

THE *AQEDAH* (GENESIS 22): WHAT IS THE AUTHOR DOING WITH WHAT HE IS SAYING?

ABRAHAM KURUVILLA*

For millennia, Bible scholars, both Jewish and Christian, have exerted themselves at the task of interpreting Genesis 22, the *Aqedah*.¹ This article will revisit these interpretations and then proceed to answer the question: What was the author *doing* with what he was *saying* in Genesis 22? The goal here is to provide the preacher with an interpretation of the account that may be fruitfully employed in the pulpit to change lives in the pews for the glory of God.

I. TRADITIONAL VIEWS

The perplexities of this narrative are many. Elie Wiesel, the holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize-winning author, called this story “terrifying in content.”² How could God test/tempt someone in so gruesome a fashion, seemingly contradicting his own promises? How could Abraham agree to this gory transaction? What did Sarah—and for that matter, Isaac—think about the whole deal? And, of course, the question of how Christ fits into the scheme has kept Christian interpreters busy.

1. *God’s joke?* The account is so unimaginable as it stands that some have thought God must have been joking! Woody Allen thinks it happened this way³:

And Abraham awoke in the middle of the night and said to his only son, Isaac, “I have had a dream where the voice of the Lord sayeth that I must sacrifice my only son, so put your pants on.”

And Isaac trembled and said, “So what did you say? I mean when He brought this whole thing up?”

“What am I going to say?” Abraham said. “I’m standing there at two a.m. in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue? ...

And Sarah, who heard Abraham’s plan, grew vexed and said, “How doth thou know it was the Lord and not, say, thy friend who loveth practical jokes ...?”

And Abraham answered, “Because ... [i]t was a deep, resonant voice, well-modulated, and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that.”

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* Abraham Kuruvilla is associate professor of pastoral ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, 3909 Swiss Avenue, Dallas, TX 75204.

¹ *Aqedah* comes from **קָבַע**, “bind” (Gen 22:9)—a *hapax legomenon*.

² Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God* (New York: Random House, 1976) 69.

³ “The Scrolls,” in *The Insanity Defense: The Complete Prose* (New York: Random House, 2007) 137–38.

And so he took Isaac to a certain place and prepared to sacrifice him, but at the last minute the Lord stayed Abraham's hand and said, "How could thou doest such a thing?"

And Abraham said, "But thou said—"

"Never mind what I said," the Lord spake. "Doth thou listen to every crazy idea that comes thy way?"

And Abraham grew ashamed. "Er—not really . . . no."

"I jokingly suggest thou sacrifice Isaac and thou immediately runs out to do it."

And Abraham fell to his knees. "See, I never know when you're kidding."

And the Lord thundered, "No sense of humor. I can't believe it."

"But doth this not prove I love thee, that I was willing to donate mine only son on thy whim?"

And the Lord said, "It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice."

And with that, the Lord bid Abraham get some rest and check with him tomorrow.

Kant deprecated this whole idea of God conversing with Abraham, asserting that Abraham could never have known that it was actually God who was speaking. In fact, according to Kant, one could be sure that the voice was not God's; and, Kant advised, Abraham ought to have repudiated this supposedly divine command: "That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven."⁴ In other words, Abraham should not have been taken in by the "resonant, well-modulated" voice. This argument will not be countered here; I accept the veracity of the biblical account as a starting premise, construing it as part of inspired Scripture.⁵

But was God joking? This is unlikely. The particle **אָ**, that is linked to God's command to Abraham to "take" (Gen 22:2; **אָקַח**), is found over sixty times in Genesis. However, it is employed in divine speech only five times: Gen 13:14; 15:5; 22:2; Exod 11:2; Isa 7:3, and in each of these instances, God demands something incredulous of the individual addressed, "something that defies rational explanation or understanding."⁶ No, there could be no question but that God *was* aware of the magnitude of what he was asking Abraham to do in Genesis 22. He was not joking;

⁴ Immanuel Kant, "The Conflict of the Faculties," in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (trans. Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 283 (7:63), and the unnumbered footnote on the same page.

⁵ While not considering this episode a joke, Elie Wiesel's accounting of the event is unique: Abraham actually twisted God's arm and forced the test back upon God, as if to say: "I defy You, Lord. I shall submit to Your will, but let us see whether You shall go to the end, whether You shall remain passive and remain silent when the life of my son—who is also Your son—is at stake!" And of course, God blinked! Abraham won. Wiesel thinks *that* was why, at the conclusion of this tussle of wills, God sent an angel to rescind the order and to congratulate him: because God was too embarrassed to do so personally, after having lost this battle of bluffs (*Messengers of God* 91).

⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 101.

and that he did mean “sacrifice” is clear from the reference to “burnt offering” in 22:2.

2. *Satanic influence in the test?* There is a whole array of rabbinic expositions that dwell on the role of evil angels in the *Aqedah*. They are said to have instigated the test of the patriarch after the manner of Job’s trial. *Jubilees* 17:16 and 4Q225 (pseudo-Jubilees) propounds a Satanic character, Mastema, inciting God to test Abraham; *m. Sanh.* 89b assumes it was Satan himself, who was behind all of this.⁷ Another account thinks jealous demons had something to do with this frightful test—jealous apparently because Abraham had a son (Pseudo-Philo, *L.A.B.* 32:1–4).⁸ None of these ideas has any biblical basis.

3. *Isaac—ignorant victim or willing partner?* Given that this was actually a test—rather than a joke or a demonically-instigated enterprise—how does one explain Abraham’s willingness to go through with the sacrifice? The rabbis tried hard to blunt the force of the horrific narrative by speculating that Isaac was a willing participant in the affair, colluding with his father. The seemingly passive Isaac of Genesis was reinterpreted by later Jewish scholars to depict a “mature, active, and virtuous volunteer, the perfect offering.”⁹ In *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen 22:10, the son exhorts his father, “Bind me well that I may not struggle in the agony of my soul and be pitched into the pit of destruction and a blemish be found in your offering” (so also *Tg. Neof.* and *Gen. Rab.* 56:8). Josephus even has Isaac being so “pleased” with the news of his fate, that he “went immediately to the altar to be sacrificed” (*Ant.* 1.13.4). Later in the history of interpretation, Isaac is also supposed to have bound himself (*Sipre* Deut 32).

About Isaac’s willingness, we do best to remain as restrained as the biblical account is. There is no record of any conversation between father and son, beyond the cryptic remarks of each in Gen 22:7–8. Luther, however, thought there was more chatting between father and son, and he gave in to his speculative tendencies:

The father said: “You, my dearly beloved son, whom God has given me, have been destined for the burnt offering.” Then the son was undoubtedly struck with amazement and in turn reminded his father of the promise: “Consider, father, that I am the offspring to whom descendants, kings, peoples, etc., have been promised. God gave me to my mother Sarah through a great miracle. How, then, will it be possible for the promises to be fulfilled if I have been killed?”

⁷ *m. Sanh.* 89b explains “after these things” (Gen 22:1) as “after the words of Satan” (so R. Johanan after R. Jose B. Zimra). Mastema is a cryptic and esoteric evil being frequently found in the Qumran literature: 1QS, 1QM, CD, 4Q286, 4Q387, and 4Q390, in addition to 4Q225. The word *מַסְתֵּמָה* is a feminine abstract noun meaning “opposition,” an etymology similar to that of *מִשְׁפָּח*. See Moshe J. Bernstein, “Angels at the Aqedah: A Study in the Development of a Midrashic Motif,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 7 (2000) 263–91.

⁸ There are other florid stories of angels as well: watching and weeping angels (*Gen. Rab.* 56:7 speculates that the tears of angels dissolved Abraham’s knife; elsewhere, in *Gen. Rab.* 65:10, it is said that their tears, falling into Isaac’s eyes, blinded him), and singing angels (they sang, apparently when Isaac had been spared, *t. Sof.* 6:5).

⁹ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26* (NAC 1B; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005) 301.

Nevertheless, let us first confer about this matter and talk it over.” All this should have been recorded here. I do not know why Moses omitted it.¹⁰

But despite all these heroic efforts, the text remains inscrutable. There is hardly any concern for the details of the event that Luther and others are grasping for: How old was Isaac? Where was Sarah? Where was Moriah? What was Abraham thinking during those three days it took the caravan to approach the mountain? What was going through Isaac’s mind? And so on. The fact is that the author simply does not seem interested in narrating everything that happened. Rather, as I will demonstrate, authorial interest is theological; the writer has an agenda and therefore is selective about what is detailed in the text. It is those details that the interpreter must attend to—it is the text that must be privileged, not the events *behind* the text.

4. *Typology of the Passover?* Over the millennia, one of the more common avenues of exploration of the *Aqedah* has been the identification of the typology within the narrative. The purported willingness of Isaac to go to the altar rendered him a virtuous sacrifice that was seen by Jewish interpreters as efficacious for future generations of Israelites. For instance, *Mek. R. Ishmael (Pisha*7 on Exod 12:13) interprets God’s “When I see the blood [of the Passover lamb] I will pass over you,” as, in fact, concerning the blood of the sacrifice of Isaac, anachronistic as it may be. In similar fashion, the account of the *Aqedah* in *Jubilees* makes it coincident with the (pre-)anniversary of the Passover. As *Jub.* 18:3 has it, God’s command to Abraham regarding Isaac was issued on the twelfth day of Nisan; the sacrifice party then travels for three days, making the sacrifice on “Mt. Zion” occur on the fifteenth of Nisan, the exact date of the Passover ritual. Subsequently, returning to Beersheba, a seven-day fast is observed by Abraham (*Jub.* 18:18–19), corresponding to the only seven-day feast in the Bible—that of Passover (Lev 23:6 and Num 28:17). The *Aqedah* thus becomes the “etiology of Passover.”¹¹ One is hard pressed to see how this line of typological thinking is substantiated in the canonical Scriptures.

5. *Typology of the atonement?* It is quite understandable why the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has been oft linked to the *Aqedah*. The concepts of “sacrifice” and “son” and “substitute” in Genesis 22 have obvious parallels in the theology of the atonement; the resulting enterprise of finding typological elements in Genesis 22 has been unparalleled in the history of biblical interpretation. The identification of Abraham with God the Father and Isaac with God the Son was articulated by numerous patristic and medieval interpreters.¹²

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 21–25: Luther’s Works*, vol. 4 (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; trans. George V. Schick; St. Louis: Concordia, 1964) 112–13.

¹¹ Leroy Andrew Huizenga, “Obedience unto Death: The Matthean Gethsemane and Arrest Sequence and the *Aqedah*,” *CBQ* 71 (2009) 511. Other parallels in *Jubilees*: both the *Aqedah* and the Passover celebrations involved rejoicing (18:18–19 and 49:2, 22); Mastema (the mysterious evil heavenly being) showed up in both accounts (17:16; 18:9, 12 and 48:2, 9); and he was ultimately shamed (18:9–12 and 48:13; 49:12).

¹² See Jon Balsarak, “Luther, Calvin and Musculus on Abraham’s Trial: Exegetical History and the Transformation of Genesis 22,” *RRR* 6 (2004) 364–65, for an extensive list and bibliography.

Barnabas (2d century) was perhaps the earliest to advance on this path: “He himself [Jesus Christ] was going to offer the vessel of the spirit as a sacrifice for our sins, in order that the type [ὁ τύπος] established in Isaac, who was offered upon the altar, might be fulfilled [τελεσθῆ]” (*Barn.* 7.3). Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) also explicitly labeled Isaac as a “type” of the Christ—both are sons, both are victims, both bear wood (*Christ the Educator* 1.5.23).¹³ Tertullian (c. 160–220) contributed to this line of thought as well: “Isaac, on the one hand, with his ‘wood,’ was reserved, the ram being offered which was caught by the horns in the bramble. Christ, on the other hand, in His times, carried His ‘wood’ on His own shoulders, adhering to the horns of the cross, with a thorny crown encircling His head” (*Adv. Jud.* 13). Origen (c. 185–254) came to the same conclusion: “We said ... that Isaac represented Christ. But this ram no less also seems to represent Christ” (*Homilies on Genesis* 8.9).¹⁴ Irenaeus (2d century) declared: “For Abraham, according to his faith, followed the command of the Word of God, and with a ready mind delivered up, as a sacrifice to God, his only-begotten and beloved son, in order that God also might be pleased to offer up for all his seed His own beloved and only-begotten Son, as a sacrifice for our redemption” (*Haer.* 4.5.4). Caesarius of Arles (c. 470–542) observed that “[w]hen Abraham offered his son Isaac, he was a type of God the Father, while Isaac prefigured our Lord and Savior” (*Sermon* 84.2). He went further: the two servants of Abraham, left below the mountain, represented the Jewish people, who could not ascend or reach the place of sacrifice because of unbelief in Christ; the donkey, inexplicably, indicated the synagogue.¹⁵ Thus Abraham represents the believer and his faith, Isaac represents the believer’s self-denial, and Isaac also represents Jesus Christ, creating no small confusion, not to mention the typology of wood and thorns, ram, and donkey.

Typical of modern-day interpreters who focus on OT typology is Clowney¹⁶:

When God provided the ram, he not only spared Isaac (and Abraham!) but showed Abraham that the price of redemption was greater than he could pay. The Lord himself must provide the offering that brings salvation The One descended from Abraham must come, in whom all the families of the earth will be blessed. “The Lord Will Provide” promises the coming of Christ Not Isaac but the Lamb of God was the Sacrifice that the Father would provide.

¹³ Cited in Thomas C. Oden and Mark Sheridan, eds., *Genesis 12–50* (ACCS; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 105.

¹⁴ Cited in Oden and Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50* 109. Chrysostom (c. 349–407) asserted: “All this, however, happened as a type of the cross. ... an only-begotten son in that case, an only-begotten son in this; dearly loved in that case, dearly loved in this” (*Homilies on Genesis* 47.14; cited in Oden and Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50* 110). Jerome (c. 347–420) described “Isaac who in his readiness to die bore the cross of the Gospel before the Gospel came” (*Ep. ad Pammachium* 7).

¹⁵ Cited in Oden and Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50* 102. So also Melito of Sardis (see Fragments 1 and 3, translated in Robert L. Wilken, “Melito, The Jewish Community at Sardis, and the Sacrifice of Isaac,” *TS* 37 [1976] 64, 66, 67), and Theodoret (*Dialogues* [III: “The Impassable”]). Later commentators followed suit, blending the types of Isaac and the ram into the antitype of Christ, among them Augustine (see *City of God* 16.32, and *De Trinitate* 6.11).

¹⁶ Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002) 76–77.

There is no mention in all of these expositions about the “fear of God” for which Abraham was commended (see below). According to Sidney Greidanus, another proponent of the redemptive-historical approach to OT interpretation, “[c]learly, the theme of God providing a lamb leads directly to Jesus Christ and the sacrifice he makes so that his people may live.”¹⁷ His resulting sermon has this goal: “[t]o assure God’s people that their faithful covenant LORD can be trusted to provide their redemption.”¹⁸

Despite these Christocentric assertions, ancient and modern, Moberly makes it clear that $\lambda\psi$, translated “lamb” in Gen 22:7, is “a generic term for an animal from a flock.” Indeed, even the LXX of Gen 22:7 has $\pi\rho\acute{o}\beta\alpha\tau\omicron\nu$ (and not the Christological “lamb $\lambda\mu\nu\omicron\varsigma$ ”) of John 1:29 that one might expect). The precise Hebrew word for lamb is $\lambda\psi$ (as in the “lamb” of the “continuous” offering, Exod 29:38), and not $\lambda\psi$; thus there appears to be little basis for drawing out any ovine typology from Genesis 22.¹⁹ Calvin is honest about these conjectures: “I am not ignorant that more subtle allegories may be elicited; but I do not see on what foundation they rest” (*Commentary on Genesis* on 22:13). All of these typological explorations render the narrative a tangled skein of anachronistic references, especially for preachers. Rather than immediately fling out a lifeline from the NT to accomplish a Christocentric rescue of the *Aqedah*, I suggest that the interpreter privilege the text and its immediate context to figure out what the A/author was *doing* with what he was *saying* (the theology of the pericope). For there is the “strong danger of ultimate superficiality” when the ancient text is not allowed to speak for itself and express its primary message. “If the Old Testament no longer says something to the Christian in its own right, to which the Christian still needs to attend and on which Christian faith necessarily builds, its actual role within Christian faith will tend to become marginal and optional, no matter what rhetoric is used to urge its importance.”²⁰ A sound warning, indeed.

It is certainly not universally accepted that Isaac and the ram represent God the Son, and Abraham, God the Father. Even in the late first-century interpretation of Genesis 22 by Clement of Rome (*1 Clem* 10:7), there is no indication of typology: “By obedience he [Abraham] offered him a sacrifice unto God on one of the mountains which He showed him.”²¹ Clement instead pronounces on Abraham’s

¹⁷ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 311. He does admit that “there is no agreement” as to which character of the story is a type of Christ—Abraham, Isaac, or the ram (Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 202, 203).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 205 (italics removed). For a review of Greidanus’s work, see Abraham Kuruville, “Book Review: *Preaching Christ through Genesis*,” Sidney Greidanus, *JEHS* 8 (2008) 137–40.

¹⁹ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 107, n. 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 140.

²¹ Where the patriarch was commanded to make his burnt offering apparently was the same location where the children of Abraham were called to do so—at the Temple mount (see the use of “Moriah” in Gen 22:2 and 2 Chr 3:1; also note the use of $\lambda\psi$ in Gen 22:14 and in Ps 24:3; Isa 2:3; etc.). This does not necessitate a connection with the atonement; rather the nexus is with faith. The faith of Abraham (or “fear of God”; see below) in the *Aqedah* was the attitude God’s people were to have as

righteousness and faith as aspects of the narrative that ought to be exemplary for the Christian. In fact, the NT does not explicitly refer to the *Aqedah* at all.²² Kessler remarks on the unusual lack of references to the *Aqedah* in the NT, suggesting that “the biblical story was either not of special importance and/or lacked significance to Jesus and his first followers.” This is especially telling, in light of the fact that OT quotations are, as a rule, frequently employed in the NT to substantiate atonement themes. Yet there appears to be no evidence that the earliest Christians viewed Genesis 22 as Christologically significant. Even though Paul uses a phrase in Rom 8:32 (τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ οὐκ ἐφέισατο) that is perhaps an allusion to Gen 22:12 and 22:16 (οὐκ ἐφέισω τοῦ υἱοῦ σου), “he makes little theological capital of it”; neither is there any obvious portrayal of Isaac as a type of Christ elsewhere in Paul.²³ In Rom 8:32, “the typology is purely implicit, a by-product of the imaginative application to God of a clause that pertains to Abraham in the Greek Bible tradition.”²⁴ This is a critical observation, often missed by those examining OT quotes in the NT. Not every citation or allusion or oblique reference to the OT in the NT is an *exposition* of the older text that adheres to literary, historical, and grammatical constraints. Rather, often, they are imaginative applications and creative reemployments of a pithy phrase—a hijacking, if you will, of a recognizable commonplace, slogan, or bromide: an intertextual pun.²⁵

II. GENESIS 22 AND THE AUTHOR’S *DOINGS*

That the writers of Scripture were *doing* something with what they were *saying* is incontrovertible. Their literary products were agenda-driven and discoursed for a purpose—to convey the theological thrust of the text, pericope by pericope—not merely created to convey information.²⁶ “History is therefore never history, but

they approached him, in the Temple or elsewhere. Any approach to God, any relationship with God, is to be undergirded with faith; hence the link between the Temple (the place where God was encountered) and the *Aqedah* (the paradigmatic biblical demonstration of faith).

²² P. R. Davies and B. D. Chilton, “The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History,” *CBQ* 40 (1978) 532.

²³ Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 60–61, 121. The “typology” in Heb 11:19 refers to the reception of Isaac symbolically/figuratively back from the dead (thus, παραβολή, “symbol/figure”). Rather than being a definitive statement of the meaning of the *Aqedah*, this verse simply underscores Abraham’s incredible faith in a faithful God, as a result of which, “in a sense/so to speak he [Abraham] received him [Isaac] back from the dead.”

²⁴ Davies and Chilton, “Aqedah” 533.

²⁵ One must bear in mind that the use of the OT in the NT is not a monolithic transaction. There is clearly a vast diversity of purposes in the use of OT texts in the New: illustrations and analogies and intertextual puns, in addition to prophetic, typological, and allegorical usages. Rather than seeking the *hermeneutical* bases of these NT uses of OT texts, I suggest that one must seek the *rhetorical* bases of their uses. What was the NT author trying to do in/with the writing of *bis* text—OT quotes and all? At least for preaching purposes, the interpreter must privilege the text itself, not the hermeneutical method the author employed to bring that text into being.

²⁶ For the conception of “what the author is doing” in a biblical passage as the “theology of that pericope,” and for the value of pericopal theology in homiletics, see Abraham Kuruvilla, “Pericopal Theology: An Intermediary between Text and Application,” *TrinJ* 31 NS (2010) 265–83; idem, *Text to Praxis: Hermeneutics and Homiletics in Dialogue* (LNTS 393; London: T&T Clark, 2009) 142–90; and idem, *Privilege*

history-for."²⁷ As Block declares, "In the Scriptures historiographic compositions are primarily ideological in purpose. The authoritative meaning of the author is not found in the event described but in the author's interpretation of the event."²⁸ That, of course, is not to claim that the events so described in the biblical text did not happen, but simply that it is the Holy Spirit's *in-the-text accounts* of those events that are to be attended to for life transformation, not the restoring and deciphering of those *behind-the-text events* themselves: the accounts are inspired, not the events, for doctrine, reproof, correction Such an interpretive undertaking that considers what authors *do* with what they *say* is integral to the field of pragmatics, dealing with those aspects of meaning not necessarily secured exclusively by a semantic theory.²⁹ In other words, the text is not merely a *plain glass* window that the reader can look *through* (to discern some event behind it). Rather, the narrative is a *stained glass* window that the reader must look *at*.³⁰ Therefore, rather than try to piece together "what really happened" *behind* Genesis 22 betwixt Abraham, Isaac, Yahweh, ram, donkey, and young men, this essay will closely examine the telling of the story in Genesis 22. What clues does this inspired recounting provide that the preacher may discern the theological thrust of the pericope? What was the A/author *doing* with what he was *saying*?

1. *A necessary test of faith.* The account begins with a time-stamp: "Now it came about *after these things*, that God tested Abraham" (22:1). What exactly were "these things"? A review of the Abrahamic saga is helpful for arriving at the purpose of the narrator.

Bergen observes that "[t]his most prominent theme—that of Abraham's search for a proper heir—ties the diverse stories of the Abraham cycle together more securely than any other."³¹ Indeed! In Genesis 12, we have God commanding Abraham to leave his relatives and father's house in order to secure a blessing that would come through an heir (12:1–3).³² And, yes, Abraham showed faith in stepping out as commanded, but one notices that he took Lot his nephew, even though the divine word called for a separation from relatives and father's house.³³

the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching (Chicago: Moody, forthcoming). Also see idem, *Mark: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) for an accounting of what the author was *doing* with what he was *saying* pericope by pericope in the Gospel of Mark.

²⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966) 257–58 (emphasis added).

²⁸ Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman& Holman, 1999) 604–5.

²⁹ See Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 12, 17; idem, *Presumptive Meanings: The Theory of Generalized Conversational Implicature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2000) 9, 168.

³⁰ "[N]o historical narrative is a transparent windowpane for viewing the facts beyond; historical narratives are more like stained-glass windows which artistically reveal the significance of certain facts from a specific faith perspective" (Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989] 196).

³¹ Robert D. Bergen, "The role of Genesis 22:1–19 in the Abraham Cycle: A Computer-Assisted Textual Interpretation," *CTR* 4 (1990) 323.

³² "Abraham" is, of course, "Abram" in Genesis 12, but for felicity of expression his final name (and that of his wife, "Sarah," not "Sarai") will be used throughout, despite the anachronism.

³³ In fact, the motif of "separation from family" delineates the various episodes of Abraham's life: 12:1, 15; 13:11; 16:6; 20:3; 21:14.

Was Abraham thinking of Lot as the likely heir, seeing that he, himself, was already 75 years old, and his wife 65 (12:4)? That certainly was not an attitude of faith in God's promise. Later, perhaps still holding on to the hope that his nephew Lot would be the chosen descendant, Abraham gives him the choicest portion of the land; Lot goes east and Abraham west (13:10–11). God appears to Abraham soon thereafter, renewing the promise to his descendants (13:16) as if to assert that he, Abraham, had been mistaken in his reckoning of Lot as his heir. The patriarch *was* wrong, for the descendants of Lot would become sworn enemies of the descendants of Abraham—the Ammonites (19:38).

Soon after he left his father's household and homeland, as Abraham stepped into the Negev, his caravan was hit by a famine (12:9–10). He promptly decamped to Egypt "to sojourn there," despite the fact that Yahweh had just appeared to him and promised, "To your descendants I will give this land," upon which Abraham had immediately built an altar (12:7). There appears to have been a hint of faithlessness in his fleeing to Egypt. Surely he knew God would keep his promise? Of course, one knows what happened in that land of refuge: Abraham was willing to pass off his wife, Sarah, as his sister, lest he get killed by Pharaoh for that "very beautiful" woman (12:12–14). Would not God keep his promise about the seed? Why then did he have to worry about his own life, and even put his wife's well-being in jeopardy?

In Genesis 15, Yahweh's promise to Abraham was renewed (15:1). But Abraham was still childless, and so the heir, he figured, must be Eliezer, his steward (15:2–3). God completely negated that suggestion: Abraham's heir would be "one who shall come forth from your own body" (15:4), a promise set forth in covenant form (15:5–21). Yet Sarah continued to remain barren (16:1), and so Abraham resorted to a compromise: perhaps the chosen heir, "from your own body," was to come through the maternal agency of one other than Sarah (16:2). Acting on this misconception, Abraham fathers Ishmael through Hagar, the Egyptian. God reappeared to Abraham in Genesis 17 and once again spelled out his promise to the patriarch. The divine word was crystal clear: *Sarah* would be the mother of the heir (this was iterated thrice this time: 17:16, 19, 21), not the maid, Hagar. And just as in the case of Lot, Ishmael's descendants (25:12–18) would turn out to be enemies of the descendants of Abraham. Again, faithlessness characterized Abraham's response to God.

Then, to make matters worse, in Genesis 20 Abraham palmed his wife off as his sister ... again—this time to Abimelech (20:2) but for the same reason that he had conducted his subterfuge in Genesis 12—out of fear for his own life (20:11). This despite the extended account of Yahweh's appearance and re-promise to Abraham and his wife that an heir would be born to them (Genesis 19). As in Genesis 12, God had to intervene to set things straight (20:6–7).

Thus, all along, Abraham is seen rather clumsily stumbling along in his faith. All of his attempts to help God out with the production of an heir had come to naught. None of his schemes had worked; in fact, they had only created more trouble for himself and, in the future, for his descendants. Genesis 12–20, then, is not the account of a pristine faith on part of the patriarch.

Finally in Genesis 21 the heir is born, and the account makes it very clear that God had done what he had promised to do all along. Three times in two verses, Yahweh's faithfulness is established: "Yahweh took note of Sarah *as He had said*" (21:1a); "Yahweh did for Sarah *as He had promised* (21:1b); "Sarah conceived and bore a son ... at the appointed time *of which God had spoken to him*" (21:2). This threefold iteration was almost a rebuke to Abraham's faithlessness thus far. God had been faithful; and he had done as he had promised. Abraham could surely trust him! The thorny issue of "seed," a problem that Abraham had been trying to solve on his own (or at least "help" God in solving it), had now been settled, as God had promised.

And in the very next chapter, Genesis 22, Abraham was tested.³⁴ It was almost as if this test was a necessary one. Had Abraham learned his lessons? Would he come around to realizing, finally, that God was faithful? Would he now acknowledge that even against all odds and despite all unfavorable circumstances God's promises *would* come to pass? A test was necessary—not for God's benefit, of course, but for Abraham's, and for the benefit of all succeeding generations of readers of the text, to demonstrate what it meant to trust God fully, to take him at his word.

The test in Genesis 22 commenced with another divine word. Both in structure and concept, this test was strikingly similar to the "test" in Gen 12:1–7. The latter was the first time God spoke to the patriarch; the former, the last. Both speeches contained the same command, found nowhere else in the Bible (לֵךְ-רָחֵק, "Go forth/out," Gen 12:1; 22:2). The first called for a break with Abraham's past; the second, with Abraham's future. Both stressed a journey, an altar, and promised blessings. Thus Genesis 12 and 22 form an appropriate commencement and conclusion, respectively, of the Abrahamic saga. As will be seen, Abraham passed his test in Genesis 22 with flying colors. How he did, and what the A/author was *doing* in the recounting of that successful examination will be addressed next.

2. *Abraham's fear of God.* Notice the key phrase in the acclamation of the angel of Yahweh in Gen 22:12: "Now I know that you *fear God*." This "fearing of God" is a critical element in the account. The last time fear of God was mentioned in the Abrahamic saga was in 20:11 (in fact these are the first two occurrences of "fear of God" in Bible: יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים in 20:11; and יִרְאָ אֱלֹהִים in 22:12). When Abimelech, confronted Abraham with his wife/sister deception, Abraham's excuse was: "Surely there is no fear [יִרְאַת] of God in this place; and they will kill me because of my wife" (20:11). "No fear of God in this place"?—the reader immediately catches the irony. Abimelech was terror-stricken at the possibility of having run up against God; the text explicitly tells us so: "And the men were greatly frightened [מֵאֵד ... וַיִּירְאוּ]" (20:8). On the other hand, it was *Abraham* who did not fear God enough to trust him to take care of him when God had promised him descendants. Surely his life would not be in danger before he produced progeny.

³⁴ That this account of Genesis 22 was being closely connected to Gen 21:1 seems obvious in that the first time יִרְאָ appears after Gen 21:1 is in 22:11.

But here, in Genesis 22, Abraham appeared to have learned his lesson in trusting God. It is quite likely that Genesis 21, with the birth of Isaac and Yahweh's triple assertion of his faithfulness (21:1–2), had had something to do with it. Apparently, after many blunders and fumbles, Abraham had finally come around to trusting God. And in Genesis 22, the divine declaration “Now I know that you fear God” (22:12), gave proof to the fact that Abraham now feared God, trusting him enough to obey him without question. Surely a God who could give him an heir from a dead womb could return him from a charred altar. No wonder God could affirm Abraham's fear of God after this momentous test. The assertion that prefaces God's announcement, “now I know,” was often used in the OT to describe a solemn declaration (Exod 18:11; Jdg 17:13; 1 Sam 24:20; 1 Kgs 17:24; Ps 20:6).³⁵ Targumic interpretation put it this way in the mouth of God: “Now I am telling everybody that you love me: ‘seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me’ (Gen 22:12).” And “I credit the merit to you for this action as though I had said to you, ‘Offer me yourself,’ and you did not hold back” (*Gen. Rab.* 56:7).³⁶ Indeed, this was a sacrifice not of Isaac, but of Abraham himself—all he hoped for, his future, his life, his seed.³⁷

Ironically, when Abraham understood that “God sees/provides” (אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה), 22:8), God in turn acknowledged that *Abraham* “fears God” (יִרָא אֱלֹהִים, 22:12); the paronomasia is obvious.³⁸ One might say that “fear of God” is equivalent to the

³⁵ Robert B. Chisholm, “Anatomy of an Anthropomorphism: Does God Discover Facts?,” *BSac* 164 (2007) 13. This phrase, of course, is not to deny an omniscient God the knowledge of Abraham's character even before the test (Ps 44:21; 94:11; 139:1–4; Jer 17:10; 20:12). “God contextualized His self-revelation to Abraham (and to the readers of the narrative) within the relational, metaphorical framework of a covenant lord. Thus one should not be surprised to hear Him speak in ways that reflect the relational role He assumed within this metaphorical framework” (*ibid.*). In other words, these were written for us!

³⁶ So also *Jub.* 18.16 (and 4Q225), quoting God: “I [God] have made know to all that you [Abraham] are faithful to me in everything which I say to you.”

³⁷ So also Ross: “the real point of the act was Abraham's sacrifice of himself, that is, of his will and his wisdom with regard to his son Isaac” (Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997] 393). Appropriately enough, Gerhard von Rad's booklet on Genesis 22 is titled *Das Opfer des Abraham* (“The Sacrifice of Abraham”)—not that of Isaac (Kaiser *Traktate* 6; Munich: Kaiser, 1971).

³⁸ The verb רָאָה (“to see/provide”) echoes through the account: Gen 22:8, 13, 14 [×2]. In fact, “Moriah” (מֹרְיָה, 22:2) also may quite likely be related to this root: thus, the “place of seeing.” Moreover, one could also read בָּהָר יִהְיֶה בְּהָר יִרְאֶה (22:14b) as “in the mount, the Lord will be seen” (or “in the mount of the Lord, he will be seen”), thus providing an etiology for what might have been the site of the Temple. The various uses of רָאָה in the story form a chiasmic structure, centered about Abraham's faith in God's provision for a substitute for his son, and his discovery of that provision.

A God announces the name of the mountain (הַר): land of “the place of seeing” (מֹרְיָה, “Moriah,” 22:2)

B Abraham sees (רָאָה) the place (מְקוֹם) of sacrifice (22:4)

C Abraham asserts God will see/provide (רָאָה, 22:8)

C' Abraham sees (רָאָה) God's provision (22:13)

B' Abraham names the place (מְקוֹם) “God sees/provides” (רָאָה, 22:14a)

A' Narrator announces maxim about the mountain (הַר): where “God will be seen” (רָאָה, 22:14b)

intense degree of faith that Abraham exhibited. Here, in Gen 22:12, the verb **אָרַא** is used substantively to denote Abraham as a “fearer” of God—a (now-proven) characteristic of this patriarch. “Fear of God” is the fundamental OT term for depicting the appropriate human response to God—the Hebrew equivalent to the Christian “faith” (see Deut 10:12; Eccl 12:13, in addition to Ps 103:11, 13, 17; 112:1; 128:1; Prov 31:30; Luke 1:50). Walter Moberly asserts that “Genesis 22 may appropriately be read as a, arguably the, primary canonical exposition of the meaning of ‘one who fears God,’” entailing “obedience of the most demanding kind” grounded in a deep trust in God.³⁹ In other words, the *Aqedab* defines the meaning of **יִרְאַת אֱלֹהִים**—“obedience which does not hold back even what is most precious, when God demands it, and commits to God even that future which he himself has promised.”⁴⁰ Abraham’s sacrifice thus becomes “a paradigm for his successors,” in his “wholehearted devotion to God” expressed in his obedience.⁴¹ Maimonides would have agreed with this assessment; according to Rambam, one of the great principles of the Jewish faith that is taught in the *Aqedab* is that

it shows us the extent and limit of the fear of God. . . . The angel, therefore, says to [Abraham], “For now I know,” etc. [Gen 22:12], that is, from this action, for which you deserve to be truly called a God-fearing man, all people shall learn how far we must go in the fear of God. This idea is confirmed in Scripture; it is distinctly stated that one sole thing, fear of God, is the object of the whole Law with its affirmative and negative precepts, its promises and its historical examples . . . (*Guide for the Perplexed* 24).

And faith is an integral part of that “fear.” Abraham’s faith in God is underscored in 22:5, where in a series of first person plural verbs, the result that Abraham expected as the final outcome of the incident is implied: “I and the lad—we shall go . . . , and we shall worship, and we shall return.” It is this faith of the patriarch in God, despite insurmountable odds, that is emphasized in Heb 11:17–19. James 2:21 points to the “justification” of Abraham by the specific “work” of his offering up Isaac, thus perfecting or fulfilling faith. James asserts that this was why Abraham was called “the friend of God.”⁴² The *Aqedab*, thus, is an account

Rather than an atonement analogy, this play of words and structure strongly emphasizes Abraham’s faith in a faithful God: he sees (with the eyes of faith)—and God sees (to it).

³⁹ Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* 79, 96. Also see R. W. L. Moberly, “What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?,” *JTI* 3 (2009) 176.

⁴⁰ Hans Walter Wolff, “The Elohistc Fragments in the Pentateuch” (trans. Keith R. Crim), *Int* 26 (1972) 163–64. As Chisholm put it, “[f]earing God is a metonymy for reverence that results in obedience” (“Anatomy of an Anthropomorphism” 13).

⁴¹ Gordon J. Wenham, “The Akedah: A Paradigm of Sacrifice,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 102.

⁴² Second Chronicles 20:7 and Isa 41:8 call the patriarch “beloved” of God (participle of **אָהַב**); the LXX of Isa 51:2 adds ἀγαπάω to point to God’s love for Abraham. The “faith” of Abraham (**אֱמוּנָה** and, in the LXX, πιστός) is specifically noted in Neh 9:7–8.

that teaches God's people what fearing God is all about—the willing sacrifice of *everything*⁴³

3. *Abraham's love for Isaac.* The father-son relationship is emphasized in the account of Genesis 22: “father” and/or “son” is mentioned fifteen times in Gen 22:1–20 (in 22:2 [×2], 3, 6, 7 [×3], 8, 9, 10, 12 [×2], 13, 16 [×2]). The readers are never to forget the relationship. In the only conversation recorded in the Bible between Abraham and Isaac, the latter's words begin with “my father” and the former's words end with “my son” (22:7–8)—this is also Abraham's last word before he prepares to slay Isaac (בְּנִי, “my son,” is a single word in the Hebrew). The narrator is explicitly creating an emotional tension in the story; no matter what the typological lens with which this account is viewed, one thing is clear: a father is called to slay the son he loves. The structural parallels between Gen 21:3 and 22:2 make this paternal-filial attachment even more clear:

Gen 21:3

Son	who was born to him	whom Sarah bore to him	Isaac
בְּנוֹ...אֵת	הַנּוֹלְדֵי לוֹ	אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָהּ-לוֹ שָׂרָה	אִצְחָק

Gen 22:2

your son	your only son	whom you love	Isaac
אֶת-בְּנִי	אֶת-יְחִידִי	אֲשֶׁר-אֶהְבֶּתָּ	אֶת-אִצְחָק

Gregory of Nyssa exclaimed: “See the goads of these words, how they prick the innards of the father; how they kindle the flame of nature; how they awaken the love by calling the son ‘beloved’ and ‘the only one.’ Through these names the affection towards him [Isaac] is brought to the boil.”⁴⁴ In a sense, Mastema's sentiments were right on the money: “And the prince Mastema came and said before God, ‘Behold, Abraham loves Isaac his son, and he delights in him above all things else; bid him offer him as a burnt-offering on the altar, and Thou wilt see if he will do this command, and Thou wilt know if he is faithful in everything wherein Thou dost try him’” (*Jub.* 17:16). It is therefore highly significant that the first time the word “love” (אָהַב) occurs in the Bible is in this account, in 22:2. With the entry of this new word into Scripture came an implicit question: Was Abraham's love for Isaac so strong that his allegiance to God had diminished? It appears, then, that this love of Abraham for Isaac was a crucial element in the test—it was this love that was being tested. Would Abraham be loyal to God, or would love for the human overpower love for the divine?

Without even perusing the details of Abraham's test, one can find the answer to that question of Abraham's love when one compares the unique descriptors of Isaac. There are three heavenly announcements to Abraham (22:1, 11, 14) with three corresponding descriptors of the (proposed/putative) sacrifice, Isaac: in 22:2,

⁴³ On the other hand, the reversion to typology and a focus on parallels between the *Aqedah* and Christology diminishes the value of the story in its exhortation of the kind of “fear of God” that God desires from his people.

⁴⁴ *Deit.*, translation from Kessler, *Bound by the Bible* 49.

12, 16. These three descriptors contain three of the ten instances of בן (“son”) in the account; but these three alone are inflected with the second person singular possessive pronoun (בְּנֶךְךָ, “your son”) and fitted into a patterned construction. However, there is a significant alteration, before and after the test, in how God/angel of Yahweh described Isaac.

Pre-test:

22:2 “your son, your only son, *the one you love*”

Post-test:

22:12 “your son, your only son”

22:16 “your son, your only son”

The narrative omission in 22:12 and 16 help clarify the reason for the test. The trifold description of Isaac in Gen 22:2 was to emphasize that this son, this particular one, was the one Abraham *loved*, with a love that potentially stood in the way of his allegiance to, and faith in, God. The subsequent deletion of the phrase, “the one you love,” was clear indication that Abraham had passed the test. The three-part description of Isaac *before* the test (“son/only son/one you love”) becomes, *after* the test, two-part (“son/only son”). The *Aqedah* was, in reality, a demonstration of love for God over and against anything that advanced a rival claim to that love.

Four Maccabees 13:12 agrees with this reading of Abraham’s shift in loyalties from Isaac to God: “Remember whence you came, and the father by whose hand Isaac would have submitted to being slain for the sake of devotion [to God; εὐσέβειαν].” Philo, too, was on the right track when he noted that though Abraham was “attached to his child by an indescribable fondness,” because he was “wholly influenced by love towards God, he forcibly repressed all the names and charms of the natural relationship,” “inclining with his whole will and heart to show his devotion to God” (*On Abraham*, 32.117; 35.195).⁴⁵ Though Abraham’s son was “well-beloved,” “the commands of God are loved still more.” Therefore, Ambrose exhorts, “Let us then set God before all those whom we love, father, brother, mother Let us, then, imitate the devotion of Abraham” (*On the Decease of His Brother Satyrus* 2.97, 99).⁴⁶ Origen expressed it this way: “For Abraham loved Isaac his son, the text says, but he placed the love of God before love of the flesh”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ So also Josephus: Abraham “preferred what was pleasing to God, before the preservation of his own son,” proving his “piety” (θρησκεία; *Ant.* 1.13.1).

⁴⁶ Ambrose also declares that Abraham did not “put love for his son before the commands of his Creator,” thus demonstrating his “devotion to God” (*On the Duties of the Clergy* 1.25.119). Calvin, while agreeing with Abraham’s agonies, thinks it was directed elsewhere and not primarily a paternal anguish. “For the great source of grief to him was not his own bereavement ... but that, in the person of this son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish” (Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* 22:1). It is a little hard to imagine a father with a knife poised to strike his child being more worried about his posterity than about his bound son lying helpless before him on the altar. Kierkegaard depicts the pathos well: “There was many a father who lost his child; but then it was God, ... it was His hand took the child. Not so with Abraham. For him was reserved a harder trial, and Isaac’s fate was laid along with the knife in Abraham’s hand” (Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* [trans. H. Honig and E. Honig; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983] 36).

⁴⁷ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 8.7 (cited in Oden and Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50* 106–7). And likewise, “[U]nless you are obedient to all the commands, even the more difficult ones, unless you offer sacrifice

In sum, the test “proved” the patriarchs absolute allegiance to God—his unadulterated love for deity. Nothing would stand between Abraham and God and, in a circumspect way, the text actually tells us that (see below).

4. *Isaac’s disappearance.* One element of the account that has perplexed interpreters throughout the ages is the apparent disappearance of Isaac from the Abraham stories after the mention of “son” in Gen 22:16. Indeed, father and son are never shown speaking to each other again after this narrative; Isaac does not even show up in the account of Sarah’s death and burial (Genesis 23). The only mentioned “contact” between father and son after the stunning incident of the *Aqedah* is at Abraham’s funeral (25:9).⁴⁸ In fact, in the Genesis 22 account itself, it appears that Isaac, after the aborted sacrifice, has vanished. Abraham, we are told, returned from his test, apparently *without* Isaac: “So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba” (22:19).

The rabbis recognized the strangeness of this “omission” in Gen 22:19 and responded with some even stranger solutions. “‘And where was Isaac?’ R. Berekhiah asserted: ‘He had sent him to Shem to study Torah with him.’ R. Yose bar Haninah said, ‘He sent him away by night, on account of the evil eye.’” And, equally confusingly, R. Levi explained, “He took him and hid him away. He thought, ‘Lest that one who tried to seduce him [Satan] throw a stone at him and render him unfit for use as an offering’” (*Gen. Rab.* 56:5).⁴⁹

When the documentary hypothesis (with its many refinements) was in vogue—dividing the Pentateuch between sources J, E, D, and P—Genesis 22 was usually ascribed to E on the basis of the employment of אֱלֹהִים in 22:1, 3, 8, 9, and 12. The appearance of יהוה in 22:11 and 14 was then attributed to faulty redaction, as was also this return of Abraham *alone*.⁵⁰ The speculation was that perhaps the sacrifice of Isaac actually did happen, but the redactor(s), in a bit of sloppy editing while attempting to valorize Abraham and concoct an account of an averted sacrifice, neglected to tweak the original conclusion of the return journey of the

and show that you place neither father nor mother nor sons before God [Matt 10:37], you will not know that you fear God. Nor will it be said of you, ‘Now I know that you fear God’” (Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 8.8 [cited in Oden and Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50* 107]).

⁴⁸ Moreover, “[a]fter the *Aqedah*, there is no more direct divine revelation to Abraham and *vice versa*, no contact of Abraham with God in the rest of Abraham’s stories in the book of Genesis” (Isaac Kalimi, “Go, I Beg You, Take Your Beloved Son and Slay Him! The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought,” *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 13 [2010] 16).

⁴⁹ Other creative speculations as to the fate of the missing son are collected in Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah* (trans. Judah Goldin; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1967) 3–8. They include: Isaac out of weariness, from the shock of the whole affair, fell behind in his walking; Abraham sent him back home by another route to bear the glad tidings to Sarah; God took Isaac to the Garden of Eden where he remained for three years to be healed (of the wound inflicted by his father?); etc. Spiegel labels all this “paradoxical haggadic lore”—a “deviation from the patent sense of Scripture.” He asks rhetorically, “The story of the Akedah—is it possible that these pious generations failed to be affected by the plain meaning of the words of Scripture?” Good question! (*ibid.* 8).

⁵⁰ See Robert Crotty, “The Literary Structure of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22,” *ABR* 53 (2005) 32.

patriarch *sans* sacrificed son.⁵¹ This oversight resulted, it is surmised, in the awkward stitching together of the story of an abandoned sacrifice with the absence of Isaac at the end of the account. However, none of these explanations is satisfactory.

Because of this seeming inconsistency regarding the presence/absence of Isaac in Gen 22:15–18, the conclusion of the narrative has often been considered an addendum to the main story: there appear to be stylistic differences between the two parts (economy of wording and heavy background in the latter, and repetitiveness and the use of synonyms and similes in the former), as well as vocabulary distinctions (two phrases in 22:15–18 are unparalleled in Genesis but common in prophetic literature: “By myself I have sworn,” and “declares Yahweh” (22:16). Yet, the story’s opening in Gen 22:1 is neatly concluded in 22:18, and the recurrent motif of “only son” (22:2, 12, 16) further strengthens the unity of the whole account. Moberly is right in proposing that Gen 22:15–18, integral to the main account, “should be described as the earliest and canonically recognized commentary on the story”—a commentary from God himself.⁵²

But one is still left with the burden of explaining the disappearance of Isaac. What happened to the lad after the sacrifice of the ram and the reissuing of God’s promises?

As was noted earlier, there is one significant difference in the description of Isaac in the pre-test and post-test accounts (22:2 vs. 22:12, 16)—the “love” motif, missing after the abandoned sacrifice (see above). Quite interestingly, in parallel, while there are three assertions of Abraham being accompanied by one or more companions (יְהוָהוּ ... וְיִצְחָק, “they walked together,” 22:6, 8, 19), the last such statement—the post-test version—is significantly different from the other two: in 22:6 and 8, “them” indicates Abraham and Isaac; in 22:19, Isaac is missing—“they” indicates Abraham and his two young men.

Pre-test:

22:6 “so the two of them [Abraham and Isaac] walked on together”

22:8 “so the two of them [Abraham and Isaac] walked on together”

Post-test:

22:19 “they [Abraham and his young men] ... went together”

After the test, it was as if Isaac had altogether vanished; the narrator apparently took an eraser and wiped out any mention of Isaac after the “sacrifice.” But there was a purpose behind this: the author was *doing* something with what he was *saying* (in this case, with what he *failed* to say, creating a striking gap in the narrative, but that, too, is to “say” something). No more would the account portray father and son speaking to each other or even being in one another’s presence until

⁵¹ So, according to Coats, “the Yahwist has appropriated an ancient story of child sacrifice, altering it so that it becomes an example of Abraham’s faith and an occasion for God’s renewing the promise for great posterity, for possession of land, and for blessing open to all the nations of the earth” (George W. Coats, *Genesis: With an Introduction to Narrative Literature* [FOITL 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 161).

⁵² R. W. L. Moberly, “The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah,” *VT* 37 (1988) 307–8, 314.

one of them dies (25:8–9). When one remembers that the test was actually an examination of Abraham’s loyalties—to God or to the son, “the one you love”—one understands what it was the author was doing in Gen 22:19: he was describing, in yet another way, Abraham’s success in this critical test. The author was depicting a line drawn; the relationship between father and son had been clarified, the tension between fear of God and love of son had been resolved. This test had shown that Abraham loved God more than anyone else.⁵³ One might almost say: *For Abraham so loved God that he gave his only begotten son* And to bring that home to readers, father and son are separated for the rest of their days—*literarily* separated, that is, for the purpose of achieving the narrator’s theological agenda.⁵⁴ He was *doing* something with what he was *saying*.

5. *Consequences of Abraham’s success.* The consequences of Abraham’s action, as depicted in the narrative of Genesis 22, also give credence to the interpretation of the story a paradigm of what it means to fear God. That Abraham successfully passes this test is not only expressly depicted, but it is also strongly implied: the narrative is both the zenith of the Abrahamic saga and the climax of Abraham’s worship. Of the three altars in the patriarch’s story (12:8; 13:18; and 22:9), the one in Genesis 22 is the only one with a sacrifice; with the others, Abraham only calls on the name of Yahweh (12:8; 13:4). At any rate, the satisfactory completion of the test ensures God’s promise to Abraham; in fact, it *enhances* God’s promise.

Scholars have generally held that the Abrahamic promises (in Genesis 12, 15, 17, 18, and 22) are unconditional. Yet, upon examination of the promise made to the patriarch at the conclusion of the momentous events of Genesis 22, one cannot but notice contingency: the clauses “because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son” and “because you have obeyed my voice” (*A* and *A’* below) bookend the promised blessing (Gen 22:16c–18).

A because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son,

B indeed I will greatly bless you (בָּרַךְ אֶבְרָהָם),

C and I will greatly multiply your seed (וַיַּרְבֵּךְ)

D as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore;

C’ and your seed (וַיַּרְבֵּךְ) shall possess the gate of their enemies.

B’ In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (הֵתְבַרְכֶנּוּ),

A’ because you have obeyed My voice.

⁵³ The equation of “fear of God” and “love for God” is not illegitimate: Deut 6:2 and 10:12 command fear, while the *Shema* calls for love (6:5); Deut 10:12 and 13:3–4—each has both elements; also see Deut 10:20 with 11:1; as well as Ps 31:19, 23; and 145:19–20. There is considerable overlap between these two concepts, fear and love for God, as is evident in the *Aqedah* itself.

⁵⁴ As to whether they were *actually* separated, that is an issue *behind* the text that is not the concern of its author; therefore, it need not concern the interpreter either.

This reiterated promise is quite different from the earlier promises in several ways: Gen 22:17a has “greatly bless” (*B* above; בָּרַךְ אֶבְרָהָם, emphatic and in the infinitive absolute, unique in Genesis⁵⁵); likewise, “greatly multiply” (*C*; וְהִרְבָּה אֶרְבָּהּ) is also found in Gen 16:10, but 22:17b is the only instance of this promise to the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob lineage). Moreover, 22:17c employs two similes—stars of the heavens, and sand of the seashore (*D*)—used elsewhere in Genesis singly, but never together (Gen 15:5; 26:4; 32:12; also Exod 32:13); and the possession by Abraham’s seed of “the gate of their enemies” (*C*; 22:17d) is unique in the promises in Genesis.⁵⁶ The nations being blessed “in your descendants” (*B*; 22:18a and 26:4; 28:14) is also new—thus far the blessing of the nations had been explicitly “in Abraham” (12:3; 18:18). This focus on descendants is appropriate given that the *Aqedah* deals with the “saving” of a descendant.⁵⁷ Thus, there are significant differences—*contingent enhancements*—to the promises already given to Abraham in Gen 12, 15, 17, and 18. While the essence of the blessing remains the same in its various iterations, the attachment of the contingency of obedience (though there was already a hint of this in Gen 17:1–2 and 18:19), along with the enhancements is certainly striking.⁵⁸

Origen disagrees: “I see nothing additional. The same things are repeated which were previously promised” (*Homilies on Genesis* 9.1). He explains that the first promises were given at the time of Abraham’s circumcision to the “people of circumcision” (those of the flesh), and the second promises, at the time of the “passion of Isaac,” to “those who are of faith and who come to the inheritance through the passion of Christ.”⁵⁹ Thus Origen employs the story to create a disjunction between Israel and the church. Likewise, Calvin asserts: “Certainly, before Isaac was born, this same promise had been already given; and now it receives nothing more than confirmation” (*Commentary on Genesis* on 22:15).

But this is not what one infers from the divine (re)promise in this account (22:16–18). Every element of the original promise is fortified here, ratcheted up a notch, *because of obedience*. It is an enhancement of the earlier promise, especially solidified in Yahweh’s unique swearing by himself (“By Myself I have sworn,” 22:16)—the first and only such divine oath being made in the patriarchal stories, though that oath is frequently referred to elsewhere (24:7; 26:3; 50:24; Exod 13:5; Num 14:16; Deut 1:8; etc.).⁶⁰ The oath is validated further by the addition of “declares Yahweh” (וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה), which echoes often in the prophetic corpus (Isa 45:23; Jer 22:5; 49:13) but, in the Pentateuch, is only found in Gen 22:14 and Num 19:28. Thus this promise in Genesis 22 is made far more definitive than all the preceding ones, and carries added solemnity and gravitas. Abraham’s possession of

⁵⁵ This construct is also found in Num 23:11, 25; Josh 24:10; Deut 15:4; Ps 132:15; 1 Chr 4:10.

⁵⁶ This phrase also occurs in Gen 24:60, with the blessing of Rebekah by her family.

⁵⁷ Moberly, “Earliest Commentary on the Akedah” 316–17.

⁵⁸ This “enhancement” of the promise is more like an unexpected bonus, which, of course, is what grace is all about.

⁵⁹ Cited in Oden and Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50* 112–13.

⁶⁰ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* 111. The phrase, “by Myself,” is also unique in Genesis, but is found in Jer 22:5; 49:13; Amos 4:2; 6:8; and in the NT, in Heb 6:13–18.

the land was promised earlier in Gen 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7–21; and 17:8; but here in 22:17, we find the most militant and triumphant version of that promise (“your seed shall possess the gate of your enemies” = conquer your enemies’ cities). And, correspondingly, the blessing is focused upon all the *nations* of the earth, not just the *families* as in 12:3. Contingent upon his obedience, every aspect of the earlier promises to Abraham is now “augmented and guaranteed by the LORD unreservedly.”⁶¹

Moberly understands the changes in the promise of Genesis 22 this way: “A promise which previously was grounded solely in the will and purpose of Yahweh is transformed so that it is now grounded *both* in the will of Yahweh *and* in the obedience of Abraham. It is not that divine promise has become contingent upon Abraham’s obedience, but that Abraham’s obedience has been incorporated into the divine promise.”⁶² While this is a reasonable explanation of the theological worth of human obedience, it does not take the textual evidence into account: there *are* actual changes in the items of the promised blessing—significant changes of degree of their fulfillment. Thus, in my accounting, human obedience has greater value than merely being incorporated into divine plan, and the resulting blessing is more than just a confirmation of what God has already promised. There is, indeed, a *contingent* divine response to human obedience—in a sense, a divine reward for the latter. So Wenham concludes: “God’s test had put Abraham on the rack. Yet torn between his love for his son and his devotion to God, he had emerged victorious with his son intact and his faithful obedience rewarded beyond all expectation.”⁶³ It is exactly this divine reward that is emphasized in the promise to Isaac in Gen 26:2–5, where the blessing is clearly stated to have been contingent upon the obedience of Abraham (“because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws, 26:5). This contingency of faithful obedience heightens the *degree of blessing*, not that the blessing itself is changed in character, but that, in some sense, the quantum of blessing is supplemented and its quality intensified. Obedience does result in reward.

III. CONCLUSION

What was the author *doing* with what he was *saying* in Genesis 22? Putting together the various textual clues as to the *doing* of the author, one arrives at the writer’s theological focus (pericopal theology): *faith in God’s promises and his word is required from the child of God, and such a faith is liable to be tested. This faith, equivalent to a*

⁶¹ Ibid. 116.

⁶² “The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah” 320–21. Chisholm seems to agree with Moberly: “[B]y revealing Himself in this manner God made it clear that He was in a dynamic relationship with Abraham in which the patriarch’s actions and responses would play a formative role in how the future unfolded. The Lord granted the dignity of causality to Abraham, His responsible covenantal partner” (“Anatomy of an Anthropomorphism” 150).

⁶³ Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* 116. Also see idem, “Akedah” 101. This, then, is God’s gracious reward upon seeing his child’s “fear of the Lord” (obedience): notice the use of שָׂכָר (“reward”) in the promise of God to Abraham in 15:1.

supreme love/fear of God that trumps every other allegiance, is manifest in self-sacrificial obedience to his word. Such faith in God (love/fear of God), God sees fit to reward with blessing.

This essay sees the intent of the author as calling for an identification of the readers with the protagonist of this story—Abraham, the paragon of faith. God’s people everywhere are to exercise the kind of faith in God that Abraham had, the kind of love for God that Abraham demonstrated, the kind of fear of God that Abraham exhibited: nothing comes between God and the believer. *Nothing!* This is the lesson the preacher must proclaim; this is what the reader must do. Calvin recognized the exemplary features of Abraham’s action: “This example is proposed for our imitation. . . . [W]e pay Him the highest honor, when, in affairs of perplexity, we nevertheless entirely acquiesce in his providence” (*Commentary on Genesis* on 22:7). This is no less a Christological understanding of Genesis 22 than any other interpretive option: part of what it means to be Christlike is to exercise the kind of faith, demonstrate the kind of love, and exhibit the kind of fear that Abraham did. “Abraham alone ought to be to us equal to tens of thousands if we consider his faith, which is set before us as the best model of believing, to whose race also we must be held to belong in order that we may be the children of God” (Calvin, *Institutes* 2.10.11).

The ultimate goal of God is to conform each believer into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ; each pericope of Scripture is a Spirit-directed literary instrument that directs the Christian in that direction, towards the image of Christ.⁶⁴ And so Genesis 22 seeks to move the Christian toward the demonstration of a faith in God, a love of God, a fear of God, so that “the man[/woman] of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work”—that “everyone may be presented complete in Christ” (2 Tim 3:17; Col 1:28).

⁶⁴ This hermeneutical concept is dealt with in detail in Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text* (forthcoming).