ISAAC AS THE LAMB OF GOD: A HERMENEUTIC CRUX IN THE RE-READING OF JEWISH TEXTS

John C. Ulreich

In a recent study of Abraham as the ancestor of three faiths, Bruce Feiler observes that “Jews, Christians, and Muslims… have [all] chosen to place the narrative of a father preparing to kill his son at the heart of their self-understanding.”¹ Feiler’s insight raises disturbing questions for both Jewish and Christian understandings of the Bible. To be sure, the two faith traditions tend to read the story in profoundly different ways. Judaism generally rejects the idea of child sacrifice, whereas Christianity displaces the sacrifice onto the Father God, who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).² But the patriarchal image of an all-consuming father who demands the sacrifice of his son overshadows both traditions. Therein lies the very large problem on which I hope to shed a little light in this paper.

According to the story told in the twenty-second chapter of Genesis, Elohim tells Abraham: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (Genesis 22:2). As he had done many years earlier when he responded to Yahweh’s call to “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house” (Genesis 12:1), Abraham responds with unquestioning obedience: rising “early in the morning, [he] saddle[s] his donkey, and [takes] two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut[s] the wood for the burnt offering, and set[s] out and [goes] to the place in the distance that Elohim had shown him” (Genesis 22:3). He arrives at the Mount of Vision fully prepared to carry out Elohim’s command. But at the last possible moment, an angel of Yahweh “calls out to him from heaven”

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. One general exception to this rule is that I have substituted the Hebrew terms Elohim for “God,” and Yahweh for “(the) Lord.” The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, 3d ed. (ed.) Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
and says “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham looks up and sees “a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns,” so he takes “the ram and offer[s] it up as a burnt offering instead of his son” (Genesis 22:13). He calls the place *Yahweh-yireh*, probably signifying that “Yahweh will see to it.” And so the story ends, we might say, happily. It was only a test.

As Erich Auerbach observed many years ago, this story is deeply mysterious and “fraught with background”: because its opaque surface inevitably points toward “concealed meaning,” the story “positively demand[s] the symbolic interpretation which [it] later received.” In general, both Jewish and Christian exegetes have read the story parabolically in order to affirm Abraham’s act as a crucial expression of faith. But the tension between the surface meaning of the story and its hidden depth yields an almost unbearable paradox. Stephen Mitchell has captured the intensity of this paradox with great clarity in his parable called “The Binding of Isaac”:

> Abraham is caught in a dilemma. In parable, he must sacrifice his beloved son, even if a substitute should miraculously appear, bleating, within the thicket. In fact, however, the command is obviously demonic and he must refuse. In parable, he is a paragon of wisdom; but he is a homicidal maniac in fact.5

The general purpose of this essay is to explore some of the implications of that paradox and to ask, in effect, whether Abraham passed the test.

Judaism: “Consecrate to me all the firstborn” (Exodus 13:2)

Then you [Moses] shall say to Pharaoh, “Thus says Yahweh: Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, ‘Let my son go that he may worship me.’ But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.” (Exodus 4:23–24)

---

3 My translation here follows Robert Alter’s attempt to capture the word-play in Hebrew on the verb *raʿ*ah, whose meanings range from ‘appear,’ ‘behold,’ and ‘see’ to ‘provide for’ and ‘take care of.’ When Isaac inquires about the conspicuous absence of an appropriate sacrificial animal, Abraham cryptically (or deceptively? or prophetically?) replies: “God himself will provide [yir* ʾ*eh] the lamb for a burnt offering” (NRSV 22:8). Alter translates: “God will see to the sheep for the offering, my son” (Alter 110). Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).
