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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.¹ 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.² 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 are no longer required: Abraham "has no mercy on sinners," God

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.

determines (10.14).³ 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.⁴ 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 earth swallows up the couple; fire consumes the thieves (10.4-11). Despite

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).

answering Abraham's request for punishments for these three incidents, God eventually directs Michael to stop that portion of the tour so as to avoid Abraham destroying the entire created world (10.13); Abraham, according to God, has not himself sinned and thus is not capable of being merciful towards those who have.

Once Abraham has been prevented from killing all the sinners on the face of the earth, the angel takes him through a gate and into a throne room, in which a fearsome man is sitting on a throne. This man is not God, but rather, the angel explains, this is Adam, "the first formed." Adam's task is to watch souls entering in through one of two gates to heaven: one that is narrow and one that is wide. The narrow gate is entered only by the righteous, who pass on to Paradise, while the wide gate leads to destruction and eternal punishment (11.1-12). Each time Adam sees a soul enter through the broad gate, he weeps and mourns, while he rejoices each time a soul enters through the narrow gate. In another room, a glorious judge assisted by angels weighs each soul's sins and judges it according to a divine book. This judge is Abel, who was killed by his wicked brother Cain (Gen 4:8), and is therefore in a good position to evaluate the consequences of sin. The text explains this according to God's word: "For God said, 'I do not judge you, but every man is judged by man'" (13.3). This justification does not quite answer the question, since God's statement about humanity judging itself refers to "man" in a general rather than a specific sense; it does not explain why Abel in particular should be the judge as opposed to, for instance, another prominent and respected figure such as Abraham. It is possible that the author had in mind, as Jan Dochhorn suggests, Gen 9:6, which connects judgment and blood in a way that might call to mind Abel's blood in 4:10.⁵ Regardless, the discussion of Abel's fitness to judge apparently resides in his role as victim of sin rather than as sinner, which appears inconsistent with God's earlier statement that Abraham is incapable of appropriate judgment of sin because he himself had not sinned.

⁵ J. Dochhorn, "Abel and the Three Stages of Postmortal Judgement: A Text-Critical and Redaction-Critical Study of the Christian Elements in *Testament of Abraham A 13:2-8*," in I.H. Henderson and G.S. Oegema, eds., *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity, and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity* (Studien der JSRZ 2; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 2006), 398-415 at 413.

According to the text as it has been preserved, this method of judgment, with Abel presiding, is the preferred method only until the Parousia, when Abel will be replaced as sole judge by the twelve tribes, and finally, by the Lord God himself in a third stage. However, this three-stage judgment may reflect a later, Christian interpolation, as Dochhorn has argued.⁶ If he is correct, this suggests that Abel stands in for God's judgment and does not represent, then, a stop-gap measure, but is part of the intended process for eternity. The mechanism for judgment is explained in the next section. Two angels, one on each side, record righteous and wicked deeds, respectively, which are then weighed by a third angel named Dokiel, who is described as "the righteous balance-bearer" (13.9-10). This angel weighs a person's righteous deeds against his or her sins and metes out reward or punishment accordingly. Similarities have been pointed out between these procedures for heavenly judgment and Egyptian and Neoplatonic versions of the afterlife.⁷ What is clear from the text, however, is that it is seemingly oblivious to any distinction between Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Jewish views of the afterlife and heavenly judgment.⁸ This lack of discrimination suggests that the *Testament of Abraham* preserves non-sectarian Jewish beliefs about the afterlife.

At this point, Abraham asks his guide what happens when a soul has exactly the same number of righteous deeds as sins – an important question.⁹ The angelic guide replies that souls in this scenario are in a kind of limbo; they must wait for the judge of all to come (14.2), at which point, presumably, God will employ some other kind of process, unavailable to angels, to judge righteousness. The angelic guide tells Abraham that a soul in limbo would only need one righteous deed more to be saved (14.4). The balance of righteous deeds to wicked ones is therefore crucial to how divine judgment is carried out; Abraham's previous mistake was apparently that he did not take into account the entirety of a person's deeds. Notably, the mercy

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ M.R. James, *The Testament of Abraham* (T&S 2.2; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), G.H. McCurdy, "Platonic Orphism in the Testament of Abraham," *JBL* 61 (1942): 213-26 at 218, and G.W.E. Nickelsburg, "Eschatology in the Testament of Abraham: A Study of the Judgment Scenes in the Two Recensions," in G.W.E. Nickelsburg, ed., *Studies on the Testament of Abraham* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 31-34.

⁸ Reed, "Patriarchal Perfection," 210-11.

⁹ In Recension B chapter 10, the soul that Abraham observes being judged is a murderer and is shown no mercy; this is in contrast to the evenly-balanced soul in Recension A.

that Abraham was said to lack in the earlier section of the text is not yet a function of the angelic juridical procedures.

Abraham begins to introduce the aspect of mercy. He urges the angel to join him in prayer on behalf of the soul, and when the patriarch and the archangel arise, the soul is gone, taken into Paradise because God listened to their prayer (14.5-8). Realizing the ramifications of prayer – that intercession on behalf of another is effective, at least in the case of an evenly-balanced soul – Abraham begs the angel to join him again in prayer, this time on behalf of all the people he cursed previously – the ones he set on fire and caused wild beasts to attack. He says:

I beg you, archangel, heed my plea; let us beseech the Lord yet again and let us prostrate ourselves for his compassion and beg his mercy on behalf of the souls of the sinners whom I previously, being evil-minded, cursed and destroyed, whom the earth swallowed up and whom the wild beasts rent asunder and whom the fire consumed because of my words. Now I have come to know that I sinned before the Lord our God. (14.10-12)

God hears Abraham's prayer and restores those whom Abraham cursed, although it is not immediately clear whether they are then restored to life on earth for a time or directly to eternal life in Paradise. God declares that "those whom I destroy while they are living on the earth, I do not requite in death" (14.15); in a kind of pre-modern correctional policy that "time served counts for double," God does not punish in the afterlife those who die prematurely since they have already received punishment in their early death. In effect, Abraham's prayer has negated his earlier unjust punishments, but also potentially resulted in the automatic entry into Paradise of those whom he had killed.

After this, Abraham's tour of the heavens comes to a close and Michael returns him to earth to finally prepare for his death. Once again, however, Abraham refuses to come quietly with the angel and questions Michael's divine pronouncements. Having no other recourse, since Abraham will not follow the directions of his messenger, God summons Death "the one of abominable countenance and merciless look" (16.1). Death disguises his fearful appearance and takes on the outward appearance of an archangel, in order to respect Abraham's special relationship with God. He tells Abraham that he is Death, but once again Abraham questions the truth of his

statements (16.12-14). Regardless of Abraham's preferences now, Death follows Abraham everywhere: "Abraham arose and went into his house, and Death followed him there. Abraham went up into his room, and Death also went up with him. Abraham reclined on his couch, and Death came and sat by his feet" (17.1). The humor here is subtle yet unmistakable. Abraham demands to know what is going on, and when Death rearticulates his identity, Abraham demands proof: he wants to see Death's true appearance, not the one he assumes for the righteous (17.9). Death obliges, and his appearance is so ferocious and frightening that it kills all of Abraham's seven thousand male and female servants (17.18) – God later brings them back to earthly life after Abraham and Death pray together (18.11). Abraham himself faints and begs Death to hide his true nature, and then retires to his room to recover. Death follows him once more, and in anger Abraham challenges Death's authority and once again demands proof, asking Death to teach him how he changes his appearance, and all the inexplicable mysteries of death, which Death obliges (19.5-16). Understandably, Death is getting a bit tired of Abraham's continuous evasive tricks, like a child who will not be put to bed. In the end, offering to restore Abraham's strength after his ordeals, Death tricks Abraham into kissing his hand, and Abraham's soul leaves his body (20.8-9). Although the reader is not shown the judgment of Abraham's soul on the balance, the text states that Abraham enters Paradise to join the other righteous ones (20.14).

3. *Analysis*

The origins of *Testament of Abraham* have implications for how we understand the kind of judgment it portrays as well as for its characterization of Abraham. The current consensus – that the *Testament* is Jewish in origin despite its preservation and redaction by Christians – has been challenged,¹⁰ but the text nevertheless persists in resisting categorization.¹¹ On the one hand, there is no concern about belonging to the people of Israel in order to be saved after death – deeds hold more weight than religious membership. Despite this emphasis on behaviour, however, the text is silent about keeping the Sabbath, circumcision, or Torah observance of any specified kind, and the text seems at peace with the idea of Jews living in harmony with non-Jewish neighbours, if its use of Egyptian and Neoplatonic descriptions of the afterlife is any

¹⁰ Davila, *Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha*, 199-207.

¹¹ Reed, "Patriarchal Perfection," 210-11.

indication. On the other hand, the received texts are Christian and were preserved and edited by Christians, and yet do not show any clear indications of Christian theology;¹² the idea of Christ as eschatological judge is absent from the narrative. It is therefore very difficult to say anything of certainty about whether and in what way the text reflects ancient Jewish or ancient Christian ideas about divine justice. That the text's major features were acceptable to its first authors, likely Jews, as well as to its later Christian redactors perhaps implies that the *Testament of Abraham* reflects a generalized ancient understanding of divine and human notions of justice. Above all, the text upholds the idea of mercy as something to be commended in human beings, with Abraham's redemption from his earlier judgmental attitude supporting this trait's value for mortal beings.

The genre of the *Testament of Abraham* is also complicated. The text itself tells us variously that it is a testament, a narrative, an account, an apocalypse, and a biography, depending on the recension.¹³ In reality, it is a combination of these genres and contains familiar elements of each, which is of course typical of many ancient texts, not just the *Testament of Abraham*.¹⁴ Part of how the text plays with genre is in Abraham's heavenly journey, which is a major feature of both apocalypses and testaments.¹⁵ That Abraham specifically is taken up to heaven and favoured by God to see divine things is not unique to this book, or, in fact, to the testamentary genre, parody

¹² Doehorn's proposal that *Test. Abr.* 13.5-8 is a later Christian interpolation ("Abel and the Three Stages of Postmortal Judgement," 408-12) suggests that an original reconstruction of 13.16 depicts the twelve apostles as the eschatological judges in the second stage of judgment rather than the twelve tribes, but likewise proposes that the three-stage judgment as a whole is a later addition. The three-stage judgment, apparently unprecedented in early Jewish literature (Nickelsburg, "Eschatology in the Testament of Abraham," 40) and the mention of the apostles, if original, possibly could be the only distinctively Christian elements of the text.

¹³ Allison, *Testament of Abraham*, 41-42.

¹⁴ E.S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 191, and L.M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 254.

¹⁵ J.J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979): 1-20 at 15, *idem*, "The Genre Apocalypse in Hellenistic Judaism," in D. Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East. Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12-17, 1979* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 531-48 at 541, *idem*, "The Testamentary Literature in Recent Scholarship" in R. Kraft and G.W.E. Nickelsburg, eds., *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 268-285 at 277-78, and Allison, *Testament of Abraham*, 42.

or not.¹⁶ In *4 Ezra* 3:13-14, Abraham is chosen and to him alone God reveals the end of times. In *2 Bar.* 4.5, again Abraham is shown Paradise by the divinity. And finally, Ps-Philo, *LAB* 18.5 implies that when God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, he did so while God had taken Abraham up into the heavens to reveal divine matters to him. There is even a long section in the *Apocalypse of Abraham* that details over several chapters (9-32) what Abraham saw when he visited heaven, including the royal throne, Paradise, the Fall, and the events leading up to the end times.

A significant problem, however, with the *Testament of Abraham* as a testament is that it lacks one key element of the genre. Scholars of early Jewish literature point out that the *Testament of Abraham* has no farewell discourse and therefore departs from the genre in that respect; it seems, rather, to be a parody.¹⁷ Abraham never makes his testament, despite being given ample warning that he is to die. Any expectation for a melancholy text, reflecting the somber situation of an aged patriarch about to meet his maker, is actually inverted. This fits well with the multiple comic elements throughout the work. This generic complexity allows the text to complicate and subvert religious elements such as piety and judgment. The comedic elements include the elaborate introduction of Abraham as a righteous man, as the narrator reiterates what other texts mention in praise of Abraham – his hospitality, his gentleness, and his piety. This contrasts with Abraham’s own speech and actions, which illustrate instead the reluctance of Abraham to obey God’s messengers, and indeed, conflicts with his judgmental behaviour in section 10.¹⁸

¹⁶ Nickelsburg, “Eschatology,” 23-24.

¹⁷ G.W.E. Nickelsburg, “Stories of Biblical and Early Post-Biblical Times,” in M.E. Stone, ed., *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (CRINT 2.2; Assen/Philadelphia: Van Gorcum/Fortress, 1984), 33-87 at 62; Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 253, and J.W. Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death: Narrative Humor in the Testament of Abraham* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 18. Ludlow takes issue with describing the text as a parody, since strictly speaking a parody mocks a specific rendition of a story or character, a specific text, rather than the idea of the virtuous patriarch as a whole (“Humor and Paradox,” 204, and *Abraham Meets Death*, 56). See also R. Doran, “Narrative Literature,” in R.A. Kraft and G.W.E. Nickelsburg, eds., *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 287-310 at 288, and Gruen, *Diaspora*, 187.

¹⁸ Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death*, 57-64.

While Abraham's comedic characterization is significant, other characters are also parodied. Their representations also affect how we understand the kind of divine justice presented by the text. One example is the parodic characterization of Michael as reluctant to face Abraham and tell him the truth about his impending death, speaking rather around the subject, which contrasts with Michael's description in bold military terms as God's commander in chief.¹⁹ Similarly, Death, which is not typically anthropomorphized in early Jewish literature (although as an agent of divine destruction Death features widely),²⁰ here becomes an absurd, fully fleshed out character, who is further duped into agreeing to Abraham's constant demands.²¹ The most fearsome Death and the mightiest of angels are both cowed by a mortal. The comic characterization of divine beings, representatives of God (though not God himself), creates space for the human realm and the divine realm to interact. Characters are made more relatable, and even though God himself is not portrayed in this comedic way, the fact that the angel and Death are offers an opportunity for human readers to relate to divine predicaments just as much as they might be able to relate more readily to "righteous" Abraham.

Abraham's characterization in the *Testament* is likewise subversive. In early Jewish literature, including Philo and Josephus, Abraham is frequently held up as an example of faith.²² This is despite the fact that the biblical Abraham is from time to time depicted as duplicitous and disobedient:²³ he haggles with God in Gen 18:22-23, lies about his relationship to his wife in Gen 12:10-20 and 20:1-18, and obscures the truth in Gen 22:8. But, perhaps emanating from the tradition that God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac, other texts from around the time of composition of *Testament of Abraham*, or just before it, consistently uphold Abraham's faith. Sirach (44:19-21) emphasizes the obedience of Abraham in keeping the law, and reiterates the guarantee by God that the nations of the earth will be blessed through Abraham because of his loyalty. Likewise, *Jubilees* preserves a tradition in which Abraham is tested not

¹⁹ Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death*, 74-94, and Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 253.

²⁰ Ludlow, *Abraham Meets Death*, 97-98; cf. Jer 9:21-22 for a potential example of personified death.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 95-118, for a full discussion of Death's characterization.

²² Reed, "Patriarchal Perfection," 185-212.

²³ G.W.E. Nickelsburg, "Structure and Message in the Testament of Abraham," in G.W.E. Nickelsburg, ed., *Studies on the Testament of Abraham* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976) 85-93 at 87, and Ludlow, "Humor and Paradox," 203.

only in the incident of the binding of Isaac, but several other times.²⁴ Specifically, *Jubilees* records the angels observing Abraham's patience and forbearing in times of frustration: "he himself did not grow impatient, yet he was not slow to act; for he was faithful and one who loved the Lord" (*Jub.* 17:18). The text uses the term patient several times in its description of Abraham's nature in the face of tests.

Despite this characterization of Abraham as patient, his rush to judgment in the *Testament of Abraham* betrays an impetuous nature and participates in the comic tone of the work as a whole, and represents a foil to the ordered bureaucracy of the heavenly courts. In contrast to the measured, methodical way that divine justice is portrayed, Abraham's method of judging sinners is immediate, and he later needs to recant his curses and repent of his impulsive actions. Divine justice has order: souls progress through objective tests for their righteousness, and specific angels and other divine figures have specific roles to play in the administering of divine justice. Abraham, on the other hand, follows his anger and punishes what he perceives as impiety without enquiring whether his victims have any good deeds to their names. Far from the patient Abraham we find in many other early Jewish texts, the *Testament of Abraham* characterizes the reckless human Abraham as a foil to a divinely patient God.

This characterization of Abraham, however, has a parallel in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells a parable about a man called Lazarus and a wealthy man:

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the

²⁴ *Jub.* 17:17-18 lists seven tests: "the Lord knew that Abraham was faithful in every affliction which he had told him, for he had tested him with regard to [leaving his] country, and with famine [in Canaan], and had tested hi with the wealth of kings, and had tested him again when she was taken forcibly, and with circumcision; and He had tested him through Ishmael and Hagar, his maid-servant, when he sent them away." *Jub.* 19.8, although it does not list them, gives ten total tests including the binding of Isaac.

tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (NRSV)

Interestingly, the figure of Abraham here is similar to the one depicted in the first part of *Testament of Abraham*: he appears to be in a position to pass judgment on certain people, or at least to offer relief to those in the torments of Hell. Luke’s Abraham is also not interested in mercy. Rather than trying to send the rich man’s family a warning about what befalls the greedy after death, Abraham remains steadfast in his view that anyone should be able to find the path to heaven through the writings of Moses and the Prophets. Both texts also share the idea that those who suffer while on earth are exempt from suffering in the afterlife, as Abraham reminds the rich man: “remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish” (16:25). As in the *Testament of Abraham*, the patriarch is here portrayed as neither patient nor merciful but as judgmental.

4. *Conclusions: Implications for Divine Judgment*

On the face of it, the *Testament of Abraham* presents two models of judgment. First, we see human judgment, imperfect at best, even when carried out by the most pious, patient, and righteous Abraham. Abraham’s rush to judgment is viewed negatively by his guide, Michael, and by God, who puts a stop to his activities. Second, there is the divine model of judgment, which is elaborate in its bureaucracy, with multiple angels taking on specific roles to ensure the same treatment of each soul that enters the afterlife. This divine model has parallels in both Jewish literature that predates the *Testament of Abraham*, and with earlier Egyptian texts and traditions,

particularly concerning the weighing of souls.²⁵ It is surprising, perhaps, that a soul's entry into Paradise or its punishment seems to have no relation to their religious affiliation and is rather determined by whether their deeds (rather than their beliefs) are righteous. Abraham's judgment, though deemed by God to be inappropriate, likewise relies on actions rather than affiliation; Abraham's fault is that he relies only on one action rather than the actions of a person's entire life; while God states that Abraham lacks compassion, what he really lacks is the full picture.

This divine model of justice is not as specific about punishment for sin as Abraham is in his pronouncements. Where Abraham specifically calls for the destruction of sinners by wild beasts, or fire, or pits in the earth, the angels send souls through gates with much vaguer threats. The imprecise nature of the divine punishments might allow the imagination of the reader to conjure up even worse fates than those that Abraham devised. However, this too is unclear, as God states that those who suffer on earth (and therefore suffer only the worst that mortals can conceive) are not subjected to further punishment in the afterlife. Thus, whatever Abraham subjected his victims to while he judged them is considered by God to be ample retribution for whatever their additional sins might have been.

The apparent contrast set up by the text between human judgment and divine is therefore complicated by the idea of intercession. The divine courts, for all their careful precision, can likewise be altered. While God curtails Abraham's initial judgments, seemingly out of mercy and in order to assure the souls a fair trial, God's judgments are affected at times by Abraham's intercession. When one soul has an even number of sins and righteous deeds, Abraham's prayers alter the regular course of divine judgment; the soul's balance is tipped to righteousness not because of God's inherent mercy but because of Abraham's. And when Abraham pleads with God to undo his hasty punishments of chapter 10, God states that those souls were punished in judgment for a period of time, but that after God has "heeded" his voice, those souls are restored. Human action therefore impacts divine mercy.

Human judgment is likewise complex. While Abraham, the most righteous of the patriarchs, seems incapable, at least initially, of meting out justice, other mortals, namely Adam and Abel,

²⁵ Nickelsburg, "Eschatology," 31-34.

are well-suited to their roles in the divine court. Punishments themselves are equally problematic; the reader recoils from the idea of immediate and violent punishments for sinners, such as those doled out by Abraham, and yet Abraham's punishments are left unchallenged by God until Abraham prays to him in repentance.

These contradictions, while perhaps frustrating to the scholar seeking to offer a definitive answer about what this text imagines justice to be, actually offer a much more interesting scenario, which is the unpredictability of justice. While intercessory prayer is present elsewhere in early Jewish literature, this is possibly the earliest text that portrays it as being effective after death.²⁶ As such, the *Testament of Abraham's* comments on heavenly judgement illustrate the capriciousness of violence in the earthly realm, where one might be struck down at any moment by a fellow human in a moment of sin. At the same time, though, the text challenges the notion that God's judgment is necessarily absolute; his decisions can also be affected and altered by the prayers of a human being, at least until the final judgement at the *parousia* (*Test. Abr.* 13.3-4).

The comic aspect of much of this text breaks down the barrier between ordinary, sinful humans and righteous father Abraham. Abraham's foibles, presented in a humorous tone in a context of parody, are a non-threatening way of reducing the great patriarch Abraham to a more human scale, one potentially attainable (and thus understandable) by ordinary people. Abraham makes mistakes, lacks patience at times, disobeys God, and sins. But this does not alienate him from God entirely – Abraham's first prayer, after all, is answered before he repents of his capricious judgments. Thus, as much as this text ridicules the idea of human beings carrying out judgment for sin on earth, the anticipated divine judgment is likewise challenged and brought down to a human level.

In sum, the universalizing criteria for judgment in the *Testament of Abraham* reflects a non-sectarian context in which religious identity is not a factor in determining a soul's afterlife

²⁶ *Ass. Mos.* 11.17 and 12.6, *Ps-Philo*, *LAB* 33.5, *2 En* 53.1, and *4 Ezra* 7:102-15; cf. Sanders, "Testament of Abraham," 891. J.A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 449, notes that the reference to prayer in *2 Macc* 12:43-45 refers to intercession on behalf of the living community implicated in the sin and not the sins of the dead.

experience. Rather individual deeds represent the most important component in divine evaluation of righteousness. But this universalising tendency, in conjunction with the humour which is foundational to the narrative as a whole, extends beyond religious identity and into ontology. The criteria that God uses to criticise Abraham's rush to judgment – Abraham's lack of mercy – also implicates God, when in the end Abraham, as he does in Genesis 18, is able to cajole God to greater mercy in judgment. This levelling therefore emerges not only from the generic considerations of parody but also from biblical understandings of God's relationship with Abraham. The malleability of judgment presented in the *Testament of Abraham* suggests not only a certain attainability for those who strive for righteousness, but also – because Abraham introduces an aspect of mercy into God's appraisal of souls – includes humanity in heavenly justice. Human engagement is required in order for divine justice to properly function. The reciprocal relationship between divine mercy and human compassion constructs an obligation for human beings not only to perform good deeds but also to demonstrate divine mercy on earth.