

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC IN GENESIS AND HEBREWS

A Study in the Hermeneutic of Faith

• James Swetnam, S.J. •

Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome

One of the key texts in the Old Testament, both in its own right and as viewed by Christian authors, is the account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-18.¹ The present essay will attempt to understand the meaning of the account; to study how it is interpreted in the Epistle to the Hebrews; and to outline how Cardinal John Henry Newman's book, *A Grammar of Assent*, may offer grounds for a faith-centered hermeneutic that aids in the exegesis of both the Genesis and the Hebrews texts.

In the later history of biblical criticism, the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham has proved a veritable storm center.² With the coming of the Enlightenment the sacrifice has often been viewed as an immoral action.³ But such condemnations are normally based on a view of Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac which is divorced from its context. In the way in which Genesis 22:1-18 is customarily interpreted as part of the canonical

This article is an adaptation in English of a conference originally given in Italian on November 5, 2003, at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. It marks the conclusion of the author's thirty-six years of teaching at the Institute. The Italian and original English versions are available on the Institute's website, www.biblico.it.

¹ For a brief summary of the importance of Genesis 22 in scholarly biblical research and in the light of varying religious traditions, see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71-72. The expression "sacrifice of Isaac" does not mean to imply, of course, that in Genesis 22 Abraham was allowed to carry through God's command to offer Isaac in sacrifice. The traditional Hebrew expression, the "Binding [*Akedah*] of Isaac," is used to show how far the intention of Abraham to sacrifice his son was allowed by God to proceed. But there is no question that *as regards intention* Genesis 22 depicts Abraham as sacrificing his son. The Epistle to the Hebrews uses the perfect tense of the Greek verb προσενήνοχεν ("offer in sacrifice") in 11:17 to show how the author viewed Abraham's sacrificial stance towards his son as having a permanent witness in Scripture. In this sense, Genesis 22 is about the "sacrifice of Isaac."

² See Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 132-161, for a brief presentation. A more detailed discussion can be found in David Lerch, *Isaaks Opferung christlich gedeutet: Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1950); Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York: Behrman, 1979 [translation from the Hebrew edition of 1950]).

³ See the forceful condemnation of Abraham's action in agreeing to slay his son by the influential philosopher Immanuel Kant as presented in Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 128-129. See also some remarks of contemporary scholars, 162.

text of the Old Testament alone or of the Old Testament and the New Testament together in various religious traditions, the verses present no insuperable difficulty in this regard.⁴

There are three broad headings which seem to commend themselves in a brief discussion of the implications of Genesis 22:1-18 within the canonical text of the Old Testament: *covenant*, *sacrifice*, and *faith*. Taken together, these three headings provide a convenient way of entering into the text.

The Covenant Setting

For a proper understanding of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac it is crucial to keep in mind the covenant setting of the canonical text. Verse 1 states that God is "testing" (Hebrew: נִסָּה; Greek: πειράζειν) Abraham. That is to say, God is arranging a test to discover if his son is "faithful" (יָצִיט; πιστός).⁵ The text of Genesis 22 is the climax of a progression involving call, promise, covenant, and oath.⁶ The call is found in Genesis 12:1-3, and consists of three blessings: a blessing which involves a land and nation (vv. 1-2a); a-blessing which involves a dynasty (v. 2b); and a blessing which involves the entire world (v. 3 with v. 2).⁷

These three elements seem to correspond to the three covenant episodes presented in Genesis 15, 17, and 22.⁸ In Genesis 15, the episode with the divided animals represents the making of a covenant by which

⁴ This point is well made by Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 129-130. On evidence from within the text that it was part of a canonical tradition (Moberly, 114).

⁵ See Birger Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1966): "Faith' is a vital element here; faith meaning to 'treat YHWH as reliable' (יָצִיט; πιστεύειν), to trust him, to believe that he will faithfully and lovingly keep his promises and honor his 'obligation.' What is required of the people in general is also required of each member individually" (26-27); "When the Old Testament speaks of YHWH testing his covenant son, 'tempting' him (נִסָּה; πειράζειν), it means that God arranges a test to find out if his son is true to the covenant, is יָצִיט, πιστόν. It is almost a formula that God tests 'that he might know' whether his chosen one is true or not" (27).

⁶ See the discussion by Scott W. Hahn, "Kinship by Covenant: A Biblical Theological Study of Covenant Types and Texts in the Old and New Testaments" (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 1995), 181-211.

⁷ See Hahn, "Kinship by Covenant," 183-184.

⁸ Most commentators agree that the covenant between God and Abraham is a "grant-type," i.e., it comprises six basic elements: (1) oath of suzerain (i.e., God); (2) blessing by suzerain of vassal and curse of enemies; (3) unconditional obligation on part of suzerain; (4) naming of progeny of vassal as beneficiaries by suzerain; (5) suzerain's praise of "name" of vassal; (6) frequent reference by suzerain to virtue of vassal. See Hahn, "Kinship by Covenant," 168-171.

Abraham's descendants will live as a nation in a particular land. In Genesis 17, the emphasis is on Abraham's great "name," that is, there is question of a dynasty. And in Genesis 22:16-18, the climax, there is question of a blessing to all nations.⁹

Thus Genesis 22:1-18 can be viewed as the culmination of Abraham's life as it is portrayed in the canonical text of Scripture. Afterwards he enters into the story only in relation to the death of Sarah (Gen. 23) and the marriage of Isaac (Gen. 24). His definitive life and destiny in terms of his relation with God are outlined in Genesis 22.¹⁰

The oath sworn by God to Abraham can be considered the concluding high point in the series of covenant episodes.¹¹ It incorporates, so to speak, the successful outcome of Abraham's test into the blessing given to all nations, so that Abraham's faith is now a part of the destiny of his offspring.¹²

The context of the covenant in Genesis 22 is fundamental for ascertaining the precise point of the passage. For Abraham is being tested with regard to his faith in God and his faith in God's pledge to give him the blessings of the covenant despite the apparent contradiction of God's command to offer his only beloved son. Further, Abraham must have been aware that this was a test, that he was being faced with a cruel dilemma in which his filial affection must be secondary.

⁹ See Hahn, "Kinship by Covenant," 185-186.

¹⁰ "Within the Genesis portrayal of Abraham's life and his relationship with God, Genesis 22 is the climactic moment. It is not the final story of Abraham, for there are still two more stories in which he features. Since, however, his purchase of a burial place for Sarah anticipates his own dying and burial (Gen. 23), and in the lengthy story of the acquisition of a wife for Isaac the focus shifts away from Abraham himself to Abraham's faithful servant (Gen. 24), these stories provide a kind of diminuendo and prepare for the story line to move on from Abraham. Genesis 22 is the last dialogue between Abraham and God, and its content focuses on the nature of the relationship between Abraham and God" (Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 72-73).

¹¹ See the discussion in Hahn, "Kinship by Covenant," 198-202.

¹² See R. W. L. Moberly, "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah," *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988): 320-321.-

At stake was not only the meaning of his God-centered existence but the meaning of the God-centered existence of Isaac and of all who were to be descended from him.¹³ The command from God to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, in other words, was a deadly serious affair for Abraham and for God.¹⁴

That the command of God to Abraham was a serious affair for God, as well as for Abraham, has perhaps not been sufficiently noted. For in ordering the test, God is implicitly endangering the whole enterprise of his covenant with Abraham. In terms of the story, God is waiting to see the result of Abraham's free reaction to the test: a refusal by Abraham to sacrifice Isaac would show that Abraham had not passed the test of his faith.¹⁵ Hence the covenant enterprise and everything associated with it would presumably collapse and salvation history would have to take a radically new turn.

The Meaning of Sacrifice

A second major perspective according to which Genesis 22 should be interpreted is that of sacrifice. Sacrifice here is associated with the location in which the action of Genesis 22 occurs. There is ample reason to take that

¹³ Moberly, after a discerning discussion (*The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 102-106) of how God's omniscience can permit of the statement that "now I know" (cf. Gen. 22:12), has these summary remarks: "Issues about God with the Old Testament are never posed in separation from the relational dynamic through which Israel knows God. The most explicit raising of the issue of divine omniscience, Psalm 139, raises the issue entirely with the context of the psalmist's relationship with God. It would be a mistake to construe God's 'knowing' in relation to his 'testing' any differently. The concern of the texts is for a deepening of the encounter between God and people. Although the primary emphasis falls upon the appropriate human response, this response is relational at the same time as being moral, and this relationship is not conceived as one-sided but rather God is engaged within the encounter in such a way that the outcome is a genuine divine concern. When Abraham is depicted as 'one who fears God,' the divine pronouncement 'now I know,' rather than 'now people will know,' indicates that the deepened relationship is in some way an intrinsic concern of God even as it also constitutes the nature of mature humanity" (106-107). Moberly takes the "fear of God," which is the object of God's knowledge as a result of the test, as equivalent in Christian parlance to the "faith" of Abraham which is being tested (79). But this equivalence seems a bit too facile, and betrays a lack of recognition of the covenant dimension of faith. "Fear of God" in Genesis 22 seems to be the virtue of Abraham which is based on his faith and is evidenced by his obedience.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 97-98.

¹⁵ "It is [the] dimension of human choice that is primarily signified by *nissah*, which characteristically, as in Deut. 8:2, poses Israel's response in terms of a fundamental choice—'testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandment[s], or not.' What marks out Abraham as 'one who fears God' is that he *chose* to obey God. What Deuteronomy holds out as a human possibility, all too often unrealized, is realized in Abraham. Human growth through choosing to obey God is the issue" (Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 105).

location (“Moriah” מֹרְיָה in v. 2) as Jerusalem.¹⁶ If this is so, then Genesis 22 becomes the basic Old Testament text for understanding animal sacrifice as practiced in the Temple of Jerusalem. This, in turn, would solve the puzzle as to why so little is said in the Pentateuch about the meaning of such sacrifices.¹⁷

The principal type of sacrifice indicated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy is the whole burnt offering (עֹלָה; ὁλοκαύτωμα).¹⁸ This is precisely the type of sacrifice which Abraham is called on to make of Isaac and actually does make of the ram.¹⁹

The relevance of sacrifice in the interpretation of Genesis 22 has not always been given the importance it should. This lack of attention not only distorts understanding of the interpretation of Genesis 22 which must have guided generations of faithful readers in Israel. It further distorts the possible relevance which Genesis 22 should have for the modern reader of the canonical text. By showing exactly how sacrifice can have a purchase on human existence as personified in Abraham, Genesis 22 is of crucial importance in the understanding of God’s revelation as contained in the Bible.

The Centrality of Faith

The perspectives involving covenant and sacrifice indicate the centrality of faith in Abraham’s response to God. Covenant and sacrifice are focused on God as he manifested himself to Abraham (covenant) and as Abraham

¹⁶ See Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 108-116. Moberly notes that the emphasis given in v. 14 to the place of the testing as “YHWH sees” indicates that “the general truth about God is tied to a particular place where that truth is realized” (p. 109).

¹⁷ See Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 117-118: “Genesis 22 becomes the primary account within the Old Testament of the meaning of animal sacrifice (as practiced in the Jerusalem Temple). It has long been a puzzle that the extensive Pentateuchal prescriptions for sacrificial worship say so little about the meaning of what is prescribed. One explanation, at least in terms of the Pentateuch as a canonical collection, is that the meaning of sacrifice has been so clearly depicted in Genesis 22 that further explanation becomes superfluous.”

¹⁸ Lev. 1; Deut. 12:6,11,13,14,27. See also, Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 118.

¹⁹ Gen. 22:2,13. “Within Genesis 22 Abraham’s sacrifice of the ram stands in place of his sacrifice of Isaac. Once Abraham sees the ram, he does not need to be told what to do, but directly grasps its significance and so he sacrifices the ram instead of Isaac. The meaning of this substitution of animal for child is provided by the preceding narrative of God’s testing, Abraham’s fearing, and God’s providing. That is, the whole burnt offering is symbolic of Abraham’s self-sacrifice as a person who unreservedly fears God. Sacrifice could, and no doubt did, mean other things within Israelite history (not to mention other contexts). But the canonical and received meaning is that of Genesis 22, where visible religious action and inward spiritual significance are knit together as one” (Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 118).

replies to God's command (sacrifice). It is faith that motivates Abraham.²⁰ To have faith is to treat God as reliable (ἰσχυς; πιστεύειν), to trust him, to believe that he will faithfully and lovingly keep his promises and honor his obligations.²¹

Because Abraham's faith was based on his covenant with God, he was aware of what was at stake, and was cognizant not only of what was expected of him (obedience) but what God expected of himself (fulfillment of the promises)—Abraham's faith was a type of knowledge. And it was this knowledge which enabled Abraham to withstand the test God had prepared for him: Abraham *knew* that God would somehow provide a solution to what, outside the realm of faith, was an insoluble problem. In other words, Genesis 22:8 ("God will Himself provide a lamb for a burnt offering") is to be taken not simply as the anxious words of a distraught father to a questioning son, but as an expression of certainty based on faith.

In seeking the relevance of Genesis 22 for the reader of today, faith is thus the crucial element. It is this element which provides the basis for the religious significance of the original text for any application of that significance to a world contemporary with a reader of any time.²² Hence any attempt to read Genesis 22, if it is to come to grips with the core relevance of the text for the contemporary world, has to be based on Abraham's faith.

But there are two basic ways in which Abraham's faith can be approached by the contemporary reader. The reader may choose to stand "inside the loop" of Abraham's faith, or outside of it. That is to say, the reader may share in the faith of Abraham as he undergoes the events of Genesis 22, or the reader may simply consider himself to be an onlooker of the events portrayed. Herein lies the crucial hermeneutical challenge of Genesis 22.

Nothing within the text will force the reader to opt for a reading in which he incorporates Abraham's faith into his own life. The stance here has to be dictated by the reader's own free choice. God's freedom in

²⁰ The result of Abraham's faith as seen in Genesis 22 is that he is shown to "fear God" (יִרָא אֱלֹהִים). This phrase seems to situate Abraham in a broader context than the covenant, making his conduct a model for all those who react in obedience to God. See Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 94-97.

²¹ See above, n. 5.

²² On the question of the religious meaning of a biblical text as a key element for the application of that text to the situation of a later age, see the remarks of Albert Vanhoye, former secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in Peter Williamson, "Catholicism and the Bible," *First Things* 74 (June-July, 1997): 36: "The Bible is a collection of religious writings. If one does not explain the religious meaning of a biblical writing, one has not explained the text adequately."

calling Abraham and in putting him to the test and Abraham's freedom in responding to this call and test are mirrored in the freedom which every reader enjoys before the text as it stands. This is not something peculiar to Genesis 22—it is a choice which faces every reader of the Bible. It is the peculiar merit of Genesis 22, however, that it sets forth this choice in all its starkness.²³

Abraham in Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews pays particular attention to Genesis 22. This attention can serve as a guide in understanding how the early Christians interpreted this key text in their search for understanding the reality of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews (11:17-19) singles out Abraham's faith in its understanding of the Genesis text:

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, in the act of being tested, stands as offering Isaac, that is, he attempted to offer up his only son in sacrifice, he who had received the promises,¹⁸ he to whom it had been said that *In Isaac will your seed be named*,¹⁹ having concluded that God was able to raise from the dead, and as a result he received Isaac back as a symbol.²⁴

The text is theologically rich. "Faith" (πίστις) is highlighted. In Hebrews 11, faith is attributed to a variety of Old Testament heroes, and is described in 11:2-3, 6.²⁵ The word "offer [in sacrifice]" is used twice in v. 17. The first use is in the perfect tense (προσενήνοχεν, "stands as offering")—Abraham's sacrificial stance is the chief point of Genesis 22 upon which the author of Hebrews wishes to base his understanding of the whole text. The second verb is in the imperfect tense (προσέφερον, "attempted to

²³ See the remarks of E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 24: "Since it is very easy for a reader of any text to construe meanings that are different from the author's, there is nothing in the nature of the text itself which requires the reader to set up the author's meaning as his normative ideal. Any normative concept in interpretation implies a choice that is required not by the nature of written texts but rather by the goal that the interpreter sets himself."

²⁴ My translation from the Greek. The text used is that of Nestle–Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994²⁷), 581. There are no significant textual variants.

²⁵ Any detailed study of the use of Genesis 22 in Hebrews would have to take into account these descriptions. But such a study is beyond the possibility of the present paper.

offer"). This conative imperfect describes how Abraham was "in the act of being tested" (πειραζόμενος).

The terms of the testing are made clear: he was offering up his "only son" (μονογενῆ) as "one who had received the promises" (ὁ τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀναδεξάμενος). The promise in question is specified: "He to whom it had been said, 'In Isaac will your seed be named'" (πρὸς ὃν ἐλαλήθη ὅτι ἐν Ἰσαὰκ κληθήσεται σοι σπέρμα). These remarks indicate that the author of Hebrews has read the text of Genesis 22 with care, and has set out the parameters of the test with precision. What follows is a remarkable interpretation of the reasoning behind Abraham's faith in God: "having concluded that God was able to raise from the dead" (λογισάμενος ὅτι καὶ ἐκ νεκρῶν ἐγείρειν δυνατὸς ὁ θεός).

The apparently matter-of-fact way in which the author of Hebrews attributes belief in the resurrection from the dead to Abraham should not distract one from realizing the implications of what is being affirmed. Abraham's faithful inference would seem to be plausible, given his previous belief in the birth of Isaac from his own "dead" body and Sarah's "dead" womb.²⁶ In view of Abraham's heroic faith, there is nothing forced or artificial about the exegesis. If God's promise of offspring through Isaac (v. 18) had to be believed without qualification, and the command to sacrifice Isaac was for Abraham required by God, then his belief in the resurrection would seem to a possible—indeed, perhaps even the only possible inference.

What is remarkable is the attribution of belief in resurrection from the dead to Abraham. He stands at the very fountainhead of Old Testament belief and practice, and this belief and practice is traditionally understood as being agnostic with regard to resurrection from the dead.²⁷ Here, a Christian writer who had clearly reflected long and deeply on the Old Testament antecedents to his Christian faith, states decisively that Abraham believed in resurrection from the dead.²⁸

If Abraham's interior attitude in sacrificing Isaac is to be understood as paradigmatic for the interior attitude of all subsequent Old

²⁶ See Heb. 11:10-11; Rom. 4:19.

²⁷ The following texts are sometimes cited in support of belief in resurrection from the dead in the Old Testament: Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:4-14; Dan. 12:2. The first two texts are not conclusive. The third is much more probable as an indication of belief in individual resurrection from the dead, but it is quite late.

²⁸ One modern commentator on Hebrews remarks dryly: "This phrase and the belief thus attributed to Abraham go well beyond the scriptural data." See Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 335. The explicit scriptural data, certainly. But what is implicit in the scriptural data, perhaps not. Another modern commentator on Hebrews notes: "What the present verse says about resurrection is clearly derived not from Old Testament or other pre-Christian sources, but from primitive Christian tradition." See Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 602. Agreed. But again the inference attributed to Abraham seems legitimate given the circumstances and given Abraham's faith.

Testament worshippers, this is a startling statement about what Hebrews' author regards as implicitly standing behind all Old Testament sacrifice. The author seems to be attributing this attitude, at least implicitly, to all those offering sacrifices in the Old Testament.

What seems to be happening in Hebrews 11:19 is that the author, guided by his faith in the resurrection of Christ (Heb. 13:20), is extrapolating this belief into the world of Abraham. But the extrapolation is perfectly in keeping with the words of the Old Testament text—that is, the interpretation does no violence to the parameters of the Genesis account as it stands. As we have noted, in the context of Abraham's presumed heroic faith in God, there is nothing out of character for such a belief on Abraham's part. The second part of Hebrews 11:19 confirms the view that the author of Hebrews was thinking of the restoration of Isaac with relation to the resurrection of Jesus, for he states that the restoration is a "symbol" of the resurrection of Jesus.²⁹

The Oath Sworn to Abraham

Hebrews (6:13-18) alludes to the sacrifice of Isaac at 6:14 with a citation from the text of Genesis 22:17. The context of Hebrews is revealing:

¹³ For God, having made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater to swear by, swore by himself,
¹⁴ *with the words: With blessing shall I bless you, and with increase shall I increase you.* ¹⁵ And thus, having endured, did Abraham receive the promise. ¹⁶ For men swear by that which is greater; and at the end of every controversy among them comes the oath as a confirmation. ¹⁷ Thus God, wishing to show more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable nature of his design, intervened with an oath. ¹⁸ The purpose of the oath was that, through two unchangeable things in which it is impossible that God lie, we have a strong source of comfort, we who have fled, so

²⁹ Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 604) suggests that the reference is more to the resurrection of believers than to the resurrection of Jesus, since the author of Hebrews is more interested in the former than in the latter. I wish to contest this view—the resurrection of Jesus is, for the author of Hebrews, that which brings to “perfection” the priesthood of Jesus. See James Swetnam, “The Structure of Hebrews 1:1–3:6,” *Melita Theologica* 43 (1992): 58-62; in particular, n. 28. Also, see James Swetnam, “Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Biblica* 70 (1989): 78-79 and n. 17.

as to lay hold of the hope before us.³⁰

The author of Hebrews is here exhorting his addressees to show the necessary diligence and concern to imitate the heirs of the promises and receive themselves what has been promised through faith and endurance (see Heb. 6:9-12, especially v. 12). Hence the presence of the introductory “for” in v. 16. That Genesis 22 is in the mind of the author of Hebrews is seen, not only from the citation of v. 17 of that chapter at Hebrews 6:14, but also from the allusion to the oath of Genesis 22:16 in Hebrews 6:13. This suggests that for the author of Hebrews the oath has a close relation to the blessing and multiplication of Abraham’s offspring.

The precise content of the “two unchangeable things” mentioned in Hebrews 6:18 is much canvassed.³¹ The text at Hebrews 6:13-14 would seem to furnish the first step towards an answer. The “two unchangeable things” are the oath of Genesis 22:16 and the promise of Genesis 22:17. They are juxtaposed in Hebrews just as they are juxtaposed in Genesis. The words of the promise speak for themselves with regard to the content: they have to do with the multiplication of Abraham’s progeny.³² The oath serves to reinforce this promise, so that when Abraham receives the promise at the conclusion of his heroic show of patience at the call to sacrifice Isaac (Heb 6:15), the promise has been reinforced by an oath. Abraham is thus portrayed as having received the promise.

But it is clear from the way the author of Hebrews uses the verbs ἐπιτυγχάνω (6:15; see 11:33) and κομίζω that even if Abraham had received (ἐπιτυγχάνω) the promise reinforced by an oath, he had not received (κομίζω) the thing promised—progeny (cf. 10:36 and 11:39).³³

The mind of the Hebrews’ author is revealed by the third use of κομίζω—at 11:19, where he says that Abraham received (κομίζω) Isaac after the attempted sacrifice “as a symbol” (ἐν παραβολῇ). In other words, the thing promised to Abraham at the sacrifice of Isaac—progeny—is received only with the coming of Christ. Christ himself is that promised progeny.

³⁰ My translation from N-A²⁷; see n. 24, above.

³¹ See the discussion of opinions in William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, 47a (Dallas: Word, 1991), 152.

³² It is this promise which is referred to in the singular at Hebrews 6:17, “to the heirs of the promise” (τοῖς κληρονόμοις τῆς ἐπαγγελίας).

³³ See also Heb. 11:13 where the verb κομίζω is a variant reading for the better attested λαμβάνω. The use of the latter verb emphasizes the reality of the obtaining or not obtaining of the promises, while the use of κομίζω takes in the emphasis on the reality of obtaining or not obtaining while adding an eschatological nuance.

If the content of the promise to Abraham is Christ, then the oath that God swore to Abraham is, at the most profound level, a symbolic action foreshadowing the definitive granting of the thing promised, which is Christ. That is why the author of Hebrews emphasizes the oath sworn by God to Jesus at the moment of his resurrection (Heb. 7:20-21). This is the oath which was foreshadowed by the oath of God at the sacrifice of Isaac. This latter oath results in the actual granting of that which was promised in the oath sworn to Abraham: definitive progeny. As Christ is the definitive progeny promised by God's oath to Abraham, that oath was a symbolic foreshadowing of the oath that God swears at the resurrection—that Jesus will be a priest forever.³⁴

By identifying the oath of Psalm 110:4 with the fulfillment of the oath of Genesis 22:16, and by placing the oath in the explicit context of the multiplication of Abraham's seed, the author of Hebrews has brought about a profound transformation in the nature of this seed. For the Hebrews author, the true and definitive offspring of Abraham is effected not through his physical child Isaac, but through his spiritual offspring, Jesus Christ, of whom Isaac was a "symbol" with regard to Jesus' resurrection, as well as with regard to the accompanying oath of Psalm 110:4.

The author of Hebrews thinks that this offspring can be best described by evoking the Old Testament figure of Melchizedek, in the context of whom Jesus Christ emerges as the definitive High Priest. As the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, Jesus Christ replaces the Levitical high priesthood which had heretofore given identity to Abraham's descendants (Heb. 7:11). This new high priest is the Son of God himself (Heb. 7:3).³⁵

He is the source of the definitively better hope which is the cause of the addressees' encouragement. The one through whom God made the ages (Heb. 1:2) is the one through whom God definitively blesses and multiplies Abraham's offspring. Through Christ's risen priesthood a new people has come into being (Heb. 7:12), one coextensive with the entire human race. Through a son who transcends time, Abraham's offspring is extended to all men who have ever lived and who will ever live—to those who existed before Abraham as well as those who will exist after him. This is the way the author of Hebrews understands the meaning of Genesis 22:17, with its

³⁴ For the classic presentation of this interpretation of the role of Ps. 110:4 (though without some of the nuances given here) See Helmut Köster, "Die Auslegung der Abraham-Verheissung in Hebräer 6", in *Studien zur Theologie der alttestamentlichen Überlieferungen*, ed. Rolf Rendtorff and Klaus Koch (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), 95-109.

³⁵ See James Swetnam, "Hebrews 1:4-14," *Melita Theologica* 51 (2000): 51-68.

promise that God will bless and multiply Abraham's offspring.

The Relevance of Faith

Just as the reader is faced with the choice of a hermeneutic when confronted with Genesis 22, so the reader is faced with the choice of a hermeneutic when confronted with the interpretation of that text in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The reader may opt to share in the obvious faith the Hebrews' author had in the Christian relevance of the Genesis account, or he may not. That is to say, the reader may opt to be a participant in Christ's role and in Abraham's role in Genesis 22 as seen by the author of Hebrews, or he may opt to be a spectator. Right here is the crucial hermeneutical challenge of Genesis 22 as presented in Hebrews.

Every reader of Hebrews comes to the text with a certain set of presuppositions, just as every reader comes to Genesis with a certain set of presuppositions. Such presuppositions determine in large measure the reader's choice of a hermeneutic. A Christian who lets his Christian faith enter into every facet of his life will identify automatically with the Christian author of Hebrews. For such a believer, identification with the faith of Abraham as presented in Genesis 22 will be subsumed into the faith of the Hebrews' author in the Christ who gives to the Abraham-Isaac story a new dimension.

According to the interpretation of the author of Hebrews, with the coming of Christ the account in Genesis 22 assumes a more profound meaning: the faith of Abraham becomes a faith in the power of God to raise from the dead. Further, the oath made to Abraham finds its fulfillment in the oath made by God to Jesus at the moment of his resurrection so that his earthly priesthood can become a heavenly priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek—that is, a priesthood which transcends all human limitations.

One final, crucial truth about the faith of Abraham as seen by the author of Hebrews should be noted: Abraham's obedience is rewarded by God with the gift of Isaac as symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. Thus the faith-trust of Abraham enters into the providence of God in achieving the role of Christ as High Priest for all of humanity.

According to Hebrews 11:17-19, Abraham received Isaac back "as a symbol" (ἐν παραβολῇ), that is, he received Isaac as a symbol of the eschatological reality which is the risen Christ.³⁶ Abraham's reasoning is expressed in Hebrews 11:19a: ". . . having believed that God was able to raise from the dead." The text goes on to say, "whence (ὅθεν) he received him back as a symbol" (Heb. 11:19b).³⁷ Abraham's trust (Heb. 11:17) leads

him to believe in God's ability to raise from the dead (Heb. 11:19a) and this faith earns him a divine reward—not only the gift of Isaac, but the gift of Jesus, who is prefigured by Isaac.

Hebrews 11:17-19 is found in a section of the letter in which God is presented as a “rewarder” (μισθαποδότης; see Heb. 11:6) of those who seek him in faith. The inference to be made, then, is that the supreme gift of the resurrection of Jesus, and all that follows from it, is in a sense a “reward” for the faithfulness of Abraham, who has passed the test imposed by God.³⁸

Thus, the final act of Genesis 22—God's oath to Abraham—contains something new for the author of Hebrews: the role of Abraham's faith enters into the gift of the risen Jesus and hence into all that the risen Jesus implies for humanity, as outlined above.³⁹ God has taken cognizance of Abraham's covenant faith and has responded in the language of his own covenant loyalty. And he has done so in a completely unexpected way.

The Preconceptions of Christian Belief

There is one final step needed to sketch a satisfying hermeneutic of Genesis 22 and Hebrews: the preconceptions which prompt the Christian believer to believe in a Christian interpretation of Abraham's faith must be explored. No one approaches any written text without preconceived ideas. If this is true of any written text in general, all the more so is it true of a religious text such as the Bible. In particular it is true of Genesis 22 and the Christian interpretation of Genesis 22 in the Epistle

³⁶ Some authors maintain that the resurrection of Jesus is not as important for the author of the epistle as the resurrection of Christians (for example, Attridge, *Hebrews*, 335, n. 34). But this is to ignore much patristic evidence to the contrary on the relation between Isaac and Jesus, as Attridge himself admits. The view represented by Attridge also depends very much on his interpretation of Hebrews 2 with regard to the expression “Son of Man,” in which Attridge follows common views for the most part. For a different view, see Swetnam, “The Structure of Hebrews 1:13–3:6,” 58-62, in particular, 64, n. 28.

³⁷ See the discussion of ὁθεν in Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 603.

³⁸ See the discussion of Hebrews 11:6 in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 318-319.

³⁹ This inference of the author of Hebrews follows the sense of the Old Testament of Genesis 22, where the oath following on Abraham's successful completion of the test contains something new with respect to the original promise of descendants made by God to Abraham: the plans of God for Abraham's descendants are henceforth based on the will of God and the obedience of Abraham (which two elements, obviously, do not enjoy equal billing). See above, n. 12.

to the Hebrews.

It was argued above that the only proper way to approach the interpretation of Genesis 22 is on the basis of its place in the larger context of Scripture. For the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham was intended by the author of Genesis 22 to be understood in a much broader context than the text itself.⁴⁰ This broader context takes in such fundamental questions of religious cult and morality that Genesis 22 frequently serves as a focus of discussion on man's relations with God.⁴¹

Given the fundamental nature of the questions involved, then, it is impossible that the reader not approach Genesis 22 with certain preconceptions. These preconceptions may be of a believer or of a non-believer. Whatever their nature they are present, and their presence, since it inevitably involves subsequent interpretation of the biblical text, should be taken explicitly into account. As was argued above, hermeneutical stance is a matter of choice: one chooses one's approach to a text.⁴² But this choice is not made in a vacuum of values. One's preconceptions are inevitably the basis for one's choice of hermeneutical stance. Hence the choice of one's hermeneutical stance must be investigated in the light of one's preconceptions.

It is in this context that it seems appropriate to introduce John Henry Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870).⁴³ The core insight of the book is that the act of assent of the human person is not the result of a reflex act which is called certitude; rather the act of assent is the result of a variety of contributing causes working together in what he calls the "illative sense."⁴⁴ The illative sense, for Newman, is the personal use of reason about some concrete matter.⁴⁵ He insists on the personal nature of any such use of reason.⁴⁶ As authorities for this view he cites Aristotle and Scripture.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ For example, the use of the word "test" implies the context of covenant, as was mentioned above (cf. n. 5); the mention of "Moriah" suggests the context of Jerusalem, as was mentioned above (cf. above, n. 16); the mention of "holocaust" suggests the context of sacrifice, as was mentioned above (cf. n. 19).

⁴¹ See Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 71-72.

⁴² See above, n. 23.

⁴³ The edition used in this article is John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, with introduction by Nicholas Lash (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

Given the personal nature of any such use of reason with regard to some concrete reality, the role of conscience in religion is for Newman unavoidable:

Our great internal teacher of religion is . . . our conscience. Conscience is a personal guide, and I use it because I must use myself; I am as little able to think by any mind but my own as to breathe with another's lungs. Conscience is nearer to me than any other means of knowledge.⁴⁴

The use of the word "knowledge" in the last sentence should be noted:

⁴⁴ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 271: "I have already said that the sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense, a use of the word 'sense' parallel to our use of it in 'good sense,' 'common sense,' a 'sense of beauty,' &c.;—and I own I do not see any way to go farther than this in answer to the question." In his discussion of faith Newman tends to think in terms of what is believed as a result of the use of the illative sense ("*fides quae*"). But this conception of faith as being that which is believed logically presupposes a prior faith in the biblical sense ("*fides qua*"), i.e., the trust in God which is the basis for what is believed.

⁴⁵ Newman draws a contrast between a judgment about something "scientific" and a judgment about something "practical." It is necessary to study the chapter, "The Illative Sense," (Grammar, 270-299) to understand his approach. A detailed discussion is impossible here. As with any other imaginative suggestion, this suggestion of Newman's must be corrected, refined, and deepened.

⁴⁶ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 321: ". . . in any inquiry about things in the concrete, men differ from each other, not so much in the soundness of their reasoning as in the principles which govern its exercise, that those principles are of a personal character, that where there is no common measure of minds, there is no common measure of arguments, and that the validity of proof is determined, not by any scientific test, but by the illative sense."

⁴⁷ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 321-322. He gives no explicit references, but does give citations. For example, "Young men come to be mathematicians and the like, but they cannot possess practical judgment, for the talent is employed upon individual facts, and these are learned only by experience; and a youth has not experience, for experience is only gained by a course of years. And so, again, it would appear that a boy may be a mathematician, but not a philosopher, or learned in physics, and for this reason—because the one study deals with abstractions, while the other studies gain their principles from experience, and in the latter subjects youths do not give assent, but make assertions, but in the former they know what it is they are handling" (322). Newman is referring to a passage in Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. 6, chap. 8 (cf. J. A. K. Thomson, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics Translated* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971], 182). Among the Scripture texts alluded to by Newman is John 7:17: "If anyone wishes to do his will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own" (my translation). Cf. also Epistle VII of Plato [#344A-D] (Plato, with an English Translation: *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, by R. G. Bury [Loeb IX; London: William Heinemann / New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1929], p. 538).

Conscience, in matters of religion, is a means of knowledge. From this it follows that Scripture is not merely a collection of abstract truths, but an authoritative teaching.

And the whole tenor of Scripture from beginning to end is to this effect: the matter of Revelation is not a mere collection of truths, not a philosophical view, not a religious sentiment or spirit, not a special morality . . . but an authoritative teaching, which bears witness to itself and keeps itself together as one, in contrast to the assemblage of opinions on all sides of it, and speaks to all men, as being ever and everywhere one and the same, and claiming to be received intelligently, by all whom it addresses, as one doctrine, discipline, and devotion directly given from above.⁴⁹

This view, of course, is the result of Newman's own exercise of conscience as a means of knowledge. He reached his judgment about "the whole tenor of Scripture" as a result, in part, of the personal guidance of his conscience, and to this judgment he gives real assent.⁵⁰ He concludes his book by showing his own reasons for believing in the Catholic Church as God's providential gift to be accepted by faith,⁵¹ a faith, however, which is associated with an accumulation of probabilities yielding the certitude

⁴⁸ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 304. See further the remarks of one recent commentator: "His [Newman's] concern is not with finding *more* knowledge of the divine, but rather with showing that religious experience can help us *realize* the more abstract knowledge of God we already have. The question he poses to himself in the *Grammar* is this: 'Can I attain to any more vivid assent to the Being of a God, than that which is given merely to notions of the intellect? Can I enter with a personal knowledge into the circle of truths which make up that great thought? Can I rise to what I have called an imaginative apprehension of it? Can I believe as if I saw?' The religious experience in conscience enables him to answer these questions in the affirmative, because God is there perceived and encountered, not as an abstract essence, but as a concrete reality. The difference that such an experience makes in our conception of God, and in our relation with him, is analogous to the difference between actually meeting a person and just hearing about him." J. van Schalkj, "Newman and Otto on Religious Experience," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 28 (2001): 734.

⁴⁹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 302.

⁵⁰ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 82-83: "Real assent . . . calls as the experience which it presupposes, is proper to the individual, and, as such, thwarts rather than promotes the intercourse of man with man. . . . I call the characteristics of an individual accidents, in spite of the universal reign of law, because they are severally the co-incidents of many laws, and there are no laws as yet discovered of such coincidence."

which results from the legitimate use of the illative sense.⁵²

Newman offers a hermeneutics of exegetical preconceptions that gives grounding to the hermeneutics of exegetical choice advanced above in regards to Genesis 22 and its interpretation in Hebrews.

Conclusion

The present study began with a presentation of Genesis 22, with all its attendant challenges to interpretation. Because of its explicit connections to covenant and cult, an exegesis was advanced based on the acceptance of that covenant and cult as part of the religious dispensation whose written record is the Old Testament. The proper response to Genesis 22, it was argued, is one of faith mirroring the faith of Abraham. This interpretation of the propriety of faith was occasioned by the content of Genesis 22, not mandated. It was argued that the acceptance of Genesis 22 in a spirit of faith was the result of a hermeneutics of free choice.

An interpretation given to Genesis 22 by the Epistle to the Hebrews was next suggested. This interpretation revolved around the faith of Abraham and the oath of God sworn to Abraham following the successful outcome of his test. The faith-inspired interpretation given by the author of Hebrews was seen as a function of faith in Jesus Christ. The propriety of a reading of the text accompanied by faith was again proposed. And once again, this faith was seen as the result of a hermeneutics of free choice. The Old Testament faith of the believing Jew was subsumed into the New Testament faith of the Christian.

Finally, an attempt was made in this paper to ground this hermeneutics of exegetical choice on a hermeneutics of exegetical preconceptions. Newman's "illative sense" was proposed as a key factor in understanding the exegetical preconceptions that the Christian believer (in Newman's case, of the Catholic believer), brings to the biblical text. Because of the importance of conscience in the formation of the preconceptions which underlie the Christian's act of faith, the role of moral choice is evident here as well.

Following Newman, it can be argued that, when all is said and

⁵¹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 321: "... instead of saying that the truths of Revelation depend on those of Natural Religion, it is more pertinent to say that belief in revealed truths depends on belief in natural."

⁵² Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 319-320; see also, 299.

done, it is the individual exegete who is responsible for the exegetical stance adopted for interpreting a given text of Scripture—first with regard to the preconceptions which govern his choice of an exegetical approach, and then with regard to the choice itself.

It is clear that Genesis 22 portrays Abraham as a man of faith; it is clear that the Epistle to the Hebrews portrays Abraham in Genesis 22 as a man of faith and presents Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of that faith. Whether the exegete will put himself in tune with this faith is a matter of his own choosing, a choosing both remote and proximate.

In attributing hermeneutical stance to personal choice one should not neglect the bias built into the biblical text itself: the text itself is an invitation to believe as its authors believe. It is clear from the way Genesis 22 is framed, and from the way that the Epistle to the Hebrews enters into a development of Genesis 22 in terms of Jesus Christ, that the authors of these texts are believers who have written these texts for other believers, actual or potential.

The Hebrews' author speaks frequently of "we"—"we believers" (cf. 1:2; 2:3; 3:6; etc.). He believes, and writes to others who believe. At the most profound level, these texts call for participation in the faith of those portrayed, not simply a contemplation of that faith. As Kierkegaard remarks about the biblical passage involving the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-44), acceptance of the story on its own terms, that is, presupposing the faith of the widow, transforms the gift "into much." This faith-challenge is the challenge of Genesis 22 in its Old and New Testament guises as well.

. . . that sympathetic person who accepts the book and gives to it a good place, that sympathetic person who, by accepting it, does for it through himself and through his acceptance, what the treasury did for the widow's mites: hallows the gift, gives it significance, and transforms it into much.⁵³

⁵³ Translated by T. Jacobsen from the preface to *Fire opbyggelig Taler*, Søren Kierkegaards samlede Verker udgivne af A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg, og H. O. Lange, 2nd ed. IV (Copenhagen, 1923), 7. Used by Jacobsen in his article "The Myth of Inanna and Bilulu," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1953): 160-187, and reprinted in Thorkild Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 61. Jacobsen uses the quotation to invite the reader to invest credibility in an ancient Sumerian myth written in an "old book of clay." As it is used in the conference above, it invites faith in the Bible. A "literary faith" of the type advocated by Jacobsen has, of course, its own value, but a "religious faith" that saves presents a dimension that is completely different. A faith that saves, obviously, is dependent ultimately on a gift of God.