

in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to be frustrated by sin ?

(*To be concluded*)

Upholland College  
Wigan

T. WORDEN

### THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC (GEN. 22)

The sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22) is not included among the passages most frequently discussed in modern literature on Genesis. There are a certain number of difficulties, however, which modern readers sense. They find the picture of God's temptation of Abraham to sacrifice his only son repulsive.<sup>1</sup> The horror which human sacrifice excites makes it hard for them to see how God could utter such a command even when it is not seriously intended, or how Abraham could have accepted such a command as a true divine revelation; and they find metaphysical evasions based on 'God's supreme dominion over life' vacuous. H. Junker has written that such a command in modern times would be a sure sign that the alleged revelation was not genuine<sup>2</sup>; our modern reader wonders whether our moral and religious world is so different from that of Abraham that this would not be an equally valid sign in the world of Abraham. Or he may wonder whether it is not also a valid sign that such a narrative is certainly not historical. Even if this were admitted, it would not solve his problem; for he wants to know how the narrative is religiously significant, whether it is historical or not. These questions indicate that an investigation of the literary, historical, and theological character of the passage may be rewarding.

Modern critics almost unanimously attribute the story to the Elohist strand of narrative in the Pentateuch. They hasten to add that they do not thereby imply that the narrative is homogeneous; indeed, there are some evident signs that it is not. Thus vv. 15-18, in which the 'angel of Yahweh' addresses Abraham 'a second time,' recapitulating the promises of a great progeny in commonplace terms derived from other passages of Genesis, are with scarcely any doubt

<sup>1</sup> An example of this may be seen in the following extract from a letter to *The Sunday Times* of 28 October 1956: 'The other day my granddaughter, aged nine, was told in school the story of Abraham and Isaac, and how "God had told Abraham to sacrifice his son." Surely no-one believes this barbarous doctrine nowadays? I assured her that God never asked or told anyone to make such a sacrifice, but that in olden times priests had preached that doctrine.'—Ed.

<sup>2</sup> H. Junker, 'Die Opferung Isaaks,' *Pastor Bonus*, LII (1941), p. 29

a supplement to the original narrative. This passage does not, however, suggest that the author of our Pentateuch has suppressed another account of the sacrifice of Abraham. Although the 'angel of Yahweh' addresses Abraham in vv. 11 and 18, God Himself (*'elohîm*) speaks to Abraham in v. 1 ff. The place of the sacrifice is called by Abraham 'Yahweh will provide' (Yahweh will see) in v. 14; the second half of the verse, however, calls the place 'on the mountain of Yahweh he will appear,' which should more probably be vocalised to read 'on the mountain Yahweh will appear.' 'Yahweh will provide' is an obvious allusion to v. 8. The place of the sacrifice is called the land of Moriah in v. 2. This name occurs elsewhere only in 2 Chron. 3:1 as the name of the temple mountain in Jerusalem. This solitary witness of the name at a late date does not argue that the title was original. But the ancient versions did not take Moriah as a proper name: Greek, 'high land'; Vulgate, 'land of vision'; Syriac, 'land of the Amorites.' This textual tradition leads M. George to suggest that the name is a late insertion into Genesis<sup>1</sup>; but one might also suppose that the appearance of the name in 2 Chron. was due to an effort to connect the site of the temple with Abraham's sacrifice. Modern critics find no evidence whatever for locating Moriah. It is three days' journey from Abraham's residence, which is not mentioned by name. The whole story is locally detached from the Abraham saga. And we ought to observe that it is also temporally detached; it stands alone with no reference to a larger context. It is not unique in this respect; all the stories of Abraham exhibit the signs of their earlier existence as detached anecdotes. But they have been roughly woven together in our Pentateuch; ch. 22, except for vv. 15-18, is not a piece of this fabric. Nevertheless, it seems evident that the compilers of our present Pentateuch intended the story to appear where it does as the climax of the spiritual adventure of Abraham: the supreme test of his faith and submission to God, which he passed triumphantly. The position of the story, however, does not imply that the story had this significance in its original form. The fact that this significance is explicit in vv. 15-18 renders it even more likely that the original story had a different orientation.

From these considerations we see that this episode shares the character of all the Pentateuchal traditions—a character which is not always given its due attention, not only by the general reader, but sometimes by scholars; yet the examination of the literary character of any passage ought to be dominated by the principle that these written accounts record traditions which were once living. As living they

<sup>1</sup> A. George, 'Le sacrifice d'Abraham,' *Études de Critique et d'Histoire Religieuse*, Lyon 1948, p. 102

exhibited the vitality of oral traditions which, to borrow a phrase from M. George, lived and grew with Israel<sup>1</sup>; in them later generations found the roots and the foundations of the religion—creed, code, and cult—which existed in their own times. The successive retelling of the traditions gave the story different forms and emphases in different phases of its development. This naïvely free handling of tradition, in which the users of the tradition were entirely masters of their material, is indicated in the phrase employed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1948: we are not dealing with history in the classical or modern sense of the word. It should be added that the same vitality often appears in the New Testament use of the Old Testament; thus the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews finds that the story illustrates the heroic faith of Abraham (Heb. 11:17–20), and St Paul borrows a phrase from the passage to say that God has not spared His only begotten Son (Rom. 8:32; Gen. 22:16). The New Testament writers also were masters of their material, and in applying the Old Testament to the Christian fact were not restricted by the necessity of investigating the original form and purpose of the story. This we can now do, and we ought to do it.

The literary character of the story is inextricably connected with its theological character. M. George, in what is perhaps the best modern study of the passage, has stated a triple purpose of the story, and we may assume for the moment that this triple purpose represents three phases of its development. The first of these M. George calls 'topographical': it is the story of the theophany at a sanctuary whose name has been lost, as we have indicated above.<sup>2</sup> In ancient Israelite traditions almost every sanctuary of which we have any information has such a theophany tradition attached to it; the theophany designated the place as sacred, a place where Yahweh had appeared and thus indicated His readiness to receive supplication: cf. Mamre (Gen. 18:1 ff.); Beersheba (Gen. 26:24); Bethel (Gen. 28:13); Gilgal (Joshua 5:2, 9); Jerusalem (2 Sam. 24:16). This consideration suggests that 'on the mountain Yahweh will appear' is more probably the original name of the sanctuary, and that this name had no connection with Abraham's sacrifice. 'Yahweh will provide' is a secondary interpretation of the name derived from the sacrifice of Abraham.

The second of the three purposes suggested by M. George is 'liturgical': the author wished to condemn the sacrifice of children and to base the custom of redemption upon divine revelation.<sup>3</sup> Human sacrifice is frequently alluded to in the Old Testament as a Canaanite practice; cf. Deut. 12:31; 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; Micah 6:7:

<sup>1</sup> George, *op. cit.*, p. 99

<sup>2</sup> George, *op. cit.*, pp. 101 ff.

<sup>3</sup> George, *op. cit.*, pp. 105 ff.

Jer. 2:13, 7:31, 19:5; Ezek. 23:37. This practice is not well attested by extra-Biblical evidence for the period of the Hebrew monarchy, but there is no reason to doubt the Hebrew affirmation. Hebrew religion rejected this abomination; with other ancient Semitic peoples the Hebrews believed that the first-born belonged to the deity, but the first-born was offered to Yahweh and redeemed from sacrifice by the payment of a ransom (cf. Exod. 22:29, 13:13, 34:19-20). The liturgical rejection of the offering of the first-born, symbolised by the rite of redemption, is also dramatised by the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Indeed, it is not impossible that the story of the sacrifice of Isaac had a liturgical function; its recitation could form part of the rite of redemption. In the words of M. George, the narrator makes of Abraham's 'generous and savage act' a temptation; but Yahweh rejects such generosity. The tradition explained the redemption of the first-born as due to a revelation made to their ancestor when he, under the influence of Canaanite superstition, thought that his god also desired the sacrifice of the first-born. The actual rite of substitution is found in Gen. 22:13. M. George suggests that 22:12, which he finds parallel to such passages as 1 Sam. 15:22 and Micah 6:6-8, is a further development of the same theme by the Elohists. A prophetic lesson, affirming the primacy of the spiritual sacrifice of obedience and submission, is derived from the story; this was probably not included in its original form.

The third purpose is 'hagiographical': it comes from the author of the Pentateuch as we have it and is derived from its position in the context. As M. George describes it, this purpose exhibits the event as the great climactic crisis in the life of Abraham, 'which precedes the realisation of the promises and elicits supreme faith and pure hope.'<sup>1</sup>

G. von Rad also has pointed out the dual significance of the story in itself and in its present context; there is no single basic thought, but several. M. Chaine found two great ideas in the story: the greatness of Abraham's faith and the rejection of human sacrifice. His faith is compared by Chaine with the faith of Job; there can be little doubt that Job, who is modelled after Abraham in his external manner of life, also imitates him in his renunciation (Job 1:21, 2:10). A multiple motif in the story is also noticed by de Vaux, Vawter, Vaccari and Junker.<sup>2</sup> Hence we may take this as a generally accepted conclusion of modern exegetes; it is a little more difficult to determine which motif is to be regarded as primary—that is, both in the logical

<sup>1</sup> George, *op. cit.*, p. 109

<sup>2</sup> G. von Rad, *1 Buch Mose 12, 10—25, 18* (ATD), Göttingen 1952, pp. 203, 208; J. Chaine, *Le livre de Genèse*, Paris 1948, p. 270; R. de Vaux, *Le Genèse* (BJ), Paris 1953, ad loc.; Bruce Vawter, *A Path Through Genesis*, New York 1956, ad loc.; A. Vaccari, *La Sacra Bibbia*, Florence 1942, 1, p. 104; H. Junker, *op. cit.*, pp. 33 ff.

and in the temporal order, the motif which was proper to the original form of the story and from which the other motifs are derived.

We have seen that the motif of Abraham's faith and obedience depends both on the position of the story in the context and upon vv. 15-18, which are the first exegetical comment upon the story; hence this motif, which appears in the New Testament use of the passage and which is most frequently employed in modern homiletic use, is the latest in the development of the story. We are then left with the sanctuary motif and with the rejection of human sacrifice. Von Rad believes that the sanctuary motif is the original motif, and M. George seems to share this view<sup>1</sup>; but M. Chaine omitted it from consideration. One may contrast this account with the theophany of Bethel (Gen. 28:11 ff.). In the Bethel story the sanctuary motif is obviously primary; Bethel is recognised as a holy place, 'fearful, the house of God and the gate of heaven'; for Yahweh is in the place (28:17-18), and the story has no other point. Here, as we have seen, the original form of the name of the sanctuary exhibits no connection with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac; and the story will stand if the sanctuary motif is omitted altogether. We are then reduced to the liturgical function of the story.

The thought occurs immediately that the story, in this hypothesis, is not among the oldest patriarchal traditions. We cannot date the origin of the practice of redemption, and there is no reason to doubt that it was ancient. But the prophetic passages in which the question is urgent all belong to the eighth century and later; and the framing of this story so as to present this lesson falls easily into the same period, although this date has only the merit of conjecture. This conjecture does not imply that the practice of redeeming the first-born was also of recent origin; but we can deduce from the prophetic passages that there was in this period a problem of justifying the practice of redemption. One can only say that our story fits this theological pattern. It is a dramatisation of the liturgical practice of redemption, basing it upon the oldest traditions of Israel and ultimately upon the religious experience of their patriarchal ancestor. Obviously we are not here dealing with history in the modern sense of the word, but with the creation of a narrative from existing traditions and liturgical practices. On the other hand, such use of traditional material is not unusual in the Old Testament, as we now know from recent studies. The story exhibits a concept of God which is extremely anthropomorphic and not very mature; and this is the concept which we find in all such Israelite creations. At the same time, this concept is the base of such spiritual and theological applications as we find in the

<sup>1</sup> Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 208

Elohistic account, in its position in the context of the Pentateuch, and in its use in the New Testament. Modern readers may find the story religiously more significant and less difficult if they understand what its writers were trying to do and how they employed the materials which were available to them.

JOHN L. MCKENZIE, S.J.

*West Baden College  
West Baden Springs, Indiana*

A SHORT NOTE ON DANIEL 12:11-12

The two periods mentioned in Dan. 12:11-12 differ by 45 days.

Many scholars think that Dan. 8:14 refers to 2,300 evenings and mornings, meaning 1,150 days, and that it may refer to Antiochus's desecration of the Temple.

The abomination of desolation was set up in the Temple on 15 Casleu of the 145th year of the Seleucid era (1 Mac. 1:54). Pagan sacrifices started in the Temple on 25 Casleu of the same year (1 Mac. 1:59). The Temple was rededicated on 25 Casleu of the year 148 (1 Mac. 4:52-4), that is 3 years 10 days, or 1,105 days, after the abomination was set up. This differs from the 1,150 days of Dan. 8:14 by 45 days.

Although the Temple was rededicated after 1,105 days, perhaps the religious persecution did not finally cease till an extra 45 days had elapsed. This may be the same period as that referred to in Dan. 12:11-12.

In this case, the following will be the dates of certain events (years being reckoned as in 1 Mac.):

In June 145 (185 days before 15 Casleu), Antiochus's decree forbidding sacrifices (1 Mac. 1:45).

In Dec. 145, on 15 Casleu, abomination set up in Temple.

In Dec. 145, on 25 Casleu, pagan sacrifices started in Temple.

In Dec. 148, on 25 Casleu, rededication. This would be 1,290 days after the decree of June 145 (see Dan. 12:11).

45 days later, persecution definitely ceases. This would probably not be the date of Antiochus's death, for this took place in 149 (1 Mac. 6:16) and the new year probably did not begin until the spring. Before his death Antiochus did officially cease persecuting the Jews (2 Mac. 9, especially verses 10-17). This was during his illness which took place after the rededication (see 1 Mac. 6:7-8). It could therefore be 45 days after the rededication, in which case it