

The Akeda or the sacrifice of Isaac

Creative readings of a text

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The sacrifice of Isaac. Beth Alpha. Mosaic pavement. 517–518

A visual reading

THIS MOSAIC PANEL FROM THE FLOOR OF THE ruined synagogue of Beth Alpha in Galilee presents us with a narrative account of Genesis 22, reading from left to right.¹ There are two dedicatory inscriptions, one in Aramaic by the community and the other in Greek by the artisans, the latter dating the work to the reign of Justin, a Byzantine emperor in the sixth century CE. Reading from left to right we have the two servants with the donkey, the ram (which here is suspended from a tree, a feature of later iconography), and the hand of God above the tree. Abraham, who seems to have a Christian halo or aureole, is at the centre, while the strong lines, linking the figures from the hind legs of the ram, through the knife and the stripes on Abraham's clothing and the positioning of Isaac's body – serve to focus our eyes on the dramatically flaming pyre.

The debate among art historians about the influence of ancient Near Eastern pre-Christian motifs, such as the ram browsing the top of a

bush, as against Christian influence serves as a paradigm for the debate on the Akeda and readings of Genesis 22 in both Jewish and Christian tradition.² Both the names of the artisans and elements from the mosaic suggest that it is likely that the artisans were Hellenized Jews influenced by Christian motifs.

The text of Genesis 22

A foundational text in three great traditions, Jewish, Christian and Muslim, it is commonly called in Christian tradition 'the sacrifice of Isaac' and in Jewish tradition 'the Akeda'. It would perhaps be better to name the text 'the sacrifice of Abraham' to make the point that the focus of the texts is Abraham, while Isaac is a passive subject throughout.

This is a stark, horrific story. In no way does the narrator's introduction, making clear that God tested Abraham, mitigate the demand. A study of the piel verb *nasah* in the Hebrew Bible shows that it was used in the context of 'proving' or 'putting to the proof', e.g. whether the people will obey God or not (Exod 16:4; 20:20), or conversely whether God is present with the people or not (e.g. Gideon in Judges 2:22). There is no question of this episode being *only* a test. In asking what it is that Abraham is willing to sacrifice, we can note the mounting precision and concreteness of v 2: 'your son' / 'your only one' (*yahid*) / 'whom you love' / 'Isaac'. According to Levenson³ the background is the notion that the first-born, the first-fruits (symbol of the whole) belongs to God. Abraham is willing to give that back. In the context of the Abraham stories in Genesis this represents much more because the demand represents the annihilation of the promises of Genesis 12ff. The same Hebrew phrase (*lek leka*) demanding that Abraham 'move on' is found in the opening of both chapters. When Abraham proves his faith ('fear God') the promises are reiterated and the ram functions as a substitute offering for his son.

The role of Isaac is passive throughout. The structure of the text focuses on the dialogue at the centre, in vv 7–8, framed by the phrase 'they went on together'. Isaac's question, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?', is given what can only be termed an evasive answer, but one that takes on a fuller significance as the story develops. An interesting exegetical technique is to engage in a 'conversation analysis' of a text, i.e. to study statements, questions and types of answers, and particularly to reflect on texts where we would expect dialogue but do not find it. This

approach highlights the *reticence* of our text and the almost *invisibility* of Isaac in the silences.

- 1 Genesis 22:1–3. God commands and Abraham sets out to obey. What was Abraham thinking or saying? We find nothing on this, only silence.
- 2 22:5. Why did Abraham leave the young men behind? Why did he leave the donkey behind so that Isaac had to carry the wood? There is no explanation, but it is interesting that later in the chapter Isaac's carrying of the wood is balanced by his being placed on the wood.
- 3 What did Abraham intend by what must seem an evasive statement in 22:5, granted his intention: 'We will worship and *we* will return'? Only Abraham can return and indeed in the text, after the scene on the mountain, there is no mention of Isaac returning. Isaac disappears when the ram is substituted. In 22:19 Abraham returned to his young men and they (plural) went to Beersheba and Abraham (singular) lived at Beersheba. Isaac is invisible.
- 4 Apart from the brief dialogue in 22:7–8 what did Isaac and Abraham discuss on the journey? What were Isaac's thoughts as he was placed on the wood? There is more silence in this text than anything.

It is worth noting at this point that in the Bible story as a whole Isaac is a shadowy figure – the events of his youth melt into the life story of Abraham, and his old age is little more than a background to the story of Jacob. However, in rabbinical exegesis his personality is more sharply defined.

Isaac in later tradition

What we see in later tradition are *expansions* on the text. Isaac takes on a fuller active role and many of the silences of the text are filled in. Josephus has Isaac rush to the altar and gives his age as twenty-five years. He requests, in some texts, to be bound so that he does not disturb the sacrifice and render it invalid. Isaac is said to have a vision of heaven. In Pirke de Rabbi Eleazar ch 31 Isaac's soul left his body and did not return till he heard the celestial voice. Abraham prays that his offering and Isaac's willingness will be remembered before God. Isaac actually dies or goes to the school of Shem to study Torah for three years. Isaac's blood *is* shed and there is reference to the 'ashes of Isaac' (Amoraic period). Isaac experienced resurrection and because of this is linked with the second of the Eighteen Benedictions. Similarly in Christian texts Isaac's death has expiatory value and is taken as a type of Christ's death. Elements of the text are picked up and seen as type or

foreshadowing of the death of Christ: Isaac carries the wood, the ram or Isaac are seen as foreshadowing Christ, the ram is depicted as suspended on a tree.

Dating of texts and development of the tradition

Jonathan Gorsky gives sufficient indications on the dating of texts in the Jewish tradition, and the debate about cross-influence from one tradition to another depends on a detailed analysis of many individual texts. Two general points are sufficient here: we cannot make a synthesis of these texts in either tradition into one overall picture. First, what we have here are individuals and groups reading a foundational text in different times and places and imaginatively producing 'creative theologies'⁴ which have reference to their own situation. Second, in both Jewish and Christian tradition it does seem, however, that a pattern emerges. In earlier texts the focus is still on Abraham; it is later texts which shift the focus on to Isaac.

The reading process

The shift of focus and expansions might seem to suggest that we are entitled to read anything into a text. Note what was said above about Genesis 22 with its reticence and silences. There are, however, two stimuli to such readings.

The situation of the community

Following Jonathan Gorsky I note three such situations. In circumstances of persecution Isaac becomes a willing martyr. After 70 CE there are haggadic or interpretative developments of the text which may be connected with the loss of the Temple and of the thrice-daily sacrificial offering. Note that the noun Akeda, which became almost a technical term for the scene of the 'binding of Isaac', is used in the Mishnah (second century CE) for the manner of tying the sacrificial lamb. With the loss of the means of expiation Isaac becomes treated as the previous source of expiation for Israel's sins: 'When Abraham, our father, bound Isaac his son, the Holy One, blessed be He, instituted the sacrifice of two lambs . . . in order to show that when Israel offered the tamid on the altar . . . the Holy One, blessed be He, may remember the sacrifice of Isaac'.⁵

Likewise it has been debated as to whether many of the details of the haggadic presentation of Isaac as an expiatory offering were developed in response to Christian ideas about Jesus.

The text itself

What we are witnessing in these readings is not simply a reading into the text, but a reading which is at the same time a response to something in the text itself. For example, many of the silences of the text about Isaac are filled in. What did Isaac think and say? The community supplied the answer. What happened to Isaac in the second part of the story? He died and returned again. Elements in the story also take on a fuller, charged meaning: the wood, the tree, the ram caught by its horns in a thicket, the horn. In the latter case in the Beth Alpha mosaic there is only one horn. Is this an allusion to the Shophar?

An ecumenical context

In such a context can we imaginatively reread our text? In the texts on Abraham there is a tension which here I can indicate only in a summary fashion. There are texts which see Abraham as a bridge figure forging links to the world in which Israel lived; for example, in Philo Abraham appears as a sage and philosopher. There are texts which claim Abraham for themselves and shut out others, for example, texts where Abraham is presented as a priest and rabbi focused on Torah observance. This may be compared with the New Testament discussion on the children of Abraham. In later Muslim tradition it is Ishmael, not Isaac who is sacrificed.

Perhaps we should keep Genesis 12:3 in mind in this context: 'in you all the families of the earth will be blessed'. Here we have the promise of recreation, of renewal following on the downward descent of Adam in the primeval history of Genesis 1—11. We can note that in all three traditions – Jewish, Christian and Muslim – there is a tension between particularism and universalism. May we transcend that particularism with the thought that with Isaac we are all sons and daughters of Abraham. This can become, perhaps, the basis of a creative reading as, like Abraham, we respond to the God who offers fresh hope, ever and ever again, and continually summons us into the unknown (*lek leka* of Genesis 12 and 22), as Abraham was summoned.

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NOTES

- 1 Gabrielle Sed Rajna, *Ancient Jewish art* (Neuchâtel, 1985), p 110.
- 2 F. Manns (ed), *The sacrifice of Isaac in the three monotheistic religions* (Jerusalem, 1995).
- 3 J. D. Levenson, *The death and resurrection of the beloved son* (New Haven, 1993).
- 4 The phrase is borrowed from K. J. Kuschel, *Abraham: a sign of hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims* (London: 1995).
- 5 Lev. Rabbah on 2:11.