

# Human and Divine Justice in the *Testament of Abraham*

Meredith J.C. Warren

## 1 Introduction

The *Testament of Abraham* depicts the last days of the life of the biblical patriarch Abraham.<sup>1</sup> In telling Abraham's experience resisting Death, the text preserves a certain understanding of the rewards and punishments associated with righteousness and sin, respectively, and a particular view of the appropriate and inappropriate ways of processing the souls of the deceased.<sup>2</sup> The modes of divine and human justice in the *Testament of Abraham* are not uniform, and represent a complex understanding of both righteous humans and the divine. The description of judgment and punishment follows a visit from the Archangel Michael to notify Abraham, as a matter of courtesy, that his life is about to end. After giving the messenger of the Most High the slip several times, Abraham agrees to be taken up to heaven, where God instructs Michael to show him "all things" and that Michael should follow Abraham's instructions concerning the meting out of punishments for mortal beings. Abraham's decisions do not turn out to be models of divine best practice. Abraham unleashes retribution upon a number of people before God notifies him that his services

1 Most scholars date the composition of the text relatively early, prior to the third century CE, and quite possibly as early as the turn of the era; see D.C. Allison, *Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2003), 34–40. In contrast, Davila cautiously assumes a Christian composition no later than the fifth century CE; see J.R. Davila, *The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (JSJSup 105; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 199–207.

2 Throughout this paper, I refer to Recension A's versification and version of the narrative events. This recension preserves more of the comedic elements of the characterization and plot. Other recensions will be noted where appropriate. The recension tradition of *Testament of Abraham* is complex but the majority position understands the longer Recension A to be the more original, at least in terms of its narrative structure if not its vocabulary; see here J.W. Ludlow, "Humor and Paradox in the Characterization of Abraham in the Testament of Abraham," in J.-A. Brant et al., eds., *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 202.

are no longer required: Abraham “has no mercy on sinners,” God determines (10.14).<sup>3</sup> While God criticizes Abraham for his lack of mercy, and while Abraham eventually learns compassion after visiting heaven and witnessing the process of divine judgment, the notion of what divine justice looks like is not unambiguous in the Testament of Abraham. Abraham’s learned compassion is not modelled on God’s own characteristics as judge; he, as well as Abraham, seems changeable in his judgment. This characterization of God results in an unsettling view of the nature of divine justice, where God, like Abraham, must be cajoled and convinced in order to grant mercy to sinners. This paper explores the modes of divine and human justice portrayed in this curious text, and considers the significance of the parodic genre and the comedic characterization of Abraham as vehicles for theological reflection on judgment in antiquity.

## 2      *The Testament of Abraham: Narrative and Parody*

An overview of the narrative serves to contextualize the characterization of Abraham and God in the *Testament of Abraham* and provides a framework for interpreting its mechanisms of heavenly judgment. The general consensus is that the longer version, Recension A, appears to be older, despite possible interpolations; this longer version includes many humorous elements that Recension B has apparently removed in an attempt to make the narrative less problematic in its depiction of the patriarch.<sup>4</sup> In an effort to postpone his death, Abraham convinces the Archangel Michael to show him “all the inhabited world and all the created things” (9.7), promising that after he is given a tour of heaven and earth, he will acquiesce to God’s summons. It is while Abraham is on this tour that he calls down punishments on the sinners he sees from heaven. Each time Abraham sees sinners—some murderers, a couple engaging in “sexual immorality,” thieves—he prays to the Lord, who carries out Abraham’s gruesome punishments: wild beasts devour the murderers; the

3 Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the *Testament of Abraham* are drawn from E.P. Sanders, “Testament of Abraham,” in J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Volume 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 871–902.

4 J.W. Ludlow, “The Testament of Abraham: Which Came First—Recension A or Recension B?” *JSP* 13 (2002): 3–15, and A.Y. Reed, “The Construction and Subversion of Patriarchal Perfection: Abraham and Exemplarity in Philo, Josephus, and the *Testament of Abraham*,” *JSJ* 40 (2009): 185–212. For the Greek recensions, see M.E. Stone, *The Testament of Abraham, The Greek Recensions* (New York: SBL, 1972).