

## Torah Reading as a Weapon: Rosh Hashanah and the Akedah

By Rabbi Elie Kaunfer  
Executive Director, Mechon Hadar

In the mind of the modern Jewish worshipper, the Akedah (Genesis 22) is typically associated with the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. This association is an ancient one: the Akedah is listed in the Talmud as the selection read from the Torah on the second day of the holiday.<sup>1</sup> The link is often drawn to the ram caught in the thicket (Genesis 22:13) as presage of the shofar later blown on Rosh Hashanah.<sup>2</sup> It is also related as a means of achieving the "gracious acquittal" sought on Rosh Hashanah.<sup>3</sup>

It is not the case, however, that the Akedah was always associated in popular Jewish understanding with Rosh Hashanah.<sup>4</sup> I will argue that the selection of Genesis 22 as the reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah reflected a conscious decision by certain of the Rabbis to move the Akedah away from its original calendrical home: Passover. This transfer was completed in order to distance the story of the Akedah with a time of the year that was increasingly associated with another martyr/sacrifice narrative, that of Jesus. The transfer of the Torah reading to Tishrei represented but one strategy on the part of the Rabbis to combat the Christological associations with the Akedah. The other, equally daring move was to reappropriate the martyrology imagery of the Jesus narrative and read it back into the Isaac story. Taken together, these two moves offered the Rabbis an effective set of tools in battling to distinguish Judaism from Early Christianity.

---

<sup>1</sup> B. Megillah 31a.

<sup>2</sup> B. Rosh Hashanah 16a; Reuven Hammer, Entering the High Holidays (Philadelphia: JPS, 1998), pp. 70-71.

<sup>3</sup> Jon D. Levenson, The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 183. See Rashi s.v. "maftirin b'hanah" on B. Megillah 31a: "...so God will remember [the Akedah] for us in judgment."

<sup>4</sup> Levenson, p. 182. Frederic Manns, "The Binding of Isaac in Jewish Liturgy," in The Sacrifice of Isaac in the Three Monotheistic Religions. Edited by Frederic Manns (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1995), p. 67.

On closer examination, it becomes clear that the Akedah is not inherently connected to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. The obvious connection between blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah and the ram in the Akedah falls away when one notes that nowhere in the Biblical presentation does Abraham cut off the horn of the ram or in any other way indicate that it was to be used for ritual purposes. Surely the sacrifice of an animal does not indicate the development of a ritual object from its carcass. In addition, there is little evidence of a Tannaitic association between the Akedah and the rituals of Rosh Hashanah: Spiegel notes that the Mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 3:3-4), in discussing the shofar, ignores any connection to Genesis 22.<sup>5</sup> The Tosefta and the Yerushalmi, referencing the same law, state simply that the ram's horn is used on Rosh Hashanah (as opposed to the Jubilee year) because it is more common (than antelope's horns).<sup>6</sup> In fact, Philo of Alexandria connects the shofar with the giving of the Torah, not the Akedah: "It is a memory of the great and exalted deed at the moment of the Giving of the Torah, for then from the heavens was heard the very strong blast of the shofar."<sup>7</sup> Dov Noy states simply that Genesis 22 "is a reading which does not deal with the issues of the holiday or its laws in the Torah."<sup>8</sup> Manns sums up this line of argument by noting that the Akedah placed in Rosh Hashanah is "out of place in this context."<sup>9</sup>

By examining the development of the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah, it becomes clear that the Akedah narrative was assigned to the holiday relatively late.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*. Trans. by Judah Goldin (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993), p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> T. Rosh Hashanah, 3:3; Y. Rosh Hashanah 3:5 (end); Spiegel, p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Dov Noy, "Rosh Hashanah and the Binding of Isaac," *Mahanaim* 49 (1961), p. 47, note 9. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> Noy, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Manns, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> I. Levi asserted that the Akedah was originally associated with the Musaf of Rosh Hashanah, as early as the first century C.E. (See I. Levi, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac et la mort de Jesus," *REJ* 64 [1912], p. 178). However, Ismar Elbogen brought evidence from the Cairo Genizah to show that the Akedah references in

Elbogen claims that Rosh Hashanah was the last of the holidays to be assigned a special Torah reading.<sup>11</sup> The Mishnah (Megillah 3:5) reports that the reading for Rosh Hashanah is not Genesis 22, or even Genesis 21, but Leviticus 23:23.<sup>12</sup> In the discussion on B. Megillah 31a, a baraita reports that there are those who say to read "And God remembered Sarah" (Genesis 21:1) instead.<sup>13</sup> The editor of this sugya (based on a baraita interrupted by editorial comments) continues: "Now that there are two days, the first day is read according to the alternate opinion ("hayesh omrim," i.e. Genesis 21:1) and the next day 'And God tested Abraham' (Genesis 22:1)."

The conflict over what to read on Rosh Hashanah, whether Genesis 21 or Leviticus 23, is mentioned in the Tosefta (Megillah 3:6) as well. Lieberman notes that the Erfort manuscript reverses the primacy of the Genesis 21 reading, making it the first opinion rather than the "yesh omrim."<sup>14</sup>

Ezra Fleischer claims that Genesis 22 may have been chosen for the second day because Genesis 21 was already being read on the first day. "Since on the day before they read the nearby parasha, they developed the custom to read on the following day the section which is found connected to it, and fits its theme more or less."<sup>15</sup> Yet it is not immediately clear why some of the Tannaim would have advocated to include Genesis 21

---

the Musaf Zikhronot section are in fact a later addition. See Daniel Goldschmidt, Mahzor L'Yamim Noar'im (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), p. 29, note 7. See also Bruce Chilton, "Isaac and the Second Night: A Consideration," Biblica 61 (1980), p. 81; Spiegel, pp. 88-96; Manns, p. 61, discussed below.

<sup>11</sup> Ismar Elbogen, Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History (translated by Raymond Scheindlin; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Megillah 30b, where Rashi notes that this is the section beginning with Leviticus 22:26, currently read on the second day of Passover and both days of Sukkot. Noy brings an alternate version which renders the reading Numbers 29: 1-6, which is used as the maftir in modern times. (Noy, p. 42).

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that Munich 95 has a significantly altered version in which Genesis 22, not Leviticus 23:23, is the original reading for the first day. This is the only manuscript which attests to this tradition, and seems inaccurate, given that it would contradict the Mishnah.

<sup>14</sup> Saul Lieberman, Tosefta Kifshuta: Moed (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), p. 354. See also Y.N. Epstein, Mavo LeNusach HaMishnah (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), p. 122, n.3.

<sup>15</sup> Ezra Fleischer, "Iyunim B'minhagei Ha-Keriyah Shel B'nai Eretz Yisrael Ba-Torah u'Ba-Nevi'im," Sfunot, Sidra Hadashah 16, p. 47.

instead of the reading concerning the Levitical description of the holiday of Rosh Hashanah. There is nothing inherent in the birth of Isaac which is connected to the Rosh Hashanah story. In fact, in their disagreement about the dating of the New Year, both Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua agree that Isaac was born on Passover, not Tishrei.<sup>16</sup>

Joseph Heinemann argues that the debate over including narrative readings for the holidays versus the description of the holiday laws in Leviticus is an ancient one. He observes that "there was not one singular minhag widespread in Israel concerning reading Torah on holidays. The attempts of the halachic authorities to set a specific minhag testifies to the confusion [on the matter]. In particular, they were not successful in setting the short parshiot for the holidays in all places, for example... 'On the seventh month' [i.e. Leviticus 23:23-26] for Rosh Hashanah. Rather, there were communities, *apparently in all times*, that preferred the "richer" parshiot more... such as the binding of Isaac."<sup>17</sup>

There is additional evidence that the Tannaim themselves debated placing the Akedah as the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah. Manns suggests that the shift to reading the Akedah on Rosh Hashanah occurred as early as 70 CE.<sup>18</sup> Dov Noy proposes the theory that Rosh Hashanah was connected to the Akedah by the time the disagreement between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua had their argument about the dating of the new year. He concludes that this connection was expressed in the selection of the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah. "One can conjecture that parallel to the disagreement about the season of the birth of the forefathers [Abraham and Jacob, see Rashi on B. Rosh

---

<sup>16</sup> B. Rosh Hashanah 10b – 11a. In fact, one midrashic tradition has it that Isaac's birth was foretold on Rosh Hashanah (See Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), vol. 1, p. 261; vol. 5, p. 245) which would lead one to suspect Genesis 18 as a more appropriate reading for the holiday.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Heinemann, "Parashot B'Va-Yikra Rabah She-Mekoroteihen M'fukfeket," Tarbiz 38:4 (1968) p. 347. Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Manns, p. 61.

Hashanah 11a], whether in Tishrei or in Nissan, there was an *older* disagreement about the season of the Akedah. However, this disagreement was already decided at an earlier time in favor of Tishrei, and this decision came to expression also in the Torah portion for Rosh Hashanah, a reading which does not concern the issues of the holidays and its laws in the Torah."<sup>19</sup> It is certainly possible, then, that communities in Tannaitic times were reading the Akedah on Rosh Hashanah.

While it is ultimately not clear whether the Akedah was read in Tannaitic times, certainly by Amoraic times, Rosh Hashanah began to be associated with the Akedah: Rabbi Abahu, a third century Palestinian amora, said: "Why do we blow the horn of the ram? The Holy One (blessed be he) said: 'Blow the ram's horn before me so that I may remember for your benefit the binding of Isaac, son of Abraham, and account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before me.'"<sup>20</sup> Whether it was completed in Tannaitic or Amoraic times, it is most likely that the introduction of the Akedah into the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading was a development which post-dated the original reading, i.e. the selection from Leviticus mentioned in the Mishnah (or perhaps Genesis 21, mentioned in the baraita, but see following).<sup>21</sup> In addition to the evidence from the Talmud in Megillah 31a, Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, a fifth century Palestinian text, shows that the Akedah was a later development than the Leviticus reading. Certain manuscripts bring a homily concerning the original reading listed in the Mishnah, Leviticus 23:23. However, the Karmeli manuscript lists two homilies related to Rosh Hashanah: one for

---

<sup>19</sup> Noy, p. 42. Emphasis in original.

<sup>20</sup> B. Rosh Hashanah 16a, translation in Levenson, pp. 182 – 183.

<sup>21</sup> Unless one takes Heinemann's theory to the extreme, in which any narrative portion might have been customary. See also the Munich 95 Manuscript version considered with above.

Genesis 21 and one for Genesis 22. Abraham Goldberg cites this as evidence that these piska'ot were later versions of the original text.<sup>22</sup>

What, then, motivated the change? According to Fleischer, and even in the wording of the Bavli itself, this addition almost seems to be an insignificant afterthought. Since Genesis 21 had developed as a custom, Genesis 22 was the next logical addition. However, this strategy to simply introduce the next chronological text was not employed in the other holidays (see B. Megillah 31a). Perhaps some other factor motivated the addition of the Akedah to Rosh Hashanah's lectionary cycle.

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine what calendrical association the Akedah aroused in the mind of the ancient Jewish worshipper. The clearest and oldest example of this is the retelling of Genesis 22 in Jubilees 17-18, a second century BCE text.<sup>23</sup> There, Prince Mastema challenges God to test Abraham on the 12<sup>th</sup> of the first month, i.e. Nissan.<sup>24</sup> After a 3-day journey to the mountain, Isaac is then bound on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nissan, the date of Passover. Following the Akedah ordeal, Abraham instituted a 7-day festival called "the feast of the Lord." Jubilees ends the chapter stating: "And thus it is ordained and written in the heavenly tablets concerning Israel and his seed to observe this festival seven days with festal joy."<sup>25</sup> This holiday is likely Passover.

Spiegel and Levenson argue forcefully for the original connection between the Akedah and Passover.<sup>26</sup> "[T]he aqeda has been transformed into an etiology of Passover, or, to be more precise, that Passover, like other Pentateuchal festivals in Jubilees, has

---

<sup>22</sup> Abraham Goldberg, "Sifrut Ivrit u'Mada Ha-Yahadut B'chul," *Kiryat Sefer* 43 (1967-8) p. 71 note 2.

<sup>23</sup> Avraham Cahana, *Hasefarim Ha-hitzonim* (Tel Aviv: Mekorot, 1937), vol. 1, p. 218; Levenson, p. 176.

<sup>24</sup> Jubilees 17:15.

<sup>25</sup> Jubilees 18:19.

<sup>26</sup> Spiegel, chapter 7; Levenson, chapter 14.

acquired what Mircea Eliade calls 'the prestige of origins.': its root lies in the life of the very first Jew."<sup>27</sup>

Levenson suggests that this connection is in fact logical, and I would argue it is certainly much more logical than the connection with Rosh Hashanah. Levenson even goes so far as to suggest a pre-existing tradition prior to Jubilees making the connection between the Akedah and Passover. He says that the connection between the sacrifice of the first born son and the sacrifice conducted at Passover are intertwined. "One wonders why the association first appears only in the mid-second century BCE and whether Jubilees does not depend here upon an older tradition still. For...both the near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 and the sparing of the Israelite first-born sons in the tenth plague upon Egypt in Exodus 12-13 reflect a cultic institution, pre-Israelite in origin and evident among the Phoenicians...Jubilees this only makes textually explicit a relationship that had always lain in the deep structure of Israelite culture."<sup>28</sup>

It is clear, then, that there is an early connection between Passover and the Akedah.<sup>29</sup> This connection was subverted by the rabbis who transposed the Akedah story to the Torah reading of Rosh Hashanah.<sup>30</sup> But what about the connection between Passover and the Akedah caused the rabbis to institute this liturgical change?

---

<sup>27</sup> Levenson, p. 176.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>29</sup> It is interesting to note that there is a Kabbalistic tradition of associating the Akedah with Yom Kippur. See Ginzberg, vol. 5, p. 252, note 248. However it is clear this is a later development, and Noy posits that there is no significant difference between this claim and the connection with Rosh Hashanah (Noy, p. 42). See also Y. Heinemann, "Sidrei Berakhot Ha-Kedumim Le-Rosh Hashanah U-le-Ta'anit," in Iyunei Tefilah, ed. Avigdor Shinan (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1981), p. 50, n. 28, including a midrashic strand that associated the Akedah with Shavuot.

<sup>30</sup> Why was the Akedah transplanted specifically to Rosh Hashanah and not another holiday? Fleischer claims it was logical simply because it was close to the existing reading of Genesis 21 (Fleisher, p. 47). But there are other reasons to explain the Akedah's appearance in Rosh Hashanah. First, Rosh Hashanah has no narrative already associated with it. In addition, the Akedah was already referred to by the Mishnah regarding prayers on fast days (M. Ta'anit 2:2-4.) This custom was already in existence in the Second Temple (Manns, p. 64). The liturgical theme of asking God for mercy on Rosh Hashanah may have

Manns briefly proposes the theory that the Rabbis moved the Akedah from Passover to Rosh Hashanah as a result of the destruction of the Temple. "The most probable cause of the change was the ending, after 70 A.D., of the Passover sacrifice itself. The blowing of the ram's horn which remembered the Binding of Isaac was not affected by the destruction of the Temple."<sup>31</sup> This thesis is not fully satisfying, however. First, Manns assumes that the Akedah already had an association with the blowing of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah before the destruction of the Temple, when in fact this is not clear at all. As noted above, the Mishnah does not mention this connection in its discussion of the blowing of the ram's horn, and this connection seems likely to have been introduced as part of the liturgical shift to Rosh Hashanah. Second, the Passover ritual, codified in the Talmud following the destruction of the Temple, retains many customs which cannot be performed after 70 C.E., including the eating of the "Hillel sandwich."

It seems, in fact, that the transfer of the Akedah to Rosh Hashanah was a reaction to an association with Passover which made the Rabbinic authorities uncomfortable. Noy points out that extraordinary liturgical decisions were often made to "eject" another group from the synagogue.<sup>32</sup> He notes that the introduction of the Haftarah was a "weapon" against the Samaritans who rejected the Prophets. Later, the introduction of Pirkei Avot

---

occasioned the transfer to Rosh Hashanah (although it would also logically fit at Yom Kippur – see previous note.)

<sup>31</sup> Manns, p. 61. Alan Segal also claims that the Akedah was used as a means of "understand[ing] the destruction of the temple by means of an Isaac martyrology and anything else at its disposal." Alan Segal, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Judaism and Christianity," in *The Other Judaisms of Late Antiquity*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 128. Ginzberg also notes that "On the basis of the Haggadot which connect the ceremony of the blowing of the ram's horn on New Year with the ram sacrificed in lieu of Isaac, the view arose that the 'Akedah took place on that day.'" (Ginzberg, vol. 5, p. 252). Like Manns, Ginzberg assumes the blowing of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah was already connected to Genesis 22.

<sup>32</sup> However, note Kimelman's objection to political factors spurring liturgical change. See Reuven Kimelman, "Blessing Formulae and Divine Sovereignty in Rabbinic Liturgy" in *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue*. Edited by Ruth Langer and Steven Fine (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005), pp. 25-6.

into the regular Sabbath liturgy was added in order to force the Karaites, who rejected Rabbinic oral law, to leave the synagogue. Referring to the introduction of the Akedah to the Torah reading calendar, Noy states: "It is possible to claim that these circumstances are wholly tied to the battles between normative Judaism and the sects, and in the attempt of the majority to eject the minority from the synagogue."<sup>33</sup>

If the liturgical decision to introduce the Akedah into Rosh Hashanah was indeed a "weapon," against which group was it directed? Noy conjectures that the Rabbis were battling the Sadducees "or one of the sects of a similar outlook." He makes this claim based on the evidence from Jubilees: the people who wrote and held that text sacred were the sect that the Rabbis were battling.<sup>34</sup> By contradicting the Jubilees' explicit dating of the Akedah to Passover, the Rabbis forced the Sadducees from the synagogue. What upset the Rabbis such that they had to attack the Sadducees on this method of dating? Noy proposes that the disagreement centered on a battle of universalism versus particularism. Those who supported Rosh Hashanah as the New Year (the Rabbis) believed in a universal application of the trial of the Akedah, while those who supported Passover as the New Year (the Sadducees) preferred to retain the Akedah as a story between the God of Israel and the children of Israel.<sup>35</sup>

This reasoning seems faulty on a number of grounds. First, if the battle were directed against the Sadducees as a reaction to the dating in Jubilees, the liturgical move should have occurred much earlier, at least by the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. However, as noted above, there is little record of the introduction of the Akedah to the Rosh Hashanah story

---

<sup>33</sup> Noy, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 42 – 43.

before the destruction of the Temple.<sup>36</sup> Second, it is hard to imagine the move as a battle of universalism versus particularism since the Akedah itself has a rather particularist ending: in Genesis 22:17, God promises Abraham that his descendants will "possess the gate of his enemies." Finally, the Rabbis themselves argue about whether the New Year should be in Nissan or Tishrei.<sup>37</sup> It is unlikely that Rabbi Joshua who supported Nissan was siding with the Sadducees and ejected from the community.

The evidence suggests, however, that the Rabbis did want to exclude a group from the claim to the story of the Akedah. I suggest that the group the Rabbis were battling were the early Christians. It certainly would not be the first major liturgical change introduced by the Rabbis in these battles. Yisrael Yuval has demonstrated that much of the Passover ritual may have in fact been a reaction to the early Christians.<sup>38</sup> Manns entertains this theory as well, albeit briefly: "Did the Christian theology contribute to the suppression of the links between the Binding of Isaac and the Passover? The hypothesis seems probable. It wouldn't be the only such case in the history of Jewish Liturgy."<sup>39</sup>

In order to understand why the Rabbis felt threatened by the association of the Akedah with Passover, it is necessary to understand how the Christians re-read the Akedah as a presage to Jesus. If one understands the Akedah as an example of Isaac's submission to God in which an actual sacrifice occurred, then it is quite easy to read the Akedah as a foreshadow for Jesus. The Christians would therefore hope to associate the sacrifice of Isaac with the timing of Passover because of "the historical fact that Jesus

---

<sup>36</sup> Of course it is not clear when regular readings from the Torah scroll were introduced in general.

<sup>37</sup> B. Rosh Hashanah 10a – 11b.

<sup>38</sup> Yisrael Yuval, "Ha-Poschim al Shtei Ha-Se'ifim: Ha-Haggadah shel Pesah v'Ha-Pasha Ha-Notzrit," *Tarbiz* 65:1 (1996) pp. 5-28.

<sup>39</sup> Manns, p. 61.

happened to have been crucified at Passover time."<sup>40</sup> This Christian reading of the Akedah, and its placement at Passover, would provide clear motivation to the Rabbis to dissociate the Akedah narrative with the holiday of Passover.

There is significant debate in the literature of the Akedah about whether the *sacrifice* of Isaac was originally a Jewish idea (Vermes) or originated with the Christians (Davies and Chilton).<sup>41</sup> (Spiegel even claims that there was a common pagan source for both traditions,<sup>42</sup> but this thesis is uniformly rejected by later scholars<sup>43</sup>). Segal carves out a middle position, saying that both Vermes and Davies and Chilton are too extreme. "It is clearly wrong to say that there was no Jewish tradition of the sacrifice of Isaac before Christianity....On the other hand it is also wrong to assume that there was a single paradigmatic tradition which could be picked up by the church as a *typos* for Jesus."<sup>44</sup>

Regardless of the origin of the martyrdom of Isaac, it is clear that the Christians advanced the thesis that Isaac was a presage to Jesus. Even if the sacrifice of Isaac was a Jewish concept dating before Christianity, Segal argues that Paul transformed the story from that of simple martyrdom to that of a messiah. "The novel aspect for Paul is a story of a crucified messiah, the obvious aspect of the story missing from the pre-Christian Jewish exegeses, where Isaac is never understood as a type of the messiah."<sup>45</sup> Paul broke away from Judaism's understanding of the Akedah, even as a martyrology, and the

---

<sup>40</sup> Philip R. Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 30 (1979), p. 66.

<sup>41</sup> Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961); Philip R. Davies and Bruce Chilton, "The Akedah: A Revised Tradition History," *CBQ*, 40 (1978), pp. 514-546. See also: Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah," and Bruce Chilton, "Isaac and the Second Night: A Consideration," *Biblica* 61 (1980), pp. 78 – 88.

<sup>42</sup> Spiegel, pp. 116 – 118.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah," p. 59 and Segal p. 110, note 5, where he calls the theory "Israeli romanticism."

<sup>44</sup> Segal, p. 116.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Rabbis were forced to combat that notion.<sup>46</sup> The first line of attack would logically be to dissociate the Akedah from the date of Jesus' death: Passover. An effective "weapon" in this battle was the Torah reading. By moving the Akedah to Rosh Hashanah, the Rabbis were innovating, and followed this innovation with midrashim connecting the shofar to the ram of Genesis 22.

The association between the Akedah and Rosh Hashanah, borne out in the liturgical move of the Rabbis, is also ratified in the Midrash. Levenson states that Tishrei "is *eventually* said to be the month in which the aqedah took place."<sup>47</sup> For instance, Leviticus Rabbah 29:9 gives the etiology of Rosh Hashanah as based on the Akedah: "When the children of Isaac give way to transgressions and evil deeds, recollect for them the binding of their father Isaac and rise from the Throne of Judgment and move to the Throne of Mercy....When?' In the seventh month."

One must still ask the question, however, why the connection between Passover and the Akedah tradition is not completely eradicated from the tradition. Exodus Rabbah 15:11 makes this enduring connection clear: "After the Holy One (blessed be he) had chosen his world, he established the order of the new moons and the new years. And when he chose Jacob and his sons, he established the new moon of redemption, in which Israel was redeemed from Egypt and in which they will in the future be redeemed... This [Nissan] is the month in which Isaac was born and in which he was bound."<sup>48</sup> The tradition of the Palestinian Targum, specifically Neofiti, also associates the sacrifice of

---

<sup>46</sup> Davies argues that the connection between Isaac and Jesus did not occur explicitly until the second century CE with the Epistle of Barnabas and Melito of Sardis (Davies, "Passover and the Dating of the Aqedah," p. 66.) But even if Davies is correct, this would afford the Tannaim motivation already by the second century.

<sup>47</sup> Levenson, p. 182, note 12. Emphasis mine.

<sup>48</sup> Translation by Levenson, p. 183.

Isaac with the night of Passover. Chilton argues that this was also a post-Christian development.<sup>49</sup>

The 4th-century Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishmael also preserves the association between Passover and the Akedah, although less directly. Commenting on Exodus 12:13, "When I see the blood [of the paschal lamb] I will pass over you..." the Mekhilta states: "I see the blood of the binding of Isaac."<sup>50</sup> Levenson notes that "the blood of Isaac has displaced the blood of the lamb that dies so that the Israelites may be freed from bondage in Egypt."<sup>51</sup> Although this is not a calendrical connection of the Akedah to Passover, the thematic connection is strong for Rabbis who ostensibly wish to *dissociate* the Akedah from Passover.

Noy conjectures that the midrash of Exodus Rabbah is in fact a preservation of the original association of the Akedah with Passover dating back to Jubilees.<sup>52</sup> He says the minority opinion finds its way into the tradition, but was originally preserved strictly orally since it was an unpopular opinion. However, Noy's thesis cannot explain why this tradition, originally unpopular, was eventually codified in the midrash. What event allowed it to return to the tradition explicitly?

I would argue that the Rabbis combated the Isaac-Jesus typology on two fronts. One, as demonstrated above, was liturgical. By moving the Akedah to the holiday of Rosh Hashanah, the Rabbis broke with those who associated Passover with Genesis 22. This clear break from the Christian calendar gave the Rabbis some room, however, to combat the Christian association on another, more direct front. Even if the "sacrifice" of

---

<sup>49</sup> Chilton, p. 87.

<sup>50</sup> Translation by Levenson, p. 180.

<sup>51</sup> Levenson, p. 180. See also Mekhilta on Exodus 14:15.

<sup>52</sup> Noy, p. 42.

Isaac was a concept existing pre-Christianity, this theme may have intentionally been further developed as a method of proposing an alternative to the Christian understanding of the Akedah. Segal writes: "[I]t is not out of the question that rabbis continued to discuss this connection [with Passover] in competition with the Church-fathers' use of Isaac as a *typos* for Christ. The amoraic traditions of the death and ashes of Isaac and his subsequent resurrection can be reasonably understood as an attempt to enrich Judaism with a figure that was as colorful as the one known to Christian exegesis."<sup>53</sup>

In sum, I suggest that the development of the Akedah as the Rosh Hashanah reading is a result of Rabbinic attempts to dissociate the Isaac narrative with the Jesus narrative, which gained significant popularity at the same time. This liturgical development, which may have occurred as early as Tannaitic times, gave the Rabbis a "weapon" used to eject early Christians from the synagogue. But the association between Passover and the Akedah, while absent liturgically, remained in certain midrashic formulations. The Rabbis may have developed these midrashim as a "second front" on the war with Christianity, proposing Isaac as a direct competition to the figure of Jesus.

---

<sup>53</sup> Segal, p. 129.