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The Sacrifice of Isaac

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

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Abstract: When I was in high school, everybody was being very smart and emancipated, and we always cheered the news that some scholar had dis-covered the original story of Samson or the Flood or the Garden of Eden in some ancient nonbiblical writing or tradition. It never occurred to anybody that these parallels might confirm rather than confound the scripture—for us the explanation was always perfectly obvious: the Bible was just a clumsy compilation of old borrowed superstitions. As com-parative studies broke into the open field, parallels began piling up until they positively became an embarrassment. Everywhere one looked there were literary and mythological parallels. Trying to laugh them off as "parallelomania" left altogether too much unexplained. ...



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When I was in high school, everybody was being very smart and emancipated, and we always cheered the news that some scholar had discovered the original story of Samson or the Flood or the Garden of Eden in some ancient nonbiblical writing or tradition. It never occurred to anybody that these parallels might confirm rather than confound the scripture—for us the explanation was always perfectly obvious: the Bible was just a clumsy compilation of old borrowed superstitions. As comparative studies broke into the open field, parallels began piling up until they positively became an embarrassment. Everywhere one looked there were literary and mythological parallels. Trying to laugh them off as “parallelomania” left altogether too much unexplained. In the 1930s English scholars started spreading out an overall pattern that would fit almost all ancient religions. Finally men like Graves and Santillana confront us with huge agglomerations of somehow connected matter that sticks together in one loose, goeey mass, compacted of countless resemblances that are hard to explain but equally hard to deny. Where is this taking us? Will the sheer weight and charge of the stuff finally cause it to collapse on itself in a black hole, leaving us none the wiser? We could forego the obligation of explaining it and content ourselves with

contemplating and admiring the awesome phenomenon for its own sake were it not for one thing—Joseph Smith spoils everything.

A century of bound periodicals in the stacks will tell the enquiring student when scholars first became aware of the various elements that make up the superpattern, but Joseph Smith knew about them all, and before the search ever began he showed how they are interrelated. In the documents he has left us, you will find the central position of the Coronation, the tension between matriarchy and patriarchy, the arcane discipline for transmitting holy books through the ages, the pattern of cycles and dispensations, the nature of the mysteries, the great tradition of the Rekhabites or sectaries of the desert, the fertility rites and sacrifices of the New Year with the humiliation of the kind and the role of substitute, and so forth. Where did he get the stuff? It would have been convenient for some mysterious rabbi to drop in on the penniless young farmer when he needs some high-class research, but George Foote Moore informs us that “so far as evidence goes,” apocalyptic things of that sort were “without countenance from the exponents of what we may call normal Judaism.”

Take, for example, the tradition that the sacrifice of Isaac merely followed the scenario of an earlier sacrifice of Abraham himself. Nobody has heard of that today—until you tell them about it, when, of course, they shrug their shoulders and tell you that they knew about it all along. Which prompts me to recommend a simple rule for the ingenuous investigator: always ask the expert to tell you the story first. I have never found anyone who could tell me the Joseph Smith Abraham story, and the apocrypha records which report it have all been published since his day. Today the story of Abraham casts a new light on the story of Isaac. Here is some of it.

While it is the unique and different in human experience that most engages the modern fancy, the Egyptian was intrigued by the repeated and characteristic events of life. The most important of these events were ritualized, just as we ritualize the inauguration of a president or the Rose Bowl game, repeating the same plot year after year with different actors. Hence, if Abraham and Sarah went through the same routine with King Abimelech as with Pharaoh,

it is not because either or both stories are fabrications, as scholars have so readily assumed, but because both kings were observing an accepted pattern of behavior in dealing with eminent strangers. Likewise, if Abraham was put on an altar bed like dozens of others, it was because such treatment of important guests had become standard procedure for combating the drought prevailing in the world at that time.

Repeating patterns of history suggest ritual as a means of dramatizing and controlling events, but they exist in their own right—they are not invented by men. In the exodus of the Saints from Nauvoo, thousands of people suddenly found themselves moving west in the dead of winter amid scenes of some confusion. But within three days the entire host was organized into twelve main groups—one under each of the Apostles—and companies of fifty and one hundred. Instantly and quite unintentionally the order of Israel in the wilderness and the Sons of Light in the Judean desert was faithfully duplicated. A student of history three thousand years from now might well reject the whole account as mythical, since it so obviously reduplicated an established pattern.

To one who is aware of the interplay of pattern and accident in history, the stories of the sacrifice of Isaac and of Sarah are perfect companion pieces to the drama of Abraham on the altar. Take first the case of Isaac, who is just another Abraham: a well-known tradition has it that he was in the exact image of his father,¹ so exact, in fact, that until Abraham's hair turned white, there was absolutely no way of distinguishing between the two men in spite of their difference of age.² "Abraham and Isaac are bound to each other with extraordinary intimacy," writes a recent commentator; ". . . the traditions regarding the one are not to be distinguished from those concerning the other;" for example, both men leave home to wander, both go to Egypt, and both are promised endless posterity and certain lands as an inheritance.³ What has been overlooked is the truly remarkable resemblance between Isaac on the altar and Abraham on the altar.

First, in both stories there is much made of the preparatory gathering of wood for a "holocaust" that never takes place. Abraham is commanded, "Take now thy son . . . and offer him . . . for a *burnt* offering" (Genesis 22:2; emphasis added). "Behold, I offer thee now as a holocaust," he cries in the Pseudo-Philo.⁴ Accordingly, he "bound Isaac his son, and laid him upon the altar on the wood,"⁵ sometimes described as a veritable tower, just like

the structure that “Nimrod” had built for Abraham.⁶ And while the Midrash has Isaac carrying the wood of the sacrifice “as one carries a cross on his shoulder,”⁷ so Abraham before him “took the wood for the burnt offering and carried it, just as a man carries his cross on his shoulder.”⁸ According to one tradition, the sacrifice was actually completed and Isaac turned to ashes.⁹ On the other hand, when the princes announced their intention of putting Abraham in a fiery furnace, he is said to have submitted willingly: “If there is any sin of mine so that I be burned, the will of God be done.”¹⁰ Indeed, the Hasidic version has it that “Abraham our father offered up his life for the sanctification of the Name of God and threw himself into the fiery furnace.”¹¹ The famous play on the words “Ur of the Chaldees” and “Fire [ur] of the Chaldees” was probably suggested by these traditions—not the other way around, since Isaac escapes from the flames in the same way that Abraham does; that is, the original motif requires a fire, not a city called Ur.

For all the emphasis on sacrificial fire, it is the knife that is the instrument of execution in the attempted offerings of Abraham and Isaac: “And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son” (Genesis 22:10). It was always the custom to slaughter (*zabakh*) the victim and then burn the remains to ashes; the blood must be shed and the offering never struggles in the flames. Many stories tell how the knife was miraculously turned aside as it touched the neck of the victim, whether Abraham or Isaac: suddenly the throat is protected by a collar of copper or the knife becomes soft lead.¹² But in the usual account it is dashed from the hand of the officiant by an angel who is visible to the victim on the altar but not to the priest.¹³ If the wood under Abraham and Isaac was never ignited, neither did the knife ever cut.

Being bound on the altar, Abraham, as the book of Abraham and the legends report, prayed fervently for deliverance. Exactly such a prayer was offered as Isaac lay on the altar, but though in this case it was Isaac who was in mortal peril, it was again Abraham who uttered the prayer for deliverance: “May He who answered *Abraham* on Mount Moriah, answer you, and may He listen to the voice of your cry this day.”¹⁴ And just as the angels appealed to God when they saw Abraham on the altar, so later when they saw Isaac in the same situation they cried out in alarm: “What will happen to the covenant with Abraham—‘My covenant will I establish with Isaac,’—for the slaughtering knife is set upon his throat. The tears of the angels fell upon the knife, so that it could

not cut Isaac's throat."¹⁵ It is still Abraham for whom the angels are concerned, even though it is the life of Isaac that is in intimate danger. Everything seems to hark back to the original sacrifice—that of Abraham. Thus, at the moment that Isaac was freed from the altar, God renewed His promises to *Abraham*,¹⁶ the very promises that had been given at the moment of Abraham's own deliverance (see Abraham 1:16, 19); while he in turn prayed to God that "when the children of Isaac commit trespasses and because of them fall upon evil times, be mindful of the offering of their father Isaac, and forgive their sins, and deliver them from their suffering."¹⁷ Thus Abraham's prayer for deliverance is handed down to all his progeny.

In both sacrifice stories an angel comes to the rescue in immediate response to the prayer, while at the same time the voice of God is heard from heaven. This goes back to Genesis 22:11–12, 15–18, where "the angel of the Lord" conveys to Abraham the words of God speaking in the first person: "And the angel of the Lord . . . said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord." As the rabbis explained it, "God makes a sign to the Metatron, who in turn calls out to Abraham," or "the Almighty hastened to send his voice from above, saying: Do not slay thy son."¹⁸ That this complication is ancient and not invented by the doctors, whom it puzzled, is indicated in the "lion couch" situation in which, as we have seen, the appearance of the heavenly messenger is accompanied by the voice of the Lord of all, which is heard descending from above. It is Abraham who establishes the standard situation: how many times in his career did he find himself in mortal danger only to pray and be delivered by an angel? An angel came to rescue the infant in the cave when his mother had given him up for dead; the same angel came to rescue the child Abraham from the soldiers, saying, "Do not fear, for the Mighty One will deliver thee from the hand of thine enemies!"¹⁹ The same angel delivered him first from starvation in prison and then from death in the flames. So it is not surprising that the angel who comes to rescue Isaac puts a stop to the proceedings by calling out "Abraham, Abraham" (Genesis 22:11), while Isaac remains passive throughout.²⁰

One of the strangest turns of the Abraham story was surely Abraham's refusal to be helped by the angel, with its striking Egyptian parallel.²¹ Surprisingly enough, the same motif occurs in the sacrifice of Isaac. For according to the Midrash, God ordered Michael, "Delay not, hasten to Abraham and tell him not to do the deed!" And Michael obeyed: "Abraham! Abraham! What art thou

doing?" To this the patriarch replied, "Who tells me to stop?" "A messenger sent from the Lord!" says Michael. But Abraham answers, "The Almighty Himself commanded me to offer my son to Him—only He can countermand the order: I will not hearken to any messenger!" So God must personally intervene to save Isaac.²² Such a very peculiar twist to the story—the refusal of angelic assistance in the moment of supreme danger—is introduced by way of explaining that it is God and not the angel who delivers; so in the book of Abraham: ". . . and the angel of his presence stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands; And his voice was unto me: Abraham, Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee" (Abraham 1:15–16). Everything indicates that this is the old authentic version.

In both sacrifices the role of Satan is the same, as he does his best at every step to frustrate the whole business. As the man in black silk pleaded with Abraham on the altar to be sensible, yield to the king, and so save his own life, even so he addresses him at the second sacrifice: "Are you crazy—killing your own son!" To which Abraham replied, "For that purpose he was born." Satan then addressed Isaac: "Are you going to allow this?" And the young man answered, "I know what is going on, and I submit to it."²³ First Satan had done everything in his power to block their progress on the road to the mountain,²⁴ and then as a venerable and kindly old man he had walked along with them, piously and reasonably pointing out that a just God would not demand the sacrifice of a son.²⁵ It was even Satan, according to some, who dashed the knife from Abraham's hand in the last moment.²⁶ In both stories it is Satan who suggests the sacrifice in the first place²⁷ and then does everything in his power to keep it from being carried out. Why is that? The explanation is given both times: Mastema suggests the supreme sacrifice in order to discredit Abraham with the angels, for he is sure that the prophet will back out in the end. As soon as it becomes perfectly clear, therefore, that Abraham is *not* backing out, Satan becomes alarmed, and to keep from losing his bet he wants to call the whole thing off.

In a recent and important study, Roy A. Rosenberg has pointed out that the sacrifice of Isaac has its background in the Canaanite rite of the substitute king, which rite was "celebrated in both Persia and Babylonia in connection with the acronical rising of Sirius . . . [as Saturn] the god who demanded human sacrifices."²⁸ We have already noted that the worship of Sirius played a conspicuous part, according to Abraham 1:9, in the rites involving

the sacrifice of Abraham. In connection with the offering of Isaac, Rosenberg lays great emphasis on a passage from the Book of Enoch: "The Righteous One shall arise from sleep and walk in the paths of righteousness," the figure on the altar being the Righteous One.²⁹ At once we think of "the weary one" or "the sleeping one" who arises from the lion couch. What confirms the association is the report that as Isaac was about to be sacrificed, the *Arelim* began to roar in heaven. For the *Arelim* are "the divine lions," whose role in Egyptian sacrificial rites we have already explained. Thus, even the lion motif is not missing from our two sacrifice stories.

The close resemblance between the sacrifices of Abraham and Isaac, far from impugning the authenticity of either story, may well be viewed as a confirmation of both. Joshua Finkel points out that there are many close parallels to the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in ancient literature, and that these are "overwhelmingly ritualistic;"³⁰ that is, they belong to a category of events that follow a set pattern and yet *really do happen*. "In the mountain of the Temple of the Lord Abraham offered Isaac his son," according to a Targum, "and in this mountain—of the Temple—the glory of the Shekhinah of the Lord was revealed to him."³¹ What happened there was the type and shadow of the temple ordinances to come, which were in turn the type and shadow of a greater sacrifice. The one sacrifice prefigures the other, being, in the words of St. Ambrose, "less perfect, but still of the same order."³² Isaac is a type. "Any man," says the Midrash, "who acknowledges that there are two worlds, is *an* Isaac," and further explains, "Not *Isaac* but *in Isaac*—that is, a portion of the seed of Isaac, not all of it."³³ In exactly the same sense Abraham too is a type: ". . . and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and *in* thy seed . . . shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Abraham 2:11; emphasis added). Far from being disturbed by resemblances, we should find them most reassuring. Is it surprising that the sacrifice of Isaac looked both forward and back, as "Isaac thought of himself as the type of offerings to come, while Abraham thought of himself as atoning for the guilt of Adam," or that "as Isaac was being bound on the altar, the spirit of Adam, the first man, was being bound with him"?³⁴ It was natural for Christians to view the sacrifice of Isaac as a type of the Crucifixion, yet it is the Jewish sources that comment most impressively on the sacrifice of the Son. When at the creation of the world the angels asked, "What is man that You shouldst remember him?" God replied, "You shall see a father slay his son, and the son consenting to be slain, to sanctify My name."³⁵

But if Isaac is a type of the Messiah as “the Suffering Servant,” Abraham is no less so. Even while he labors to minimize any spiritual resemblance between Christ and Abraham, Alberto Soggin reluctantly confesses that the historical and literary parallels between the two are most conspicuous.³⁶ An important point of resemblance between the two sacrifices is the complete freedom of will with which the victim submits. “I know what is going on,” says Isaac on the altar, “and I submit to it!” In time the main significance of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, was on the free-will offering of the victim for the atonement of Israel; we are even told that Isaac at the age of thirty-seven actually “asked to be bound on the Day of Atonement and Abraham functioned as the High Priest at the altar.”³⁷ In the same way, a great deal is made of Abraham’s willingness: “I was with thee,” says God in the Midrash, “when thou didst willingly offer for my name’s sake to enter the fiery furnace.”³⁸ When Abraham refused to escape though Prince Jectan opened the way for him, the prince told him, “Your blood will be upon your own head,” to which the hero cheerfully agreed.³⁹ The Hasidic teaching was that “Abraham our father offered up his life . . . and threw himself into the fiery furnace.”⁴⁰ There need be no sense of competition between the merits of father and son here—others too have made the supreme sacrifice—but the significance of Abraham’s test on the altar, as Raphael J. Loewe points out, “is that Abraham in Nimrod’s furnace is the *first* of those who willingly gave up his life for the sanctification of the divine Name.”⁴¹ This assigns a very important place in the history of the Atonement to the drama depicted in the book of Abraham and strongly attests its authenticity.

THE RESURRECTION MOTIF

In the Egyptian versions of the “lion couch” drama, the Resurrection motif was paramount. The sacrifices of Isaac and Abraham, apart from typifying the Atonement, were also foreshadowings of the Resurrection. There are persistent traditions in each case that the victim actually was put to death, only to be resurrected on the spot. We have seen in the Abraham stories how, when no knife could cut his throat, he was catapulted into the fire, which thereupon was instantly transformed into a blooming bower of delicious flowers and fruits amid which Abraham sat enjoying himself in angelic company.⁴² This at once calls to mind the image found in numerous (and very early) Oriental seals and murals of the revived or resurrected king sitting beneath an arbor amid the delights of the feast

at the New Year.⁴³ St. Jerome cites a Jewish belief that Abraham's rescue from the altar was the equivalent of a rebirth or resurrection.⁴⁴ It is Abraham who leads out in the Resurrection. "After these things," says the Testament of Judah, "shall Abraham and Isaac and Jacob arise unto life, and I (Judah) and my brethren shall be chiefs of the tribes of Israel."⁴⁵

The stories of the resurrection of Isaac are quite explicit. As Rabbi Eliezer puts it, "When the blade touched his neck, the soul of Isaac fled and departed, but when he heard his voice saying 'Lay not thy hand . . .' his soul returned to his body, and he stood upon his feet. And Isaac knew that in this manner the dead in the future would be quickened. He opened his mouth and said: Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickeneth the dead."⁴⁶ Another tradition is that "the tears of the angels fell upon the knife, so that it could not cut Isaac's throat, but from terror his soul escaped from him"—he died on the altar.⁴⁷ Another has it that as the knife touched his throat "his life's spirit departed—his body became like ashes;" that is, he actually became a burnt offering;⁴⁸ or, as Geza Vermes puts it, "though he did not die, scripture credits Isaac with having died and his ashes having lain upon the altar."⁴⁹ But he only dies in order to prefigure the Resurrection, for immediately God sent the dew of life "and Isaac received his spirit again, while the angels joined in a chorus of praise: Praised be the Eternal, thou who hast given life to the dead!"⁵⁰ In another account God orders Michael to rush to the rescue: "'Why standest thou here? Let him not be slaughtered!' Without delay Michael, anguish in his voice, cried out: 'Abraham! Abraham! Lay not thine hand upon the lad. . . .' At once Abraham left off from Isaac, who returned to life, revived by the heavenly voice."⁵¹ Isaac is a symbol of revival and renewal—"Is any thing too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14). At his birth, we are told, both Abraham and Sarah regained their youth.⁵² And "just as God gave a child to Abraham and Sarah when they had lost all hope, so he can restore Jerusalem."⁵³ When Robert Graves surmises that "Abraham according to the custom would renew his youth by the sacrifice of his first-born son," he is referring to a custom which Abraham fervidly denounced but which was nonetheless observed in his own family, according to the book of Abraham, which reports that his own father "had determined against me, to take away my life" (Abraham 1:30). The famous Strassburg Bestiary begins with a vivid scene of the sacrifice of Isaac followed by the drama of the sacrificial death and resurrection of the fabulous phoenix bird, the Egyptian and early Christian symbol of the Resurrection.

Why the insistence on the death and resurrection of Isaac? Because a perfect sacrifice must be a *complete* sacrifice, and the rabbinical tradition, especially when it was directed against the claims of the Christians, insisted that the sacrifice of Isaac was the perfect sacrifice, thus obviating the need for the atoning death of Christ. "Though the idea of the death and resurrection of Isaac was generally rejected by rabbinic Judaism," writes Roy A. Rosenberg, still the proposition was accepted "that Isaac was 'the perfect sacrifice,' the atonement offering that brings forgiveness of sins through the ages."⁵⁴ Accordingly, the blood of the paschal lamb is considered to be the blood of *Isaac*,⁵⁵ and according to some Jewish sectaries the real purpose of the Passover is to celebrate the offering of Isaac rather than the deliverance from Egypt.⁵⁶ It wasn't only the sectaries, however: "Rabbinical writings show clearly that sacrifices, and perhaps the offering of all sacrifice, were intended as a memorial of Isaac's self-oblation."⁵⁷

THE UNCOMPLETED SACRIFICE

But the stories of Isaac's "resurrection" are scattered, conflicting, and poorly attested, however persistent, and this leads to serious difficulty: "The main problem was, of course," writes Geza Vermes, "the obvious fact that Isaac did not actually die on the altar."⁵⁸ The whole biblical account, in fact, focuses on the dramatic *arrest* of the action at its climax, "Lay *not* thine hand upon the lad" (Genesis 22:12; emphasis added). It has often been claimed, in fact, that the story of Isaac's sacrifice really records the abolition of human sacrifice, when Abraham decides it will not be necessary.⁵⁹ But the validity of the sacrifice, according to the rabbis, lay in Isaac's complete *willingness* to be offered. Abraham may have known that Isaac was in no real danger when he said, with perfect confidence, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:8), and when without equivocation he told the two young men who escorted them to the mountain: "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Genesis 22:5); Isaac did not know it—it was he who was being tested. But Abraham had already been tested in the same way; if "Isaac . . . offered himself at the Binding," so before his day the youthful "Abraham . . . threw himself into the fiery furnace. . . . If we follow in their footsteps they will stand and intercede for us on the holy and awesome day."⁶⁰ Isaac was being tested even as other Saints are tested, since "the testing of the righteous here below is essential to the *plan* of the universe." The Midrash, in

fact, strongly emphasized the parallelism between the sacrifice of Isaac and the willing martyrdom of *other* heroes and heroines, including many who suffered terribly painful deaths.⁶¹ Isaac, in short, belongs to the honorable category of those who were willing to be “partakers of Christ’s sufferings,” as all the Saints and martyrs have been (1 Peter 4:13).

The second problem raised by the claim that Isaac’s sacrifice was the ultimate atonement is that the shedding of blood did *not* cease with it: “If Isaac’s self-offering on Mount Moriah atoned for the sins of Israel,” asks Vermes, “why should animal victims be offered daily for the same purpose in the sanctuary on Mount Zion?”⁶² Circumcision no less than the Akedah remains a never-ceasing atonement for Israel, being performed by Abraham himself and on “the Date of Atonement, and upon the spot on which the altar was later to be erected in the Temple,”⁶³ but for all that, no one claims that all the law is fulfilled in it. “Students of Christian origins have come increasingly to realize,” writes Rosenberg, a Jew, “that the sacrifice of Isaac was to be reenacted by the ‘new Isaac,’ who, like the old, was a ‘son of God.’”⁶⁴ The early Christian teaching was that, as he was about to sacrifice his son on the mountain, Abraham “saw Christ’s day and yearned for it. There he saw the redemption of Adam and rejoiced, and it was revealed to him, that the Messiah would suffer in the place of Adam.”⁶⁵ But the old Isaac, called in the Targum “the Lamb of Abraham,”⁶⁶ neither suffered sacrificial death nor put an end to the shedding of blood. His act was an earnest of things to come, and that puts it on the same level as the sacrifice of Abraham.

This explains, we believe, the absence of the story of Abraham on the altar from the pages of the Old Testament. Geza Vermes points out that whereas in the biblical version of the sacrifice of Abraham “the principal actors [were] Abraham and God,” other versions, even in very early times, “somewhat surprisingly shift the emphasis and focus their interest on the person of Isaac.”⁶⁷ Whatever the reason for the shift, it was a very emphatic one: “The Binding of Isaac was thought to have played a unique role in the whole economy of the salvation of Israel, and to have a permanent redemptive effect on behalf of its people.”⁶⁸ It completely supplanted the earlier episode of the sacrifice of Abraham on the ancient principle that the later repetition of an event causes the earlier occurrence to be forgotten.⁶⁹ The principle is nowhere better illustrated than in the story of Abraham himself: the names Abram and Sarai are unknown to most Christians, because of the explicit

command, “Do *not* call Sarah Sarai” anymore, “do *not* call Abraham Abram” — those were once their names, but no more!⁷⁰ When Israel finally returns to God and goes to Abraham for instruction, we are told, instead of teaching them himself, he will refer them to Isaac, who will in turn pass them on to Jacob and so on down to Moses — it is from the *latest* prophet of the latest dispensation that the people receive instruction.⁷¹ On this principle, the only words of the Father in the New Testament are those which introduce His Son and turn all the offices of the dispensation over to Him (see Matthew 3:17; 17:5).

It was necessary to overshadow and even supplant the story of Abraham’s sacrifice by that of Isaac if Isaac were to have any stature at all with posterity. Scholars long declared both Isaac and Jacob, imitating Abraham in everything, to be mere shadow figures, mythical creatures without any real personalities of their own. Jacob, to be sure, has some interesting if not altogether creditable experiences, but what is left for Isaac? The three stand before us as a trio: “Abraham instituted the morning prayer, Isaac the noon prayer, and Jacob the evening prayer”; that is, they all share in establishing a single body of rites and ordinances.⁷² One does not steal the glory of the other. Great emphasis is laid by the rabbis on the necessary equality of merit and glory between Abraham and Isaac, while each emphasizes some special aspect of the divine economy: Abraham was the Great One, Jacob the Little One, and Isaac who came in between was “the servant of the Lord who was delivered from the bonds by his Master.”⁷³ The special emphasis on Isaac is as the sacrificial victim. If his sacrifice was “an imperfect type,” it was still more perfect than the earlier sacrifice of Abraham on a pagan altar, and in every way it qualified to supersede it. Though it was an equal test for both men, “purged and idealized by the *trial* motivation,”⁷⁴ the second sacrifice was the true type of the Atonement. In the long and detailed history of Abraham the story of the sacrifice in Canaan could safely be omitted in deference to the nobler repetition, which, while it added no less to the glory of Abraham, preserves a sense of proportion among the patriarchs.

Abraham gets as much credit out of the sacrifice of Isaac as he does from his own adventure on the altar — he had already risked his own life countless times; how much dearer to him in his old age was the life of his only son and heir! And since the two sacrifices typify the same thing, nothing is lost to Abraham and much is gained for Isaac by omitting the earlier episode from the

Bible. But that episode left an indelible mark in the record. The learned Egyptologist who in 1912 charged Joseph Smith with reading the sacrifice of *Isaac* into facsimile no. 1 and the story of Abraham was apparently quite unaware that ancient Jewish writers of whom Joseph Smith knew nothing told the same story that he did about Abraham on the altar. The important thing for the student of the book of Abraham is that the sacrifice of Abraham was remembered—and vividly recalled in nonbiblical sources—as a historical event. This makes it almost certain that it *was* a real event, for nothing is less probable than that the Jews would at a very early time *invent* a story which, while adding little or nothing to the supreme glory of Abraham, would do definite damage to Isaac's one claim to fame. If the binding on the altar—the *Akedah*—was to be the “unique glory of Isaac,” it was entirely in order to quietly drop the earlier episode of Abraham that anticipates and overshadows it, just as it is right and proper to forget that the hero was once called Abram.

BACK TO THE LION COUCH

Studies of the sacrifice of Isaac emphasize as its most important aspect the principle of substitution, which is also basic in the sacrifice of Abraham. As J. Finkel expressed it, “evidently the primary aim of the story (of Isaac) was to give divine sanction to the law of substitution.”⁷⁵ Isaac was not only saved *by* a substitute, but he himself was substituting for another. A ram by the name of Isaac went at the head of Abraham's herd. Gabriel took him and brought him to Abraham, and he sacrificed him instead of his son. As he did so, Abraham said, “Since I brought my son to you as a sacrificial animal be in thine eye as if it were my son lying on the altar.” Accordingly, “whatsoever Abraham did by the altar, he exclaimed, and said, ‘This is instead of my son, and may it be considered before the Lord in place of my son.’ And God accepted the sacrifice of the ram, and it was accounted as though it had been Isaac.”⁷⁶ Himself noble, Isaac was saved by the substitution of “a noble victim.”⁷⁷

But, more important, Isaac himself was a substitute. “In Jewish tradition,” writes Rosenberg, “Isaac is the prototype of the ‘Suffering Servant,’ bound on the altar as a sacrifice.”⁷⁸ Rosenberg has shown that the title of Suffering Servant was used in the Ancient East to designate “the substitute *king*” — the noble victim. Accordingly, the “new Isaac” mentioned in 4 Maccabees must be “a ‘substitute king’ who dies that the people might live.”⁷⁹ The starting

point in Rosenberg's investigation is Isaiah 52:13–53:12, which "seems to constitute a portion of a ritual drama centering about a similar humiliation, culminating in death, of a 'substitute' for the figure of the king of the Jews." If we examine these passages, we find that they fit the story of Abraham's sacrifice even better than that of Isaac.

Thus beginning with Isaiah 52:13 we see the Suffering Servant raised up on high, reminding us of the scene from the Midrash: they felled cedars, erected a large dais for him, and set him on top, while uttering praises before him [in mockery], saying: 'Hear us, my Lord!' [and the like]. They said to him, 'Thou art King over us; Thou art a god to us!' But he replied, 'The world does not lack its king, and the world does not lack its God!'"⁸⁰ Here Abraham both rejects the office and denounces the rites. The Midrash also indicates that the rites of Isaac were matched by heathen practices, his Akedah resembling the binding of the princes of the heathen, since every nation possesses at its own level "a 'prince' [as its] guardian angel and patron."⁸¹

In the next verse (Isaiah 52:14), the picture of the Suffering Servant with "visage . . . marred," recalls Abraham led out to sacrifice after his long suffering in prison while the princes and the wise men mock. Verse 15, telling of the kings who shut their mouths in amazement, recalls the 365 kings who were astounded to behold Abraham's delivery from the altar. In Isaiah 53:1 the arm of the Lord is revealed, as it is unbeknownst to the others in the delivery of Abraham (see Abraham 1:17). Isaiah 53:2 emphasizes the drought motif, which, as we have seen, is never missing from the rites of the substitute king. In verses 3–7 the Suffering Servant is beaten that *we* may be healed—a substitute for all of us. In verse 8 He is "taken from prison and from judgment" to be "cut off out of the land of the living," exactly as Abraham was according to the traditions. Verse 9 reminds us of Abraham in wicked Canaan, and verse 10 ("it pleased the Lord to bruise him") recalls the description of Abraham as a son being mercilessly beaten by a loving father but never complaining. Finally the reward: Because His soul was placed as an offering, He shall see His progeny, His days shall be lengthened, and He shall prosper greatly (see Isaiah 53:10–12)—all "because he hath poured out his soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:12). Such was the reward of Abraham, with the assurance also that by the knowledge gained he would be able to sanctify others (see Isaiah 53:11). In the end the Suffering Servant becomes the great intercessor: "he bare the sin of many,

and made intercession for the transgressors” (Isaiah 53:12), just as Abraham does, as the great advocate for sinners living and dead. Thus Isaiah 52:13–53:12, while vividly recalling the suffering of Isaac, is an even better description of Abraham on the altar.

The sacrifice of the substitute king is found all over the ancient world. According to Rosenberg, the rite was “celebrated in both Persia and Babylonia in connection with the acronical rising of Sirius,” sometimes identified in this connection with Saturn, “the god who demanded human sacrifice.”⁸² The book of Abraham has already apprised us of the importance of Sirius (*Shagre-el*) in the sacrificial rites of the Plain of Olishem, and it even labors the point that human sacrifice was the normal order of things in Canaan in Abraham’s day. We have taken the position from the first that Abraham was put on the altar as a substitute for the king, an idea first suggested by the intense rivalry between the two, as indicated both in the legends and in the book of Abraham. Rosenberg’s study of the sacrifice of Isaac concludes that in the earliest accounts of that event “both the Jewish and Christian traditions stem ultimately from the ancient Canaanite cult of Jerusalem, in which periodically the king, or a substitute for the king, had to be offered as a sacrifice.”⁸³ It was to just such a cult—in Canaan—that we traced the sacrifice of Abraham, and that is why we have been at such pains to point out the close and thorough-going resemblances between the two: they are essentially the same rite and have the same background. If the one reflects “the ancient Canaanite cult” in which “a substitute for the King had to be offered,” so does the other. Rosenberg says the sacrifice of Isaac most certainly goes back to that cult, and the book of Abraham tells us flatly that the sacrifice of Abraham does. Certainly the Abraham story in its pagan setting is much nearer to the original substitute-king rite in all its details than is the Isaac story, which is a sizable step removed from it. The substitute sacrifice is a red thread that runs through the early career of the prophet: the life of the infant Abraham when his brother Haran substituted a slave child to be killed in his place;⁸⁴ then Haran himself died for Abraham in the flames;⁸⁵ and then Abraham was saved from the lion-couch when the priest was smitten in his stead (see Abraham 1:17, 29); finally, his life was saved by his wife Sarah, who was willing to face death to rescue him again from the lion couch. This last much-misunderstood episode deserves closer attention.

NOTES

1. Bernhard Beer, *Leben Abraham's nach Auffassung der jüdischen Sage* (Leipzig: Leiner, 1859), 47; Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909), 1:262; for Rashi's explanation, see Gerald Abrahams, *The Jewish Mind* (London: Constable, 1961), 51, n. 1.

2. Micah Joseph bin Gorion, *Die Sagen der Juden* (Frankfurt: Rutten and Loening, 1914), 2:325.

3. Horst Seebass, *Der Erzvater Israel und die Einführung der Jahweverehrung in Kanaan* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966), 105.

4. Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 199–200.

5. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 209.

6. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 66, 182.

7. Israël Levi, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac et la mort de Jésus," *Revue des Études Juives* 64 (1912): 169.

8. Bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:300.

9. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 67.

10. Pseudo-Philo 6:11; see also Isaac's speeches in Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 65.

11. Nahum Norbert Glatzer, *Faith and Knowledge: The Jew in the Medieval World* (Boston: Beacon, 1963), 178.

12. Bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:303.

13. See Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 67. Sometimes Abraham lets the knife fall, and sometimes it is not the angel but Satan who dashes it from his hand. See also bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:287.

14. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 195.

15. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:281.

16. Pseudo-Philo 32:2–4; complete Latin text in Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 199–200.

17. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:284; see next note.

18. Pseudo-Philo 32:2–4; complete Latin text in Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 199–200.

19. Ma'aseh Abraham Abinu, in Adolph Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrash* (Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1967), 1:28.

20. Bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:287.

21. Discussed in the *Improvement Era* 72 (August 1969): 76. In all the apocryphal accounts of Abraham on the altar he refuses the assistance proffered by the angel, saying that God alone will deliver him. Ma'aseh Abraham Abinu, in Jellineck, *Beth ha-Midrash*, 1:34, and Midrash de Abraham Abinu, in Jellineck, *Beth ha-Midrash*, 1:41; Ka'b el-Ahbar, text in Bernard Chapira, "Légendes bibliques attribuées à Ka'b el Ahbar," in *Revue des Études Juives*, 70 (1920): 37.

22. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 68.

23. Levi, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac et la mort de Jésus," 169.

24. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:276–77.

25. *Sefer ha-Yashar* 23:25–28.

26. Bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:287.

27. Levi, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac et la mort de Jésus," 166–67.

28. Roy A. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965): 382.

29. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 385, quoting the Book of Enoch 92:3, which Rosenberg calls "the most important text yet uncovered of the Jewish apocalyptic literature."

30. Joshua Finkel, "Old Israelitish Traditions in the Koran," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 3 (1930): 15.

31. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 195.

32. Jean Daniélou, "La Typologie d'Isaac dans le Christianisme Primitif," *Biblica* 28 (1947): 392–93.

33. William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 2:180.

34. Bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:307–8.

35. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 201; see also Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 68.

36. J. Alberto Soggin, "Geschichte, Historie und Heilsgeschichte im Alten Testament," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 89 (1964): 732–33.

37. Gerald Friedlander, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Hermon, 1965), 227.

38. Genesis Rabbah 39:8, in *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, trans. Harry Freedman (London: Soncino, 1939), 1:316; *Midrash on Psalms* 119:3, in Braude, *Midrash on Psalms*, 2:248.

39. Pseudo-Philo 6:11; bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:81.

40. Glatzer, *Faith and Knowledge*, 178.

41. Raphael J. Loewe, "Apologetic Motifs in the Targum to the Song of Songs," *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), 166, with Tanḥuma text supplied in his note 35.

42. So in the *Ma'aseh Abraham Abinu*, in *Beth ha-Midrash*, 1:34. According to the *Sefer ha-Yashar* 8, "Abram walked in the midst of the fire for three days and three nights," Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 73. Ka'b al-Ahbar, *Qiṣṣat Ibrahim Abinu*, text in Chapira, "Légendes bibliques attribuées à Ka'b el Ahbar," 42; see also *Midrash de-Abraham Avinu*, in Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrash*, 5:40–41. According to Tha'labī, *Qiṣṣat al-anbiyā'* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalibī wa-Awlāduhu, a.h. 1340), 55, it was the "Angel of the Shadow" who sat with Abraham in the fire, i.e., he was sacrificed.

43. Anton Moortgat, *Tammuz: Der Unsterblichkeitsglaube in der altorientalischen Bildkunst* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1949), 63, 114, 139–42.

44. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 113.

45. Testament of Judah 25:1.

46. Friedlander, *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, 228.

47. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:281.

48. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 67.

49. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 205.

50. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 69.

51. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:281–82.

52. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:206, 287.

53. Sofia Cavalletti, "Abrahamo come Messia e 'ricapitolatore' del suo popolo," *Studie Materiali* 35 (1964): 263.

54. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 388.

55. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 388.

56. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 386, citing Jubilees 18:18.

57. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 209.

58. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 205.

59. So Zecharie Mayani, *Les Hyksos et le monde de la Bible* (Paris: Payot, 1956), 21.

60. Glatzer, *Faith and Knowledge*, 178.

61. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 202–3.

62. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 208.

63. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:240.

64. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 388.
65. Nibley's translation of Cave of Treasures, 29:13–14, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge (London: Religious Tract Society, 1927), 149–50 (fol. 25b col. A).
66. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 388, citing the fragmentary Targum to Leviticus 22:27.
67. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 193.
68. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 208.
69. Oscar Holtzmann, *Der Tosephtakraktat Berakhot*, supplement to *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 23 (Töpelmann: Gießen, 1912): 12–13.
70. Holtzmann, *Der Tosephtakraktat Berakot*, 12–13.
71. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 206, n. 974.
72. *Midrash on Psalms 55:2*, in Braude, *Midrash on Psalms*, 1:493.
73. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 203, citing Targum to Job 3:18.
74. Finkel, "Old Israelitish Traditions in the Koran," 14.
75. Finkel, "Old Israelitish Traditions in the Koran," 12.
76. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:283.
77. Finkel, "Old Israelitish Traditions in the Koran," 12.
78. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 385.
79. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 383, 385.
80. Genesis Rabbah 42:5, in Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 1:347.
81. Genesis Rabbah 56:5, in Freedman, *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 1:495, n. 1.
82. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 382.
83. Rosenberg, "Jesus, Isaac, and the 'Suffering Servant,'" 388.
84. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 15. That Haran died as a substitute for Abraham is clearly indicated in *Midrash de Abraham de Abraham Abinu*, in Jellinek *Bet ha-Midrash*, 5:40; Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, 73; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:216; bin Gorion, *Sagen der Juden*, 2:96–97; Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 1:310–11.
85. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, 16–17.