The biblical narrative was not created in a vacuum. Biblical stories often draw their ideas, beliefs and motifs from the variety of traditions known in their cultural surroundings—the ancient Near East. Therefore, in studying a story’s historico-ideological content, one should take into account its relationship with the whole cultural system. In other words, we should ask if a biblical story has any interrelation with similar traditions in the Near East; if such exist we must examine their meaning and be able to explain their significance: what is the nature of these relations? Is there any purpose (for example a polemical interest) in their textual expression? The cycle of the Abraham stories, the Akedah in particular, is not an exception in this respect. We can immediately observe some motifs—both of style and of content—that they have in common with similar tales of the ancient Near East. Here too, one has to consider the significance of such similarities.

The traditional approach, which was widely adopted in the literature, is that the Abraham stories—especially the Akedah—are constructed as a polemic against the ritual of child sacrifice. They present a well known myth of child sacrifice but change the ending: God does not wish the death of the son. Thus the stories have been regarded as an important turning point, marking a transition in the history of religious thought.¹


* I wish to thank Prof. E. Greenstein for his comments. This paper was first read as a short paper in the IOSOT conference, Basel 2001. I thank many of the audience for some crucial comments.
More recent interpretations, however, object to this view and today it seems hard—even impossible—to accept it. N. Sarna, for instance, argues that at the time when the Abraham stories were written down, human sacrifice could not have been an actively practiced ritual. This is proved, he says, by the account of the sacrifices offered in the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. iv 3) and those made by Noah. Both assume animal, not human sacrifice. He adds that Isaac’s innocent question in the thick of the Akedah “and where is the sheep for burnt offering?” (Gen. xxii 8) obviously also assumes animal—not human—sacrifice. His conclusion is that the traditional interpretation of the Akedah as a polemic against human sacrifice “cannot be supported”. E. Speiser is no less persuasive. He observes that the demand imposed on Abraham by God is at the outset regarded by the author as something “not normally expected”, but as a terrifying, inconceivable demand. Had it been intended as a polemic against a barbaric ritual, says Speiser, it would have been differently formulated. He concludes that “certainly, the object of the story has to be something other than a protest against human sacrifice”. Sarna went further, arguing that there is nothing in common—of any sort or kind—between the story of the Akedah and the traditional Near Eastern myth of child sacrifice. In support of this claim he briefly outlines the leading motifs of this myth, indicating their absence in the stories of Abraham: “The Akedah has nothing in common with pagan human sacrifice, which was practiced in order to appease an angry or inattentive deity, as in 2 Kings iii 27. In such cases it is the worshipper who takes the initiative. In the case of Abraham, there is no emergency, no impending disaster to be warded off. It is God himself who makes the request, and it is God who interrupts the sacrifice.”

However, it seems to me that Sarna, in saying that the Akedah has nothing in common with the ancient tradition of child sacrifice, went too far. Indeed, the traditional interpretation of the Akedah as a polemic against the ritual of child sacrifice is untenable. Nevertheless, this is not enough to allow us to dismiss the striking similarities altogether—both verbal and narratical—between the stories. It is not much of a

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5 See below for a full discussion.