

## Jewish Intertextuality on the Early Life of Abraham in Alphonso X's *General estoria*

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Medieval western universal historiography originated from the biblical text. Due to its foundation as a text written by divine inspiration, the Bible became a point of reference for historical chronicles, providing them with a structural and chronological framework. With the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, there began an extensive tradition of historical accounts of humanity, starting with the translation of the Vulgate into vernacular languages. The *General estoria* [GE] by Alphonso X of Castile (1212-1284) constitutes the principal compilation in this area.<sup>1</sup> The work was initiated in 1274 in the monarch's scriptorium and conceived with an encyclopedic function based on two main objectives: to create a world history modeled upon the Bible in order to emphasize its Christian universalism, and to grant the monarch the role of *rex magister* of his people (Lida de Malkiel, 111).<sup>2</sup> To achieve these objectives, the editors of the text utilized the annals technique and the "explanatio," with the intention of interweaving the sacred text with other narrative sources from the classical tradition. Secondly, the publication of the GE in Castilian, a language that had previously been used only in the genres of the epic and short stories, allowed the work to reach a wider audience and strengthened the cohesion between the king and his subjects (Bautista, 94; Niederehe, 431). In addition to the Vulgate, the GE served as an historiographical guide for other texts, principally the *Historia Scholastica* by Peter Comestor (1100-1178). Nevertheless, this did not prevent the enrichment of the work with other texts, primarily Flavius Josephus, classical authors, Church Fathers, Arabic chronicles, and anonymous stories and legends, indicating the tolerance of the monarch toward the exchange and diffusion of knowledge (Alvar, 37). Within this group of writings is the implicit insertion of a series of midrashic, aggadic, and apocryphal texts of the rabbinical tradition that relate the first years of Abraham in order to explain his role as "chosen" when he is commanded by God to leave Haran and settle in Canaan. In this article, I will examine the narrative parallels between the GE and Hebrew sources used in the profile of this character under the motifs of Abraham the "astronomer," "monotheist," and "iconoclast." This analysis allows for the establishment of a correlation between these uncited works within the compilation that function as *amplificatio* of the infancy and youth of the Patriarch without altering the Christian reading of the text.

Abraham in the Jewish Exegetical tradition: the motifs of "astronomer," "monotheist," and "iconoclast"

The use of alternative external sources was a common practice among both Christian and Jewish biblical scholars to facilitate the exegetical study of the Scriptures. The consultation of Hebrew and apocryphal works in the translation process of biblical stories into the vernacular served to clarify polemic passages. Their function was similar to that of midrashic and aggadic

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Professors Francisco Peña and David Wacks for their advice and thoughtful suggestions on this study.

<sup>2</sup> The text was conceived as a continuation of the *Estoria de España*. It consists of six sections, only the first five of which were completed (Fernández Ordóñez & Armistead 2000, 67). All the citations from the GE come from the edition by Borja Sánchez-Prieto (2009). References from *Historia Scholastica* are from the 2011 digitalized edition by George Stampel (1616). All biblical citations come from the Jewish Study Bible (Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler eds. 2014).

literature used by Hebrew exegetes to creatively interpret the literal message through the use of an explicatory comment or inter-text.<sup>3</sup> One of the most important episodes of Genesis is centered around the character Abraham. The story of the first Patriarch's life is gleaned from just a handful of verses in the Vulgate (Genesis 11:26, 28, 31), beginning at age 75 when he leaves Haran and settles in Canaan by God's calling.<sup>4</sup> Abraham's youth and early manhood, crucial periods when he had apparently come to know the One creator, were objects of scrutiny by early Jewish exegetes due to the lack of information in the biblical account. This led to a rich and varied interpretive tradition to sustain the attributes and qualities that made Abraham stand out from other individuals. In midrashic narrative, Abraham's conversion occurs gradually and at an early age through various stories that portray him under two initial motifs: Abraham the *astronomer* and Abraham the *monotheist*. Astronomy, which serves to foretell his birth, also represents the means through which he will discover monotheism (Jones, 72). Two stories that reflect this tradition are the *Maaseh Avraham* [*Story of Abraham*] and *Sefer Hayashar* [*Book of Jasher*]. The first one, an anonymous late medieval midrashic work on the life of Abraham, relates how the astronomers of King Nimrod, after studying a star in the firmament, predict the future dethronement of the monarch by a young man who will be born within his kingdom.<sup>5</sup> As a result of this momentous prediction, Abraham's mother, who was already pregnant at the time, takes refuge in a cave. After giving birth to Abraham, she abandons him while he is nourished by the angel Gabriel with milk for ten days.<sup>6</sup> The midrashic work *Sefer Hayashar* [*Book of Jasher*], dated in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, narrates a similar version of the story that takes place on the same night of Abraham's birth.<sup>7</sup> Nimrod, after being advised by his astrologers that the appearance of

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<sup>3</sup> *Midrash* (interpretation) and *aggadah* (narration) refer to the two types of rabbinic literary activity. The former represents ancient rabbinic interpretation of Scripture while *aggadic* literature is focused on legendary and non-legal strata of the biblical texts in the form of parables, legends, humor, and small talk (Goldin, 509-515).

<sup>4</sup> The first mention of Abraham, under the name of Abram, appears in Genesis 11:26, at the end of a genealogy that stretches from Shem to Terah. After, verses 27 to 32 describe Abram's family and their experiences in Chaldea: his brothers Nahor and Haran, his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, as well as the lengthy journey undertaken by Terah and his clan from Ur to Chaldea. Chapter 12 begins when God calls upon Abram, ordering him to leave his country [*lekh lekha*], and continues the story with the episodes describing the covenant of the circumcision [*berit milah*] (17: 10); the name changes to Abraham and Sarah (17: 5, 15); the blessing of Ishmael and the promise of the birth of Isaac (17); the announcement of Sodom's destruction (18); the destruction of Sodom (19); the visit to the court of Abimelech (20); the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (21); the binding of Isaac [*akedah*] (22); the death and interment of Sarah [*khayyei Sarah*] (23); the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah (24); and the death of Abraham (25: 7-11).

<sup>5</sup> Written in Arabic and later translated into Hebrew, the purpose of the text aimed to reclaim Abraham as the first monotheist and adversary of all forms of idolatry by drawing material from other literary sources known to Jewish exegetes, including the Torah, the Talmud, the Targumim, classic midrashim, the siddur, and the Qur'an. It was first published in a late midrashic compilation called *Sefer Ben Sira* in Constantinople in 1580 (Mehlman, 4). The narration of the facts in this work maintains parallelisms with the birth stories of the prophets Moses and Christ: the appearance of a star in the firmament and the slaughter of innocents by Pharaoh and Herod, respectively. See Exodus 1:16; and Matthew 2:1-18.

<sup>6</sup> "When her time approached, she left the city in great terror and wandered toward the desert, walking along the edge of a valley, until she happened across a cave. She entered this refuge, and on the next day she was seized with throes, and she gave birth to a son. [...] God sent Gabriel down to give him milk to drink, and the angel made it to flow from the little finger of the baby's right hand, and he sucked at it until he was ten days old" (in Ginzburg, 168-170).

<sup>7</sup> Also known under the titles *Toledot Adam* and *Dibre ha-Yamim be-'Aruk*, the work covers the biblical account from the Creation in Genesis to a summary of the initial Israelite conquest of Canaan (Jones, 75-76). In his endeavors to explain all biblical subjects, the author invented entirely new narratives, interweaving them with certain passages of the Bible, including, for example, an explanation of the murder of Abel by Cain. Written in Italy

the star will announce the end of his kingship by the son of Terah, commands Abraham's death in exchange for monetary compensation. Terah initially accepts the mandate, but instead of obeying it, he gives the monarch the son of a concubine while he hides Abraham, along with his mother and a servant, in a cave for ten years with the hope that Nimrod will eventually forget the entire affair.<sup>8</sup>

Exegetes profiled Abraham from his birth as highly gifted, with the reasoning ability of an adult. For example, the *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* [*Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer*] describes how the young Abraham, after surviving inside a cave for thirteen years, developed full competence in the Hebrew language and the ability to refuse false idols.<sup>9</sup> *Sefer Hayashar* and *Midrah Tanchumah*, in their interpretation of *lekh lekha* (Gen. 12:1), explain the capacity of the young boy, at the astonishing age of 3, to establish his own deductions that lead him to the acceptance of monotheism.<sup>10</sup> In the *Book of Jubilees*, an adolescent Abraham rejects idols and asserts his trust only in God.<sup>11</sup> And *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* reiterates that the wisdom of Abraham is superior to that of the ten previous generations since Noah.<sup>12</sup>

All the magnates of the kingdom and the magicians sought to kill him, and he was hidden under the earth for thirteen years without seeing sun or moon. After thirteen years he went forth from beneath the earth, speaking the holy language; and he despised idols and held in abomination the graven images, and he trusted in the shadow of his Creator. (*Pirque XVI*, 187-88)

Abram knew the Lord from three years old, and he went in the ways of the Lord until the day of his death, as Noah and his son Shem had taught him. (*Sefer Hayashar IX*, 19)

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around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the first printed editions appeared in Naples in 1552 and Venice in 1625 (Jacobs & Ochser ed., XII: 588-89).

<sup>8</sup> "And it was on the night that Abram was born, that all the servants of Terah, and all the wise men of Nimrod, and his conjurors came and ate and drank in the house of Terah, and they rejoiced with him on that night. And when all the wise men and conjurors went out from the house of Terah, they lifted up their eyes toward heaven that night to look at the stars, and they saw, and behold one very large star came from the east and ran in the heavens [...] And they said to each other, "This only betokens the child that has been born to Terah this night, who will grow up and be fruitful, and multiply, and possess all the earth, he and his children for ever, and he and his seed will slay great kings, and inherit their lands." [...] And the king said to Terah, "I have been told that a son was yester night born to thee, and after this manner was observed in the heavens at his birth. And now therefore give me the child, that we may slay him before his evil springs up against us, and I will give thee for his value, thy house full of silver and gold." [...] and Terah he took a child from one of his servants, which his handmaid had born to him that day, and Terah brought the child to the king and received value for him. [...] And took Abram his son secretly, together with his mother and nurse, and he concealed them in a cave, and he brought them their provisions monthly. And the Lord was with Abram in the cave and he grew up, and Abram was in the cave ten years, and the king and his princes, soothsayers and sages, thought that the king had killed Abram" (VIII, 17-19).

<sup>9</sup> The anonymous text, falsely ascribed to the Tannaitic scholar R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, embodies a widely popular midrash during the medieval period among exegetes due to more than two dozen editions of the work, including a Latin version with commentary in 1644 (Friedlander, xiii-xiv).

<sup>10</sup> Homiletical midrash on the Pentateuch ascribed to Tanhuma bar Abba, a 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. aggadist from Palestine. The earliest printed editions were in Constantinople 1522, Venice 1545, and Mantua 1562 (Berman, xii). Citations come from the 1996 translation by Berman.

<sup>11</sup> Dated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. and considered an example of the "Rewritten Bible" literary genre, it describes an account of the biblical history from Genesis through the middle of Exodus. Ascribed to an unknown author, the work is divided into periods or 'Jubilees' of 49 years. The only complete version of the book is preserved in Ethiopian, although large fragments in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and Syriac remain (Segal, 3-41). I refer to the 1983-85 edition by James Charlesworth in two volumes.

<sup>12</sup> Made of 29 chapters ascribed to Palestinian scholar and rabbi Hoshayah around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E., the work consists of a verse-to-verse homiletic and ethical interpretation of Genesis. The compilation took place sometime after the redaction of the Jerusalem Talmud (Freedman and Maurice, 29).

When he was only a child of three, he recognized his Creator, as it is said: *Because Abraham hearkened to my voice* (Gen. 26: 5). (*Midrash Tanhumah* 3: 3)

And he was two weeks of years old [= 14 years]. And he separated from his father so that he might not worship the idols with him. And he began to pray to the Creator of all so that he might save him from the straying of the sons of men. (*Book of Jubilees* II, 11:17)

Wisdom maketh a wise man stronger than ten rulers (Eccl. VII, 19) this refers to Abraham, [whom wisdom made stronger] than the ten generations from Noah to Abraham. (*Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* xxxix, 4)

Chaldea was renowned in antiquity as the home of astrology and astronomy in addition to being Abraham's place of birth (Kugel, 249). It is probable that the exegetes naturally assumed Abraham's competence in the study of the stars, which would permit him to recognize the existence of monotheism. Hellenistic Jewish writings *On Abraham* by Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E. – 40 C.E.) and *Jewish Antiquities* by Flavius Josephus (37 C.E.-100 C.E.) portrayed a Greek idealization of Abraham as an expert astronomer and wise thinker focused on philosophical contemplation. This *vita contemplativa* results in the discovery of monotheism through the observation of the stars:

[Abraham] opening the soul's eye as though after profound sleep and beginning to see the pure beam instead of the deep darkness, he followed the ray and discerned what he had not beheld before, a charioteer and pilot presiding over the world and directing in safety his own work. (*On Abraham* VI, 41)

He began to have more lofty conceptions of virtue than the rest of mankind and determined to reform and change the ideas universally current concerning God. [...] He inferred from the changes to which land and sea are subject, from the course of sun and moon, and from all the celestial phenomena. (*Jewish Antiquities* I, VII: 1)

According to these exegetical interpretations, Abraham's adult intelligence and attention to observation led him to acquire strong knowledge in astronomy. This science seems to be the initial channel through which Abraham encounters monotheism, later abandoning this science and devoting himself to the existence of the One creator, even before his calling to leave for Canaan.<sup>13</sup>

In order to emphasize the role of Abraham as the first monotheist, the ancient exegetes exploited the worship of other gods, idols, and human creations, taking him and his father Terah as main characters of the stories. While Terah is depicted as an idol worshiper and seller of these idols, Abraham is portrayed as an *iconoclast*. For example, in the *Book of Jubilees*, the future Patriarch unsuccessfully attempts to convince his father to abandon his idolizing practices.<sup>14</sup> Other works conduct an in-depth study of the Abraham *iconoclast* by means of the popular aggadic tale of the "idol shop." *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit*, *Sefer Hayashar*, and the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Abraham* introduce the story of the "idol shop" in its many variations, humorously casting Abraham as destroyer of the wooden idols that his own father fabricates and idolizes. In

<sup>13</sup> "The Lord said to Abram, "-Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." [...] Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons that they had acquired in Haran; and they set out for the land of Canaan" (Gen 12: 1-5).

<sup>14</sup> Abram spoke to Terah, his father, saying: "-What help or advantage do we have from these idols before which you worship and bow down? Because there is not any spirit in them, for they are mute, and they are the misleading of the heart. Do not worship them. Worship the God of heaven"" (12: 1-5).

the versions of *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* and *Sefer Hayashar*, Abraham breaks the figures with a cane, afterwards placing it in the hands of the largest idol. When his father returns and asks what happened, to Terah's incredulity, Abraham responds that the largest idol was responsible for the destruction of the other figures. The *Apocalypse of Abraham* presents a more satirical episode, in which Abraham casts the idols Marumath and Barisat, venerated by Terah, into the fire, saying that the idols threw themselves into the fire to heat his father's food:<sup>15</sup>

He took a stick, broke them, and put the stick in the hand of the largest. When his father returned he demanded, “-What have you done to them? I cannot conceal it from you,” he rejoined. [Abraham responded] “-A woman came with a plateful of fine meal [for the idols] and requested me to offer It to them. One claimed, “-I must eat first,” while another claimed, “-I must eat first.” Thereupon the largest arose, took the stick, and broke them.” (*Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* XXXVIII, 13)

And when Abram saw all these things his anger was kindled against his father, and he hastened and took a hatchet in his hand, and came unto the chamber of the gods, and he broke all his father's gods. And when he had done breaking the images, he placed the hatchet in the hand of the great god which was there before them, and he went out. And Terah, having heard the noise of the hatchet in the room of images, ran to the room to the images, and he met Abram going out; and he said to him, “-What is this work you have done to my gods?” And Abram answered and said, “-I brought savory meat before them, and when I came nigh to them with the meat that they might eat, they all at once stretched forth their hands to eat before the great one had put forth his hand to eat. And the large one saw their works that they did before him, and his anger was violently kindled against them, and he went and took the hatchet that was in the house and came to them and broke them all.” (*Sefer Hayashar* xi: 33-40)

And I said to him: “-Father Terah, do not bless Marumath your god, do not praise him! Praise rather Barisat, your god, because as though loving you, he threw himself into the fire in order to cook your food” And he said to me: “-Then, where is he now?” [And I said:] “He has burned in the fierceness of the fire and become dust.” And he said: “Great is the power of Barisat! I will make another today, and tomorrow he will prepare my food.” (*Apocalypse of Abraham*, in Charlesworth I: 691)

The exegetes interpreted Abraham's defense of monotheism as a threat to his life and those of his family by the peoples of Chaldea (Kugel, 251). To reinforce the role of the Patriarch as the first missionary and defender of monotheism, we find several midrashic stories inserted about Abraham being rescued from the fire by God. As Kugel suggests, the word *ur* in Hebrew had several meanings including “fire” and “flame,” and interpreters associated the term with Gen. 15:7 to find a hidden meaning “about some fire or burning that had taken place in Ur and from which God had in fact saved Abraham” (252).<sup>16</sup> *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* and Philo's *Biblical Antiquities* describe similar episodes in which Abraham's monotheistic faith saves him from the threats of the Chaldeans by divine intervention, setting the tone and the reasons as to why the family abandoned Chaldea for Haran:<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The text survives only in Old Slavonic translations from previous Hebrew or Greek versions. It is preserved in six manuscripts and was composed at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. The work starts with Abraham's rejection of idolatry and continues with his discussions about the origin of evil and visions of revelatory apocalyptic events, including the destruction of the Temple, the arrival of the Messiah, and the gathering of Israel in the Promised Land (Charlesworth I, 681-688).

<sup>16</sup> “I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans.”

<sup>17</sup> Initially ascribed to Philo of Alexandria, the text is a version of the biblical account from Adam to the death of Saul. It was probably written originally in Hebrew in the second half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. and subsequently translated into Greek and from Greek into Latin. The work includes additional stories, explanatory passages, and interpretations very similar to those found in rabbinical writings. Citations of the text come from the translation by Harrington in Charlesworth's edition, vol. 2 as quoted in the bibliography. *Book of Jubilees* retells how Abraham

When Abram descended into the fiery furnace and was saved, he [Nimrod] asked him, “-Of whose belief are you?” “-Of Abram’s,” he replied. Thereupon he seized and cast him into the fire; his innards were scorched, and he died in his father’s presence. Hence it is written, “and Haran died in the presence of his father Terah.” (*Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* 38: 13)

Abraham believed in me and was not led astray with them. And I rescued him from the flame and took him and brought him over all the land of Canaan and said to him in a vision, “*To your seed I will give this land.*” (*Biblical Antiquities*, in Charlesworth II, 332-333)

The motifs of the Abraham “astronomer,” “monotheist,” and “iconoclast” were implemented through intertwined stories to narrate a linear explanation of the most obscure biblical passages about the life of the Patriarch. Abraham’s birth foretold, his rejection of idolatry, learning of monotheism through astronomy, missionary acts, and his salvation from the fire through divine intervention made Abraham the best candidate to establish a covenant with God, resolving the abrupt beginning of Gen. 12.

The motifs of Abraham the “astronomer,” “monotheist,” and “iconoclast” in the *General estoria*

The *GE* was redacted inside the alphonsoine scriptorium by a large group of *trasladadores* [translators], *ayuntadores* [compilers], and *capituladores* [editors] under the supervision of Alphonso X (Fernández Ordóñez, 117). As Diego Catalán extensively examined, this diverse cluster of individuals was responsible for dividing the text into sections and for titling each chapter.<sup>18</sup> However, despite the vast number of participants involved in the project, the king’s authorial presence seems to stand out alone throughout the entire work (Márquez Villanueva, 125).<sup>19</sup> For example, the use of the first person plural *nós* seems to be employed in a heterogenic manner, alluding sometimes to both the king himself and his collaborators but maintaining their names in anonymity (Sánchez-Prieto Borja, xli). Eckman suggests that the use of expressions such as *nuestros sabios* [our wise men] and *nuestros latinos* [our Latin writers] seems only to denote a linguistic and doctrinal meaning referring to Christian exegetical authorities and Latin sources as opposed to other phrases such as *dizen* [they say] or *unos sabios* [some wise men] that would imply references to writings of authors of Jewish, Arabic, and gentile backgrounds (2016, 776). To this regard, Eckman affirms that despite the fact that some of the sources cited are drawn from non-Christian texts, the compilers “are clear on their own Christian affiliation” and

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decides to burn the figures of the idols, while his brother Haran dies in the fire attempting to save them (12: 12-14). The premature death of Haran, which serves as an explanatory note to Gen. 11:28, results in Terah’s decision to abandon Ur with the entire family and take up residence in Haran: “Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of the Chaldeans. [...] Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there.”

<sup>18</sup> “El taller historiográfico alfonsí. Métodos y problemas en el trabajo compilatorio,” In *Romania* 89 (1963): 354-375.

<sup>19</sup> “Onde por todas estas cosas yo don Alfonso [...], después que oue fecho ayuntar muchos escriptos e muchas estorias de los fechos antiguos, escogí d’ellos los más uerdaderos e los mejores que ý sope, e fiz ende fazer este libro, e mandé ý poner todos los fechos sennalados tan bien de las estorias de la Biblia, como de las otras grandes cosas que acahesçieron por el mundo, desde que fue començado fasta’l nuestro tiempo” (I, prologue: 5-6) [For all these reasons I, don Alphonso, [...], after gathering together many writings and stories about ancient facts, chose the truest and best of these to my knowledge, and I ordered that this book be written, including important events from biblical stories as well as from other episodes that occurred throughout the world, from its beginning until our times].

the use of this literary exegetical tradition reinforces the Christian authority of the work (2016, 777). While we are uncertain of the religious background of these compilers, it is very probable that they included experts in Jewish exegesis (Sánchez-Prieto Borja 2009, xciv). This fact is unsurprising given the team members' superior multilingual knowledge. Hebrew had not lost its role as the *lashon kodesh* [sacred tongue] and teaching language of the Hebrew religion; Arabic was utilized as a language of cultural transmission from the time of the Muslim conquest of the Peninsula, and Castilian was the everyday language of communication in the *aljamas* [Jewish quarters] (Castro 1948, 474).<sup>20</sup> Scientific, astronomical, and mathematical works of the alphonine scriptorium were translated from the original Hebrew or Arabic to a corrupted Castilian by Jewish translators, and later translated to Latin by Christian collaborators (Rubio Tovar, 19; Bel Bravo, 147). Nevertheless, while we know the names of the principal Hebrew collaborators in these works, little is known about the Jewish editors involved in the writing of the *GE*.<sup>21</sup> I argue the possibility of an active participation by a group of Jewish compilers and translators in this project based on the following aspects: first, their competence in both Hebrew and Romance languages allowed them to gain access to Jewish exegetical texts and translate them to Castilian; second, the additional explanatory insertions, drawn from midrashic and apocryphal writings, helped fill any narrative gaps in the Vulgate and maintain a lineal sequence in the historiographical work; and finally, the omission of the titles of these works and the names of their authors reinforced an orthodox reading of the biblical text without encouraging a heterodox interpretation that deviated from its Christian *authoritas*.

Book IV of the *GE* employs a lineal and gradual narration style to relate the first years of Abraham's life, from his birth to his relocation to Haran along with his family:

1. The generations of Abraham's family (chapters III-V).
2. The premonition through the sighting of a star that foretells the birth of Abraham (chapter VI).
3. Nimrod's order to assassinate male children (chapter VII).
4. The birth of Abraham, adultlike abilities at an early age, knowledge of astronomy, and acceptance of monotheism (chapters VIII y IX).
5. The episode in the idol shop (chapters X-XI).
6. Abraham's salvation from the fire (chapter XV).

The insertion of these stories results in an *amplificatio* of this character under the motifs of "astronomer," "monotheist," and "iconoclast," sharing intertextual parallels to those of the midrashic and apocryphal writings mentioned. The *GE* begins with the same narrative technique as the Vulgate and the *Historia Scholastica*, enumerating the generations before Abraham until

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<sup>20</sup> One example is the translation of the *Esther megillah* [Book of Esther], recited in Purim for the members of the *aljama* of Zaragoza due to their lack of competence in Hebrew (Hershman, 19-20). Although Castilian translations of religious texts such as the Qur'an, Talmud, or the Cabalistic compendium *Sefer ha-Zohar* or *Libro de Esplendor* [Book of Splendor], commissioned by Alphonso X, have not been preserved, some of them are mentioned in contemporary texts of the period, as in the prologue of the *Libro de la caza* [Book of hunting] by Don Juan Manuel, Alphonso's nephew: "otrozi fizo trasladar toda la ley de los judíos, et aun el su Talmud et otras sciencias que han los judíos muy escondidas, á que llaman Cábala" (1981, 525). [In addition, he ordered to translate all the laws of the Jewish people, and their Talmud and other secret sciences Jews have and refer to Kabbalah].

<sup>21</sup> On the collaboration of Jews in the alphonine *corpus*, see the works by Gil (1974), Roth (1985, 1990), G. Menéndez Pidal (1951), and Martin (2002).

the Patriarch is called upon by God.<sup>22</sup> However, Comestor does not provide any details about the infancy of the protagonist, which coincides with the biblical text.<sup>23</sup> Faced with this gap in the content of the story, the alphonsine copyists inserted various “fechos” [stories] from sources such as the Church Fathers, classical authors, Arabic sources, and *other wise men*:

Adelante en el dozeno capítulo cuenta otrossí Moisés de cómo mandó Nuestro Señor Dios a Abraham sallir d’aquella tierra. Mas ante d’aquello queremosvos contar sobre los fechos de Tare e de sos fijos en Caldea e en Mesopotamia otras razones que fallamos de los santos padres e de otros sabios e de arávigos que son dichos sobresto en sos esponimientos. (I, IV: 158)

[Afterwards in the twelfth chapter, Moses recounts how the Lord our God ordered Abraham to leave that land. But before this, we would like to tell you the stories of Terah and his sons in Chaldea and Meopotamia, as well as other stories that we find in the texts of the Church Fathers, and of other wise men, and of Arab authors that speak of this in their works.]

The Arabic chronicle *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik* (*Libro de los caminos y de los reinos*) [*Book of the Itineraries and Kingdoms*] by Abū ‘Ubayd al-Bakrī (b. 1014) served as the principal source the alphonsine editors used to relate the foretelling of the birth of Abraham by means of a star, the future dethronement of Nimrod, and the decree to assassinate all recently born male children:<sup>24</sup>

E cuenta aquel Abul Ubeyt en aquel capítulo que al tiempo en que Abraham ovo de nacer que pareció en el cielo una estrella muy luzia, como nacen las estrellas a que llaman cometas [...] e [Nimrod] envió por los estrelleros del regno e preguntóles que aquella estrella nueva qué mostrava. [...] Dixoren ellos estonces: “-Pues entendemos nós e vemos por aquella estrella que en el tu tiempo nascrá omne de tales fechos e de tal poder que por él e por el su consejo e los sos fechos e por los d’aquellos que d’él vernán serás perdido tú e tu regno, e destroidos e desfechos los tus dioses que tú aoras.” E [Nimrod] mandó a sos privados que avié por sus villas e sos alfozes que matasen d’allí adelante cuantos niños naciessen varones por todos sus regnos. (I, VI: 161-62; VII, 163)

[And Abul Ubeyt says in this chapter that when Abraham was born, there appeared in the sky a shining star, just as the stars are born that they call comets [...] and [Nimrod] called upon the star readers of the kingdom and asked them what that star meant. [...] And they told him: “-We understand and see by that star that during your life a man of great works and power will be born, and to him you will lose your kingdom and your person, and the gods that you now idolize will be destroyed.” And [Nimrod] ordered his ministers in his towns and villages to kill all the male children that were born throughout his realm.]

<sup>22</sup> The *Historia Scholastica* is organized in a narrative format similar to that of the Bible, where each individual history corresponds to a biblical book or a collection of books (Clark, 40). The work became “the single most important medium through which a popular Bible took shape,” leading to multiple translations in vernacular languages throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries (Morey, 6).

<sup>23</sup> “Thare cum esset septuaginta annorum genuit Abram, Nachor, et Aran, et est ordo praeposterus. Aran enim primogenitus, et Abram ultimus fuit, et forte non genuit eos cum esset hujus temporis, sed tunc coepit generare, et suis temporibus, eos genuit, scilicet per diversa tempora, ita quod jam centum viginti annorum erat cum genuit Abram, qui fuit ultimus. [...] Dixit autem Dominus ad Abram: Egredere de terra tua, etc. (Gen. XII)” (40; 42).

<sup>24</sup> Composed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and preserved in a fragmented form, it pertains to a group of texts of Muslim descriptive geography of great popularity which also included general historical and cultural information (Fernández Ordóñez, 173). The work is mentioned throughout the alphonsine text under the titles *Libro de los caminos et de los regnos* [*Book of the Itineraries and Kingdoms*] and *Estoria de Egipto* [*Story of Egypt*], and it serves as a principal source to complete the biblical history of the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. The conserved fragments are geographical references from Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Northern Africa, Sudan and the Iberian Peninsula drawn from Greek and Arabic geographers and astronomers like Mas‘ūdī, Ibn Rustah and al-Rāzī (Vidal Beltrán, 9).



Referring once again to al-Bakrī, the alphonstine text illustrates the motifs of Abraham the “astronomer” and “monotheist” in a series of chronological events. First, by describing how Terah hides his wife in a cave to save her from Nimrod, the birth of Abraham there, his hidden life in that cave for several years, the development of adultlike abilities at an early age, his interest in astronomy, and his rejection of his father’s polytheistic practices:

E Tare cuando lo sopo vino a furto a la cibdat, e tomóla a escuso, e levóla a una aldea que yazié en Caldea [...] e avié allí un caño muy grande como cueva, [...] e ascondióla allí. E allí diz que nació Abraham en aquella cueva. E creció luego, e fizose formudo. Ca assí como dize Abul Ubeyt más creció Abraham en una semana que otro moço non suele crecer en un mes. [...] E desque fue Abraham moço grandezuello ya tollió el rey el decreto que avié dado de la muerte de los niños. E asseguróse Tare, e fue estonces cuando el sol puesto sacó a su muger e su fijo. E cuando fueron fuera de la cueva cató Tare al cielo e vió la estrella de Júpiter estar sobre la cabeça de Abraham [...] e començó de luego a leer e aprender otrossí de luego el saber de las estrellas, e salió en sus palabras e en sos fechos muy amigo de Dios e su siervo, e començó de luego a dezir que non eran nada los ídolos si non locura e vanidad. E predigava que uno era el Dios que criara todas las cosas del mundo. (I, VII: 163-64)

[And when Terah found out, he arrived in secret to the city, took his wife and brought her to a village in Chaldea [...] and there was a very large tunnel like a cave, and he hid her there. And there it is said [al-Bakrī] that Abraham was born, in that cave. And Abraham grew and became strong. And as Abul Ubeyt says, Abraham grew more in one week than any other young boy could grow in a month [...] And when he was a young man, the king repealed the decree that declared death to young boys. So Terah, after making sure, took his wife and his son from the cave at sunset [...] [Abraham] began to read and learn about the wisdom of the stars as well, and showed himself in his acts a true friend and servant of God, and he began to say that the gods had no value and that they were merely a product of madness and vanity. And he preached that there is only one God, creator of all the things of the world.]

Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* is also employed as a reference to enhance the role of astronomy, for which reason Abraham argues the function of the stars over the earth as a fact that is not rational nor subject to any law, but rather subordinate to one single creative force:

Cuenta Josefo en el ochavo capítulo del primero libro de la estoria de la Antigüedad de los judíos palabras ya quanto oscuras d’esta razón de Abraham [...]. Fue por sí omne muy entendido en todas cosas e sabio en todas aquellas que oyera e aprendiera de los otros sabios. [...] E entendiélo por las ciencias del cuadrivio, dond era él muy grand señor [...] Ca él fue el primero que se atrevió a dezir ante que todos que uno era el Dios que criara todas las cosas [...] e diz que esto sabié Abraham e judgava por la natura de la tierra e de la mar, que mostrava que obedecién a Dios, e otrossí por aquellas cosas que contecen en el sol e en la luna muchas vezes, e sobre todo por aquellas que parecen en el cielo e son siempre sobre todas las otras. (I, VIII, 165)

[Josephus tells in the eighth chapter of the first book of the history of Antiquity of the Jewish people somewhat obscure words on this subject of Abraham [...] He was a highly intelligent man who thought for himself in all things and in everything he learned and heard from other wise men [...] And he understood this through the sciences of the quadrivium, of which he was a great master, and for this reason [Josephus] says that he was superior to the rest due to the richness of virtue and knowledge he possessed. He was the first who dared to say that one was the God who created all things [...] and [Josephus] says that Abraham knew this and judged by the nature of the earth and the sea, which demonstrated how to obey God, and the same with all the other events that happen around the sun and in the moon, and for all of the others that appear in the sky and are always above the rest.]

Despite the fact that the sources by al-Bakrī and Josephus are the only ones cited, we can infer the possibility that other non-quoted writings were utilized as well. Fernández-Ordóñez explains that the lack of critical edition of the conserved fragments and of complete translations of al-

Bakrī's work makes it difficult to verify precisely how much information from this work served as source material for the *GE* (175). The parallelism that this episode mirrors from the Midrash and apocryphal versions analyzed and the use of the expression *otros sabios* in reference to non-Christian texts would permit the establishment of a possible intertextual influence from this rabbinic material. The most interesting case is the motif of Abraham the "iconoclast" by means of a specific version of the episode of the "idol shop." The alphonsine account shares a close parallel to that of the versions mentioned in the midrashic and apocryphal writings of *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit*, *Sefer Hayashar*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. In contrast to previous episodes, no specific sources or authors are mentioned, and the expression *dizen* is instead employed in reference to unknown authors, who describe Terah as a follower of God, but also as a man who adopted polytheistic customs working as a manufacturer and vendor of idols in order to blend himself in with the inhabitants' traditions of Chaldea:

Tare, padre de Abraham, maguer que era bueno e uno de los padres de la buena liña, componiés con los de la tierra ó morava, e en las más cosas fazié como veyé fazer a ellos. [...] Però comoquier que él en su voluntad creyé un Dios, con vergüença de sos cibdadanos tenié ídolos en su casa. [...] E aun *dizen* [emphasis mine] que era Tare entallador d'ellos, e que fazié él aquellas imágenes, e que las vendié [...] E estaban todas aquellas imágenes en una cámara en casa de Tare, e avié y imágenes de los elementos e imágenes de los planetas e d'aquellos a quien los gentiles llamavan dioses. (I, IX, 167)

[Terah, father of Abraham, although he was just and one of the fathers of good lineage, adapted to be like those of the place where he lived, and did the same things he saw them do. [...] But although he voluntarily believed in God, with shame of his fellow citizens he kept idols in his house [...] And still **they say** [emphasis mine] that Terah was a manufacturer of idols, that he made such images, and sold them [...] And all of those idols were in a room in Terah's house, and there he had images of the planets and of those whom the gentiles called gods.]

The presentation of the episode introduces an explanatory chapter from the work *Methamorphoses* by Ovid. The text enumerates a series of images linked with polytheism in antiquity, as a way of rejecting said practice on the part of the copyists.<sup>25</sup> The last mention of these figures is dedicated to Vulcan, god of fire, idolized by the inhabitants of the region of Chaldea, and of whom Terah, according to the alphonsine copyists, had a figure in his house. After arguing with his father about the sinfulness of polytheism, Abraham destroys almost all the idols in Terah's shop with a hammer, leaving only Vulcan intact, in whose hand he then places the hammer, to later allege that this figure was responsible for the destruction of the rest:

En casa de Tare estava la imagen de Vulcano fecha a manera de ferrero, e un grand macho en las manos [...] E Abraham contendió todavía con su padre e sos hermanos que se partiessen de razón de ídolos e de sus imágenes, diziéndoles que por qué los fazién e los tenién en casa, pues que pecado era el fecho d'ellos [...] E Abraham entró un día a furto a aquella cámara de su padre, e tomó aquel macho de las manos a Vulcano, e dio por aquellas imágenes, [...] e descorpólas e desfizolas todas, e parólas tales que non eran de veer. E desde lo ovo fecho tornó su macho a la imagen de Vulcano comol tenié d'antes, e a aquella imagen de Vulcano non la tanxo nin le fizo mal ninguno. (I, X, 172-3)

[In Terah's house there was an image of Vulcan portrayed as a blacksmith, with a great hammer in his hands [...] And Abraham still argued with his father and his brothers, urging them to separate themselves from the idols and their images, asking them why they manufactured such idols and kept them at home, saying it was an error to do this [...] And one day, Abraham secretly entered his father's room, took the

<sup>25</sup> This work was the direct source of inspiration for treatises on mythology. In this case, the writers of the *GE* present mythology as a form of disfigured history, enumerating various myths and mythological figures in order to provide a rational and didactic explanation (Salvo García, 204).

hammer from Vulcan's hands, and struck the images, destroying them and breaking them until they could no longer be seen. And after doing this, he placed the hammer in Vulcan's hands, and did not touch or harm that image in any way.]

Faced with an incredulous Terah, Abraham responds that it was Vulcan that destroyed the rest of the images, with the intention that his father reflect and accept the uselessness of the stone and wooden figures that he manufactures and idolizes:

-Padre, si tú a razón te quisieses acoger como varón e padre derecho bien veyés tú aquí quién fizo el daño, ca esta imagen que está sana e su macho en la mano se desabino con estas otras, e barajaron; e estas otras como non tenién arma ninguna con que se defender d'él firiólas él a todas, e crebantólas e parólas cuales veyes que yazen [...] Assí querría yo que vós que esso dezides que entendiéssedes el fecho de los ídolos, cómo son fuste e piedra e tierra, e fechura de las manos de los omnes, e cómo los mandan fazer las yentes a sus talentos e como quieren. (I, X, 174)

[-Father, if you rightly wish to portray yourself as an honest man and father, you clearly saw what happened here and who did the damage, that this image that is here undamaged with his hammer in his hand became the enemy of the rest and confronted them; and as they did not have any weapons with which to defend themselves, he struck all of them down and destroyed them as you see here [...] So I wanted you to understand what you say about the subject of the idols, how they are wood, stone, and earth, created by the hands of man, and how people order them to do their will in their manner and to their liking.]

The story continues with the insertion of the fire episode, depicted in various texts in the rabbinical tradition and absent from the sources by Josephus, Comestor, and the chronicle by al-Bakrī. The alphoncine copyists claim *unos sabios departidos* [some renowned wisemen] as the reference sources of the episode (I, XV: 182). The description, which closely resembles the versions from *Midrash Rabbah Bereishit* and Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, presents a charismatic Abraham, a monotheistic missionary whose popularity caused many Chaldeans and other inhabitants to "ívanse partiendo de los ídolos" [they separated themselves from the idols] (I, XIV: 180). The news of Abraham's success reaches Nimrod, and after discovering that Abraham is the person who was foretold by the stars, Nimrod orders the deaths of Abraham and of his brother by fire. However, while Haran dies in the flames, Abraham miraculously comes out unscathed. The episode serves to explain Terah's decision to abandon Chaldea with his entire family and settle in Haran. Once there, Abraham continues preaching monotheism and gaining recognition by presenting himself as a model to follow, and for this reason, according to interpreters, he is chosen by God:

E [Nimrod] mandó fazer una grand foguera tamaña [...] e mandó tomar por fuerça a Aram e a Abraham e dar con ellos en aquella foguera. E Abraham salió ende en salvo, e Aram cayó de guisa que non pudo ende salir. [...] E tomóse Tare con esta su compañía ordenada como diximos e salió con ellos d'aquella cibdat Ur e de toda Caldea, e passaron el regno de Babiloña, e fuéronse Mesopotamia adelante, e andudieron fasta que llegaron a Arán, que era una cibdat d'aquella. [...] E Abraham, predigando toda vía por la carrera ó les acaecié en las pueblas e allí un Dios e un solo criador de todas las cosas. (I, XV: 182; XVII: 185-86)

[And Nimrod ordered the making of a great bonfire [...] and he ordered that Haran and Abraham be taken by force and thrown into that bonfire. And Abraham came safely out of the fire, and Haran fell and could not get out [...] And Terah took his family as we said, and with them left the city of Ur and all of Chaldea, and they passed through the reign of Babylon and traveled until they arrived in Haran, a city there [...] And Abraham always preached on the way in each village in which they found themselves that there is one God and one creator of all things.]

The copyist's decision to include these arguments serves to build a fluid line of argument around Abraham, similar to that of the stories of the Hebrew exegetes as an explanatory purpose in Gen. 12. Abraham is unique among the peoples of Chaldea; his interest in astronomy becomes the channel to embrace monotheism, reject false idols, and expand his message abroad, leading to a confrontation with the king. This scenario results in Abraham's father's decision, fearing for his family's future, to abandon Chaldea and establish themselves in Haran, which would prepare the way for God to later call upon Abraham.

#### Final Remarks

By way of conclusion, and without discounting the importance of the Latin tradition in this work, we can observe, from a less orthodox perspective, the notorious presence of non-Christian sources employed to describe Abraham's childhood and his conversion to monotheism. While the Vulgate and the *HS* by Comestor serve as a framework to provide the alphon sine text with a narrative form, the copyists did not hesitate to add additional passages to the gaps present in the biblical text about the Patriarch's youth, creating a lineal sequence of related events. The editors of the text make use of sources from the classical tradition, Patristic writings, and Arabic chronicles referred to by means of expressions such as *nuestros sabios* and *nuestros latinos*; meanwhile, unknown or undesirable sources and authors are introduced with the expressions *dizen o unos sabios*. The fact that a work as extensive as the *GE* was not fully supervised by Alphonso X, and that it was redacted by numerous writers, some of Jewish origin and with competence in Hebrew exegesis, could have favored the insertion of a midrashic narrative tradition, foreign to Christian ideology. This material would have been employed to expand the account of the first few years of the Patriarch's life and filling the breach between his childhood and adult life narrated in the biblical text. The profile of Abraham the "astronomer," "monotheist," and "iconoclast" depicted in the midrashic and apocryphal sources analyzed presents an intertextuality with respect to the alphon sine text, being employed to complete the literary gap in reference to Abraham's infancy and youth: the foretelling of his birth by the stars; his first years hidden in a cave; the learning of astronomy that led him to embrace monotheism; the rejection of polytheistic practices in the episode of the "idol shop"; his role as a monotheistic missionary, and his salvation from the fire by divine intervention, forcing the family to abandon their home and take up residence in Haran. Although references to these sources may be omitted from the text, they seem to provide a place for this voice or these voices of copyists who were familiar with the rabbinical tradition and stories only recognizable to Hebrew audiences and readers. The result is an original narration about one of the most important characters in the Old Testament, enriching the story with episodes from non-Christian sources, and opening a new space in defense of its heterodoxy.

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