The Death of Sarah and the Akedah: The Evolution of a Midrashic Tradition[[1]](#footnote-2)\*

The character of Sarah, the wife of Abraham, unlike many biblical women, is frequently mentioned in the Abrahamic family stories, including her accompanying Abraham on his journeys to Egypt and Gerar. The last mention of Sarah as an active character in the Torah is in the story of Ishmael’s expulsion in God’s words to Abraham: “Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice” (Genesis 21:12). Genesis 23 describes her death and includes [[2]](#footnote-3) a detailed description of the process by which Abraham of acquired a burial plot for her.

Given that Sarah is a significant character in nearly all the Abraham stories and the emphasis on her role in events relating to her son, her absence from the narrative of the Akedah is ironic.[[3]](#footnote-4) The Binding of Isaac (henceforth the Akedah) has received much philosophical attention. It is extensively represented in Jewish liturgy, poetry, and art, all of which have offered various articulations of the moral dilemma that loomed before Abraham on his way to sacrifice his son. The absence of Sarah in the narrative, as the central figure in Abraham’s household and as someone whose life could be profoundly affected by Abraham’s decision to obey God’s command, is very notable.

In this article, I will draw on Palestinian midrashic literature in which commentators chose to give Sarah a voice in the Akedah story.

One would expect to find such elaborations of the story that include Sarah’s perspective among the Second Temple authors who rewrote biblical narratives or in Rabbinic literature. As they do in other contexts, these would fill the gaps and illustrate for us what transpired in the house of Abraham and Sarah upon receiving the difficult commandment to sacrifice their beloved son. Surprisingly, both Second Temple and Rabbinic literature fully adopt the biblical narrative, effectively silencing Sarah’s voice. We do not have ancient traditions that describe Abraham relating the commandment to Sarah, nor are there traditions that voice opposition to Abraham’s obedience to the incomprehensible command of their son’s sacrifice. Similarly, there are no descriptions of Sarah’s torment over Abraham’s obligation to obey the divine decree.[[4]](#footnote-5) Even in Genesis Rabbah, which is an exception in its effusive praise of Sarah in a way that differs from its treatment of other biblical women,[[5]](#footnote-6) there is a complete disregard for Sarah’s character in all the passages dedicated to the Akedah story.

In several other midrashic compositions, compiled circa the fifth century and onwards, there is a resurgence of interest in the question of Sarah’s involvement in the Akedah. However, in all these traditions, Sarah is depicted as someone who becomes aware of the command and its execution only after the safe return of the father and son. The traditions describing informing Sarah about the Akedah deal with the question of the circumstances that led to her death and establish a connection between Sarah hearing about the commandment to Abraham and his readiness to carry it out and the circumstances of her death.

A similar spike in interest regarding Sarah’s involvement in the Akedah is found in Christian literature written in the fourth and fifth centuries. Some of these texts have Sarah involved even before Abraham and Isaac’s departure to Mount Moriah. In one unusual tradition, Sarah is depicted as having withstood a trial even greater than that of Abraham.

In this article, I will address the questions raised by the midrashic engagement with the figure of Sarah in the Akedah trial.[[6]](#footnote-7)

1. Why did the authors of biblical midrash, including Midrash Genesis Rabbah, which tends to extol the virtues of Sarah, choose not to bridge the biblical silence regarding Sarah’s role in the Akedah trial?
2. What prompted the awakening of midrashic interest in Sarah’s hearing about the Akedah, and why did they choose to have it coincide with the return of the father and son from Mount Moriah?
3. What is the significance of the differences between the traditions about how Sarah learned about the Akedah, and what do they teach about the background that led to the development of these traditions?
4. Does the parallel Jewish and Christian awakening of interest in Sarah’s involvement indicate a religious polemic?

## 1. A Gender Perspective on Sarah’s Absence from the Midrashic Narratives of the Akedah

The puzzle of Sarah’s absence from the Akedah story begins with the biblical narrative, which leaves to the reader’s imagination the question of her involvement in the preparations for the sacrifice of Isaac. The Bible also conceals Abraham’s emotions in the story of the Akedah, nor does it reveal what Isaac understood from walking alongside Abraham with fire and wood but without a lamb for the burnt offering.[[7]](#footnote-8) It is possible that the omission of emotional aspects, as well as the non-mention of Sarah, is intended to eliminate from the story any background noise that might blur the central message of Abraham’s absolute obedience and his steadfast endurance in the hardest test of the sacrifice of his son.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Can this also explain the silence of the early midrashic literature regarding Sarah’s involvement? Apparently not, as the midrashim include descriptions of emotional conflicts experienced by Abraham and his son on the way to Mount Moriah.[[9]](#footnote-10)

Feminist biblical scholars have suggested that the authors’ patriarchal approach explains the omission of Sarah from the biblical narrative of the Akedah, and some even add an alternative dialogue that supposedly took place between the couple.[[10]](#footnote-11) This type of explanation might explain Sarah’s exclusion from the midrashim in dealing with the Akedah trial.

This unique midrash, first presented in the Tanḥuma, responds to the exclusion of Sarah from the biblical Akedah narrative and also from earlier midrashim. The solution offered here absolves the author from the need to characterize how Sarah responded to the command:

“And saw the place from afar.” Abraham asked himself: What shall I do? If I reveal it to Sarah, women’s minds are easily upset over insignificant matters; how much more so with a matter as great as this! If I do not tell her and take him from her at a time when she will not notice, she will kill herself. What did he do? He said to Sarah: “Prepare food and drink for us so that we may eat and rejoice.” She said to him: “How is this day different from other days, and what is the nature of this celebration?” He said to them: “When old people like us have a son in their old age, it is fitting to eat, drink, and rejoice.” She went and prepared the food. While they were in the midst of eating, he said to her: “You know that when I was three years old, I came to know my Creator, and this child is [already] grown and still has not been instructed. There is a place a short distance away where youths are instructed; I will take him there and instruct him.” She answered: “Go in peace.” Immediately: “And Abraham arose early in the morning.” Why in the morning? He said [to himself]: Perhaps Sarah will change her mind and not permit me to go; I will arise early before she rises.” (Tanḥuma Vayera 22).[[11]](#footnote-12)

thissacrifice

The basic assumption of the midrashic author is that Abraham did not tell Sarah about God’s revelation to him and the commandment of the Akedah for fear of her extreme reaction if she had been informed. The fact that she was ignorant of the command frees the author from the need to delve any deeper into the dynamics that developed between Abraham and Sarah around Abraham’s decision to take Isaac to Mount Moriah. Nevertheless, the author is compelled to explain Abraham’s excluding Sarah, as until now he had worked hand in hand with Sarah in all their marital and familial matters. He also explains how he managed to leave with Isaac without arousing her suspicion. This interpretation incorporates stereotypical categories regarding women, both in its tone and in its details. The midrash depicts Sarah as someone who is easily distracted from significant events happening around her. Abraham is portrayed as responsible for his son’s education, while Sarah is responsible for preparing food.[[12]](#footnote-13) This description does not align with the biblical characterization of Sarah as someone good at foreseeing the future, in that she is more concerned than Abraham about the negative influence of Ishmael on Isaac’s education (Genesis 21:9-10). It also does not coincide with the description of the equal dynamics between Abraham and Sarah in preparing food for the hospitality of the three men (Genesis 18:6-7). The expression “women’s minds are easily upset,” used in this passage, is mentioned in an earlier tradition that explains why Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s wife was not told of his and his son’s hiding place in the cave when he fled from the Roman authorities (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33b). In both stories, the father and son devise a plan and hide it from the mother, as they do not trust her not to spoil it.[[13]](#footnote-14) In the story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the concern is that she might inadvertently reveal the hiding place if they torture her to extract information. In the Tanḥuma about the Akedah, the expression hints at women’s inability to bear the pain of separation from their sons, even when a divine command demands it.

The midrash in the Tanḥuma is anonymous, yet the categorical portrayal of the woman is not a novelty of this tradition; it is deeply rooted in the early and late midrashim of both the Land of Israel and Babylonia. The praise of biblical women, among them biblical heroines, focuses on the midrashic traditions about their actions within the family, their modesty, and their fertility.[[14]](#footnote-15) Alongside these praises, the midrashim do not shy away from describing characteristic flaws female character flaws, such as excessive emotionality and limited self-control. For instance, in two extreme categorical midrashim in Genesis Rabbah (and in parallels), the negative characteristics of women are enumerated, with Sarah’s figure given as an example of these traits.[[15]](#footnote-16) Despite the primarily positive attitude of the aggadic midrashim toward Sarah, she is portrayed in this tradition as someone who does not control her emotions and is rebellious and defiant.

The execution of the Akedah commandment tests Abraham’s love for God and requires a calmness and emotional neutrality which, according to several midrashim, even challenged Abraham.[[16]](#footnote-17) The Akedah, even without the categorical attributes of women, is particularly unbearable for Sarah, for whom Isaac is her only son, for whose birth she struggled for decades. Abraham’s submission to the divine command demonstrates his success in controlling his emotions. A midrashic description of Sarah’s hearing of the commandment of the Akedah would have forced the midrashic authors to decide between two possibilities. One would be to describe Sarah’s resistance to the Akedah commandment (which corresponds to their categorical conception of women). This would then have demanded of them to depict a harsh family rift when Abraham takes their only son from Sarah against her will and leads him to slaughter. The other possibility would be to characterize Sarah as submitting to the divine command and accompanying Abraham and Isaac on their journey to the Akedah, thereby refuting the Rabbinic categorical conception of women in light of Sarah’s emotional restraint and support for taking Isaac to Mount Moriah. Evidently, the midrashic authors preferred not to decide between these two complex options while reinforcing their categorical conception of women by excluding Sarah from even knowing about the commandment of the Akedah. The exclusion of Sarah from the Akedah does not tarnish her image, as the greatness of women is not typically measured in midrash by a test of their religious faith.

As noted above, the midrash in the Tanḥuma attempts to explain the absence of Sarah from prior midrashic literature. The next unit returns to the texts that formed the foundation for the Tanḥuma’s assumption that Sarah was excluded from the Akedah commandment. According to these versions, Sarah learned of the Akedah only in the last moments of her life. The sudden realization that Abraham was indeed willing to obey the divine command to sacrifice their only son is described as a deep shock that upended her world.

# 2. The Death of Sarah in Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana and Leviticus Rabbah and the Dispute on Martyrdom

### 2.1 What Led to Sarah’s Death?

The Bible describes the return of Abraham and Isaac from Mount Moriah to their home in Beersheba (Genesis 22:19), while Sarah’s death occurs in the family’s previous place of residence in Kiryat Arba (ibid. 23:2). The obvious explanation of this discrepancy is that they lived together after the Akedah in Beersheba, and after some time, in the context of Abraham’s wanderings, returned to their home in Kiryat Arba, where Sarah died.[[17]](#footnote-18) Thus Josephus describes the return of the father and son from the adventure of Mount Moriah to Sarah’s embrace:

So Abraham and Isaac receiving each other unexpectedly, and having obtained the promises of such great blessings, embraced one another; and when they had sacrificed, they returned to Sarah and lived happily together, God affording them his assistance in all things they desired. (Josephus, Antiquities 1.236, W. Wheaton trans.).[[18]](#footnote-19)

Josephus leaves the question of the disclosure of the commandment of the Akedah to Sarah ambiguous, but he does describe a process of renewed family unification. According to him, there is no connection between Sarah’s death and the news of the Akedah journey. In contrast, two Land of Israel traditions in compositions edited from the fifth century onwards describe an irreparable rift between Abraham and Sarah that was generated by Sarah’s hearing of Abraham’s obedience to the command of the Akedah.

The earliest version of this tradition appears in Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana and Leviticus Rabbah:[[19]](#footnote-20)

And when he came to his mother, she said to him, “My son, what has your father done to you?” He said to her, “Father took me and led me up mountains and down hills, and brought me to the top of one mountain, and built an altar and arranged the wood and bound me on top of the altar and took the knife in his hand to slaughter me. Had it not been for the Holy One, blessed be He, who said to him, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy,’ I would have been slaughtered already.”[[20]](#footnote-21) She said to him, “Woe to you, son of a pitiful woman, had not the Holy One, blessed be He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy,’ you would have been slaughtered already.” She did not finish speaking before her soul departed. This is what is written, “And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her” (Genesis 23:2). Where did he come from? From Mount Moriah (Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, *Aḥarei Mot*, pages 389-390. Translation by the author).[[21]](#footnote-22)

The idea that Sarah’s death is connected to her learning about the Akedah is clearly based on the juxtaposition of Abraham and Isaac’s return to Beersheba and the description of Sarah’s death at beginning of the next chapter. (Following a parenthetical note that anticipates the dispatch of Abraham’s servant after Sarah’s burial.)[[22]](#footnote-23)

According to the midrash, Isaac returns to his mother without his father. The biblical description, “And the two of them went together” (Genesis 22:6, 8), suggests that Isaac was a willing participant. The midrash ignores this verse and presents Isaac as completely passive and Abraham as the sole actor, suggesting that Isaac was forced against his will. Isaac does not withhold anything from his mother and describes the experience of the Akedah in the most terrifying way, “and he took the knife in his hand to slaughter me”. Sarah cannot withstand the emotional strain and dies on the spot. The epithet that Sarah attaches to herself, “a pitiful woman”,[[23]](#footnote-24) captures her desolation at the knowledge that her son Isaac was led to the slaughter without her husband having informed her of his intentions.

The midrash conveys a harsh critique of blind obedience and Abraham’s calm acceptance of the command to sacrifice his son. The connection between her hearing of the Akedah (despite it not being carried out in practice) and Sarah’s death intensifies the critique by indirectly blaming Abraham for the death of his wife.

What drives the midrashic author to depict Isaac as being led to the Akedah against his will?

Why is Sarah presented as criticizing Abraham’s choice to obey the command?

What is the meaning of the midrashic description of Sarah’s extreme reaction, even though her son Isaac stands before her, healthy and whole?

### 2.2 The Midrashic Dispute on Abraham’s Obedience to the Command of the Akedah

The key to understanding the harsh criticism in Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta lies in the festive and altruistic tone of the midrashim about the Akedah in Genesis Rabbah, which scholars have concluded was compiled slightly before Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta.[[24]](#footnote-25)

Two sections (55-56) of Genesis Rabbah are dedicated to the Akedah story, including introductions praising the righteous man who is tested,[[25]](#footnote-26) the future reward of Abraham’s descendants due to the Akedah,[[26]](#footnote-27) the absence of any hesitation in fulfilling the command,[[27]](#footnote-28) and passages that describe the Akedah as a public spectacle performed by Abraham and Isaac:[[28]](#footnote-29)

The midrashic authors debate among themselves which trial was more precious to Abraham, and their conclusion is surprising.

Rabbi Levi bar Chiyata said: “Lekh lekha” (go forth) is written twice. We do not know which is more beloved, the second or the first. From what is written, “Go forth to the land of Moriah” indicates that the second is more beloved than the first (Genesis Rabbah 55:7, p. 590).

The context in which the midrashic interpretation of Sarah’s death in Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta is presented is the death of Aaron’s sons and the interpretations of verses that wonder about the possibility of joy. Abraham is presented as an example of the righteous who did not enjoy their world: “Abraham did not rejoice in my world, and you seek to rejoice in my world. Abraham had a son at the age of one hundred, and ultimately, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him (Genesis 22:2), “Take now your son” (Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, *Aḥarei Mot*). In contrast, in Genesis Rabbah, God is depicted as one who calms Abraham, his court, and the nations of the world, promising that Abraham’s joy will continue even if he is asked to sacrifice his son:

“After these things”, there was contemplation there; what did Abraham contemplate? He contemplated and said, “I have rejoiced and brought joy to everyone, but I have not set aside a single bull or ram for the Holy One, blessed be He.” The Holy One, blessed be He said to him, “On the condition that you are told to sacrifice your son to Me, and you do not hesitate” (Genesis Rabbah 55:4, p. 588).

The description of Isaac in the traditions of Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta as accompanying Abraham by force, filled with fear, completely contradicts his portrayal in the traditions of Genesis Rabbah as no less eager than his father to fulfill God’s commandment and to sacrifice himself.

“And Isaac said to his father Abraham [...here is the fire and the trees, and where is the lamb for the burnt offering], etc”. Samael came to Abraham and said to him, “What, old man, have you lost your heart? Are you going to slaughter the son who was given to you when you were a hundred years old? He said to him for that reason [was he given to me]. He [Samael] said to him”, And if He tests you beyond this, will you be able to stand it? ‘If one ventures a word with you, will it be too much’” (Job 4:2)? He said to him, “Even beyond this”. He said to him: “Tomorrow He will tell you ‘shedder of blood, you are liable; you shed the blood of your son.’ He said: “For that reason”. Once [Samael saw that] it was to no avail, he came to Isaac. He said: “Son of a pitiful woman, he is going to slaughter you”. He [Isaac] said to him: “For that [I am going]”. [Samael said to him]: “If so, all the anxieties that your mother had about Ishmael [or: all the finery that your mother made for Ishmael] the hated one in her house will inherit; if you cannot inherit it all, at least inherit half!” That is what is written: “Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said [My father…]” – why “father, my father”, twice? It was so that he should become filled with mercy for him. “He said, ‘Here is the fire…’” He said to him. May [God] look upon him [Samael] and rebuke him. In any case, “God will see to the sheep…” and if not, “a sheep for a burnt offering – my son”. “And they went on together,” this one to bind and that one to be bound, this one to slaughter and that one to be slaughtered (Genesis Rabbah 56:4, page 599).

Samael the accuser refers to Isaac as the “son of a pitiful woman,” the same epithet that the author of the midrash in the Pesiqta has his mother Sarah use. In Genesis Rabbah, Isaac shows no sympathy for his mother’s distress. All he has to say is “For that reason.”[[29]](#footnote-30) In the contrary tradition (Pesiqta), the father alone is responsible for his mother’s distress.

An earlier passage in Genesis Rabbah depicts a competitive argument between Isaac and Ishmael in which Isaac triumphs by describing his willingness to sacrifice a part of himself for the love of God. His proposal is accepted with a request from God that he sacrifice his entire body.

Isaac and Ishmael were arguing with each other, one saying, “I am more beloved than you because I was circumcised at thirteen years old”, and the other saying, “I am more beloved than you because I was circumcised at eight days old”. Ishmael said to him, “I am more beloved than you. Why? When I had the possibility of protesting and did not protest”. At that moment, Isaac said, “If only the Holy One, blessed be He, would be revealed to me and say that a limb of mine was to be severed, I would not hesitate”. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “On the condition that it be said to you that you sacrifice yourself and do not hesitate” (Genesis Rabbah 55, 4 p. 588).

How different is the character of Isaac in Genesis Rabbah, who consciously and willingly goes to sacrifice himself, compared to his portrayal in Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta as someone subjected to his father’s self-controlled action!

Sarah’s anguish upon hearing Isaac’s description of what has happened and her immediate death are at the center of the Leviticus Rabbah tradition. Her scream in response becomes a source for the sound of the shofar blast: “At that time, she screamed six times, corresponding to six blasts” (Leviticus Rabbah 20:2, page 449),[[30]](#footnote-31) The scream is not mentioned in Genesis Rabbah, her name does not appear at all in the sections dealing with the story of the Akedah, and no connection is made between the story of the Akedah and her death.[[31]](#footnote-32)

The focal point of the dispute between the two traditions, as reflected by the differences presented above, is the character of Abraham and how he fulfills God’s command to sacrifice his son. The traditions of Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta do not raise the question of the need to fulfill the divine commandment to sacrifice his son but they also do not participate in the neutralizing of emotion and descriptions of joy that Genesis Rabbah ascribes to Abraham and Isaac’s journey to Mount Moriah.[[32]](#footnote-33)

Why did the editors of Genesis Rabbah choose to attribute festive emotions to Abraham and Isaac on their journey to Mount Moriah, while the editors of Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta chose to depict Isaac as a frightened son who obeys his father’s command out of necessity and fear?

### 2.3 Martyrdom for the Sanctification of God’s Name – The Theological Dispute and the Midrashic Gap

Shulamit Elitzur has shown that the *piyyutim* (liturgical poems) addressing or inspired by the Akedah from different geographical areas reveal a difference similar to the difference between the two midrashic traditions.[[33]](#footnote-34) In the *piyyutim* written in Sephardic regions, the journey to Mount Moriah is accompanied by feelings of fear and crying, whereas the Ashkenazi *piyyutim* describe the great joy experienced by father and son on their journey to Mount Moriah, with almost no expression of feelings of pain or sorrow. Elitzur attributes the difference in attitudes to the Crusades, in which the Jews of Ashkenaz were compelled to sacrifice their lives. The authors of the *piyyutim* sought to draw inspiration from the stories of earlier martyrs and to encourage the oppressed of their time to stand tall and dedicate their deaths to the glorification of God’s name:

The ancient Akedah, which was understood to be the first example of readiness to be sacrificed for the sanctification of God’s name, is retold in a way that corresponds in many details to the descriptions of those slaughtered in the Crusades. This is particularly evident in the emphasis on the complete joy of the binder and the bound... And it helped to strengthen those who might have succumbed [and allowed themselves to be baptized] in generations of persecution.[[34]](#footnote-35)

If we accept the historian’s dating of the compilation of Genesis Rabbah, it was not compiled during a period of persecution that inspired martyrdom. Nevertheless, the traces of the persecutions following the Bar Kokhba revolt are still evident in the composition of many of its midrashim.[[35]](#footnote-36) What would explain the editor’s choice to adorn his midrashim with approval for the father and son’s altruism on their way to Mount Moriah?

The full version of the legend of Abraham and the fiery furnace, including a description of Abraham’s readiness to die for his faith in God, is presented for the first time in Genesis Rabbah.[[36]](#footnote-37) In later midrashic compilations such as the Tanḥuma, parts of it were omitted, apparently censored.[[37]](#footnote-38) Urbach believes that the last two sections of the legend of Abraham and the fiery furnace (from the moment Abraham was turned over to Nimrod) contain elements familiar from the legends of the Rabbinic martyrs, and it (the midrash) is “filled with the martyrology of the generation of the persecution.”[[38]](#footnote-39)

Abraham’s readiness to die for the sanctification of God’s name in the fiery furnace and his subsequent fulfillment of God’s command in the story of the Akedah are not identical. The former is an act of martyrdom for his faith in the face of persecution, while the latter is done out of love for the commanding God. Nevertheless, it is possible to learn from one narrative about the other, as both express different aspects of martyrdom. The martyrological motif in the fiery furnace legend, the midrash’s imagining of the emotions of Abraham and Isaac on their way to the Akedah along with various other traditions scattered throughout Genesis Rabbah that demonstrate the superiority of Judaism and describe the efforts of the nation’s forefathers to spread it among their non-Jewish neighbors and the latter’s desire to adhere to it,[[39]](#footnote-40) all point to struggles between rival religions for hegemony. These themes reveal how important it was for the compiler of Genesis Rabbah to demonstrate the superiority of Judaism vis a vis its competitor.[[40]](#footnote-41) Scholars who have studied martyrdom and its religious characteristics (both Jewish and Christian) have pointed to a transformation that occurred in the fourth and fifth centuries. During this period, martyrdom was not caused only by religious persecution but began to evolve as a religious principle indicating the martyr’s love for God.[[41]](#footnote-42) The depiction of Abraham and Isaac’s enthusiasm to fulfill the divine command to sacrifice the latter was a demonstration of boundless love for God, which, while it did not require the actual sacrifice of a life, was nevertheless an exalted ideal, demonstrating the superiority of the nation’s forefathers while negating the notion that God needs human sacrifice.

Presumably, the editors of the Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta also believed in the superiority of the Jewish religion. Apparently, they disagreed with the editor of Genesis Rabbah regarding the appropriate tactics for waging the religious struggle.[[42]](#footnote-43) The danger they saw in the idealization of the Akedah and their fear of its influence on their co-religionists outweighed the need to demonstrate the superiority of the Jewish faith, which they sought to achieve in other ways.[[43]](#footnote-44)

### 2.4 Why did the Midrashic Authors Link the News of the Akedah to the Death of Sarah?

The ideological dispute among the editors of the Palestinian midrashic compositions regarding martyrdom still does not explain why those opposed to the glorification of the martyrs delayed expressing their opposition until the description of Sarah’s death. Could they not have expressed their opposition to the festive tone of the midrashim in Genesis Rabbah by describing Abraham and Isaac’s fear and hesitation on their way to Mount Moriah (as the later liturgical poets would do)?

Three answers come to mind: one conceptual, the second inspired by gender studies, and the third literary.

According to the conceptual approach, Sarah’s death from anguish represents an extreme counter-reaction to the superhuman emotional neutrality of the midrashim in Genesis Rabbah. Descriptions of hesitation and fear of the father and son on their way to the Akedah would not be enough to express antagonism to martyrdom as the expression of love for God. In contrast, Sarah’s death upon hearing the accounts of her husband’s serene near-sacrifice of their son, even though she has seen that he has been saved and stands before her safe and sound, is a tragic expression of the rejection of the legitimacy of Akedah.

The gender studies explanation uses the juxtaposition of Sarah’s death and the Akedah story to address Sarah’s absence from the story of the Akedah. In the midrashic version of Leviticus Rabbah, the verb *tzavḥah* (“cried out”) is used to describe Sarah’s reaction: “At that moment, she cried out six cries of woe.” The same verb is used in several midrashim to characterize the behavior of women when they are visited by trouble or distress, as in the case of Sarah herself in another midrash that describes her anger at Abraham,[[44]](#footnote-45) and in a more explicitly typological manner: “a woman whose way is to cry out” (PT Avodah Zarah 2:1, p. 40c). The attributed outcry of Sarah indirectly justifies Abraham’s choice not to involve Sarah before he set out to fulfill the divine command. If Sarah died upon hearing the news of the Akedah, even though her son Isaac now stood before her alive and unharmed, she certainly would not have been able to cope with the thought that her son was about to be slaughtered, and would have prevented Abraham from carrying out the divine command.

The literary approach to answering my question pertains to the broader context in which the midrash was incorporated into Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta in the section dealing with the death of Aaron’s sons. One explanation that emerges from the biblical verses concerning their sin connects their death to their closeness to God: “They approached before the Lord and they died” (Leviticus 16:1)[[45]](#footnote-46), which can be understood as connecting their death to their fierce desire to be close to God. The text also describes Aaron’s silent reaction to the death of his two sons: “And Aaron was silent” (Leviticus 10:3) ), which is reminiscent of Abraham’s calmness when complying with the Akedah commandment. The pain over the tragic death of Aaron’s sons is expressed in the midrash through the figure of Elisheva, their mother: “Elisheva, daughter of Amminadav, did not rejoice, and you seek to rejoice in my world? Elisheva, daughter of Amminadav, saw four joys in one day: her husband was the High Priest, her brother-in-law was the king, her brother was the prince, and her two sons were deputy priests and as soon as they entered, they came out burned. Her joy turned into mourning, as it is written ‘After the death of the two sons of Aaron’ (Leviticus 16:1)” (Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, ibid.). The mention of Sarah in the context of the potential death of her son resulting from excessive divine love creates a conceptual and gender-based symmetry between the midrash about Elisheva and her sons and the midrash about Sarah.

# 3. From Mount Moriah to Sarah’s Burial - Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah

A similar version to the tradition brought in Leviticus Rabbah and in the Pesiqta is presented in Ecclesiastes Rabbah. Three seemingly minor differences between the traditions fundamentally alter the meaning of the connection that the midrashic author created between the account of the Akedah and the death of Sarah. Here is the text of the midrash in Ecclesiastes Rabbah:

When he came to his mother, she asked him: “Where have you been?” He said to her: Father took me and led me up mountains and down hills, and we ascended to the top of one mountain where he built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound me upon it and took the knife to slaughter me. If an angel from heaven had not come and said: “Abraham, do not lay your hand upon the lad,” I would have already been slaughtered. When Sarah heard, she cried out and screamed, but she did not manage to finish her words before her soul departed, as it is written, “And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah” (Genesis 23:2). Where did he come from? He came from Mount Moriah. Rabbi Judah bar Simon said: Abraham was pondering in his heart and saying: Would you say that there was a flaw in my son and he was not accepted? A heavenly voice went out and said to him: “Abraham, Abraham, eat your bread with gladness, for God has already accepted your offering.” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 9, 7, p. 180).

The first difference between the Ecclesiastes Rabbah version and that of the Pesiqta concerns the wording of Sarah’s question: In the Pesiqta, the tone of the question suggests that Sarah expects a negative answer: “What has your father done to you?” In Ecclesiastes Rabbah (like in Leviticus Rabbah) Sarah is merely seeking information: “Where have you been, my son?”

The second difference is the omission of the explicit content of Sarah’s cry. In Ecclesiastes Rabbah, Sarah does not refer to herself as “a pitiful woman” or “a sorrowful woman,” nor does she repeat her son’s words, “had not the Holy One, blessed be He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy,’ you would have been slaughtered already.”

The third difference is related to the context in which the midrash is presented. In Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta, the context is the death of Aaron’s sons and the absence of joy for the righteous in this world, while in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, it could be argued that the context is the opposite. The midrash on Abraham is presented as an example of someone who received divine approval for his actions, liberating them to eat joyfully. The midrashic author paraphrases the verse from Ecclesiastes (9:7) to align it with the divine affirmation that Abraham receives after the Akedah, even though he was not, in the end, required to sacrifice his son.

In his commentary, Kipperwasser explained the midrash like this:

This text, which defines the purpose of one who lives to eat his bread and drink his wine, was interpreted metaphorically by the midrashic authors. This is no longer the statement of Ecclesiastes, but divine speech directed toward a person whose actions are pleasing in the eyes of God... (Ibid., p. 179).

The three differences between Ecclesiastes Rabbah and its predecessors neutralize the criticism toward Abraham’s actions in the Akedah and leave Sarah’s outcry as a typical response of a mother to the danger her son was in. The textual differences in the text, as modified in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, place Abraham and Sarah in separate, distinct moral and religious universes. Is it possible to prove from Ecclesiastes Rabbah’s reworking of the midrash that the editor is closer to the perspective of the editor of Genesis Rabbah’s evaluation of Abraham’s behavior at the Akedah?

Scholars of Ecclesiastes Rabbah believe that the traditions of Ecclesiastes Rabbah are closer to the Pesiqta, and only a minority of them are from Genesis Rabbah. They explain many changes that the editor made in the traditions as stemming from his desire to adapt them more clearly to the verses of the book.[[46]](#footnote-47) According to this assumption, the tradition was adapted for the sake of the verse that praises joy. It is difficult for me to accept the assumption that this adjustment is merely literary, and the editor of Ecclesiastes Rabbah’s adaptation likely reflects a disagreement with the message of the original. First, let me suggest two reasons that suggest that the adaptation is not merely from literary considerations:

1. If the editor had wanted to maintain the critical tone toward Abraham, he could have attached the precise version of the Pesiqta sermon to verses in Ecclesiastes that mock laughter, such as Ecclesiastes 2:2: “I said of laughter, ‘It is madness,’ and of mirth, ‘What does it accomplish?’”
2. The continuation of the midrash, in which Abraham is portrayed as expressing concern about the rejection of his sacrifice, even after God’s instruction “Do not lay your hand on the boy,” does not align with the atmosphere of his dedication to fulfilling the divine command as depicted in the Pesiqta. The midrash in Ecclesiastes Rabbah expresses admiration for Abraham’s level of devotion to the divine command, showing concern about rejoicing over the incomplete execution of the commandment of the Akedah.[[47]](#footnote-48)

It seems more likely that the editor of Ecclesiastes Rabbah did not share the Pesiqta’s criticism of how the commandment of the Akedah was carried out, quite the contrary. The editor of Ecclesiastes Rabbah adapted the tradition that connects the description of Sarah’s death to the news of the Akedah (while omitting the critique) as a connecting link that explains Abraham’s delay on Mount Moriah and as an explanation of what made him leave from there and return home – the comforting words of the divine voice and the news of Sarah’s death.

### 4. Family Cohesion – Traditions of the Tanḥuma[[48]](#footnote-49)

The prevailing assumption in the scholarship is that the editor of Midrash Tanḥuma had access to earlier versions of the midrash, from which he selected and reshaped the midrashim that suited him, at times adding traditions unfamiliar from elsewhere.[[49]](#footnote-50) In the first section of this article, a Tanḥuma tradition was presented that does not appear in early midrashic compilations. It describes Abraham’s deception of Sarah to conceal from her the commandment of the Akedah and Abraham’s plan to obey it.[[50]](#footnote-51) The next time Sarah is mentioned in the Tanḥuma in the midrashim on the Akedah is in the encounter of “the accuser” with Abraham and Isaac, who tries to dissuade them from obeying the command of the Akedah by describing Sarah’s pitiful collapse upon hearing the news (Tanḥuma *Vayera* 22). Later, it records the description of her death when she is exposed to the threat of her son’s slaughter (ibid. 23). While it is easy to identify the early midrashic texts from which the editor of the Tanḥuma drew some of his traditions, he managed to shape, using these along with new and unfamiliar traditions, a new narrative with a unique message that is unlike the message proposed by his predecessors, except for the typological conception of the feminine, which also characterizes the work. I present here the midrash that describes the arrival of the news to Sarah, and I will focus on the differences between it and its sources while explaining the significance of the changes the author made to the traditions that preceded him based on his treatment of the story of the Akedah:[[51]](#footnote-52)

He said to him, “Father, do not tell my mother when she is standing by the well or when she is standing on the roof, lest she throw herself off and die.” Immediately, they both built the altar and bound him upon the altar, and he took the knife to slaughter him until a *revi’it[[52]](#footnote-53)* of his blood was drawn. Then, the accuser came and pushed Abraham’s hand, and the knife fell from his hand. As soon as he reached out his hand to take it, a voice came out from heaven and said to him, “Do not lay your hand on the lad.” And had it not been so, he would have already been slaughtered. At that time, the accuser went to Sarah and appeared to her in the form of Isaac. When she saw him, she said, “My son, what has your father done to you?” He replied, “My father took me and led me up mountains and down valleys, and brought me to the top of one mountain. He built an altar, arranged the wood, and bound me on top of the altar. He took the knife to slaughter me, and if the Holy One, blessed be He, had not said to him, ‘Do not lay your hand on the lad,’ I would have been slaughtered.” He did not manage to finish speaking before her soul departed. As it is said, “And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her” (Tanḥuma *Vayera* 23).

Below are the differences (pertaining to the character of Sarah):[[53]](#footnote-54)

* The added description of Isaac’s sensitivity while he lay on the altar, cautioning Abraham about how to tell his mother about his sacrifice.
* The character who informs Sarah is switched from Isaac to the accuser.
* Sarah does not respond to the accuser (in the guise of Isaac) as her soul departs while the accuser is still reporting what happened (similar to the account in Ecclesiastes Rabbah).

The midrashic section that begins with the arrival of the accuser and the report to Sarah corresponds to the version in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, except for the involvement of the accuser. However, a deeper examination reveals a fundamental difference in the message conveyed by the Tanḥuma version. The purpose of the revised midrash on Sarah’s death in Tanḥuma is to correct the impression created by earlier traditions about a family rift in Abraham’s household. The rift is mended in two ways. The first is the revisions in the midrash about Sarah’s death: highlighting Isaac’s sensitivity to his mother even before the angel’s call to his father not to kill him; having the character who informs Sarah be the accuser rather than Isaac; and similarly to Ecclesiastes Rabbah, omitting Sarah’s accusatory words toward Abraham as expressed in Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta. The second way is found in the extensive Akedah midrashim in the Tanḥuma, which neutralize Sarah’s criticism toward Abraham. I suggested above that the traditions of Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta express through Sarah a critique of Abraham’s serenity and his total surrender to the command of the Akedah, as it is depicted in Genesis Rabbah. The Tanḥuma midrashim on the Akedah reveal the opposite tendency. They praise Abraham’s obedience to the divine command without the descriptions of his serenity on the journey to Mount Moriah found in Genesis Rabbah. Rather, the midrashim in the Tanḥuma further emphasize Abraham’s ability to withstand the Akedah trial despite Abraham and Isaac’s shared apprehensions on their way, and Abraham’s hope that he would not be forced to slaughter his son. In some of them, it is possible to identify a connection to the earlier traditions in Genesis Rabbah, with the elements of celebration and serenity removed. [[54]](#footnote-55)

The editor of the Tanḥuma apparently identified with the critical attitude of the midrashim in Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta to Abraham’s fervor and the festivity that surrounded their journey to Mount Moriah. However, the description of Sarah’s death out of anger at her spouse that is never reconciled, as depicted in the midrash on Sarah’s death in Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta, also did not sit well with him. Isaac’s involvement in the parental conflict further intensifies the discomfort with the rift in the family of the nation’s patriarch. The solution proposed in Ecclesiastes Rabbah somewhat mitigates the tension between Abraham and Sarah, but it and its context were not sufficient to fulfill the two objectives set by the editor of the Tanḥuma. The reshaping of ancient traditions with additions, while having the accuser be fully responsible for the trouble allowed for a more harmonious family picture to be presented.[[55]](#footnote-56) The spirit of Sarah is present in the midrashim accompanying each stage of the Akedah, in the concealment of information from her to prevent her distress and delay before departure; in the emotional turmoil the accuser created by mentioning Sarah’s efforts until the birth of her son: “Pitiful son of a pitiful woman, how many fasts your mother fasted until you were born, and the old man has lost his mind and is going to slaughter you” (Tanḥuma *Vayera* 22); and in Isaac’s guidance to his father on how to inform her. All these could not prevent the tragedy of her death, but they created an image of strong familial bonds.

The Tanḥuma editor’s reservations about the festive tone of the Genesis Rabbah midrashim are brought out by his emphasis on Abraham’s hesitation to kill his son and his hope to return safely home[[56]](#footnote-57) (as well as his choice to redact the full version of the legend of Abraham and the fiery furnace), may testify to his religious discomfort with the notion that martyrs prove their love for God through their death. The fear that the midrashim of the Akedah which describe Abraham’s religious ecstasy on his way to the Akedah would inspire new contemporary martyrs led to a cooling of the festive and passional elements, and replacing them with expressions of the heroes’ doubts and apprehension.[[57]](#footnote-58)

# 5. Did she know or did she not know? – Between the Sages of the Talmud and the Church Fathers

The identification of Jewish-Christian polemics in midrashic literature has been a subject of long-standing scholarly debate, divided between those inclined to find polemical aspects in midrashim originating from the third century, and those who prefer to focus on the literary and didactic messages of the midrashim and not presume polemical content where it is not explicit.[[58]](#footnote-59) In the context of the midrashim dealing with the Akedah, this dispute is intensified, with some interpreting every step Abraham and Isaac take on their way to Mount Moriah as alluding to Jesus’ way of suffering, and others ignoring the possibility of polemical content to focus on the content of the midrashim that is internal to Judaism.[[59]](#footnote-60) In this article, I have chosen not to engage with the polemical interpretations of the Akedah midrashim, as the focus of the study was on Sarah’s character, not the Akedah itself. Nevertheless, one cannot completely ignore the polemical hypothesis given the fact that Sarah serves already in the New Testament and more extensively in church literature as a character who prefigures the mother of Jesus.[[60]](#footnote-61)

The question of Sarah’s knowledge of the commandment of the Akedah also occupied the Church Fathers from the fourth century onwards. Alongside those who assume that Abraham did not inform Sarah, and explain why he concealed from her the commandment of the Akedah and his plan to comply with it in a manner similar to the Tanḥuma,[[61]](#footnote-62) there are Christian traditions (primarily Syriac) that describe a dialogue that took place between Abraham and Sarah before his departure. In most of these, Sarah is depicted as opposing and trying to prevent Abraham from fulfilling the commandment.[[62]](#footnote-63) However, in one of the Syriac traditions (erroneously attributed to Ephrem),[[63]](#footnote-64) Sarah is presented as a full partner to Abraham in their commitment to fulfill the commandment. She requests to accompany them to Mount Moriah and even offers to assist in carrying the items needed for the sacrifice of their son, but her request is not granted.[[64]](#footnote-65) The news of the Akedah to Sarah upon the return of Abraham and Isaac to their home is also mentioned in the traditions of the Church Fathers, but in not all of them does she die upon learning of it. In one tradition (that which was erroneously attributed to Ephrem), Abraham is depicted as testing Sarah’s faith, and therefore he conceals Isaac’s survival from her. Sarah’s response presents her as surpassing even’s Abraham faith and acceptance of the divine decree, making her the heroine of the story.[[65]](#footnote-66)

I will not delve into the internal Christian interpretations of the monologue attributed to Sarah.[[66]](#footnote-67) However, it is worth asking whether the way she is depicted in the context of the Akedah in Christian literature (in works from the fourth and fifth centuries) influenced her depiction in contemporary or later midrash. The fact that most Christian traditions and all Rabbinic traditions have Abraham hide the commandment of the Akedah and his compliance with it from Sarah, indicates a shared conception of the nature of women, and their inability to cope with a divine commandment that requires the sacrifice of their sons.[[67]](#footnote-68) There may be mutual influence here, but it need not be polemical. The fact that in several Christian traditions, Sarah is told about the commandment of the Akedah even before they set out for Mount Moriah and expresses her objection perhaps indicates that Christian writers were less concerned with describing a rift in Abraham’s family or from the image of a father tearing his son from Sarah’s bosom to take him to slaughter.[[68]](#footnote-69) It is possible that the isolated homily mistakenly attributed to Ephrem influenced the development of the character of Sarah in the midrash as struggling to accept the divine command of the Akedah was in contrast to Sarah’s image as a paragon of faith, prefiguring of the mother of Jesus, that is found in Christian literature from the writings of Origen onwards.[[69]](#footnote-70) Sarah’s portrayal as someone who urges Abraham to fulfill the commandment and lovingly accepts the decree for the sacrifice, along with the Christological atmosphere emanating from the description, may have influenced her being disassociated from encouraging the sacrifice in the traditions of the Akedah, and the development of her image in other Rabbinic midrashim as a paradigm of womanly duty according to the Jewish conception of them – i.e. fulfilling the commandments and performing good deeds.

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In this study, I sought to address the puzzle of Sarah’s exclusion from the Akedah narrative in midrashic literature. I began with the late midrash in the Tanḥuma that builds Sarah’s exclusion on a cover story that Abraham supposedly told her. I assumed that the foundation for this account is earlier midrashic material in which Sarah is presented as learning about the Akedah commandment only after Isaac returns from Mount Moriah. From these stories, it emerges that this delayed revelation caused her death. This article compares the midrashim that connect Sarah’s learning about the Akedah to her death, and proposes a reason why each one might have made that connection. I conjecture that the early version of the Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana and Leviticus Rabbah made that connection as criticism of the festive atmosphere that accompanies the Akedah story in Genesis Rabbah. The editors of the midrashim in Ecclesiastes Rabbah and Tanḥuma wanted either to present moderate positions regarding Sarah’s criticism of Abraham or heal the rupture between them that the Akedah caused.

The simple explanation for Sarah’s exclusion from the Akedah narrative in midrashic literature is that the midrash followed the biblical narrative, which does not mention Sarah’s involvement. However, this explanation is unconvincing, as the midrashic authors do mention Sarah’s finding out about the Akedah as causing her death, even though the circumstances of her death are not mentioned in the Bible.

The question becomes more pointed in light of the integration of a role for Sarah in the Akedah in later corpora, such as in the well-known *piyyut* “*Et Sha’arei Ratzon*” [A Time of the Gates of Goodwill] composed by Rabbi Judah ben Samuel Ibn Abbas in the 12th century, which describes the widespread pain caused by the divine command “Take your son...whom you love and offer him there as a burnt offering.” In the poem, Sarah holds a place of honor at all stages of the event. [[70]](#footnote-71)

The piyyut movingly weaves together elements of Palestinian midrash while reworking them to integrate them with the central theme of the poem that the Akedah should serve to the credit of the descendants of its participants.[[71]](#footnote-72) Although the author had the extensive midrashic literature on the Akedah to draw upon and was constrained by both the limits on the length of the poem and thematic considerations, two full stanzas (the third and tenth) were dedicated to the figure of Sarah; a line in the second stanza and two additional lines from the eleventh stanza. The *payyetan* [liturgical poet] recognized the power of intensifying the description of Sarah’s pain to amplify the merit of the Akedah. For instance, he attributes Sarah’s accession to Abraham’s request to take Isaac to her desire to teach him “the service of laughter.” Nevertheless, she pleads: “She said to him, ‘Go, my lord, but do not go far.’”[[72]](#footnote-73) More powerfully, in the stanza where Isaac imagines her reaction and her inability to find comfort when she is informed of his death:

Speak to my mother, for her joy has departed.

The son to whom she gave birth when she was ninety years old;

Has become a portion for fire and the knife;

Where shall I seek a comforter for her, where?

I am sorry for a mother who will weep and mourn.

The binder, the bound, and the altar;[[73]](#footnote-74)

Isaac even asks his father to take his ashes so that Sarah will have a memento of her beloved son.

Take with you what remains of my ashes.

And he said to Sarah, “This is the scent of Isaac”;[[74]](#footnote-75)

One might say that the poet completed what was not done in the biblical narrative and was not completed by the creators of the midrash – he presents Sarah’s sacrifice as no less than that of two other heroes of the story.

In seeking an answer to the riddle of Sarah’s absence from the midrashic narratives, I set aside an explanation based on her gender, as it seemed too simplistic to me. However, the more I delved into the matter, the more I realized that the typical female response to a command to sacrifice one’s son, which contradicts all human morality, is the appropriate one under normal circumstances. Abraham’s commitment to carrying out the command is a unique, superhuman response. The way the midrash legitimized the feminine response to resist such a command by setting Sarah’s death as her response was made post facto, to preserve for future generations the two options: that of Abraham who submitted to God’s command, despite His objection to human sacrifice, and that of Sarah who expressed in her final moments her rejection of serenely obeying a command that clashes with the human nature of parental compassion for their children.

The fluctuations in midrashic and liturgical literature between emphasizing Abraham’s choice or Sarah’s pain and the tragedy of her death, teach about the great need for these two options, in accordance with the changing reality and the challenges of the time. The Jewish people have often been required to confront the reality of sacrificing sons for the survival of the nation or the principles of its faith. The figure of Abraham, who managed to neutralize the voices of temptation and human morality, provided inspiration and faith to martyrs throughout the generations. The wailing of Sarah, echoed annually on Rosh Hashanah by the sound of the shofar, reminds us of the boundaries of child sacrifice, and the duty to remember the parallel voices: “Do not lay your hand on the boy.”

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1. \* This translation has been supported by the Research Authority at Herzog Academic College. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Rebekah and Leah’s deaths are not mentioned. Rachel’s death is mentioned due to the tragedy of her dying in childbirth at such a young age. The date of Rebekah’s death and the circumstances of its concealment are addressed in Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana 3, pp. 40-41. See Seder Olam 2 for the date of Leah’s death. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For a feminist analysis and explanation for concealing of Sarah, see Trible, "Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Jubilees 12 sticks closely to the biblical narrative. The Akedah is not mentioned in Pseudo-Philo. Genesis Apocryphon reveals an unusual affinity for the character of Sarah, see Lipscomb, “‘She Is My Sister,’” pp. 319-347. However, in the fragments of the scroll that were found, there is no written account of the Akedah, and therefore it is not possible to know how Sarah’s role would have been portrayed. See Parry and Dimant, *Dead Sea Scrolls Handbook*, between pp. 28 and 29. In scroll 4Q225, the story of the Akedah is rewritten, but it begins with a description of what happened when the father and son had already arrived at Mount Moriah, where, of course, Sarah is not mentioned. See Berthelot, “Human Sacrifice,” pp. 151-174, especially pp. 164-166, on the rewriting of this text. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.225, mentions Sarah in the story of the Akedah, but notes that Abraham hid the commandment from his wife and his household “lest they prevent him from doing God’s will.” Philo, “On Abraham,” 170 describes Abraham as one who concealed the commandment from all members of his household: “Without revealing the word of God to anyone in his household, he took...” And he went out with his son and their people as if for some sacred service that is customary.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. On the treatment of Sarah by the editor of Genesis Rabbah and the factors that led to it, see Porton, “How the Rabbis Imagined Sarah,” pp. 192-209; Zohar, “Demuto shel Avraham,” pp. 71-85; Niehoff, “Associative Thinking,” pp. 339-359; Schwartz, “The Virgin Mother Sarah,” pp. 63-103. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. We will focus on Rabbinic literature and will not discuss the question of Sarah’s silence in Second Temple literature and Hellenistic literature. On the character of Sarah in Second Temple literature and Hellenistic works, see Halpern Amaru, “The Portrait of Sarah in Jubilees,” pp. 336-348 and Uusimäki and Tervanotko, “Sarah the Princess,” pp. 271-290; on Sarah in the writings of Josephus and Philo, see Niehoff, “Mother and Maiden,” pp. 413-444. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. SeeGrossman, *Abraham*, pp. 310-317, for a discussion of the suppression of emotions in the biblical story of the Akedah and the interpretation of its meanings. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See Polak, “Ha-nusḥa’ot ha-’epiyot,” p. 42: “In the story of the Akedah, one can see how the narrator utilized the ritualistic nature of the formulas to overcome the storm of emotions.” See also: Humphreys, “Where’s Sarah,” pp. 491-512. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. See, for example, the dialogue between Abraham and Samael (the accuser) in Genesis Rabbah 55:7-8, pp. 598-599, and in Tanḥuma Vayera 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. See for example: Zorgdrager, “The Sacrifice of Abraham,” pp. 182-197; Zierler “In search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah,” pp. 10-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Translations from the Tanḥuma by the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Observe a similar phenomenon in the interpretation of the epithet ‘great woman’ for the Shunammite woman: “Her children rise up and call her blessed” (Proverbs 31:28). This is the Shunammite, who is called a great woman, and why is this so? Because she insisted on Elisha eating (Midrash Proverbs 31). See also Elitzur, *Dyuqan be-shvil ha-dorot*, pp. 420-421. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See Rashi’s explanation of the statement “Women are light-minded” in the discussion on sexual prohibitions in Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 80b: “Because their minds are light and they are easily seduced.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. See, for example, the homily on the virtues of the seven prophetesses in Babylonian Talmud Megillah 14a-b. For the representation of biblical women in Rabbinic literature, see Elitzur, *Dyuqan be-shvil ha-dorot*, pp. 403-435. For the portrayal of biblical women in Leviticus Rabbah, see: Maciá, “Alterities in the Midrash,” pp. 211-239. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. See Genesis Rabbah 18, 22 pp. 162-163; ibid. 45, 5 pp. 452-453. See also Avot de-Rabi Natan 2, 45, p. 126 (Four Characteristics); Tanḥuma *Vayishlach* 17, *Vayeshev* 6. In Deuteronomy Rabbah *Ki Teitzei* 11, the two midrashim are cited one after the other with in the name of different speakers. For an analysis of midrashic trends, see Elitzur, *Dyuqan be-shvil ha-dorot*, pp. 406-417. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. See below note [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Hebron is mentioned as the central residence of Abraham and Sarah (see Genesis 35:27). Interestingly, when Isaac marries Rebecca, he brings her to “Sarah his mother’s tent” in Hebron (Genesis 24:67). Perhaps since Rebecca was a woman, he brought her into his mother’s tent, which was separate from Abraham’s tent, as mentioned in Genesis 18:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Found online at <https://lexundria.com/j_aj/1.236/wst>. Shalit (p. 265, note 265) notes the happy ending that Josephus borrowed from Hellenistic Roman style, which gives the story the form of a folk legend. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Leviticus Rabbah 20, 2 pp. 448-449. On the chronology of the compilation of Leviticus Rabbah and Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana and the debate among scholars, see Raisel, *Mavo la-Midrashim*, pp. 228-229. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. In Leviticus Rabbah the passage from “and built…” until “…slaughtered already” is missing. I preferred the Pesiqta version of the passage because according to the text of Leviticus Rabbah, how did Sarah know about God saying “Do not lay your hand on the boy” to stop the sacrifice? The Pesiqta version of the passage appears to preserve a more precise version of the midrash. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. A parallel version with minor textual variants appears in Tanḥuma (Buber), *Aḥarei Mot* 3. I will discuss the version in Ecclesiastes Rabbah below. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. See Heinemann, *Darkhe ha-Aggadah*, p. 22; 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. In the version of Leviticus Rabbah the epithet is ברה דרוותה, son of a sorrowful woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. For a summary on the chronology of the compilation of the early Palestinian Midrash compilations, see Kadari, “The Amoraic Aggadic Midrashim,” p. 307 and note 44. There is a methodological disagreement between scholars over the possibility of discerning the editors’ worldview on the basis of the selection and styling of the traditions they included in midrashic compilations. Clearly, there are differences between compilations and conclusions drawn concerning one cannot be applied to another. Opposing the impressive list of scholars who believe that these compilations are anthologies of whatever material on the topic that was available to the editors, there is also a non-trivial group of scholars who believe that in some midrashic works, e.g., Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah and Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, it is possible to discern careful selection of the material included. Cf. Heinemann, “*Mivneihu Vehalukato*”, p. 288; Stern, “Midrash and the Language of Exegesis”, p. 56; Visotzky, *Golden Bells and Pomegranates*, pp. 10-22; 74-89; 173-174; Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 204; compared with Meir, *Ma’asei Ha’arikha*, p. 61; Meir, *Retzifut Ha’arikha*, p. 85; Meir, *Ikaron Hahaluka*, p. 10 and others. On the range of scholarly opinion on this issue, see Kadari, “*Minha Leyehuda*”, pp. 62-67. My recent scholarship on the evolution of aggadic traditions regarding the Book of Genesis has strengthened my opinion regarding influence the editors’ worldview had on their compositions and the traditions that they chose to include in each midrashic compilation. This article was written on the basis of this assumption. In the introduction to my soon-to-be-published book, I deal with this at greater length. For the worldview of the editor of Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, as it emerges from the midrashim it includes, see Atzmon, “*Arikha veMashmaut*” pp. 375-386 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. See Genesis Rabbah 55, 6, pp. 584-585. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. For example, in Genesis Rabbah 56, 6, p. 598: “All the eating of foods [אכילות [...] שאוכלין that Israel eats in this world are by virtue of that knife [מאכלת].” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. Ibid., 55, 1 p. 585: “‘And Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him’ (Genesis 21:5) and after all that sorrow he was told, ‘Take now your son …” and he did not delay.” See also Genesis Rabbah 55, 8 p. 593: “Love distorts reality and ‘Avraham arose in the morning and saddled his donkey.’ Did he not have a few slaves [who would have saddled the donkey for him]? But love distorts reality.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Contrary to the ambiguous description in the verses. See Mazor, “Abraham vs. Abraham,” pp. 125-133, who argues that the Bible presents two conflicting images of Abraham. Some verses present his calm demeanor, and others suggest an internal conflict that accompanied him throughout the journey. This reading was presented earlier by Jacobs, “Willing Obedience,” pp. 559-546. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. The words of Samael that trouble him and cause him to turn to his father, are not the pain that will be caused to his mother, but the possibility that he will die and Ishmael will become the heir. Isaac does not respond to this argument from Samael. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. On the role of a scream of anguish as a symbol for the sounds of the shofar in the Midrash, see Friedlander-Ben Arza, “Petaḥim shel meri,” pp. 74-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Here it should be noted that in the printed version of Genesis Rabbah *Chayei Sarah, 58* p. 623, on the passage: “And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah,” regarding the question of the interpreter “from where did he come,” and his answer “from Mount Moriah,” the addition “and Sarah died from that distress, therefore the Akedah is juxtaposed to the life of Sarah” appears. This addition does not appear in the best textual witnesses of the composition (London, Vatican 30, and others). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. For a literary analysis of editing, see Levinson, *The Twice Told Tale*, pp. 246-250. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Elizur, *Akedat Yitzḥak*, pp. 15-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Ibid. p. 34. Other explanations for the difference between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Judaism in relation to human sacrifices can be found in Walz, “The Collective Suicides,” pp. 213-236. See also in the collection of midrashic and liturgical traditions about the Akedah, with annotations regarding the historical moment of their formation in Spiegel, “Me-aggadot ha-’aqedah,” pp. 471-547. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. See for example in Genesis Rabbah *Vayishlach* 77, p. 614, where the midrashic author explains the angel’s touch on Jacob’s hip socket as “He touched the righteous who are destined to arise from him – this is the generation of persecution.” In Genesis Rabbah, *Vayishlach* 82, pp. 884-985, there is a story about students who changed their style of dress during a time of persecution so as not to reveal their Jewish identity. They were rebuked by a Jewish apostate who had become a Roman soldier who told them that if they were descendants of Rachel, they should be willing to give their lives for their Judaism. See also in the composition that was compiled at a later period: Song of Songs Rabbah 1, 3; ibid. 2, 7; ibid. 3, 3; ibid 8, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Genesis Rabbah 38, pp. 362-364. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. See Tohar, *Abraham in the Fiery Furnace*, pp. 21-34, on the evolution of the Aggadic traditions of Abraham in the fiery furnace. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Urbach, “Asceticism,” p. 448. Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, as well as Daniel, are mentioned several times in Genesis Rabbah, and are praised for their willingness to die as martyrs. See for example, Genesis Rabbah, 34, p. 319; 68, p. 790. Conversely, Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana (10, p. 170) voices indirect criticism when it describes the nations of the world as accusing Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah of not preventing the destruction of the Temple and the exile of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. See Genesis Rabbah *Lekh Lekha* 39, 2, p. 376: “‘And you shall be a blessing’ – just as this blessing purifies the impure, so too it brings the distant ones closer”; ibid., 39, 5, p. 379 “‘And the souls that they had gotten’ - these are the converts... “Abraham converted the men and Sarah the women”; ibid., 39, 8, p. 381, “he began to convert converts”; ibid., 43, 19, p. 421, about how Abraham would feed and give drink to passersby and ask them to bless the Lord. Genesis Rabbah, *Lekh Lekha*, 45, 1, p. 448 discusses Pharaoh and Abimelech who requested that their daughters be raised in Abraham’s house because of the miracles that happened to him; Genesis Rabbah *Lekh Lekha* 48, 1, p. 479, discusses the converts who came to join Abraham after his circumcision; ibid., 53, 7 discusses the mothers’ enthusiasm to bring their children to nurse from Sarah’s milk and their transformation into fearers of heaven. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. On the exceptional stance of the editor of Genesis Rabbah regarding martydom, even in comparison to the qualified approach of the Sages, see: Schwartz, Martyrdom, pp. 343-353. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. See Blidstein, “Rabbis, Romans, and Martyrdom,” pp. 54-62; Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs*, pp. 90-102. Herr, “Gezeirot ha-shmad” pp. 73-92; ספראי, “קידוש השם,” pp. 28-42; Boyarin, *Dying for God*. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. For an earlier dispute around the issue of martyrdom, see Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 74a and Safrai, “Qiddush ha-shem,” pp. 73-92; Shepkaru, *Jewish Martyrs*. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. On the Pesiqta’s editor’s binary conception of the difference between Israel and other nations while demonstrating Israel’s superiority, see Elitzur, *Dyuqan be-shvil ha-dorot*, pp. 73-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. “So when Sarah saw Ishmael adopting wicked behavior, she cried out and said to Abraham, ‘Drive out this maidservant and her son’” (Deuteronomy Rabbah, *Re’eh* 5). A similar usage is attributed to Achsah in BT Temurah 16a. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. As in Moses’s explanation “through those near to Me I show Myself holy” (Leviticus 10:1). This is unlike the explanation attached to the original account of their death: “And they offered before the Lord strange fire, which He commanded them not” (Leviticus 10:1), and similarly Numbers 3:4; 26:61. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. See Kiperwasser, *Kohelet Rabbah,* p. 115. Elitzur demonstrates the closeness of Ecclesiastes Rabbah to Pesiqta in their interpretation of Sarah’s death, and he is uncertain about the literary reason that led to the changes: “It seems that the author of Ecclesiastes Rabbah adapted what is found in Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana for the purpose of a sermon on the verse in Ecclesiastes ‘Go, eat your bread with gladness” (אליצור, פסיקתא רבתי, p. 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. The opening and closing verse of the midrash in Ecclesiastes Rabbah “eat your bread with joy” which is supposed to reassure Abraham about his concerns of a flaw in his son that caused the rejection of his sacrifice, is also brought in the Tanḥuma *Shelah* 14 and in Tanḥuma Buber *Shelah* 27 in the context of the story of the Akedah. However, Abraham is not worried there about a defect in his sacrifice, but about whether he has the strength to deal with it if God were to impose additional trials on him: “I will not move from here until You swear to me that You will not test me anymore forever, for if, God forbid, I had not listened to You, I would have lost all that I have worked in all my days.” God reassures him with the words: “Go, eat your bread with gladness… for your action was long ago approved by God.” It is generally accepted that the tradition in Ecclesiastes Rabbah predates the Tanḥuma tradition. The reason the editor of the Tanḥuma changed Abraham’s cause for concern is likely an expression of disagreement with the extreme description of Abraham’s fervor to bind his son in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, which does not let up even after the angel’s instruction “Do not lay your hand on the boy,” portraying Abraham as one who is distressed over not being able to sacrifice his son. How different this is from the message of the midrash in Leviticus Rabbah and the Pesiqta that criticize Abraham’s eagerness to carry out the commandment of the Akedah even before the angel’s instruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. In Tanḥuma Buber, the midrash about Sarah’s death as a result of the news of the Akedah is not mentioned in Genesis, but only on the portion of *Aharei Mot* the in the same context as the version in Leviticus and in the Pesiqta, therefore our discussion will focus on the version of the midrash in the printed Tanḥuma (henceforth ‘Tanḥuma’). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. See Fraenkel, *Darkhei Ha'aggadah*, pp. 9-10; Bregman, “Early Sources and Traditions,” pp. 269-274; Atzmon, “Pesikta in the Tanhuma,” pp. 131-156. For the discussion of Tanhuma sources that are not recognized from earlier compositions, see Bregman, “Early Sources and Traditions”; Bregman, M., Tanhuma-Yelamdenu, Chapter 1; Mann, “Ma’amarei yelammedenu.” [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Above, p. \*\*\* [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. It is interesting to note that the midrash on Sarah’s death does not appear in Tanhuma in the section dedicated to the Akedah in parashat *Aḥarei Mot*, even though the opening verse (for Tanḥuma *Aḥarei Mot* 2) “I said to the fools, do not be foolish” is identical to the opening verse of the parallels in Leviticus Rabbah, in the Pesiqta and in Tanhuma Buber, and so is most of the content of the section. The editor apparently preferred to make the textual changes in the midrash on Sarah’s death in its natural place in Genesis, rather than integrating the treatment of Sarah with an explanation as to why Abraham did not rejoice in this world. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. A small amount, corresponding to the minimal amount necessary for most ritual purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. I will discuss the role of the accuser in the Tanḥuma traditions about the Akedah below. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Compare, for example, the midrashim in the two compositions on Abraham’s two trials in Genesis Rabbah 55, 7 compared to Tanḥuma *Vayera* 22. Moreover contrast the struggle against the accuser’s attempts to prevent the fulfillment of the command in Genesis Rabbah 54, 6, p. 599: “And they both went together, one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered” to Tanḥuma Vayera 22: “Nevertheless, I will not go against the will of my Creator and the commandment of my Father” and more. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. On the cunning of the accuser as expressed in the midrash of Akedah, and on the purposes of his integration, see Raveh, “Ha-satan ve-’i-havada’ut,” pp. 235-249, who analyzes the character of Samael in the midrash in Bereshit Rabbah. The accuser is fully developed specifically in the adapted version of the Tanhuma. See McDowell, “Satan at the Sacrifices,” pp. 355-372; Dulkin, “The Devil Within,” pp. 153-175. Abraham’s encounter with Satan is also mentioned in a shortened version in BT Sanhedrin 89b. It can be assumed that the Tanhuma version is also influenced by the Babylonian text. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. “And let us prostrate ourselves and return to you in peace – his mouth prophesied that both of them would return in peace” (Tanhuma *Vayera* 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Another tradition dealing with the connection between the report of the Akedah and the death of Sarah can be found in Pirqei de-Rabi Eliezer 31. Apparently, that tradition was part of Jewish-Muslim polemics around the identity of the sacrificed son. I cannot address this tradition within the scope of this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. On the two approaches and a critique of the ease with which polemical aspects are attributed to the tradition, see Shermer, *Brothers Estranged*, pp. 122-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. For example, compare Kessler, *Bound by the Bible* who identifies Jewish-Christian polemics in all parts of the story, with Hayward, The Sacrifice of Isaac, pp. 292-306, who uses one of the most common elements used to identify polemics in the midrashim of the Akedah as an example of a midrash that can be interpreted in internal Jewish terms, without the polemical message. Extrapolating from this example, he highlights the caution required in identifying polemical content. See also an intermediate position in שפיגל, מאגדות העקדה pp. 527-528. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. See at length in Punt, “Subverting Sarah,” pp. 453-468; Schwartz, “The Virgin Mother Sarah,” pp. 63-103; Ashbrook Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence,” pp. 105-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. See Brock, “Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition,” pp. 2-30; Brock, “Where was Sarah?” pp. 14-17; Brock, “Reading Between the Lines.” pp. 169-180. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. See Brock, “Reading Between the Lines.” On the rewriting of biblical texts in Syriac Christian traditions, see Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Traditions*, pp. 35-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. See the arguments for denying the attribution to Ephrem, in Eastman, “The Matriarch as Model,” pp. 241-259. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. For the full version of the tradition, see Brock, “Two Syriac Verse Homilies,” pp. 117-129. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. See the English translation in Eastman, “The Matriarch as Model,” pp. 243-244. On the positive attitude of the Syrian Church Fathers towards women compared to their Greek counterparts, see Ashbrook Harvey, “Spoken Words, Voiced Silence,” pp. 105-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. The mother as a paradigm is the subject of Eastman’s article. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. This is explicit in one of the Christian traditions: “This secret today – women cannot be aware of.” Translated into English in Brock, “Reading Between the Lines,” p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. As described in one of the Syriac traditions (English translation: “Reading Between the Lines,” p. 173): “Leave the child behind, lest something happen, and untimely death meet him, for I am being unjustly deprived of the single son to whom I have given birth. Let not the eye of his mother be darkened, seeing that after one hundred years light has shone out for me. You are drunk with the love of God – who is your God and my God – and if he so bids you concerning the child, you would kill him without hesitation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. See Schwartz, “[The Virgin Mother Sarah.”](https://merhav.nli.org.il/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=RAMBI51391508850005171&context=L&vid=NLI_Rambi)  [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Some art historians believe that the mural showing the Akedah in the Dura Europos synagogue (third century CE) shows Sarah in the tent during the preparations for the Akedah. According to their proposed interpretation, there was an earlier aggadic tradition of Sarah being excluded from the commandment and implementation of the Akedah. See: Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, pp. 71-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. For an analysis of the *piyyut*, see Elizur, *Shira shel parasha*, pp. 41-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. Ratzaby, *Leqet piyyutim*, page 38, line 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. Ibid., page 41, lines 50-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. Ibid., page 42, lines 54-55. The request to take his ashes is not mentioned in either the early or the late Rabbinic midrashim, and is first mentioned in *seliḥot* [petitional liturgical poems associated with fast days and the Days of Awe] from the Geonic period. See Levin, *Ginzei* *Qedem*, p. 65. In the Syriac Christian tradition that was erroneously attributed to Ephrem, Sarah is depicted as lamenting over the fact that she was not brought remnants of Isaac’s body, and she even expresses longing for the scent of her son. See Eastman, “The Matriarch as Model,” pp. 243-244. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)