The Reception and Reworking of Abraham Traditions in Armenian

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In this paper, I shall discuss a corpus of mostly narrative texts about Abraham that are preserved in late medieval manuscripts in Armenian. The dates of origin of these traditions are not explicit, but they can in general be set prior to the tenth century, when their constituent elements appear in a number of sources. These texts cannot be older in Armenian than the fifth century, at which time the Armenians began to write their own language. S. P. Brock, in a fine study of the Syriac story of Abraham and the ravens, isolates points at which the Syriac tradition differs from the version of the same events in Jubilees. At virtually all these points, the Armenian Abraham saga resembles the Syriac, though I would not claim it is derived from Syriac. The story of Melchizedek, of which I shall speak below, is most closely cognate to the Greek Melchizedek tale, while certain other distinctive traditions have not been found in any language but Armenian. Of course, the date of constitutive traditions is not necessarily the date of any particular literary formulation of that tradition.

1 The Character of the Armenian Abraham Traditions

The Armenians showed a deep interest in Abraham, expressed not only in apocryphal narratives, but in poetry, art, and exegesis as well. To trace all this

* Much of the material presented in this paper was subsequently incorporated into the “General Introduction” to my book, Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Abraham (SBLEJL 37; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

1 Naturally, direct manuscript evidence before the tenth century is not available, since the oldest literary manuscript, located in the Matenadaran, Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, Erevan is dated to 981 (M2679); see A. Mathévossian, A Book of Knowledge and Belief by Priest David: The Oldest Armenian Manuscript on Paper, 981 (2 vols.; Erevan: Matenadaran-Nairi, 1995, 1997). In addition, we find traditions distinctive to this corpus in authors from the tenth century, such as Samuel Kamrǰajorec’i (MH tenth century, 742–43 [in Armenian]); and Grigor Narekac’i (Book of Lamentations [ed. P. M. Xač’atryan and A. A. Łazinyan; Erevan: Academy of Sciences, 1985], 622 [93.5] [in Armenian]).

abundance is beyond our scope here, but please bear in mind that the corpus of fifteen documents, mainly narratives, which I shall discuss is far from exhaustive.³

After all, in its simple, biblical⁴ form, Abraham's is a very dramatic story, moving from one exciting incident to another—Abraham's migration to the Land of Israel, his battle against the four kings, the double narratives of Sarah in the palaces of pagan monarchs, the story of Lot, the burning of Sodom and Gomorra, and the binding of Isaac (the Aqedah). Above all, in Christian thought, the visit of the three “men” and their annunciation of Isaac's birth to Abraham, as well as Abraham's offering of Isaac, played a pivotal role.

Here our attention will be directed to the tradition, transmission, and transformation of these stories in their Christian, specifically Armenian, retelling. Which elements of the biblical narrative were emphasized and which omitted, and why? Which nonbiblical episodes were introduced? Which ideas were reinterpreted? It is to such questions that we shall direct our gaze.

The Armenians narrated the biblical story, inviting grist for the mill of any storyteller, with clearly Christian reformulations. Christians emphasized Abraham's role as the father of all believers (cf. Rom 4:16) and the idea of the bosom of Abraham as the resting place of the righteous souls (Luke 16:23). In Jewish and Christian stories, Abraham's discovery of God was a focus of fascination. Numerous retellings of this event occur in varied sources as far back as Jubilees, and in the Armenian stories retailed here ancient traditions are mixed with newer ones. The strange story, taken as paradigmatic yet always puzzling, of Abraham offering Isaac⁵ is not connected solely with a trial of the patriarch's faith. For Christians, it foreshadowed God's offering of his Son, and so the central mystery of Christian understanding of the world.

³ See Stone, Armenian Apocrypha Relating to Abraham, for editions and translations of these fifteen narratives; the translations used in this article are drawn from that volume. See ibid., xv–xvi, for lists of the works and their manuscripts. In this article, the texts are cited by short titles derived from those lists, and by section number within the manuscript.

⁴ I use “Bible” and “biblical” to denote the books of the Hebrew Bible. Old and New Testaments together are designated “Scripture” and “scriptural.”