

### C. Medieval Judaism

In medieval rabbinic Judaism, Abraham is portrayed as autodidact and iconoclast (→Iconoclasm), missionary (→Mission) and →martyr. He faithfully and patiently suffers divine trials, and through his suffering accrues merit. This “merit of Abraham” has eschatological (→Eschatology) and apocalyptic (→Apocalypses) significance. It will aid the Jews in the future, in this world and the next. These motifs and images, found already in classical rabbinic literature, were repeated, developed, and elaborated upon in the Jewish Middle Ages, under the influence of →Christianity, →Islam, →philosophy, and →mysticism.

**1. Abraham in Medieval Midrash.** Pirquei de-Rabbi Eliezer (PRE; 8th or 9th cent., Islamic East) 26–31 retells the stories of Abraham according to his “ten trials”:

1) Abraham was hidden at →birth, to escape the decree of wicked →King →Nimrod, who had ordered the murder of all Jewish male children (→Child, Children). 2) Abraham was imprisoned – and later thrown in a fiery furnace – for smashing his →father’s idols (→Idol, Idolatry) and challenging royal authority. 3) After miraculously escaping Nimrod’s furnace, God commanded Abraham to abandon home and →family. 4) But no sooner had he arrived in →Canaan than he was forced to flee once again due to →famine, this time to →Egypt, where 5) his wife →Sarah was taken by →Pharaoh. 6) During the war with the four kings, Abraham’s nephew →Lot was captured, forcing Abraham to collect a military force to redeem him. Even Abraham’s covenants (→Covenant) with God were trying: 7) he was shown his descendants’ Egyptian bondage in the covenant of the pieces; 8) and his own physical weakness in the covenant of →circumcision. The final two trials of Abraham, according to PRE, were 9) his exile of →Hagar and →Ishmael, and 10) the trial par excellence – the command to sacrifice →Isaac (→Aqedah).

Although PRE is based on earlier rabbinic texts, there is evidence of Islamic influence as well. For example, in PRE 30, when discussing the trial of Hagar and Ishmael, the author or compiler recounts Abraham’s travels east. With Sarah’s permission, Abraham visited Ishmael, but when he arrived he was greeted by Ishmael’s wife Aisha, who refused him food and water, in response to which he left a message for his son: “Remove the doorstep of your house.” Abraham returned three years later to find a new wife, named Fatima, who attended to him according to the highest standards of hospitality. In response to this Abraham left a second message: “Keep the doorpost of your house.”

This story is clearly borrowed from the Islamic cycle of stories about Abraham, and seems to preserve a Shi’ite polemic against Sunni Islam. How it entered this late midrashic text, however, and what purpose it could have served in a Jewish context, are questions that have not yet been fully answered.

Several other medieval midrashim (→Midrash) borrow from and build upon the stories and motifs found in PRE. Three short narratives (*Ma’aseh Avra-*

*ham, Ma’aseh Avraham Avinu, and Midrash de-Avraham Avinu*) focus on the early life of Abraham, as do two 12th century compilations: *Sefer ha-Yashar* and *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*. The latter collects and synthesizes passages from PRE, together with other sources (including a Hebrew version of Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities*). The same stories are repeated, expanded, and elaborated in *Pesiqta Rabbati* and *Tanna de-vei Eliyyahu*, although within a more straightforward homiletical and liturgical context, and with greater emphasis on the eschatological “merit of Abraham.”

**2. Abraham in Maimonides.** Abraham is a central figure, perhaps the central figure, in the writings of Moses →Maimonides (Rambam: 1138–204). Maimonides himself has justly been called “Abrahamic man.” Abraham is the key figure in Maimonides’s schematic history of religion; and nearly every work by the Master – including each part of the *Guide of the Perplexed* – begins with a motto drawn from Gen 21 : 33: “In the name of the →Lord, God of the world.”

In Maimonides’ code of →law, *Mishneh Torah* (in ch. 1 of the “Laws of Idolatry and Idolaters”), Abraham plays a central role in his history of religion. There Maimonides describes a linear decline from →monotheism to idolatry, beginning with the generation of →Enosh, when the people directed their prayers towards representatives of God rather than God. In the succeeding generations, God, the first cause, was completely forgotten. Instead, people considered the celestial bodies the only rulers of the sublunar world. This continued until the birth of Abraham, who, through his rational explorations of nature – without any teacher – recognized that there is one God, the final cause of celestial motion (as Maimonides presents it, Abraham knew God through the “cosmological proof” of medieval theology). Abraham then devoted himself to spreading his doctrines throughout the ancient Near East, challenging the orthodoxies of his time, writing books to disseminate his views, attracting converts, and teaching his principles to Isaac, who taught them to →Jacob, who created a religious community based on the true belief of monotheism.

In *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides’s brief history of religion is modified and elaborated in important ways. In light of an Arabic book entitled *Nabatean Agriculture* – a work of magic (→Magi, Magic) purporting to represent the beliefs of “Sabbian” idolaters at the time of Abraham – Maimonides, as historian and anthropologist, attempted to reconstruct the exact social setting of Abraham’s preaching and polemics. For example, in *Guide* 3 : 29, after briefly describing the star-worshipping religion of the Sabians, Maimonides summarizes a text from the *Nabatean Agriculture*, which describes Abraham’s disputations with his contemporaries:

When Ibrahim, who was brought up in Kutha, disagreed with the community and asserted that there was an agent other than the sun, various arguments were brought forward against him. ... [which] set forth the clear and manifest activities of the sun in what exists. Thereupon he ... told them: You are right; it is like an axe in the hands of a carpenter. Then they mention a part of his argumentation ... against them. At the conclusion of the story they mention that the king put Abraham our Father ... into prison [where]... he persevered for days and days in arguing against them. Thereupon the king became afraid that he would ruin his polity and turn the people away from their religions and therefore he banished him toward →Syria after having confiscated all his property ....

Abraham reappears in several additional passages in the *Guide*. In *Guide* 3:22, Maimonides explains Gen 22 in detail. In *Guide* 3:51, Abraham, together with Isaac, Jacob, and →Moses, is singled out not as philosopher, polemicist, and champion of the →faith, but as a Sufi sheikh of sorts, who creates a political community, while not allowing his bond with God to be broken; he continues political engagement in this world without compromising in any way his mystical attachment to God.

Maimonides's representation of Abraham had significant influence on all later Jewish discussions of Gen 12–25, exegetical and philosophical alike. His reconstruction of ancient paganism in light of the *Nabatean Agriculture* continued to influence biblical scholarship even into the early modern period. The conception of Abraham's philosophical contemplation of God was repercussive as well as it was controversial. Later opponents of philosophy, such as Hasdai →Crescas (ca. 1340–1410/11), attempted to undermine Maimonides' rational religion through a re-reading of the same biblical and rabbinic texts singled out by Maimonides. According to Crescas, Abraham recognized the existence and unity of God not through philosophy and theoretical speculation, but through prophecy and revelation. For Crescas, in other words, divine revelation and prophecy – as represented by the first call to “get thee out” – marks the beginning of a religious life of obedience rather than the end of a philosophical life of speculation.

**3. Abraham in Nahmanides.** Gen 12–25 was explicated in the Jewish commentary tradition as well, in the foundational commentaries by →Saadia ben Joseph Al-Fayyumi, Abraham →Ibn Ezra, and Rabbi Solomon Yitshaqi (→Rashi). Most creative, however, was the work of Moses →Nahmanides (Ramban; 1194–1270).

Nahmanides' commentary on the →Torah builds upon midrash, Rashi and Ibn Ezra, borrows from and criticizes Maimonides, but introduces new ideas as well. Like the midrashim and Maimonides, Nahmanides introduces legends about the early life of Abraham in Haran and Kutha, elaborating upon them in light of the *Nabatean Agriculture*. But he appeals to other sources as well, including Near Eastern geography, based on reports

by contemporary travelers to the cities of Abraham's youth. Nahmanides also introduces one distinctive idea of his own theology – “concealed miracles” – to help explain why Abraham's early-life conflicts with Sabians and Nimrod are alluded to but not clearly reported in Scripture; God works concealed miracles for the righteous, to save them from difficult situations.

Nahmanides was one of the few medieval Jewish exegetes to use typology or prefigurative →exegesis, a method which was popular among Christians rather than Jews. For example, citing a rabbinic maxim – “everything that happens to the patriarchs is a sign to the children” (*ma'aseh avot siman la-banim*) – he explains Abraham's descent into Egypt as prefiguring the Egyptian bondage, the war with the four kings as alluding to the four eschatological kingdoms described in the Book of →Daniel, and →Melchizedek King of →Salem, priest of the most high God, as prefiguring the high priest in the future →Temple in →Jerusalem. This sort of prefigurative exegesis also helps him to find extra meaning in the text's seemingly insignificant details. Thus, Abraham's lie about Sarah was actually a cause, a parallel foreshadowing, of the difficult trials in Egypt. Here the lie is not ignored or dismissed apologetically, but is rather fit into a typological reading of redemption history, which takes seriously the implications (really cosmic implications) of moral action.

A detailed criticism of Maimonides is found in Nahmanides' commentary on Gen 18:1. The biblical text itself is problematic. God first appears to Abraham, followed by three men who are later called →angels. Does the text represent one God in the form of three (as in Christian interpretations), a single divine epiphany followed by the separate visit of three angels, or a divine revelation followed by the visit of three “men” who are like angels? Maimonides had resolved this problem by fiat. God's appearance to Abraham at Gen 18:1 marks the beginning of a single prophetic dream or vision, which means that all subsequent events in the narrative are internal psychic experiences. But this reading of the text creates additional problems; when does the dream end and reality begin? After the →prophecy about Isaac? After the argument with God? After the destruction of →Sodom? In his commentary, Nahmanides responded to all these problems. Nevertheless, after rejecting the philosophical reading of Maimonides, he proceeds to introduce a kabbalistic explanation in its place (→Kabbalah). According to him, the angels are called “men” because they take on a fine corporeal garment allowing them to be recognized in the human world. This, he says, is the “secret of the garment.”

As in so many other areas, the rival explanations of Gen 18 by Maimonides and Nahmanides

served as foundation for later reflections and controversies. For example, Rabbi Yom Tom ben Abraham al-Ishbili (Ritba, 1250–1330) devoted ch. 3 of his *Sefer Zikkaron* to reconciling the two great masters of medieval Judaism.

**4. Abraham in the Zohar.** Nahmanides was one of the earliest biblical exegetes to introduce kabbalistic notions into a biblical commentary. In general, however, he was reserved in his use of Kabbalah. In the following generation, the stories of Abraham were explained in detail in the *Zohar* (late 13th cent.), which would become the most influential work of Kabbalah.

In the *Zohar*, Abraham's life and travels are explained with constant reference to the *sefirot* ("enumerations"). Abraham himself is *hesed* (→Love; →Grace) or an individual who seeks to rise to *hesed* through his spiritual quests. His travels to Canaan were self-motivated; he began the journey and only then did God say: "Get thee to Canaan." In Canaan he conjoined with the →*Shekhinah*, the lowest *sefirah*, but had to descend into Egypt, the realm of evil, in order to refine himself. Only if he could withstand the forces of evil could he rise to a higher level still. Although he traveled frequently, he was always traveling toward the →Negeb, which means south, and represents the *sefirah hesed*.

Concerning the lie about Sarah being his "sister," according to the *Zohar* Abraham did not really lie, for Sarah is *Shekhinah*, and *Shekhinah* and *hesed* are siblings in the world of the *sefirot*, children of *hokhmah* (→"wisdom"). The sacrifice of Isaac is also explained with reference to the *sefirot*. Abraham, qua *hesed*, was all grace and love, therefore he needed to combine with *din/gevurah* ("severe judgment") – Isaac – in order to achieve a proper balance. In other words, Abraham took on the form of Isaac in order to bind Isaac, while Isaac, by submitting peacefully to the sacrifice, took on the form of Abraham – passive love and grace. Only by this merging of love and judgment can Jacob, true divine compassion, come to be.

The most interesting aspect of the Zoharic Abraham concerns circumcision, which is discussed at much greater length than any other subject in the Abraham narrative. Circumcision, of course, was a central practice in rabbinic Judaism; the rabbinic sages were especially concerned with this single →commandment, in response to Christian polemics. With the *Zohar*, however, the concerns are somewhat different. The mystical experience, in the *Zohar* as in other traditions, is often represented as a union between male and female. In the *Zohar*, this applies from above and below; the mystic's union with *Shekhinah* from below and the union of *tiferet* ("adornment") with *Shekhinah* through *yesod* ("foundation") from above. For the Jewish mystic, moreover, this sexual-mystical union must take place in a pure state. Thus, it is only after circumci-

sion that there can be a true vision of the divine world. In other words, for the author/s of the *Zohar*, circumcision is a prerequisite for mystical union.

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■ Note F. Kasten: petit formatting necessary?? ■