CHAPTER ONE

THE FATE OF THE FIGURE OF ISAAC IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

1.1 Traces of Isaac in the Gospel of Matthew

Genesis 22 is a text of enduring significance for Jews and Christians. Judah Goldin writes:

…the Akedah story, Genesis XXII, is indeed one of the most terrifying narratives in all of Scripture…So profound was the effect of this account on Jewish memory and speculation, every generation of Jews invoked it as leitmotif for its own trials and tragedies. It also penetrated deep into Christianity for its own purposes.¹

The nature and timing of that penetration, however, is greatly contested. Some scholars assert that the radical interpretive innovations of the Akedah, such as the concept of an Isaac enthusiastic to participate in his own sacrifice, developed early and were thus a resource for the earliest Christian reflection on the person and work of Jesus. The majority, however, maintain that the figure of Isaac plays little, if any, role therein.

The Gospel of Matthew, for its part, evinces suggestive traces of the figure of Isaac generally neglected or underestimated by scholars. For instance, in the very first chapter, the angel’s announcement to Joseph that Mary would bear a Son to be called Jesus (μὴ φοβηθῆς παραλαβεῖν Μαρίαν τὴν γυναῖκά σου...τέξεται δὲ υἱόν, καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦν, Matt 1:20–21) recalls God’s announcement to Abraham that Sarah would bear a son to be called Isaac (ἰδοὺ Σαρρα ἡ γυνή σου τέξεται σοι υἱόν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ισαακ, Gen 17:19 LXX). Given that both Isaac and Jesus are promised children and that both Sarah and Mary are women outside the bounds of normal childbearing status who conceive by divine power, the typological possibilities are intriguing.

This potential typology between Isaac and Jesus may extend throughout the Gospel, as other Matthean passages seem to evoke the figure of Isaac as well. The most famous and contested of possibilities concerns the heavenly voices at the baptism (Matt 3:17) and transfiguration (Matt 17:5), which may allude to Gen 22 LXX. In each of these Matthean passages, the divine voice deems Jesus ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός. In Gen 22 LXX the same syntax is found three times (allowing for changes in case): God tells Abraham to sacrifice τὸν υἱὸν σου τὸν ἀγαπητὸν Isaac (v. 2), and the angel describes Isaac using the same phrase in the genitive case (v. 12, 16). The briefer phrase ὁ ἀγαπητός μου also appears within the citation of Isa 42:1 in Matt 12:18. Jesus’ death is associated with Passover (Matt 26:1–35), as was the Akedah in early Jewish tradition. Not only does the Gethsemane and arrest sequence (Matt 26:36–56) present several conspicuous allusions to Gen 22 LXX, but in thematic terms Jesus here seals his own fate and goes willingly to his death, as did the Isaac of the Akedah in early Jewish tradition.

In general, the Matthean Jesus and the Isaac of Jewish Scripture and tradition resemble each other to a remarkable degree: both are promised children conceived under extraordinary circumstances, beloved sons who go obediently and willingly to their redemptive deaths at the hands of their respective fathers at the season of Passover. It is my contention that when rightly read as a coherent narrative in its first-century cultural setting, the Gospel of Matthew presents a significant Isaac typology.

1.2 Four Reasons for the Neglect of Isaac in the Gospel of Matthew

Scholars have largely overlooked this, however, for at least four reasons: (1) neglect of Matthean narrative dynamics; (2) failure to give full consideration to the potential relevance of extracanonical interpretations of Gen 22; (3) confusion regarding the dating and definition of the Akedah; and (4) neglect of the phenomenon of Matthean allusion.

1.2.1 Redaction Criticism and the Neglect of Narrative Dynamics

The diachronic emphasis of traditional historical-critical approaches, particularly redaction criticism, has led to a neglect of the synchronic, narrative dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew. Redaction criticism