

# A NEW EARLY CHRISTIAN POEM ON THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

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## *Introduction*

Almost half a century ago, in 1952, several dozen papyri were discovered near the Egyptian village of Dishna (not far from Nag Hammadi, where the well-known Coptic Gnostic library was found). They were acquired by Phokion Tano, a Cypriot antiquities dealer in Cairo, who sold most of them to Martin Bodmer, the Swiss magnate and scholar who founded the famous Bibliotheca Bodmeriana in Cologne (near Geneva).

In a series of monographs that appeared from the middle of the fifties a great number of these so-called Bodmer papyri were published (books of the *Septuagint* and the *New Testament*, Menander, the *Pastor Hermae* etc.). The publication, some 15 years ago, of *PBOD 29* was exciting news. It contained a completely new text, the early Christian *Vision of Dorotheus*<sup>1</sup>. This is a Greek poem from the fourth century written in Homeric language and style in which a certain Dorotheus, who had been previously unknown to us, tells about his visionary experiences<sup>2</sup>. On the last photo of the papyrus found in that edition, one can already see the opening lines of the next poem, again in Homeric hexametres, entitled *Pros Abra(h)am*. It took 15 years before the complete text of that poem was put at our disposal, but it is available now, in a beautiful edition, which also contains the text of six other early Christian poems from the same codex<sup>3</sup>. We will present here the text in an English translation and then briefly discuss the background of its contents.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Hurst, O. Reverdin & J. Rudhardt, *Papyrus Bodmer XXIX: Vision de Dorotheos* (Cologne-Genève 1984).

<sup>2</sup> For a revised edition and English translation see A. H. M. Kessels & P. W. van der Horst, «The Vision of Dorotheus (*PBOD 29*). Edited with Introduction, Translation and Notes», *Vigiliae Christianae* 41 (1987) 313-359.

<sup>3</sup> A. Hurst & J. Rudhardt, *Papyrus Bodmer XXX-XXXVII: «Codex des Visions.» Poèmes divers* (München 1999). It should be remarked here, albeit only in passing, that actually the text of this poem had already been accessible from 1994, but that the

The papyrus itself dates from the first decades of the fifth century, but the text of the poem is certainly older, although not older than the fourth century as the editors persuasively argue in their introduction (their dating of the text and papyrus of the *Visio Dorothei* has met with only marginal criticism<sup>4</sup>). Their linguistic analysis of the Greek makes clear that the author of the poem *Pros Abraam* cannot be the same as Dorotheus, the author of the preceding autobiographical poem. So it is an anonymous piece. It is a poetical rendering of the story of *Genesis 22*, the famous narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac (or the sacrifice of Abraham, as it is often called), which, in Jewish tradition, is known as the *Aqedat Yitschak* (litt. «the binding of Isaac») or, more briefly, as «the Aqedah.» The editors are not sufficiently aware of the fact that *Genesis 22* had a very influential «Wirkungsgeschichte» in the early centuries of both Judaism and Christianity (see pp. 39-40), and it is for that reason that they appeal to their colleagues to do further research to «la question de savoir s'il existe une source littéraire qui explique les écarts par rapport au texte de l'*Ancien Testament* ou s'il faut les attribuer à l'imagination de l'auteur» (p. 43). But there is not just one «source littéraire» that can explain the deviations from the text of the *Old Testament*, there are many of them, as was to be expected.

Short though it may be (only 30 lines), the poem has a tripartite structure: vv. 1-3 are a kind of prelude; vv. 4-27 form an acrostichon, a poem in which the opening letters of the lines form a word, in this case simply the Greek alphabet; finally an epilogue in vv. 28-30. This tripartite structure is very clearly indicated by the copyist of the papyrus in that he puts the word ὑπέρθετα («placed above it») above lines 1-3; above lines 4-27 the words κατὰ στοιχείον («according to the letters of the alphabet»); and above lines 28-30 the words τὰ λοιπὰ πρόσθετα («the rest is an addition» or epilogue)<sup>5</sup>.

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publication that made this possible has been intentionally ignored by almost all scholars. The scandal is as follows. The Italian classicist and papyrologist Enrico Livrea was asked in 1993 by Hurst and Rudhardt, who prepared the *editio princeps*, to give them advice on certain points. He agreed and received a copy of the Greek text and a photo of the papyrus. Shortly afterwards Livrea himself published the papyrus with an Italian translation under the title «Un poema inedito di Dorotheos: Ad Abramo» in the *ZPE* 100 (1994) 175-187. It is understandable that there were furious reactions to this «acte de piraterie littéraire»; thus, for instance, H.E. Braun, A. Hurst & J. Rudhardt in *ZPE* 103 (1994) 154 (Braun is the director of the Bibliotheca Bodmeriana).

<sup>4</sup> Notably J.N. Bremmer, «The Vision of Dorotheus,» in J. den Boeft & A. Hilhorst (edd.), *Early Christian Poetry* (Leiden 1993) 253-261.

<sup>5</sup> In the text of the translation square brackets [...] indicate that there is a lacuna in the papyrus, and round brackets (...) that the translators have added one or more words

*Text in translation**On Abraham*<sup>6</sup>

## Prelude

- (1) He who put together the world and the heaven [and the s]ea
- (2) sent from the ether<sup>7</sup> a swift an[gel] to Abraham (with the command)
- (3) to sacrifice his beloved son as a perfect offering<sup>8</sup>.

## In alphabetical order

- (4) As soon as he learnt this, he rejoiced in his willing mi[nd],
- (5) and he went to see whether he could persuade his illustrious wi[fe]:
- (6) «Wife of mine, the immortal God desires that I br[ing] to Him
- (7) the noble Isaac. [He was ?] a great gift on the thr[eshhold] of our old age<sup>9</sup>,
- (8) (this) descendant<sup>10</sup>. Let him execute [God's will] (?)<sup>11</sup>.
- (9) I will bind my un[touched(?)<sup>12</sup> son] on the altar as an offering.»
- (10) When his wife heard that, she was proud<sup>13</sup> [to say] (these) wise words:

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for the sake of clarity. The papyrus has been preserved relatively well; the lacunae are small and especially in the acrostic part at the start of the lines they can for the most part quite easily be filled because it is known with which letter of the alphabet each line has to begin. Only lines 13-14 (beginning with the letters κ and λ) are completely missing because the bottom part of the papyrus is destroyed.

<sup>6</sup> The meaning of the Greek πρὸς in this title may seem unclear at first sight since πρὸς + acc. is usually an indication of direction or of address, but that does not make sense here, unless one assumes that the title refers to the fact that the final three lines (28-30) are indeed addressed *to* Abraham. The suggestion by the editors (p. 50) that the expression is comparable to the words *le-Dawid*, which are often found as a superscript to the *Psalms*, does not solve anything. *Pros* here has the sense of «with regard to» (see W. Bauer – W. F. Arndt – F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon to the New Testament* (Chicago & London 1979) s.v. 5b); hence our translation «on.»

<sup>7</sup> Here for «highest heaven.»

<sup>8</sup> The Greek has here ἐκατόμβη.

<sup>9</sup> «The threshold of old age» is a well-known Homeric expression and verse-ending.

<sup>10</sup> One could read the word ἐκγενέτης (descendant) also as ἐκ γενετῆς (from his birth).

<sup>11</sup> Because of the lacuna the text and meaning of this line remain uncertain. One could take the word ἐκγενέτης at the beginning of the line to be the subject of the verb so as to get, «Let (our) descendant fulfill [God's will].»

<sup>12</sup> The editors here read ἄθικτον, but that is far from certain. If correct, it could be a reference to the demand that a sacrificial animal must be completely without blemish; but it could as well refer to the fact that Isaac is still unmarried (see v. 16), «untouched» in the sexual sense (ἄθικτος can also mean «virgin»).

<sup>13</sup> Or «she began» (ἤρξατο instead of ἠύξατο).

- (11) «Keep cou[rage]<sup>14</sup>, my dear child, for [you] have [been] happy in [this ]life,  
 (12) Isa[ac, child] of my womb<sup>15</sup>, [...]  
 (13) {the letter κ}  
 (14) {the letter λ}  
 (15) Full of [sweet] joy their glorious son spoke to them:  
 (16) «Parents, prepare for me a luxurious brid[al] chamber!  
 (17) Citizens, braid my fai[r] hair into locks<sup>16</sup>,  
 (18) tha[t] I may fulfil a [hol]y task with magnanimity.»  
 (19) [At] once able men stirred up the f[ire] around the altar.  
 (20) Around the flames [rush]ed the sea that Moses  
 (21) would [split]. A wave lifted Abraham's son (or: Abraham lifted his son to a wave?)<sup>17</sup>.  
 (22) The father brought h[im], who smelled of incense, to the altar, and (the son) rejoiced.  
 (23) He welcomed (?)<sup>18</sup> him [on top of?] the fire<sup>19</sup> and he hastened to  
 (24) strike his neck with a sharp [sword]. But God's  
 (25) [hand] reached out (towards him), for nearby a goat appeared<sup>20</sup>.  
 (26) Leaving his son unscathed Abra[ham plucked/sang the praise of?<sup>21</sup>] the fruit in the tree

<sup>14</sup> This imperative (θάρασει) is also often found on tombstones as encouragement for the deceased; see the discussion in P. W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (Kampen 1991) 120-122.

<sup>15</sup> Litt. «from my limbs.» The second half of this line and the two following verses are lacking due to a large lacuna.

<sup>16</sup> The editors suggest that «Isaac fait peut-être allusion à (...) la flamme du sacrifice, désignée comme une chevelure tressée» (53) with reference to Bacchyl. 3,56. It would seem more natural, however, to take it as a reference to the usual cosmetic preparation for a wedding.

<sup>17</sup> The Greek (Αβραάμ υἱά ποτιζοναίρετο κύμα) is very unclear and the whole scene is confusing in view of the fact that in the next line it is Abraham himself who brings his son to the altar.

<sup>18</sup> The exact meaning of the form διδίσκετο is far from certain.

<sup>19</sup> Litt. «Hephaistos.»

<sup>20</sup> The Greek here has μῆλον, which can mean both «goat» and «apple.» In view of what follows (Abraham's «plucking» of the «fruit» [if that reading is correct]) the author seems to make a conscious play on this homophony.

<sup>21</sup> Both the reading and the meaning of the word ψῆλεν (aorist of ψάλλω) are uncertain. In Aesch., *Pers.* 1062, according to a scholiast, ψάλλειν is used in the sense of «plucking» and that might have inspired our author, but of course the sense of «(psalm)singing» is much more current. Since the word is largely conjectural here, the editors also considered the reading ψιλόν, which in combination with «son» would yield the following translation: «Leaving unscathed his *only* son, Abraham chose the fruit in the tree to prepare as a sacrificial meal.»

(27) [so that in as]sent he chose to prepare that (goat) as a sacrificial meal (?).

[The rest i]s epilogue

(28) [...?] courageous man, could you receive another mark of honour for this (?):

(29) Thousands of flourishing [children] to make you shine (?),

(30) excellent [giver] of gifts, who has climbed the tower<sup>22</sup>.

### Comments

The differences from the biblical story are striking. To mention only the most important: (1) Not only Abraham, but Sara and Isaac as well, assent to God's command to sacrifice Isaac without any hesitation and even with enthusiasm; (2) nothing is kept hidden from Isaac; (3) Isaac compares his imminent death to a wedding; (4) Sara is presented as speaking (whereas in the biblical story she is not even mentioned); (5) God's command is here given via an angel, but (6) the biblical angel in *Gen. 22,11* here becomes God's hand; (7) the Red Sea plays an enigmatic role<sup>23</sup>. Many more differences in detail could be mentioned, but this short enumeration suffices to show that the biblical story has undergone some drastic modifications here. What is the background of these modifications?

It is well-known that already in the pre-Christian period and even more thereafter the story of *Genesis 22* gained a surplus of meaning and value in Jewish circles (and that not only in the martyrological sphere)<sup>24</sup>. For instance, we see that Isaac's sacrifice was given a soteriological significance in the first century CE *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum (LAB)* by Pseudo-Philo. In *LAB 18,5* we read the following utterance of God:

<sup>22</sup> The final three lines are an echo of the promise of numerous offspring in *Gen. 22,17*, with the special twist that these offspring are the Christians, at least, if the editors are right in suggesting that climbing the tower is here equivalent to founding the church. The tower as a symbol of the church is wellknown from the *Pastor Hermae*, a treatise parts of which were found in the same codex in which the present poem is to be found.

<sup>23</sup> The editors are of the opinion (41) that what is meant is that Isaac, by being laid upon the altar, undergoes a symbolic baptism. In this connection they refer to Paul's allegory of the passage through the Red Sea in *1 Cor. 10,1-2*. This seems somewhat forced at first sight, but it is hard to come up with a more satisfactory explanation (see, however, below in the text). Livrea (184-185) sees here a reference to a lustration ritual before sacrifice.

<sup>24</sup> The most exhaustive collection of material is now L. Kundert, *Die Opferung/Bindung Isaaks*, 2 vols. (Neukirchen 1998).

«Because he did not object, his offering was acceptable before me, and in return for his blood (!)<sup>25</sup> I chose them (namely the people of Israel).» In *LAB* 40,2 Jephtha's daughter wants to emulate Isaac on a soteriological level and speaking about it to her father, she remarks: «Or have you forgotten what happened in the days of our fathers, when the father placed the son as a burnt offering, and he did not dispute with him but gladly gave his consent to him, and the one being offered was ready and the one offering was rejoicing?»<sup>26</sup> This joyful readiness is made even more explicit in Pseudo-Philo's rendering of Deborah's song, where he has her say (*LAB* 32,2-3):

(2) Abraham did not dispute, but set out immediately. When he set out, he said to his son, «Behold now, my son, I am offering you as a burnt-offering and am delivering you into the hands of the one who gave you to me.» (3) The son said to the father, «Hear me, father. If a lamb of the flock is accepted as an offering to the Lord as an odour of sweetness and if, for the sins of men, animals are appointed to be killed, but man is designed to inherit the world, how is it that you do not say to me, «Come and inherit a secure life and time without measure?» What if I had not been born into the world to be offered as a sacrifice to him who made me? Now my blessedness will be above that of all men, because there will be no other [sacrifice like this]. Through me nations will be blessed and through me the peoples will understand that the Lord has deemed the soul of a man worthy to be a sacrifice.»

Similar remarks about Isaac's heroic stance are found in Pseudo-Philo's contemporary, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (*Antiquitates* 1,232: «Isaac received these words [of his father] with joy»), and also in later rabbinic midrashim and in the paraphrastic *Bible* translations into Aramaic, the targumim<sup>27</sup>. For instance, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* renders *Gen.* 22,7-11 as follows:

<sup>25</sup> Also some medieval rabbinic midrashim speak of Isaac's blood (or ashes) as if the sacrifice had taken place in reality. See H. Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Leiden 1996) vol. I, 583.

<sup>26</sup> Translation by Jacobson, *A Commentary on Pseudo-Philo*, 582 (slightly altered).

<sup>27</sup> Apart from the recent and all-encompassing work by Kundert (mentioned in n. 23), much material can also be found in the curious study by S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice, the Akedah* (New York 1967) (reprint Woodstock 1993); also in G. Vermes, «Redemption and Genesis xxii – The Binding of Isaac and the Sacrifice of Jesus,» in his *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden 1973) 193-227. See further J. Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac. A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Akedah* (Rome 1981) 23-80; A. F. Segal, «The Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Judaism and Christianity,»

(7) Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, «Father!» And he said, «Here I am, my son.» He said, «Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?» (8) Abraham said, «The Lord will choose for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.» And the two of them went together with a perfect heart. (9) They came to the place of which the Lord had told him, and there Abraham (re)built the altar which Adam had built and which had been demolished by the waters of the Flood. Noah rebuilt it, but it was demolished in the generation of the Division. He arranged the wood upon it and tied Isaac his son and placed him on the altar on top of the wood. (10) Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. Isaac spoke up and said to his father, «Tie me well, lest I struggle because of the anguish of my soul, with the result that a blemish will be found in your offering, and I will be thrust into the pit of destruction.» The eyes of Abraham were looking at the eyes of Isaac, and the eyes of Isaac were looking at the angels on high. Isaac saw them but Abraham did not see them. The angels on high exclaimed, «Come, see two unique ones; one is slaughtering and one is being slaughtered; the one who slaughters does not hesitate, and the one who is being slaughtered stretches forth his neck.»<sup>28</sup>

It may be clear that the motif of Isaac's joyful willingness to be an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord already had a long tradition in Judaism by the time our anonymous author wrote his poem. The same applies also to several other non-biblical motifs in the poem. For instance, God's *hand* that restrains Abraham just in time (instead of the *angel* of the Lord in *Gen. 22,11-12*) is a motif that we know from ancient Jewish art: it is to be found on the wallpaintings of the Dura Europus synagogue from the middle of the third century CE, as well as in the later floor mosaic in the synagogue of Beth Alpha (but also in early Christian pictures!)<sup>29</sup>.

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in his *The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity* (Atlanta 1987) 109-130; J. Milgrom, *The Binding of Isaac: The Akedah – A Primary Symbol in Jewish Thought and Art* (Berkeley 1988).

<sup>28</sup> Translation by M. Maher, *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (The Aramaic Bible 1B) (Edinburgh 1992) 79-80; discussion in R. Hayward, «The Present State of Research into the Targumic Account of the Sacrifice of Isaac,» *Journal of Jewish Studies* 32 (1981) 127-150.

<sup>29</sup> See the discussion in R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora* (Leiden 1998) 239-246. For other Jewish depictions of God's hand see K. Gross, *Menschenhand und Gotteshand in Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart 1985) 354-357. Some scholars think that pictures of God's hands have a pagan or Christian origin. The Christian depictions of the sacrifice of Isaac are discussed by I. Speyart van Woerden, «The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham,» *Vigiliae Christianae* 15 (1961) 214-255.

At first sight it seems a strange motif that Isaac's first reaction to the message that his father is going to sacrifice him is his request to prepare a bridal chamber (the altar!) for him. This motif is not known from other sources in relation to Isaac, but it is known from Jewish traditions concerning Isaac's female counterpart, Jephtha's daughter. It is again in the pseudo-Philonian *LAB* that we read that Seila<sup>30</sup> – as this woman, who is anonymous in the *Bible*, is called here – in a reaction to the message of her father that he has to sacrifice her, says: «The underworld has become my bridal chamber» (40,6). The motif of death as a wedding and the underworld as a bridal chamber has a long history in Greek literature. The editors of our poem rightly refer to Sophocles (*Ant.* 806ff.) and Euripides (*IA* 458ff.)<sup>31</sup> as possible sources for our author, but it is at least as relevant to point out that in Jewish works in which biblical stories are «rewritten» the motif of death as marriage to the underworld had already entered into the stories about persons who had to die young by serving as sacrifices to the Lord (Isaac and Seila), albeit under Greek influence<sup>32</sup>. The interesting thing is, however, that in the case of Seila, as in the Greek tradition of *lamentatio*, the motif is a complaint, whereas in the case of Isaac in our poem it is a paradoxical expression of joy.

Do we have to assume now that the author of the poem was acquainted with Jewish haggada about *Genesis 22*? In itself that is not impossible<sup>33</sup>, but it would seem to be less plausible if it could be demonstrated that many of the non-biblical elements could have been known to him from his own Christian tradition. For in early Christianity, probably in reaction to soteriological elements in the Jewish haggada on *Genesis 22*, a Christian haggada on the same chapter began to develop. Let us therefore look for elements in these traditions about Isaac's sacrifice that may shed light on our new poem<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Probably (Aramaic) *She'ilah* = she who is demanded (by God).

<sup>31</sup> P. 53: «On ne peut s'empêcher de se demander si l'Iphigénie d'Euripide n'interfère pas ici avec le modèle biblique.»

<sup>32</sup> See M. Alexiou & P. Dronke, «The Lament of Jephtha's Daughter: Themes, Traditions, Originality,» *Studi medievali* (3rd series) 12 (1971) 819-863; also P.W. van der Horst, «Portraits of Biblical Women in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*,» in *his Essays on the Jewish World of Early Christianity* (Fribourg-Göttingen 1990) 119-120. On old mural paintings in the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai, Isaac and Jephtha's daughter are often depicted side by side.

<sup>33</sup> An outdated but still useful survey of motifs borrowed by Church Fathers from Jewish haggadic tradition is L. Ginzberg, *Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern* (Amsterdam 1899); further, e.g., M. Hirshman, *A Rivalry of Genius. Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity* (Albany 1996).

<sup>34</sup> For what follows cf. D. Lerch, *Isaaks Opferung christlich gedeutet* (Tübingen 1950); S.P. Brock, «Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition,» *Mélanges Dominique Barthélémy*



The new text on the sacrifice of Abraham does in fact offer possibilities for a comparison with the Christian exegetical tradition of this story. We have found eight of them:

### 1. *Abraham is willing and he rejoices*

Many Christian exegetes emphasise the human grief of the faithful Abraham. Yet there are also a number of texts that present him as not only faithful, but even as rejoicing. Evidently this joy does not originate from negative feelings towards Isaac. On the contrary, Isaac is «the beloved son». Abraham's joy at the sacrifice has a different background. Apart from the martyrological interpretation which we already know from Jewish sources (2 and 4 *Maccabees*), there is also a specifically christological one. Irenaeus (second century) for example says<sup>35</sup> that Abraham obeyed God's command to sacrifice his son, because he knew what God intended to do in the long term: «Since... Abraham was a prophet and saw in the Spirit the day of the Lord's coming, and the dispensation of his suffering, through whom both he himself and all who, following the example of his faith, trust in God, would be saved, he rejoiced exceedingly». Irenaeus departs from Jo. 8,56 here («Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad»). Those who believe like Abraham are the Christians who see the life and passion of Jesus Christ prefigured in the sacrifice of Isaac. They do this in contrast to the Jews, who do not derive the meaning of Biblical texts from the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Interpreting a text from the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, Origen (third century) suggests that Abraham's hope did not just lie in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also in the resurrection of Isaac himself: «The Apostle (i.e. *Heb.* 11,17,19)... has reported to us the thoughts of the faithful man, that belief in the resurrection began to be held already at that time in Isaac. Abraham, therefore, hoped for the resurrection of Isaac and believed in a future which had not yet happened». Immediately after this, anti-Jewish polemics follow: «How, then, are they 'sons of Abraham' who do not believe what has happened in Christ, which Abraham believed was to be in Isaac? Nay, rather, that I may speak more clearly, Abraham knew himself to prefigure the image of future truth; he knew the Christ was to be

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(Fribourg-Göttingen 1981) 2-30; R. M. Jensen, «The Offering of Isaac in Jewish and Christian Tradition,» *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994) 85-110; and M.F.G. Parmentier, *Isaäk gebonden – Jezus gekruisigd: Oudchristelijke teksten over Genesis 22* (Kampen 1996).

<sup>35</sup> *Against the heresies* 4,5,4-5.

born from his seed, who also was to be offered as a truer victim for the whole world and was to be raised from the dead»<sup>36</sup>. Athanasius (fourth century) in his sixth *Festal Letter*<sup>37</sup> paraphrases the exegetical starting point in the *New Testament* for Abraham's joy, Jo. 8,56: «...The patriarch Abraham rejoiced not to see his own day, but that of the Lord; and when he thus longed for it, he saw it, and was glad». This evokes the context of Christian-Jewish polemics about the messianic status of Jesus. Immediately after the paraphrase of Jo. 8 Athanasius begins to discuss the meaning of Abraham's sacrifice. The context is always the dispute with the Jews. Athanasius even goes so far as to suggest that God stopped the sacrifice because otherwise the Jews would deny the prefiguration of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, as found in *Ps.* 40,7 (LXX 39,6) according to the text of the *Septuagint*: «Sacrifice and offering Thou wouldest not, a body Thou hast prepared me». According to Athanasius this text must be interpreted as a reference to the incomplete sacrifice of Abraham and the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ respectively. If the sacrifice of Abraham had taken place, Athanasius argues, the Jews would eliminate *Ps.* 39 [40] as a text in which Isaac's role and Jesus' role are put into the right perspective. Yet it was not Isaac's death but Jesus' death that liberated the world. Jesus raises us from the dead and prepares the joy of his festal banquet for us. Next, Athanasius elaborates for some time on the theme of joy. We may conclude: because he foresaw all this, Abraham rejoiced.

A sermon by the Latin author Zeno of Verona (fourth century) is an example on the Christian side in which not a typological exegesis but a martyrological motif explains Abraham's joy: «Abraham, fully devoted, shows no sad face, neither does grief persuade him to cry. No, he rejoices and is glad. And he is not afraid to risk the accusation of parricide, rather he is glad that God has commanded him to do this, so that he can satisfy his devotion... When everything is ready for the mysterious sacrifice, the joyful father leads the joyful son, who is going to be killed by his father's right hand... In spite of the terrible situation of the son he rejoices and is glad and he jubilates that he has gained the Lord»<sup>38</sup>.

After this, the theme of Abraham's steadfastness almost becomes an exegetical commonplace. Thus Basil of Seleucia (fifth century) writes: «How brave was his soul: he did not wail, he did not cry, he did not give in to his nature, he was not torn apart by conflicting wishes, he did not contort his face, he did not change his conviction, he did not give up his

<sup>36</sup> *Homily 8 on Genesis.*

<sup>37</sup> *The Festal Epistles of St. Athanasius (translated from the Syriac)* (Oxford 1854) 50-51.

<sup>38</sup> *Treatise on Abraham* 1,43 (2,10).

intention, he did not utter those words that can be expected from a father who is asked to butcher his child, he did not say what nature demands...»<sup>39</sup>

## 2. *Abraham tries to convince Sara*

Most Christian authors say that Abraham kept Sara ignorant of the command to sacrifice Isaac, because he was afraid that she would veto his plans. There are however quite a number of authors who record a hypothetical speech by Sara, to show what she might have said, since Sara does not occur in *Genesis* 22. Even so Isho'dad of Merv, a ninth century compiler of numerous older sources, observes that opinions about the question of whether Abraham let Sara into the secret are divided<sup>40</sup>. In fact there are also documents that record a real discussion between Abraham and Sara. Among the descriptions of the communication between Abraham, Sara and Isaac, a large number of Syriac texts, especially the so-called «dialogue poems», a specific Syriac literary genre, catches the eye<sup>41</sup>. However our new text does not present a dialogue, but a monologue which Abraham holds in front of Sara. She reacts by putting heart into Isaac. An example of a real dialogue between Abraham and Sara is the anonymous *Dialogue Poem on Abraham and Isaac*<sup>42</sup>. Apparently, Sara has sensed the divine command and she asks Abraham why he is chopping wood: not by any chance to sacrifice our son? Abraham orders her to be silent, which Sara ignores of course:

You are not aware how I have suffered  
the pains and travail through which he came to be.  
Swear to me by him that nothing will happen to him,  
for he is my hope. Then go.

To this, Abraham replies:

The mighty God in whom I believe  
stands surety for me with you if you believe firmly  
that your son Isaac returns soon  
and remains your consolation by his youth.

<sup>39</sup> J.M.Tevel, *De preken van Basilius van Seleucië*, diss. Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam 1990) 184-185.

<sup>40</sup> J.-M.Vosté et C. van den Eynde, *Commentaire de Isho'dad de Merv sur l'Ancien Testament. I. Genèse*, in: *CSCO* Vol.126 = SS Tome 67 (Louvain 1950) 173 (Syriac); *CSCO* Vol.156 = SS Tome 75 (Louvain 1955) 187 (French).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. S. Brock, «Two Syriac verse homilies on the binding of Isaac», *Le Muséon* 99 (1986) 61-129; for a survey of the speeches by Sara in Syriac and Greek Patristic literature, cp. *ibid.* 68.

<sup>42</sup> Ed. S. Brock, *Sughyotho mgabyotho (= Select Dialogue Poems)* (Glane 1982) 7-12.

### 3. *Sara puts heart into Isaac*

In our new text, Sara puts heart into Isaac. Addresses by Sara to Isaac are rare<sup>43</sup>. Amphilochius of Iconium (fourth century) records such an address by Sara to Isaac<sup>44</sup>, in which she says that she hopes that God will prevent the sacrifice at the last minute and change it into a «bloodless sacrifice». So she expects that Isaac will return alive. After this address by Sara, Abraham quickly makes off, as he is afraid that she will change her mind. Romanos the Singer (fifth-sixth century) makes Sara describe a similar feeling between hope and fear; she addresses Isaac at length<sup>45</sup>. An anonymous Syriac homily also allows Sara to speak. In tears, she admonishes Isaac to obey Abraham: «When you go with your father, listen and do all he tells you, and if he should actually bind you, stretch out your hands to the bonds, and if he should actually sacrifice you, stretch out your neck before his knife; stretch out your neck like a lamb, like a kid before the shearer.»<sup>46</sup> When Isaac has returned safely, Sara addresses him once more at the end of the poem: «Welcome, my son, my beloved, welcome, child of my vows; welcome, o dead one come to life, welcome...»<sup>47</sup> In a reworking of his earlier sermon on the sacrifice of Abraham, Gregory of Nyssa emphasises Sara's role more than in the earlier text<sup>48</sup>. This is in the year 385, in the speech that he gives on the occasion of the princess Pulcheria's death. He tries to comfort the empress Flacilla with the example of Sara's courage. In comparison with the earlier text, Sara has an unusually active role here, by means of which he hopes to set an example for the empress. After having formulated an imaginary address in which he has Sara adduce all possible kinds of objections to the sacrifice, Gregory writes: «Sara would certainly have brought forward these and similar things, if she had not seen that which is invisible to us with her own eyes. For she knew that the end of the life in the flesh is the beginning of the more divine life for those who cross over: Isaac leaves shadows behind, he reaches truth, he lets go of delusions, errors

<sup>43</sup> Brock, «Two Syriac verse homilies», 69.

<sup>44</sup> *On the Patriarch Abraham*; ed. L. van Rompay in: C. Datema (ed.), *Amphilochii Iconiensis Opera*, CCSG 3 (Turnhout 1978) 280-281 (Coptic text with English translation).

<sup>45</sup> *Kontakion on Abraham and Isaac* 3,14 (in SC 99, cf. esp. 152/153 and 154/155).

<sup>46</sup> Brock, «Two Syriac verse homilies» 118 (Syriac) and 123 (English).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 122 and 125.

<sup>48</sup> Cp. his *On the divinity of the Son and the Spirit and on Abraham*, Gregorii Nysseni Opera X,2 (Leiden 1996) 135 with his work *In Pulcheriam*, Gregorii Nysseni Opera IX (Leiden 1967) 469.

and noises and finds the good things that surpass eye and ear and heart (cf. 1 *Cor.* 2,9). Lust will not torment him nor impure desire distract him, he will not be puffed up with pride, nor will any other of the passions that trouble the soul hinder him, but God becomes all things to him (cf. 1 *Cor.* 15,28). That is why she eagerly gives her son to God.»<sup>49</sup>

#### 4. *Isaac is willing and he rejoices*

There is an old and widely known tradition that Isaac himself also looked forward to the sacrifice willingly and with joy. This seems to fit with Abraham's corresponding attitude. The idea of Abraham's joy is more or less assumed in the text of the *Gospel of John* (8,56); however, Isaac's quietness of mind or even joy cannot be derived so easily from Scripture. But Clement of Rome (end of the first century) already writes: «Isaac in confident knowledge of the future was gladly led as a sacrifice»<sup>50</sup>. It is in the same vein that Melito of Sardes (second century) speaks: «...Isaac was silent, bound like a ram, not opening his mouth nor uttering a sound. For not frightened by the sword nor alarmed by the fire nor sorrowful at the offering, he carried with fortitude the model of the Lord.»<sup>51</sup> Clement of Alexandria (second/third century) plays with the etymology of Isaac's name, which he interprets as «laughing»<sup>52</sup>, probably on the basis of the story of Isaac's birth, especially *Gen.* 21,6. However, Clement does not develop the theme of the laughter and joy from the birth story, but from *Gen.* 26,8. There Isaac's «fondling» (thus in the Hebrew) is translated into the Greek of the *Septuagint* as «sporting» (παίζων). We may wonder whether Isaac's marital bliss described here cannot also be connected somehow with his joy about the sacrifice, since precisely his wedding is used as an image for the sacrifice, both in our new text and elsewhere (see below). Moreover, Clement himself indicates the possibility that the Biblical text in question is understood as referring to the joy of the reader about his salvation (by Jesus Christ), like Isaac, who «delivered from death, laughed, sporting and rejoicing with his spouse...»<sup>53</sup> We conclude: Clement links a discussion on the meaning of Isaac's name with a tradition of Isaac's joy after (!) the cancellation of the sacrifice, although he finds the exegetical basis for this in the text of *Genesis* only four chapters further down. But a joyful Isaac before

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 469,10-20.

<sup>50</sup> 1 *Clem.* 31,3.

<sup>51</sup> *Fragment* 9.

<sup>52</sup> *Paidagogos* 1,5,22,3.

<sup>53</sup> *Paidagogos* 1,5,22,2.

the sacrifice is of course much more remarkable. It seems feasible that this motif finds its exegetical starting point in *Gen.* 21,6, but so far we have not found a text which explicitly makes this connection.

Amphilochius of Iconium (fourth century) in his sermon on *Gen.* 22 records several speeches of the actors involved, including Isaac. Abraham's son reproaches his father that he is not frank with him:

«I myself, I am ready, o my father, but my mind ponders: Which is the sheep? Or what is that which will be slain? Perhaps it is me. I am the sheep! Why don't you reveal to me my killing? Why do you deceive me as if I were not willing to offer myself to God? Certainly I am willing, and I implore it, I rejoice and I take delight in it. I have become now the one whom you hide from me; for after a while God will reveal everything to me. And now, build a place of sacrifice, and this will become a tomb for me, for your son, and I shall ascend it well. I myself, my father, I shall help you eagerly to build my tomb. I shall heap up the stones. May my tomb resemble a temple, and guide me thereto. Slay me for the One who has called you.»<sup>54</sup>

Once again we have a passage here without a typological perspective: its scope seems to be purely martyrological. The same goes for a passage in the sermon by Zeno of Verona (fourth century) already referred to above<sup>55</sup>, which explains Isaac's joy as a joy about the faith of Abraham, who is frank with Isaac: «The father, who felt safe about the faith of his offspring, revealed to his son, concerning whom he had no doubts, what the Lord had required from him, and made clear to him what he himself had promised to the Lord. The boy rejoiced about the faithful father, being strongly faithful himself, and he did not refuse the death which the God who had given life had ordered. The father rejoices about the joyful boy and he joyfully binds the hands of the only pledge of his love, who offers them willingly to have them cuffed.»<sup>56</sup>

### 5. *Isaac regards the sacrifice as a wedding*

In the new text Isaac makes a speech before his parents and he compares the sacrifice with a wedding. Apart from the Greek tradition referred to above that death is regarded as a wedding with the god of the underworld (Hades), the background of this comparison is the incompatibility of the sacrifice of his only son with the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be numerous. By this comparison, Isaac shows

<sup>54</sup> CCSG 3, 286/287.

<sup>55</sup> N. 37.

<sup>56</sup> CCSL XXII, 115.

that he continues to have faith in God's promise. We have found no other address of Isaac to both his parents, but his wedding is discussed a few times, also as an image of the sacrifice. Thus a sermon of Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century) that contains a section which looks like a paraphrase of a poem by Pseudo-Ephrem<sup>57</sup> on Abraham and his sacrifice, tells us that initially Abraham thought that God would order him to let Isaac marry: «For without doubt he expects something like the command to let his son marry and to prepare the bridal chamber quickly, so that the blessing on his seed could take effect.»<sup>58</sup> In an imaginary speech, Abraham reacts to God's command: «Is this the bridal chamber I am to build? Is this the marital bliss for which I am to make preparations? Am I to light a funeral pyre for him instead of a wedding lamp? Is it for this purpose that I shall put on a wreath? Shall I be a father of many nations in this way, when no child is conceded to me?»<sup>59</sup> Equally in an imaginary speech by Abraham, this time addressed to Isaac, Basil of Seleucia (fifth century) writes: «But I, my child, was already thinking about your wedding suite and bridal chamber. But unwittingly I have raised my dearest for the fire and the sword: instead of a wedding suite there is an altar, instead of the wedding torch there is the altar flame.»<sup>60</sup>

#### 6. *Around the flames the Red Sea roars*

According to the editors of the papyrus, Isaac underwent a symbolic baptism at the moment of his sacrifice (cf. above, n. 23). We have found this motif nowhere else in this form. In some explications of *Gen. 22* baptism is discussed indeed, but there is no question of baptism being more than prefigured in the *Old Testament* and its paraphrases. Clement of Alexandria (second/third century) makes a connection between Abraham's three day journey (*Gen. 22,3-4*) and baptism («the seal») in the name of the Trinity<sup>61</sup>. Cyril of Jerusalem (fourth century) writes that because Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his son, he received circumcision as the seal of his faith. Now the Christians, who follow the faith of Abraham, become children of Abraham and «receive like him the spiritual seal, being circumcised by the Holy Spirit through baptism, not in the foreskin of the body, but in the heart»<sup>62</sup>. Since Isaac was only eight

<sup>57</sup> *On the divinity*..., cf. n. 47 above and *GNO* X,2, 109-113.

<sup>58</sup> *GNO* X,2 133,7-10.

<sup>59</sup> *GNO* X,2 134,15-19.

<sup>60</sup> Tevel, *Preken* 184-185.

<sup>61</sup> *Stromateis* 5,11,73.

<sup>62</sup> *Catechesis* 5,5-6.

days old when he was circumcised (cf. *Gen.* 21,4), our text cannot refer to his circumcision (which might then have been linked with Christian baptism). It would seem highly likely that we have here some kind of *prefiguration* of Christian baptism. The Red Sea is a very common type of baptism in patristic texts, as Daniélou has shown<sup>63</sup>. Is this what the new text hints at? Daniélou also demonstrates that some Jewish and some Christian sources link the sacrifice of Abraham and the exodus from Egypt together. The Paschal Lamb and Abraham's sacrifice both have atoning value<sup>64</sup>.

### 7. *God's hand holds Abraham back*

The text of *Gen.* 22 says clearly that the angel of the Lord called Abraham and made him change his mind at the last minute. In the new text however it is God's hand that holds him back. Brock<sup>65</sup> has edited a Syriac homily that says that «the Lord's right hand overshadowed as a voice came from on high». The phraseology is taken from *Ps.* 138,7-8. We already referred above to ancient depictions of Abraham's sacrifice like those in the Dura-Europos synagogue, the synagogue mosaic of Beth Alpha and many Christian sarcophagi and other artefacts that represent God's hand in this scene<sup>66</sup>. We probably have here a Jewish motif that apparently influenced Christian tradition.

### 8. *A goat/apple as fruit in the tree serves as an alternative*

The typological link between the near-sacrifice of Isaac and the complete sacrifice of Jesus Christ leads to different designations in Greek of the ram which is substituted for Isaac in the *Genesis* story. Those designations come close to the notion of «sacrificial lamb». «Ram» in Greek is κριός. From the catena tradition it is evident how the church fathers wrestled to make sense of the typology. Melito of Sardes (second century) says: «The Lord was a lamb (ἀμνός) like the ram (κριός) which Abraham saw caught in a Sabek-tree»<sup>67</sup>. Eusebius of Emesa (fourth cen-

<sup>63</sup> Cp. J. Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality. Studies in the Typology of the Fathers* (London 1960) chapter III: 175-201.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 119-120.

<sup>65</sup> «Two Syriac verse homilies» 127, at line 77.

<sup>66</sup> Cp. E. Lucchesi Palli in E. Kirchbaum (Hrsg.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* I (Freiburg 1968) col.24.

<sup>67</sup> *Fragment* 10.



tury) contradicts Melito when he says that the ram (κρίος) was precisely not a young lamb (ἀμνὸς νέος) like Isaac, but a ram (κρίος), full-grown like the Lord; no doubt he once again refers to the difference in value between the two sacrifices<sup>68</sup>. Severian of Gabala (fourth/fifth century)<sup>69</sup> uses the term πρόβατον («sheep», referring to *Is.* 53,7); the same is true of the sermon by Basil of Seleucia. Lastly, Melito of Sardes, speaking about Jesus in comparison to Isaac, brings all terms together: «As a ram he was bound... as a lamb he was shorn, as a sheep he was led to slaughter, and as a lamb he was crucified...»<sup>70</sup> Nowhere in the context of the exegesis of *Gen.* 22 have we come across the word μῆλον («goat») that is used in the new text. In fact, this term is not found anywhere in the Greek *Old Testament*. It looks as if the author consciously chose an unusual term, perhaps because of the poetic effect or because of the play on words with «the fruit in the tree» (more specifically an apple, also named μῆλον in Greek).

However, something is the matter with the tree, at least in the Syriac tradition. Thus Ephrem the Syrian (fourth century) in his commentary on *Gen.* 22,13 writes: «Abraham saw a ram in a tree and he took him and offered him as a sacrifice instead of his son. That there was no ram there is proved by Isaac asking for the lamb. And that there was no tree there is confirmed by the wood on Isaac's shoulders. The mountain spat out the tree and the tree the ram, in order that in the ram that was hung and that was made into a sacrifice for Abraham's son, the day would be prefigured of him who was hung on the wood like a ram and who tasted death for the sake of the whole world.»<sup>71</sup> The dialogue poem referred to above equally speaks of «the tree that has not been conceived, which bears a fruit that has not been received»<sup>72</sup>. S.P. Brock points out that according to a Jewish tradition, the ram was one of the ten things created at the beginning of creation<sup>73</sup>; he also shows how the «virgin birth» of the ram came

<sup>68</sup> Petit, *La chaîne* 236, frg.1277.

<sup>69</sup> Petit, *La chaîne* 232, frg.1271.

<sup>70</sup> *Fragment* 9.

<sup>71</sup> R.M.Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesim et in Exodum commentarii*, in: *CSCO* 152, SS 71, Louvain 1955, 84. The «day» is of course a reference to *Jo.* 8,56. Edward G. Matthews, Jr., *The Armenian Commentary on Genesis Attributed to Ephrem the Syrian*, *CSCO* 573 (Leuven 1998) p. XXXI, ranges the fact that Abraham finds a ram in «a tree» and not in «a bush» among «Jewish readings or ideas» that can be found in both the Pseudo-Ephremitic work he edits and also in Ephrem's genuine works: he emphasises (n. 70) that «tree» is the reading of all the Targums, against the reading of the Peshitta.

<sup>72</sup> *Sughyotho* 10.

<sup>73</sup> «Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition» 28 n.72.

to lead its own life in Syriac tradition. Could it be that our new text with its play on words with «goat» and «apple» is indebted to this Syriac tradition?

### *Conclusions*

The new poem offers the following points of contact with the Christian exegetical tradition of *Gen. 22*: Abraham's joy, a well-known motif that is connected with *Jo. 8,56*; the dialogue between Abraham and Sara (in the tradition mostly imaginary); the dialogue between Sara and Isaac (in the tradition rarely attested); Isaac's joy, departing from the etymology of «Isaac» and from *Gen. 26,8*; the wedding as an image of the sacrifice; the linking of the sacrifice with baptism; the hand of God instead of the voice of the angel; the ram (goat) as fruit in the tree.

But there are also differences which seem to indicate a certain originality of our Christian poet: the dialogues are more like monologues; Isaac addresses both his parents; Isaac asks to have his hair plaited; there are active bystanders at the sacrifice; the unsacrificed Isaac smells of incense (as if the sacrifice had been completed in some sense); the play on words with goat/apple. These motifs deserve further research. Thus it seems that we have here a literary product that stands within the Greek poetic tradition<sup>74</sup>, but that has been influenced by other, probably Syriac, traditions: especially the presence of speeches and the «fruit in the tree» seem to point into that direction<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> J.B.Glenthøj, *Cain and Abel in Syriac and Greek Writers (4th-6th centuries)*, CSCO 567 (Leuven 1997) 275 indicates that just as in the homiletic tradition related to *Gen.4*, dialogue is also more characteristic of Syriac than of Greek homilies on *Gen.22*.

<sup>75</sup> We owe thanks to Dr. James Pankhurst for the correction of our English.