

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Binding or Sacrifice of Isaac: How Jews and Christians See Differently

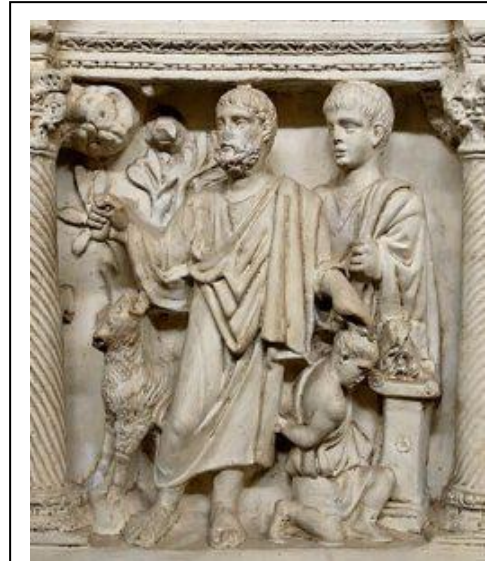
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The *Akedah* (ah-kay-DAH), or binding of Isaac, is one of the most powerful narratives in the Hebrew Bible. For nearly 2,000 years, however, it has been read somewhat differently by Jews and Christians. It is even portrayed differently in the pictures they make. For most Christians, the Hebrew word *akedah* is unfamiliar; more often than not, they will refer to the episode as the sacrifice of Isaac rather than the binding of Isaac.

Yet, as we shall see, at various times Christians and Jews were aware of each other's interpretation of the story.

According to the narrative in Genesis 22:2–18, God, without any warning, [commands Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son](#) as a burnt offering. Father and son travel three days to Moriah, the place of sacrifice, where they build an altar. [Abraham binds Isaac](#), lays him on the firewood and raises his knife to slay him. At the last moment, however, an angel calls out to Abraham to do no harm to the lad, and a ram caught in a nearby thicket is substitute for Isaac.



Detail of the upper left scene on the marble sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (see the next photo). The story of how God tested Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his son Isaac on Moriah is depicted. Abraham stands with the knife (now broken off) in hand, prepared to follow God's command. Isaac kneels in front of the altar. A servant stands at right, and the ram, which Abraham will sacrifice in Isaac's place, is at left.

In Judaism and Christianity ([as well as Islam](#)), Abraham is the paradigm of the man of faith, put to the ultimate test and found to be steadfast. Isaac, however is variously interpreted according to time and tradition. In Islam, the son is unidentified and could have been Ishmael (Abraham's son by Hagar and the ancestor of the Arabs) instead of Isaac, thus extending God's covenant to the Arab peoples. In Jewish literature around the turn of the era, Isaac is portrayed as the prototype of the voluntary and joyful martyr, willing to go bravely to his death. The first-century C.E. [Jewish historian Flavius](#)

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[Josephus](#) describes Isaac as a 25-year-old who rushes to the altar, knowing that he is to be the victim.<sup>1</sup> According to this portrayal, in future times of distress, God will remember Isaac's binding, the *Akedah*, and heed the prayers of the Jewish people for deliverance from enemies. As the text says, "Because you have done this...I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore" (Genesis 22:16–17). That is why the shofar the ram's horn is blown at Rosh Hashanah to remind God of the *Akedah* and his promise; the shofar represents the horn of the ram that was substituted for Isaac.<sup>2</sup>

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The marble sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (compare with previous photo), a Roman prefect who died in 359 C.E. Early Christian images of the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac frequently occur in funerary contexts—in catacombs and on sarcophagi. The highly popular scene often appears among other images depicting salvation and deliverance from

<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.12.1.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion in Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), pp. 206–208, 213; Erwin R. Good enough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953–69), vol. 4, p. 173; Philip R. Davies and Bruce Chilton, "The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978), pp. 534–535; and Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trail*, transl. and introduction by Judah Goldin (New York: Behrman House, 1967), pp. 471–547. According to Judah Goldin (*Last Trial* introduction, p. xix), the noun form of the Hebrew word *akedah* never occurs in scripture and the verbal root only occurs seven times in the Bible some form (six times as a passive participle). The verb as active—*wayaakod*, meaning "and he bound"—occurs only once in the Bible, the story of Abraham's "binding" of Isaac ([Genesis 22:9](#)).

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death, as, for example, on this sarcophagus, which includes a panel showing Daniel in the lion's den (lower register, second from right). *Photo: Tetraktys.*

[The Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E.](#) may have stimulated a profound new understanding of the *Akedah* in Jewish tradition. Since sacrifices could no longer be offered at the Temple, Isaac became the archetypal sacrifice, a kind of substitute for the now-defunct sacrificial system of the Temple. In Jewish tradition, until the destruction of the Temple the episode was referred to as the “offering” of Isaac; after the destruction it was called the “binding” of Isaac, a reference to the tying of a lamb's feet in the days when this sacrifice was carried out at the Temple in Jerusalem. After the Temple's destruction, the word *akedah* was used to show that Isaac's offering and/or death was a vicarious atonement that was perfected and complete in itself; the former Temple offering was only a memorial to this archetypal sacrifice.<sup>3</sup>

In later rabbinic collections, Isaac is portrayed as an adult of 37 years, fully aware of what is going to happen to him. He not only accepts the role he is to play, but begs Abraham to bind him lest he struggle in fear, thus invalidating the sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> The Jerusalem Talmud summarizes the tradition that Isaac's release is the equivalent of all Israel's release. Abraham received from God, as a reward for his obedience, God's own future intercession for Isaac's descendants when they should fall into sin. Remembering the *Akedah*, God will suppress his wrath and have mercy on his people.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Genesis story, Isaac's sacrifice was interrupted and the ram substituted. However, several ancient traditions refer to Isaac's ashes or blood; some accounts even say that Isaac actually died and was revived.<sup>6</sup> Does Genesis itself hint at this? After God tells Abraham that, because of what he has done, his descendants will be like the stars of the heaven and the sands of the sea, “Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for [Beer-sheba](#)” (Genesis 22:19). Why no mention of Isaac? What happened to him? Was there another version of the story with a different ending? In any

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<sup>3</sup> See Spiegel, *The Last Trial*. The essay originally appeared in the *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 56.4–8.

<sup>5</sup> See Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta'anit* 4.5; also *Pesiqta Rabbati* 39.

<sup>6</sup> See the Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 16a; Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta'anit* 2.1 (on the ashes); *Mekhilta of R. Simeon ben Yohai*, on [Exodus 16.2](#) (on the blood); Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909–38), vol. 1, p. 281f., and vol. 251, recounts the tradition that Isaac was also the name of the ram. See also the discussion in Hans Joachim Schoeps, “The Sacrifice of Isaac in Paul's Theology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 65 (1946), p. 389; and Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, vol. 4, pp. 183–184.

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event, in all these traditions, Isaac's ashes are the symbol of his merit, and the *Akedah* is the fulfilled expiatory sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

To resolve the seeming conflict between the tradition that he was sacrificed and the text that says a ram was substituted, later Jewish sages suggested that Isaac was laid upon the altar after the wood was kindled (in accordance with priestly law [Leviticus 1:7–8]); although the angel prevented Abraham from slaying his son, Isaac was burned to death and his ashes cast on Moriah.<sup>8</sup> Moriah, in Jewish tradition, is [the Temple Mount](#), where the Temple was later built and where sacrifices were offered in commemoration of the *Akedah*.

Christians, on the other hand, have from earliest times understood Isaac as a prefiguration of Christ, [the beloved son offered as the expiatory sacrifice for the people's sin](#). The textual parallels between Jesus and Isaac are striking. Isaac, like Jesus, was miraculously conceived. (Sarah, Isaac's mother, was 90 years old when she bore Isaac and had been barren all her life; Abraham was a hundred [Genesis 17:17].) Isaac was his father's beloved son. Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice (Genesis 22:6), just as Christ carried his own cross. The journey to Moriah took three days, parallel to the three days Jesus spent in the tomb [before his resurrection](#). And of course Jesus did Isaac one better: Isaac was not sacrificed; Jesus was.

Although these parallels are not explicitly drawn in the New Testament, later Christian exegetes made them quite specifically. [Paul](#) may even have intended his audience to make the connection when he described God as "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us" (Romans 8:32).<sup>9</sup>

Very early in post-New Testament Christian literature the story of Abraham's offering of Isaac becomes the "old covenant" counterpart of and paradigm for God's sacrifice of his own son on Calvary. The explicit connection occurs first in the Epistle of [Barnabas](#), usually dated to the early second century. Some scholars have suggested that Barnabas, possibly a converted Jew who was familiar with early *Akedah midrashim*,<sup>10</sup> preached

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<sup>7</sup> See discussions of dating and textual tradition in Davies and Chilton, "The Aqedah," pp. 537–546; and Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 28–49 Spiegel also cites late midrash on the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer that describes Isaac's revival and asserts that it draws upon earlier *aggadah* concerning the burning and resurrection of Isaac.

<sup>8</sup> Spiegel, *The Last Trail*, pp. 35–37.

<sup>9</sup> See also [Galatians 3:16](#), [4:28](#); [Romans 9:7](#), as well as discussions in Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Jesus the Christ* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), pp. 138–140; and Robert J. Daly, "The Soteriological Significance of Sacrifice of Isaac," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977), pp. 45–75.

<sup>10</sup> Midrash (plural *midrashim*) designates a genre of rabbinic literature that dates roughly from 400–1550 C.E. The term refers to a nonliteral elaboration of a biblical text, often for homiletic purposes.

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an [Easter sermon](#) that directly compared the atonement in the *Akedah* to Christ's atoning death, saying "not Isaac, but Jesus takes the place of the sacrifice."<sup>11</sup> This challenge was met with a direct response as the rabbis developed their own Passover atonement theology.<sup>12</sup> The rabbis, aware of the Christian typological interpretation of Isaac's sacrifice, developed the *Akedah* tradition in which the word *akedah* was interpreted to refer to the tying of the lamb's feet in a *tamid* sacrifice, the twice-a-day burnt offering at the Temple when it still stood.

An early church father, Melito of Sardis, noted the parallels between Isaac and Christ but stressed that while Christ actually suffered and died, Isaac was released from his bonds.<sup>13</sup>

Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement and Origen also cited the Isaac-Christ parallels. Tertullian saw the firewood Isaac carried as a figure of the cross and emphasized Christ's self-sacrifice: "Isaac, being led by his father to be a victim, and carrying himself the firewood, at that moment was a figure of Christ's death, submitting himself to his father as a victim and lugging the [fire]wood of his own passion."<sup>14</sup>

This interpretive motif continued through the fourth and fifth centuries with Ambrose, John Chrysostom, Theodoret and Augustine.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most significant use of the Isaac-Christ typology was in the liturgy of the church. The story of Isaac's sacrifice was read during the Easter vigil service in Jerusalem, and perhaps also in Milan, no later than the last half of the fourth century.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Epistle of Barnabas 7.3.

<sup>12</sup> See Davies and Chilton, "The Aqedah," p. 538, citing L. W. Barnard, "Is the Epistle of Barnabas a Paschal Homily?" in *Studies in the Apostolic Fathers and Their Background* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), p. 74.

<sup>13</sup> Melito of Sardis, *Excerptorum Libri Sex* 1–2, trans. in Isabel Speyert van Woerden, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham," *Vigiliae Christianae* 15 (1961), p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Iudaeos* 10, 6 (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* (CCSL) 2.2, 1376). See also *Adversus Iudaeos* 13.20–22 (CCSL 2.2, 1388–1389) in which Tertullian also refers to the bramble in which the ram was caught by the horns as a sign of the crown of thorns. See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.10.1.

<sup>15</sup> See Ambrose, *De Abraham* 1.8; John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in Genesis* 47.3; Theodoret, *Quaestiones in Genesis* 74; and Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 16.32.

<sup>16</sup> See John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1981), p. 253f.; and Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo, 1986), p. 47f. Egeria does not give details of the vigil readings when she was in Jerusalem, but liturgical scholars have argued that it is reasonably safe to assume the readings outlined in the Armenian lectionaries reflect a late-fourth-century tradition in Jerusalem. The readings include the Genesis stories of creation and sacrifice of Isaac.

Talley argues that Egeria omitted the Easter vigil readings in Jerusalem because they were the ones she

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As noted earlier, Jewish tradition identified Moriah, the site of the *Akedah*, as the Temple Mount, where the Temple of the Lord was later built. Christians, on the other hand, conflated Moriah with [Calvary, the site of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross](#). By the end of the sixth century the common identity had been accepted. In his famous travel account, the anonymous writer known only as the [Piacenza Pilgrim](#) gave the following description of Golgotha: "You can see the place where [Jesus] was crucified, and on the actual rock there is a bloodstain. Beside this is the altar of Abraham, which is where he intended to offer Isaac, and where Melchizedek offered sacrifice...."<sup>17</sup> Eventually a chapel dedicated to Abraham was built there.

That the rabbis were aware of the use to which their *Akedah* story had been put by the Christians is clear. In refutation one of them wrote:

"How foolish is the heart of the deceivers who say the Holy One, Blessed Be He, has a son. If in the case of Abraham's son, when He saw that he was ready to say him, He could not bear to look on as He was in anguish, but on the contrary commanded, 'a formless void' [*tohu ve-vohu*, the state of the universe before creation (quoting Genesis 1:2)]?"<sup>18</sup>

A careful look at Jewish and Christian depictions of the story and their settings reveals how they reflect the different religious traditions they represent.

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already knew and took for granted. Talley includes a table that shows fifth- to eighth-century documents that contain Easter vigil readings from [Genesis 22](#).

<sup>17</sup> Piacenza pilgrim, *Antonini Placentini Itinerarium* 19. See John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims* (Warminster, UK: Aris and Phillips, 1977), p. 83. For other pilgrim accounts that place Abraham's altar on Calvary, see the discussion by Archer St. Clair, "The Iconography of the Great Berlin Pyxis," *Jahrbuch Berliner Museum* 20 (1978), p. 23f.

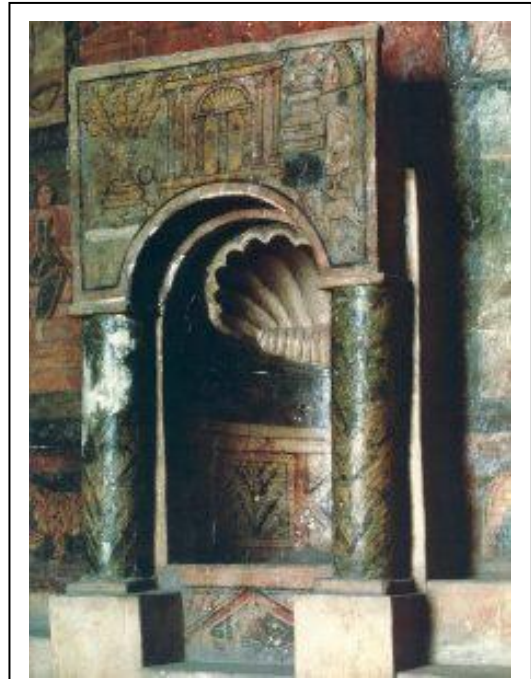
<sup>18</sup> Cited and dated by Spiegel, *The Last Trail*, p. 83, n. 26; also in Davies and Chilton, "The Aqedah," p.539.

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The “sacrifice of Isaac” was one of the most popular scenes in [early Christian art](#). From the Constantinian era (beginning in 312 C.E.) until the end of the sixth century, there remain at least 22 catacomb frescoes, approximately 90 sarcophagus reliefs, several important mosaics and dozens of smaller objects including ivory pyxides, glasses, lamps and bowls depicting the sacrifice of Isaac. This places it up there with images of [Jonah](#), [Noah](#), [Moses](#) and Daniel in popularity, making the sacrifice of Isaac a central theme of early Byzantine art.<sup>19</sup>

The two most significant Jewish depictions of the *Akedah* are in ancient synagogues, one in [the third-century synagogue at Dura-Europos](#) in modern Syria, where it is portrayed in a painting on dry plaster above the Torah niche, and the other in [the sixth-century synagogue at Beth Alpha](#) in Israel, where it is portrayed in a mosaic pavement.

Neither of these two Jewish examples comes from an urban center, and their style resembles folk art rather than high art. In the Beth Alpha mosaic, Abraham and Isaac are identified in Hebrew. The hand of God extends from heaven to prevent Abraham from proceeding. Below the hand are the Hebrew words, “Lay not [your hand].” Next to the ram are the words, “Behold a ram.”



The Torah niche at Dura-Europos, in a third-century C.E. synagogue excavated in modern day Syria. *Photo: Department of Antiquities, Syria.*

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<sup>19</sup> This enumeration is based on a brief survey of the materials in the Index of Christian Art at Princeton Univ., Princeton, NJ, as well as tables at the end of van Woerden’s article, “The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham,” p. 243f. I should note here that I have found several mistakes and omissions in van Woerden’s accounting, however. Other significant articles that analyze the Christian image of Abraham’s sacrifice include Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem* (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 51–52 and Elizabeth S. Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), p. 44f.

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The sixth-century C.E. floor mosaic from the Beth Alpha synagogue, in Israel's Jezreel Valley. The mosaic lay near the door, so that anyone who entered was confronted by the scene. Walking from here to the apse, visitors crossed a large mosaic zodiac and then a panel depicting a *lulav* (palm branch) and *etrog* (citron), menorahs, and the Ark of the Law—the same objects that accompanied the *Akedah* image at Dura-Europos 300 years earlier.

In the Dura-Europos synagogue, the *Akedah* scene shares the special panel above the Torah niche with a depiction of the Temple, as well as specifically Jewish symbols, including a menorah and a palm branch (*lulav*) and citron (*Etrog*) (both used on [the festival of Sukkot](#)).

Christian depictions of the sacrifice of Isaac, in contrast to the surviving Jewish images of the scene, appear most frequently in the artistic programs of tombs and sarcophagi. In the Roman catacombs, the sacrifice of Isaac appears near the raising of Lazarus (John 11:43–44); [the story of Jonah](#) (who returned from the belly of the fish after three days [Jonah 1:17], just as Jesus emerged from the tomb after three days); [the healing of the paralytic](#) (John 5:8–9); and the three youths who emerged from the fiery furnace unsigned (Daniel 3:24–26). This juxtaposition sends a message of deliverance from illness and death, symbolized in part by Isaac, who was delivered by God. On two well-known sarcophagi—one from the Vatican Museum and the other the famous Junius Bassus sarcophagus in the Treasury of [St. Peter's](#) (also a part of the Vatican Museum)—the sacrifice of Isaac is balanced by scenes from the arrest and [trial of Jesus](#), as if to emphasize the sacrifice of Isaac as a metaphor for the vicarious and atoning sacrifice of Christ.



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In the Priscilla catacomb fresco in Rome Isaac carries his own firewood. Is this because the artist has been influenced by Christian writers like Tertullian, who stressed the parallel between Isaac carrying the wood and Jesus carrying the cross? Or is it that the artist was simply faithfully portraying what he read in the biblical text?



“But where is the Lamb...?” (Genesis 22:7) queries Isaac, right, pictured in this late third century C.E. wall painting from the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. Peering out from under his heavy burden of firewood, Isaac may remind the viewer of Jesus under the burden of his cross—each carried the means of his own death. *Photo: Scala/Art Resource, New York, NY.*

In several Christian images, such as the mid-sixth-century mosaics in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, the sacrifice of Isaac is associated with the offerings of Abel (Genesis 4:4) and Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18–20). In San Vitale, a lunette in the sanctuary portrays a kind of Abraham cycle. To the left, Abraham and Sarah hear the announcement of Isaac’s promised birth. Abraham offers a small calf on a platter to his three angelic visitors, who sit at a table on which three loaves are spread out. To the right is the scene of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Here Isaac is placed on the altar. Abraham’s sword is aloft, but the hand of God has stayed it from striking. The ram substitute stands at Abraham’s feet. Directly across the sanctuary is a complementary lunette that depicts Abel and Melchizedek offering their sacrifices at an altar set with a chalice and two patens. Thus, the offering of Isaac is clearly identified with the sacrament of the eucharist, which, for Christians, is the representation of [Christ’s sacrifice on the cross](#).

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The mosaic lunette in the sanctuary of the Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, showing two scenes from the life of Abraham. *Photo: Petar Milošević/CC BY-SA 4.0.*

In Hebrews 5, Jesus is given a priestly lineage after the order of Melchizedek (Just as in Luke 3:23–38 and Matthew 1 he is given a royal, i.e., Davidic, lineage). The portrayal of Melchizedek’s offering is symbolic on at least two levels. First, Melchizedek prefigures Christ, who, in the person of the priest, is actually the celebrant of the eucharist. Second, the offering foreshadows the sacrament and its elements.

The placement of the *Akedah* scene over the Torah niche in the Dura-Europos synagogue delivers a different message. Nearly two centuries after the destruction of the Temple, the *Akedah* scene may here be telling us that the *Akedah*, rather than the Temple sacrifice, is the ultimate vicarious sacrifice and that the synagogue is the new locus of the faith—prayer and Torah reading have taken the place of sacrifice and temple cult.<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes Jewish and Christian depictions bear similarities, if only because they portray the same text. In almost all the Christian catacomb frescoes of the sacrifice of Isaac and in the Beth Alpha synagogue mosaic of the *Akedah*, fires burn on the altar. Is this a reference to the Levitical regulation about setting the fire on the altar first, or does it allude to the midrash that Isaac was not killed by the knife but by the fire?<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See Joseph Gutmann, “Programmatic Painting in the Dura Synagogue,” in *The Dura-Europos Synagogue*, ed. Gutmann (Missoula, MT: American Academy of Religion, 1973), pp. 147–150.

<sup>21</sup> See Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 34–40, in which he discusses midrash on the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer concerning the burning up and resurrection of Isaac.

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In none of these instances is the image merely a biblical illustration. Each goes beyond the representation of the Genesis narrative and is meant to present a truth about the faith tradition itself. In a Christian context, whether in art or in literature, the sacrifice of Isaac directly refers to the salvation offered by the vicarious sacrifice of Christ on the cross. In a Jewish context, the image underscores the place of the *Akedah* as a meritorious act that can be shared with the people of Israel, reassuring the community that, although the Temple has been lost, Isaac's descendants are safe.

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