pursued. *Barnabas*, however, is an anti-Jewish tract which reflects greater familiarity with Jewish traditions than other early Christian writers.

(Tübingen, 1950). Lerch surveys Christian views from the patristic period up to modern times. His discussion of Melito suffers from two shortcomings: (1) Lerch was not aware of the significance of the Jewish community in Sardis, nor of the *Akedah* in Jewish piety. (2) He treats Jewish views as "background" to Melito, when they should be handled as "foreground," i.e., views which were before Melito because of the community in which he lived. For the patristic interpretation, see also Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality* (London, 1960) pp. 115–30.

³⁹ See Vermes and Le Déaut; also Nils A. Dahl, "The Atonement—An Adequate Reward for the Akedah? Rom. 8:32," *Neotestamentica et Semitica* (Matthew Black Festschrift, ed. E. Willis and M. Wilcox, Edinburgh, 1969), and the older literature cited there, especially articles by Levy and Schoeps; also R. Le Déaut, "La présentation targumique du sacrifice d'Isaac et la sotériologie paulinienne," *Studiorum Paulinorum Congressus internationalis catholicus 2* (Rome, 1963) 563–74.

⁴⁰ Origen, *Hom. in Gen.* 8, 8.

Finally, before turning to Melito, let me mention a passage in Clement of Rome. Clement mentions Abraham and Isaac as examples of faithfulness and trust in God. "Why was our forefather Abraham blest? Was it not because he acted in righteousness and dependability through faith? With confidence Isaac, because he realized what was going to happen, gladly let himself be led to sacrifice" (*1 Clem.* 31).⁴¹ Here Isaac's participation is noted, but he draws no parallel with Jesus.

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC IN MELITO

The sacrifice of Isaac, then, played a minor role in early Christianity during the first 100–150 years. It is mentioned infrequently and only in passing. Melito is the most extensive early Christian commentator on the *Akedah*.⁴² His first fragment reads as follows:

He was bound as a ram is said about our Lord Jesus Christ, and he was shorn as a lamb and brought to slaughter as a sheep and as a lamb he was crucified, and he bore the wood on his shoulders, being led to be sacrificed as Isaac by his father. But Christ suffered, Isaac did not suffer. He was a type of Christ who was going to suffer. But by becoming a type of Christ he produced astonishment and fear among men. One beheld a new mystery, a son led by his father to a mountain for sacrifice, whom, when he had bound him, he placed on the wood for the offering, carefully preparing the things for his sacrifice. Isaac, however, was silent bound, as a ram, neither opening his mouth nor making a sound with his voice. For, neither fearing the knife, nor trembling at the fire, nor grieving because he was going to suffer, he courageously bore the type of the Lord. Isaac then was set forth in the midst bound as a ram and Abraham stood alongside, holding the bare knife, not ashamed to slay his son.⁴³

The text is clear enough. Melito makes Isaac a type of Christ and draws out as many parallels as possible (with the aid of Isaiah 53) between Isaac and Jesus. Like Isaac, Jesus was bound and led to death; Jesus bore the wood of the cross as Isaac bore the wood for the fire; Jesus like Isaac was sacrificed by his Father. Jesus was silent as was Isaac. Jesus voluntarily went to his death as Isaac accepted his suffering without grief. Although the account in the Targums puts a speech in the mouth of Isaac, here he is silent, though Melito makes quite clear that Isaac knew what was to happen and willingly participated in the offering. In spite of the many parallels between Isaac and Jesus, at the key point of Isaac's death the parallel breaks down. Melito says: "Christ suffered, Isaac did not suffer." The collapse of the parallel at the crucial point has

⁴¹ Note the interesting parallel between Clement and Josephus: both say Isaac "gladly" went to his death (*Ant.* 1, 13, 4).

⁴² On Melito see Lerch, pp. 27–46.

⁴³ Frg. 11 (Perler, p. 234).

troubled commentators. Lerch, for example, in his study of the history of the interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac, was puzzled that Isaac should be a type of Jesus, yet does not actually die. This difference between Isaac and Jesus seems to undercut the chief point of the typology. Lerch concluded that there was something “unsatisfying” about Melito’s interpretation.⁴⁴

It is precisely at the point of the death of Isaac and Jesus that we see the rationale behind Melito’s interpretation. Melito wishes to emphasize that Isaac did *not* die but that Jesus *did* die. If the *Akedah* was understood in Judaism as a sacrificial offering which became the basis for God’s mercy to Israel, that the offering was not completed caused certain difficulties. There are hints of this in the early sources, e.g., Philo’s statement that the offering was “perfect and complete” even though it did not come to the intended conclusion. Rabbinic sources also reflect a similar concern. In *Genesis Rabbah*, R. Joshua of Siknim is reported to have said in R. Levi’s name, commenting on Mi 6:6: “Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?”

This passage was said about Mesha, King of Moab, yet it refers to none but Isaac. For it says, “Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?” Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of the soul? Now in the case of Isaac the deed was not actually done, yet he accepted it as though it were completed, whereas in the case of Mesha it was not accepted.⁴⁵

In another place, R. Joshua (130 C.E.) is reported to have said: “The holy one, blessed be he, said to Moses, I keep faith to pay the reward of Isaac son of Abraham, who gave one fourth of his blood on the altar.”⁴⁶ These interpretations attempt to explain how it can be that Isaac’s sacrifice is a genuine sacrifice though no blood was shed, in line with the maxim “no expiation without shedding of blood.”⁴⁷ Now if we place Melito’s comments within a polemical setting vis-à-vis Judaism, it appears that he is taking advantage of the problem posed by the Jewish interpretation and that he uses this difficulty to establish the validity of his reading of the story.

Possible confirmation of such an interpretation comes from a somewhat later period. In one of his Easter epistles, Athanasius mentions that the sacrifice of Isaac was a point of contention between Jews and

⁴⁴Lerch, p.30.

⁴⁵*Genesis Rabbah* 55:5; Spiegel, p. 56.

⁴⁶*Mekhilta of R. Simeon b. Yohai* (ed. D. Hoffmann, p. 4); Spiegel, p. 46.

⁴⁷Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 5a.

Christians. Athanasius attacks the Jewish celebration of Passover and then turns to Abraham and Isaac. Abraham, "who was restrained from sacrificing Isaac, saw the Messiah in the ram which was offered up instead as a sacrifice to God." Not Isaac but the Son who was to come was sacrificed. Abraham was restrained, "lest the Jews, taking occasion from the sacrifice of Isaac, should reject all the prophetic declarations concerning our Savior, but especially those spoken by the Psalmist: 'Sacrifice and offering you would not accept; a body you have prepared for me,' and should refer all such things as these to the son of Abraham." The point at issue here is whether the sacrificial language of the Psalms is to be applied to Isaac or to Jesus, and the Jews point to Isaac. Athanasius then says that the sacrifice of Isaac did not actually take place and therefore accomplished nothing, but the death of the Son brought healing and salvation. "God accepted the will of the offerer [Abraham] but prevented that which was offered from being sacrificed. For the death of Isaac did not procure freedom to the world, but that of our Savior alone, by whose stripes we all are healed. For he raised up the fallen, healed the sick . . . raised us all from the dead; having abolished death, he has brought us out of affliction and sighing to the rest and gladness of this feast, a joy which reaches even to heaven."⁴⁸ In this text from the fourth century the conflict between Christians and Jews over the sacrifice of Isaac is stated explicitly and polemically. In this argument the Christians emphasize that this sacrifice did not actually die and the ram was offered in his place. If Isaac had actually been sacrificed, the Christian claim about the uniqueness of Christ would be less credible. That Isaac did not die is a key point in the argument. I suspect that what is made explicit in Athanasius is implicit already in Melito. It is not without significance, also, that in the two places where Melito mentions the *Akedah* in the *PH* he does not say that he was sacrificed but only that he was "bound," perhaps even echoing the Jewish name for the story.⁴⁹

The second fragment complements the first.⁵⁰ "When the lamb was sacrificed, it redeemed Isaac. Thus the Lord, being sacrificed, saved us, and being bound, released us, and being killed, redeemed us." Here it is the ram, not Isaac, who is the type of Christ. The ram appears in his place and by the offering of the ram, i.e., by the offering of Christ, Isaac is redeemed. Isaac seems to become a type of the redeemed, those who have been loosed from their bonds. Isaac cannot be the basis of God's mercy, because he was never offered and he is himself in need of redemption. Possibly Melito tried to show that the death of the ram, i.e., Jesus,

⁴⁸ Athanasius, *Festal Epistle* 6, 8-9 (tr. Robertson).

⁴⁹ *PH* 50 and 69.

⁵⁰ *Frg.* 10 (Perler, pp. 234-36).

redeemed the Church and not Israel, and the fragment pits Church against Synagogue, the new Israel against the old Israel.

The third fragment moves in a somewhat different direction.⁵¹ "For the Lord was the lamb like the ram which Abraham saw in the bush Sabek. But the bush signified the cross, and the place [signified] Jerusalem, and the lamb the Lord bound for sacrifice." Melito uses the term Sabek, which is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *SBK*, for bush or thicket. His version of the text follows the Septuagint. The significance he gives to Sabek is not, however, clear from the text. It could be that he takes the bush to refer to the cross because a ram hanging on a branch could signify someone hanging on a cross. In the *Neofiti* Targum the participle *MSBK*, "entangled," occurs in the margin and could have suggested the reference to cross.⁵² Yet another possibility is that the reference to cross comes from a purposeful misreading of the text. If the Hebrew *SBK* is written as *SBQ* in Aramaic, the term would mean forgiveness. This interpretation does occur later.⁵³ Perhaps more significant than the interpretation of Sabek is Melito's reference to Jerusalem as the place of sacrifice. Jewish tradition identified the place where Isaac was sacrificed with Jerusalem and with the temple,⁵⁴ and the Torah shrine from Dura Europos placed the *Akedah* of Isaac alongside the temple and several cult symbols. Melito may have been aware of this view and wished to say that the place was indeed Jerusalem, not because of the sacrifice of Isaac but because of the cross of Jesus. Hence his statement that Jesus was crucified "in the middle of the city."⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

Although it is not possible to say definitely how the *Akedah* was interpreted by Jews in Sardis, the evidence from elsewhere is sufficient, I think, for us to conclude that the interpretation was similar to that of other Jews at the time and that Melito's presentation of the sacrifice of Isaac was shaped, as was his *Paschal Homily*, by the presence of a strong and vibrant Jewish community in Sardis. The *Akedah Isaac* was

⁵¹ Frg. 11 (Perler, p. 236).

⁵² Gn 22:13.

⁵³ Fragment 12, printed in the editions of Melito, interprets Sabek as forgiveness, but the fragment comes from Eusebius of Emesa in the fourth century, not Melito. See E. M. Buytaert, *L'Héritage littéraire d'Eusèbe d'Emèse* (Louvain, 1949) p. 113. Also Jerome, *Quaestiones Hebraicae in Gen. 22:13*; and the *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila* 21-24.

⁵⁴ Spiegel, pp. 60-76; *Genesis Rabbah* 55, Josephus, *Ant.* 1, 224-26. Jerome knew this tradition (*Quaest. Heb. in Gen. 22:2*); see Le Déaut, p. 161.

⁵⁵ A. E. Harvey, "Melito and Jerusalem," *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966) 401-4, offers archeological grounds for the statement that Jesus was crucified in the middle of the city. By the time Melito visited Jerusalem, the place of the Crucifixion was within the city. Yet it may be that Melito was as much interested in the polemical point against the Jews as he was in geographical accuracy.

a central theme of Jewish piety during the early years of the Common Era and became a point of contention between Jews and Christians. Melito is the first genuine evidence we have of the direction Christian thinking would take. At a later date the conflict would become more apparent, but the outlines of the debate are already present in Melito. Melito and the Christian community at Sardis lived in a city where Christianity was a new religion with no past and without the familiar marks of legitimacy taken for granted by religious groups within the Greco-Roman world. The Christian movement was a newcomer not tied to a land or people. Judaism was well established and respected in Sardis; it possessed a venerable and ancient tradition; it cherished a sacred book which even some pagans read and cited to support their philosophical views. The Christians did not have a sacred book and claimed the book of the Jews as their own. If the Christians were to legitimate their way of life by reference to the Jewish Scriptures, it was not sufficient simply to draw broad lines of continuity between themselves and the Jewish writings; for the Jews claimed such continuity and could document it by their continuation of ancient rites and customs. To the Christians it seemed essential that the Jewish Bible be interpreted in accord with Christian beliefs. It was hardly sufficient to show that Jews and Christians shared certain beliefs, e.g., worship of one God, or revered the same teachers, e.g., Moses. The question was much less intellectual. To Melito Christianity claimed, without qualification, that it had replaced Judaism. The Torah had given way to the Logos. If the *Akedah* of Isaac was thought to be a symbol of God's faithfulness to the Jews and His continuing love for Israel, Melito wished to show that the *Akedah Isaac* had no such meaning and could not be used to comfort and support Israel. The meaning of Isaac was to be found only in Jesus and only in the communities which accepted him.

The story does not, however, end here. For Christians, the Christological interpretation of the *Akedah* became the classical view of Genesis 22. How central the story became in Christian piety can be seen not only in the literary works which discuss it, but in sermons, in Christian liturgy, and especially in Christian art.⁵⁶ There are hundreds of representations, some quite early in the catacombs, but others on sarcophagi, in frescoes and mosaics, on ivories, gold glasses, lamps, gems, and manuscripts. But the Christians do not have the last word, because the Jewish interpreters continued to turn to the *Akedah* as they had done before Christianity came on the scene. The later Jewish interpretation is as rich as, and even more varied than, the Christian.

⁵⁶I. Speyart van Woerden, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac," *Vigiliae christianae* 15 (1961) 214-55.

In poetry, liturgy, art, architecture, and midrash, the *Akedah* appears again and again up to the present day. And though the Jewish interpreters go their own way without reference to Christianity, some paused long enough to answer the Christians. They said: if Christians are inclined to find Christ in the Hebrew Bible, they misread it, because the texts they think refer to Christ refer in fact to Isaac. Psalm 8, "What is man that you should be mindful of him?" was taken Christologically by Christians. But R. Simeon ben Menasia said: "This psalm speaks of nothing other than Isaac ben Abraham in connection with the *Akedah*." At Isaac's *Akedah* the angels sang "O Lord, our Lord, how glorious is your name in all the earth" (Ps. 8). "At creation the angels said: 'What is man that you are mindful of him.' The Holy one, blessed be he, said to them: 'In time to come you will see a father slaying his son, and the son being slain for the sanctification of my name. . . . Had I listened to you . . . would there be an Abraham revealing my splendor in the world?'"⁵⁷

⁵⁷Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 6:5; *Tanhuma*, *WaYera* 18; *Midrash Wa-Yosha*, p. 38 (Spiegel, p. 117, n. 148).