

Wood, Sand and Stars :
Structure and Theology
in Gn 22:1-19

Here is a story in which God asks a choice and early follower to begin something not intended for completion. This is puzzling, as it would not do for God to lose credibility. But the story is a favourite in three world religions, even though the Abrahamic traditions have differed on its meaning, and it will occur in any lectionary you examine. Its interpretation in the church, therefore, is a matter of continuing interest and importance. The present study provides a translation, with both technical and general comments; an analysis of the story's structures (plural), and suggestions on the theological importance of the story to the church.

I / The Story

We should probably think of the story as having a long history of use and development. It was told often, and we meet it now in a written form of lapidary perfection in which every word is important. The translation which follows errs on the literal side, having respect to the maxim of A.K. Ramanujan, 'In the act of translating, the spirit killeth and the letter giveth life.'¹ In the present case, a slight woodenness helps bring out the force of repetitions in the Hebrew original; these give the story pattern and thus guide our reading and understanding, and the discussion which follows will quote from this translation.

(a) Translation

'After these things, he tested Abraham, this God did.' He said to him, 'Abraham,' and he answered, 'Yes, Lord?'² He said, 'Now take your son, your

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only one, ^b whom you love, yes, Isaac. ^c Set out for the land Moriah, ^d and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I will point out to you.'

³Early the next morning Abraham saddled his ass. He took two of his squires ^e with him, and, yes, Isaac ^f his son. ^gHe split kindling for a burnt offering and departed for the place his God ^h had mentioned to him.

⁴On the third day Abraham looked ahead and saw the place in the distance. ⁵Abraham said to his squires, 'Stay right here with the ass. I and the lad will go over there; we will worship and then come back to you.' ⁶Abraham loaded on Isaac his son the kindling for the burnt offering, while he himself took the fire ⁱ and the blade. ^j

The two of them went along together.

⁷Then Isaac spoke to Abraham his father. 'Father,' ^k he said, and he answered, 'Yes, my son?' 'I see the fire,' he said, 'and the kindling, but where is the animal ^m for a burnt offering?' ⁸Abraham answered, 'God will see to his own ⁿ animal for a burnt offering, my son.'

The two of them went along together.

⁹They reached the place his God had mentioned to him. There Abraham built the altar, arranged the kindling, bound ^o Isaac his son and placed him on the altar, up on top of the kindling. ¹⁰Abraham reached out and grasped the blade, to slaughter his son.

¹¹Then YHWH's messenger called to him from the sky, 'Abraham, Abraham.' He answered, 'Yes, Lord?' 'Do not lift your hand against the lad,' he said. ¹²'Do not do a thing to him. For I am now convinced that you are one who fears God, Since you do not hold back your son, your only one, from me.'

¹³Abraham looked around, and there he saw a ram, just then caught by his horns in the bush. At once Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. ¹⁴Abraham named that place 'YHWH Sees,' as it is still said today, 'On YHWH's mountain, he is seen.'

¹⁵Then YHWH's messenger called to Abraham from the sky a second time. ¹⁶'This is YHWH's oracle,' he said. 'I make this guarantee by all that I am. Because you did this — because you did not hold back your son, your only one - I am going to bless you richly. ¹⁷I am going to give you descendants without number, as the stars of the sky and as the sand on the seashore, and your descendants will possess their enemies' gates. ¹⁸All earth's nations will wish to be as blessed as your descendants, because you listened to what I said.'

¹⁹Then Abraham returned to his squires. They got up and went along together to Beersheba. Abraham stayed in Beersheba.

(b) Notes on the Translation

a. ‘this God did’: The principal clause is disjunctive, with the subject standing first, signalling particular attention to God. See below note h.

b. ‘your only one’: The Hebrew *yāḥîd* means ‘only’ and by extension ‘favourite’. JPS² renders ‘favoured’ on the grounds that Abraham had two sons, see Harry M. Orlinsky, *Notes on the New Translation of the Torah* (Philadelphia: 1970):97. Reasons for preferring ‘only’ include: (a) *yāḥîd* clearly means ‘only’ in other passages such as Ju 11:34, and JPS translates it so, using ‘favourite’ only at Zc 12:10 where the parallel line has ‘first-born’; (b) Isaac was the only son of Abraham and Sarah, and the only one through whom the promise was to be fulfilled — Ishmael has been specifically set aside (17:18-21); God’s command is a test precisely because it seems to contradict the promise which rests in Isaac; (c) Since biblical law reckoned the first-born from the mother’s side (Ex 13:2), a man could have two first-born sons; to speak as if a man had two *yāḥîd* sons would be similar; (d) a well-known midrash on this verse has Abraham say to God, ‘But each son is the only one of his mother’, showing that later tradition understood *yāḥîd* as ‘only’;³ (e) while it is correct that the Septuagint translates *agapētos* ‘beloved’, both Aquila and Symmachus render with words meaning ‘only’.

c. ‘Yes, Isaac’: The Hebrew retards the sentence by means of the disjunctive accent *ʔpašṭā* on the preceding word *ʔāhābtā* ‘you love’.

d. ‘the land Moriah’: Such a region is otherwise unknown (2 Ch 3:1 speaks of a ‘mountain’ and not a ‘land’), and every other version of the story has its own word: ‘up-country’ (LXX), ‘revelation’ (Aquila), ‘vision’ (Symmachus, Vulgate), ‘worship’ (Targum), Moraʔeh’ (Samaritan, cf. ‘Moreh’ near Shechem, Gn 12:6-8), ‘Amorite’ (Syriac); see Barrois IDB 3:438. It is possible that none of these is original; it may be that whatever stood there originally lent itself so readily to word-plays and allusions that the original has disappeared and only various second meanings remain (a phenomenon observable elsewhere in the Masoretic Text, e.g. *wəšabṭî*, Ps 23:6). Wellhausen suggested that the original may have read *ʔereš ḥamôrîm*, an allusion to Shechem (Gn 33:19, 34:2, *et passim*), since he thought Shechem would be about three days’ journey from Beersheba (*Die Komposition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* [1899]: 19). A Shechemite association for our story would be interesting, since it would explain how it can have such strong cultic affinities and still apparently stand outside the bible’s ‘priestly’ tradition.

e. The Hebrew *naʕar* denotes not age but status, a dependent relationship either to the father or to someone else; a variety of functions may be involved.

The term 'squire' is that of John Macdonald, *JNES* 35(1976):147–70. In Gn 22 Abraham uses the term both of his servants and of Isaac, but in discrete forms, consistently with Old Testament usage in general; see H.P. Stähli, *Knabe — Jüngling — Knecht: Untersuchungen zum Begriff nʿr im A.T.*, Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie (Frankfurt am Main: 1978):72–73, and for close relationships between master and servant, pp 171–72.

f. 'yes, Isaac': The Hebrew retards the sentence even more pointedly than v 2, by placing the disjunctive accent *tifhā* on the accusative marker 'et which immediately precedes the personal name, and by not binding 'et to the following word with a *maqqēf* as is usual.

g. 'He split kindling ...' Rémi Lack ('Le sacrifice d'Isaac — Analyse structurale de la couche élohiste dans Gn 22,' *Biblica* 56[1975]:1-12) has argued for the omission of this line on the ground that it is *malvenue*. It is true that we expect the splitting of the firewood to be mentioned a sentence earlier, perhaps between 'Abraham saddled his ass' and 'he took two of his squires with him.' I prefer to regard the dislocation as a narrative device: by delaying mention of the kindling until after 'Isaac his son', the narrative suggests that Abraham did not really want Isaac to know what the trip was all about. In any case, Lack does not explain how these words came to be added in the 'wrong place', and a subtle stylistic feature is a better explanation than a clumsy gloss.

h. 'his God': Three times in this story 'God' has the definite article in Hebrew (vs 1, 3, 9) but is elsewhere anarthrous (vs 8, 12). (For the definite article as implying possession, Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique*: 137f, I.2.) It is difficult to introduce 'his' into the translation of v 1 because of the English word order chosen, hence 'this' at v 1. The narrative heightens the story's tension slightly by saying that it is Abraham's own God who tests and who points out the place of sacrifice.

i. 'fire': Hebrew ʿēš. JPS, following Speiser, has 'firestone', on the ground that actual fire could not be kept alive for three days, see Orlinsky, *loc. cit.*; E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday: 1964):163. But the cited parallel, the Akkadian (*aban*) *išātu*, is dubious, since it seems to be a semi-precious stone possibly of red colour used for magic, adornment, statues, etc., and not a kind of flint-and-steel arrangement; *išātu* without the determinative *aban* 'stone' (i.e. the proper parallel to our text) does not denote fire-making equipment. The bible seems not to contain any reference to the means of making fire, but the use of a 'fire-stick' may have been common; note Nu 15:32 (making a fire on the Sabbath was later prohibited).

j. 'the blade': The Hebrew *maʿākelet* is formed on the verb 'to eat', suggesting a knife for slaughter and dismemberment; it may have ceremonial associations. The word is found elsewhere only in Ju 19:29, Pr 30:14.

k. ‘Father’: Hebrew *ʔābî* as vocative, see Orlinsky, *loc. cit.* Gn 27:18 repeats the words of this sentence exactly, with the addition of two words; and the exact form of the father’s reply (*hinnennî*) occurs nowhere else in the bible, a fact which the masoretic editors have observed. The similarity is that in each case the father replies to a younger son who has priority over the older.

m. ‘animal’: The Hebrew *śeh* denotes a single animal of the group (*śôʔn*) composed of both sheep (*kebes*) and goats (*ʿēz*). No passage requires that the *śeh* be understood only as a sheep or a goat, and several passages clearly indicate that it encompasses both groups (Ex 12:3, Lv 5:7, Nu 15:1 I, Dt 14:4). The KJV’s ‘lamb’ was doubtless chosen under a christological reading of the story.

n. ‘God will see to his own animal’: Hebrew, *ʔēlōhim yirʔeh-lô haśśeh*, ‘God will look him out the animal’, traditionally, ‘God will provide’ (KJV). The verb *rāʔû* ‘see’ has here the sense of ‘find, select, choose’, but the translation needs ‘see’ in order to preserve the resonance between this statement and the word-plays of v 14. The preposition *lô* designates God as the party whose criteria must be satisfied in the selection; it is not intensive, ‘God himself will find’, but reflexive, ‘God will find for himself; the closest parallels are 1 Sm 16:1, Dt 33:21, where the subject of the verb and the object of the preposition are the same. Hence the translation ‘his own animal’; cf. JPS ‘the sheep for his burnt-offering’.

o. ‘bound’: The verb *ʿāqad*, which gives the story its name ‘Aqedah’ in Judaism, does not occur elsewhere in the bible, nor does *ʿāqēdā* occur at all. This is perhaps because biblical sacrifices were never laid on the wood bound and alive. The cultic texts call for the animals to be killed and dismembered, for use to be made of the blood, and sometimes for certain segments to be set aside, all before the burning took place (e.g. Lv 1:10–13). According to the Mishnah (Tamid 4:1) the sacrificial animal was bound before being slaughtered and dismembered, but this was done remote from the altar (Danby, *Mishnah*, p 585). The evidence from the ancient near east is that human victims were killed on the altar, and not slain separately (Alberto Green, *The Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* [Scholars Press: 1975]:157).

p. The MT’s *ʔayil ʔaḥar*, lit. ‘a ram behind’, has traditionally (and incorrectly) been read ‘a ram behind him’. Under the influence of the MT and the Vulgate, iconographic representation of this scene show the ram behind Abraham. The translation here adopts the suggestion of Marvin Pope, following Rashi’s comments on *ʔaḥar* and Ugaritic usage, that *ʔaḥar* joins the two actions of seeing and catching. See ‘The Timing of the Snagging of the Ram, Genesis 22:13’, *BA* 49(1986):115–17. Some Hebrew MSS and most versions read *ʔayil ʔeḥad* ‘one ram’, an

expression which occurs frequently in cultic texts (Nu 7 *passim*, 28:11 etc., 29:2 etc., Ez 43:13, 25, 26:4). If *ʾaḥar* were an early copyist's mistake for *ʾeḥad* (the letters dalet and resh being as similar in many early scripts as they are in the modern square characters), it would be particularly striking that Lv 16:5 specifies that for the Day of Atonement 'the Israelite community' shall contribute 'two he-goats for a sin offering' and *ʾayil ʾeḥad lēʿôlâ* 'a ram for a burnt offering'.

(c) Comments on the Story

v 1 'After these things ...': The story opens by linking itself to all that has preceded in Abraham's life, and we must cast our minds back to 11:27 where Abram and his wife Sarai first appear. God's first words to Abram in 12:1, 'Set out' find a direct echo in 22:2, as the Hebrew *lek-lēkâ* is found nowhere else in the bible. The ten chapters which follow introduce God's call and promises to Abram, but our story's particular reference begins with the promise offered almost at once (12:2) that God will make of Abram 'a great nation', a hope the more remarkable because the story has already told us, in a laconic six-word verse (11:30), that Sarai had no children and was barren.⁴ The opening line creates a link to the previous stories in another way by speaking definitely and specifically of God (see note h above). The reference is backwards, especially to chapters 17, 20 and 21. There we hear of a God who makes promises: establishing a covenant (12:2 *et al.*), giving Abram a new name suggesting countless descendants (17:5–6), giving him the land where he was living as an immigrant (17:8), granting a son to a woman of ninety (17:17), naming that son as the bearer of this covenant (17:21), and protecting Abraham and Sarah in their interaction with the indigenous population (chs. 20-21). It is this God who now puts Abraham to the test. Thus, 'Abraham's career arrives at its dramatic end and climax in ch. 22'.⁵

Chapters 12–21 – to tarry with the story's linkage to what precedes — oscillate between hope and hazard, as Abraham tries twice, wrongly, to implement that promise on his own (15:1–6, 16:1–16). Finally, God promised the couple that Sarai/h would have her own son, a suggestion so outrageously impossible that both husband and wife laughed when they heard it (Abraham 17:17, Sarah 18:12). But God had the last laugh, and Isaac was born: his name is formed on the verb 'to laugh', and the stories seem to understand its meaning as 'Laughter'. The impossible dream had come true.

And now, in our story, the darkness falls abruptly and the reality of the impossible dream becomes a nightmare: this God will ask to have Isaac back.

v2 'your son, your only one': When we reach these words, we already know

that Abraham is in for a test, but what will it be? The Hebrew lays it out in four solemn beats: 'Take your son ... your only one ... the one you love ... Delayed as long as possible (note c above), the name finally falls, 'yes, Isaac'. The son of promise, with the name 'Laughter', is to go up in smoke as an offering to Abraham's God.

Our own response to this is to wonder how God could ask for a human being to be killed, and the story has sometimes been seen as teaching that God does not require human sacrifice. But it is not really interested in that question; of course, the Israelites were not to practise child sacrifice, but if our story was once about that subject, it is no longer. The tension is rather, 'How could God go back on the promise by taking away the gift to the aged Abraham and Sarah, thus cancelling the great future which the promises have been holding out?'

V 3: The story continues by describing preparations for departure, almost in reverse order. The beast of burden is there, the ranking servants of the family, and, mentioned last of all, as if the narrator could hardly bear to put it in, 'yes, Isaac his son' (note f above). Finally, in a reluctant afterthought, as if Abraham does not want Isaac to know what he is about, we hear of kindling for a burnt offering, and they are off (note g above).

V 4: Three days pass, and the place is at hand. A number of parallels suggest that the three days are a narrative convention, allowing a proper length of time to pass before the event at hand can take place, but the twelfth century Jewish writer Rashi wondered why God did not choose a place which could be reached sooner. His answer is, To give Abraham plenty of time to think it over. Otherwise someone might say, 'If Abraham had had time for consideration, he would not have obeyed'. As it is, no one could say that he had acted under temporary confusion and bewilderment.⁶ We should not now be inclined to read between the lines and to psychologize the story in this way. But Rashi's comment is still suggestive, for it focuses attention on Abraham's commitment and integrity, and in this respect the rabbi has read the story correctly.

v 6: As for Isaac, well, he still does not know the meaning of the trip, and Abraham still keeps it from him. 'We will worship and then come back to you.' Those of us who know the story well and who transcend it as readers, can realize the irony of these words. We can read them as full of hope. For Abraham they are full of pathos; and the squires, who have made their own deductions, watch in silence.

Isaac is left to carry the wood, truly a poignant touch. 'The children collect the kindling, the fathers light the fire': so Je 7:18 saw the distribution of tasks. Late texts speak of a regular wood-offering to fuel the temple fire (Ne 10:35, 13:31), and in our story it is Isaac who brings it. Isaac – 'Laughter' – the only link between the old man and the promise of descendants as many as the stars

and the sand — Isaac carries on his back the wood which will turn him into smoke. He brings the offering and is himself the sacrifice.

vs 7–8 ‘the animal’: See note m above. The word *śeh* is not the common one for ‘lamb’, but a general and inclusive one. Although the bible’s cultic texts usually require specific animals for specific rituals — different beasts for different feasts — they explicitly prescribe a *śeh* for very few offerings (Ex 13:13, Lv 5:7, 12:8); but there is one use of the *śeh* which the informed listener might be expected to recognize: it was the animal specified for the passover celebration (Ex 12:3–5, five times). Isaac’s question therefore links our story allusively to the Exodus, and introduces a striking irony. At the offering of the passover animal, the son was supposed to ask a question (‘What do you mean by this rite?’ Ex 12:26). Isaac does ask a question, but it is a different one: ‘Where is the animal?’ The hearer may give a shiver of recognition: although Isaac does not know it, he himself is the animal.⁷

V 9 The sacrifice is about to happen. The wood is in place on the altar and Abraham has bound Isaac. And then Isaac is in place, where the victim belongs, ‘up on top of the kindling’.⁸ Earlier, going up the mountain, the wood was on the boy; now, on the mountain, the boy is on the wood. ... That wood again, which jeopardizes God’s promise of the sand and the stars. Up to now in the story we have heard of ‘Isaac his son’ (three times); but here the words are terse and grim, and the personal name is omitted: Abraham will ‘slaughter his son’. No one is laughing.

v 11 ‘YHWH’: The divine name might come as a surprise to the attentive reader, since the story has previously spoken only of Elohim, ‘God.’ This has been thought to show that the narrative was from the hand of the E writer, later worked over by a Yahwistic redactor. We would vastly underexplain if we were to be content with this. The divine name (however it may have entered the story) stands precisely where the divine intervention occurs. We know the name of the god who saves. From this point on (except for the specialized term ‘one who fears God’ v12) the story uses only YHWH. The god who sees, who intervenes, who saves, who promises, is the god of that pronounceless name.

V 13: For modern readers this seems like the high point of the story, with its welcome relief of dramatic tension. Abraham doesn’t have to kill Isaac. He passes the test. God knows what sort of fellow Abraham really is. You and I might have closed the story here. But there is one more element of it to be resolved: ‘Where is the animal for a burnt offering?’ Isaac’s question, using a general and inclusive word, left open what kind of sacrifice would take place on the mountain and tacitly invited Abraham to specify. Abraham did not, answering by using the same general word. But now the general is made specific: Abraham saw a ram.

It doesn't seem to have bothered the commentators that Isaac asked about one category of animals, and an animal of a different category appears, but this is part of the story's impact. Why a ram? Why not a *Seh*, consistently with vs 7–8?

To start with, a ram was one of the animals which formed the offering which Abraham brought when YHWH first made a covenant with him, promising both many descendants and the land, and predicting the Egyptian enslavement and the exodus (Gn 15). This is the only earlier point in Genesis which mentions a ram, and our story alludes to it. It provides a further oblique link with the exodus, but especially does it associate YHWH's sparing of Isaac with the covenant: Abraham had brought a ram to YHWH, now YHWH will bring one to Abraham. The promise is intact.

A second thing to say is that, unlike the animal *seh*, the ram (*'ayil*) is associated with a number of particular offerings, usually as a supplement to the primary animal, rather the way liturgical incense may be used today on a variety of occasions. The ram was used on more solemn and formal occasions, and its use might be contrasted with that of the *seh* rather as holy communion is contrasted with morning and evening prayer. In non-cultic texts the ram often stands for the entire cultic apparatus (for example, 1 Sm 15:22, Is 1:11, Mi 6:7, Ps 66:15). The vagueness implicit in Isaac's question and Abraham's answer is suddenly dispelled: 'there ... on the mountain ... ' a standard solemn offering to God like those specified in the bible's cultic texts. The effect on hearers would be a little like the effect on Christians of a story in which a father and son embark on a picnic, a sinister outcome concealed from the son. A question, 'Where is the food for the picnic?' is left unanswered by the reply, 'God will see to the food, my son.' When all sinister aspects of the occasion have been dispelled, suddenly, there is a spread table, and on it a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine.

There is a third thing to say, for there are two passages which mention the ram along with two other words which are important in Gn 22, namely 'burnt offering' (*'ôlâ*) and 'appear' (*nir²eh*, v 14, see comment below). These two passages are (a) Lv 8–9 (together with Ex 29) and (b) Lv 16. To be brief, these passages are about (a) the ordination of priests together with the first-ever offering of sacrifices in the tabernacle and God's theophanic endorsement, and (b) the Day of Atonement. In these and only these texts the three terms 'ram', 'burnt offering', and 'appear' are found. The suggestion is that the ram in Gn 22 sets up, for the informed reader, resonances with cultic texts of the utmost importance. The ram is linked with the priesthood itself and with atonement, strengthening the suggestion made above that it stands for the entire cultic economy. But it does more: by these allusions the ram takes the story out of the personal, privatistic experience of Abraham, and plants it in the cultic context

of collective worship through individual giving. By means of these inner-biblical connections, the solitary sacrifice of Abraham on a remote mountain points towards the communal worship of God's people in which the divine reality appears.

V 14 'YHWH Sees ... is seen': The site of so marvellous an intervention and provision is given a name which alludes backwards in the story to v 8 and forwards into a word-play which asserts God's 'appearance' to the worshipping community. In v 8 Abraham had said, 'God will see (*yir²eh*) to his own animal', and so the place is called 'YHWH Sees', using the identical verb form, *yir²eh*. But the Hebrew consonants of that form, *yr²h*, can also be vocalized *yērā²eh*; this is the N(iphal) theme of the verb, which yields passive and/or reflexive meanings. 'YHWH is seen' also means 'YHWH lets himself be seen,' hence, 'YHWH appears.' The N of *r²h* is a specialized term for God's glorious appearance, especially to give direction, and occurs disproportionately in Gn, Ex and Lv (e.g., Gn 12:7 *bis*, 17:1, 18:1, 26:2, 24, 35:1, 9, 48:3; Ex 3:2, 16, 4:1, 5, 6:3). The use here, however, is distinct from those passages where guidance is given; here the Lord simply appears to meet Abraham's deep need, and the closest parallel is Ps 102:17–18:

For the Lord has built Zion;
He has appeared in all His glory,
He has turned to the prayer of the destitute
and has not spurned their prayer (JPS).

Since *r²h* N also occurs in the pentateuch in communal, cultic contexts (Lv 9:4, 6, 23 and 16:2, see above; Nu 24:10, 14, 16:19, 17:7, 20:6, Dt 31:15), in our story the original and primary force of 'YHWH is seen' is to suggest the divine presence in the exercise of public worship. The fact that other Genesis passages with *r²h* N had some kind of promise attached to the story in which they occur may have suggested the appropriateness of a promise in the present story (see below p. 322).

II / The Structure

Even a naive reading of this story discloses its drama and inner tension. The tautness is already there in the opening announcement that God is testing Abraham, and the command to sacrifice the son of promise only strengthens it. The tension builds unbearably as Abraham raises his hand to kill his son, until a divine messenger holds him back from the act, and it breaks. Abraham has

passed the test; Isaac, and with him the divine promise, is safe; we can all breathe more easily. The remainder of the story is almost an anticlimax to us, but we listen patiently to hear how God gets Abraham out of the tricky situation and back home. The prolix promise of vs 15–18 is even less important to us, and the ‘Common Lectionary’ can omit it altogether.⁹ In short, one could suppose, the story builds from v 1 to v 10, and with the climactic rescue of 11-12, plods slowly to a needlessly-delayed conclusion. Dramatically, it would be a two-part story, 1–12 and 13–19, but the essentials would all be found in the first part.¹⁰

No doubt there is something to be said for such a reading, and it is easy to see the story this way because we are accustomed to using dramatic movement as a key to a narrative’s shape and intent. The buildup and release of tension is a major factor in interpretation. The present essay suggests another understanding of the story, based on structuring signals within it and on the larger pattern into which the narrative falls as a result of these signals. To be specific and to anticipate the conclusion, Gn 22:1–19 is a bipartite, parallel narrative (1–10 and 11–19) which has been formed on an older story which has a concentric, ‘hourglass’ structure (1–14, 19).

One of the ways that any narrative signals its structure is through the repetition of key words and phrases, which we may extend to include thematic repetitions as well. In the case of Gn 22:1–19, such signals are amply present, but seem to indicate two separate patterns governing the organization of its events and speech: a concentric pattern, and a a two-part parallel pattern. Here is the evidence for both.

(a) Concentric

The most striking structural feature of this narrative is the exact repetition of clauses or phrases. The story repeats four such groups of words, and the repetitions fall in exact reverse or concentric order, so as to focus attention on material in its interior. These four units are

- | | |
|--|----|
| A your son, your only one | 2 |
| B the place his God had mentioned to him | 3 |
| C the two of them went along together | 6 |
| D my son | 7 |
| D my son | 8 |
| C the two of them went along together | 8 |
| B the place his God had mentioned to him | 9 |
| A your son, your only one | 12 |

This patterning seems to be deliberate. In the sequence of these pairs, references to Abraham's son — 'your son' and 'my son' — serve as an *inclusio*, appropriate to the story's content. And even though some of the words used in these units recur in the story outside of these pairs, those instances are either not precise duplicates or stand outside this pattern for some other reason. (For example, the word 'place' also occurs at v 14, but in the phrase 'the name of that place'; and in addition, this line is a response to matters raised in the heart of the story and thus plays a different role in the pattern. Again, 'The two of them went along together' finds an echo in v 19, 'They ... went along together', where, however, the omission of 'the two of them' breaks the exactness of the duplication, and plays its own role in the story. The word 'son' occurs frequently in the story, but never elsewhere in the form 'my son'. And finally, 'your son, your only one' certainly recurs in v 16, in the exact form cited as pair A; but there is reason to believe that vs 15–18 have played a specific role in the story's development which excludes them from the concentric pattern [see below].¹¹)

Thus, the exactness of the repetitions creates a palistrophe which serves to help identify the story's intent and meaning. The hourglass structure draws particular attention to the dialogue which stands at its centre or waist: Isaac's only words in the story and Abraham's reply.

.. I see the fire,' he said, 'and the kindling, but where is the animal for a burnt offering?' Abraham answered, 'God will see to his own animal for a burnt offering ...'

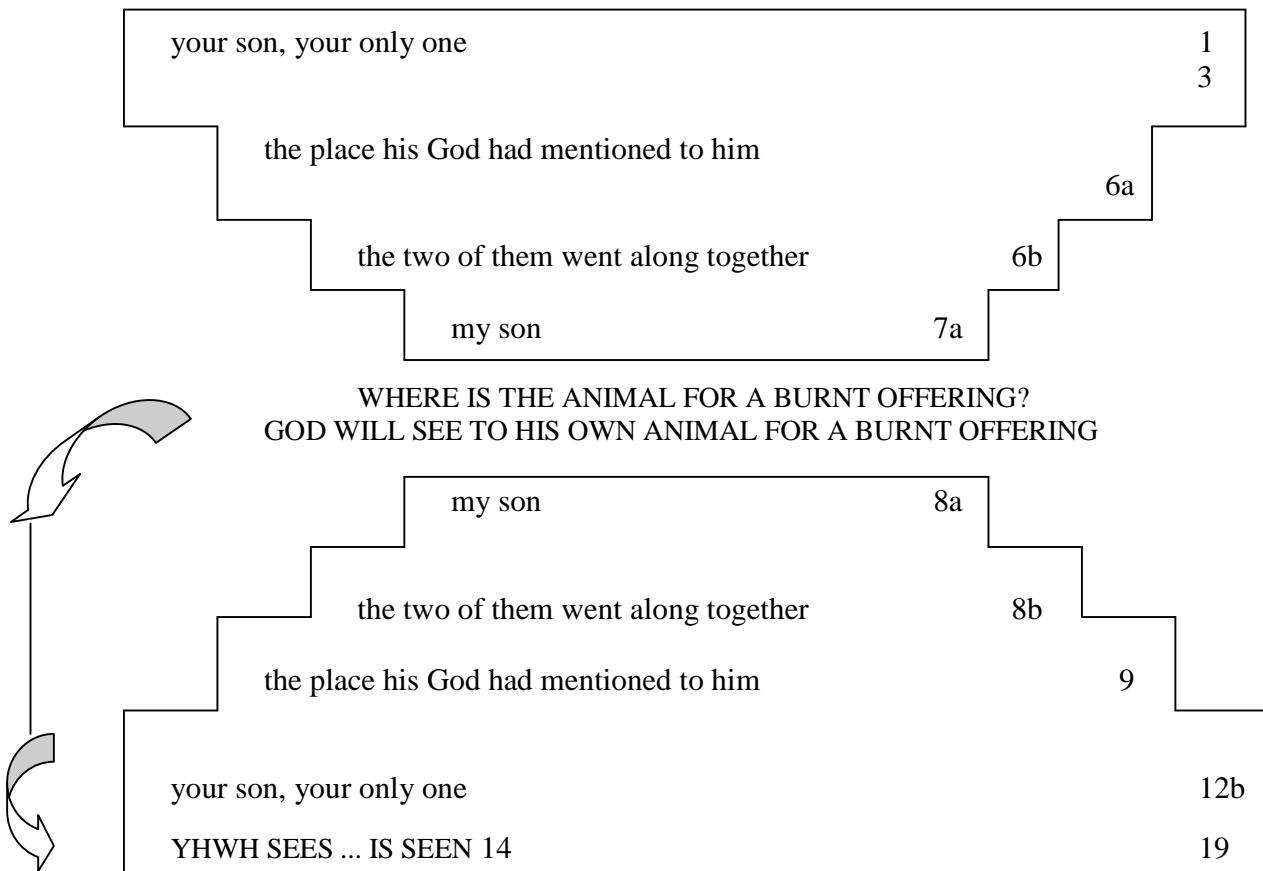
The chart figure 1 gives a schematic depiction of the concentric narrative.

(b) Parallel

The second set of signals also uses repeated words, but employs in addition formal and thematic similarities. Where the concentric pattern uses four groups of words, repeated in reverse order, the parallel pattern uses seven units, repeated in the same order.

The basic indicators of a two-part structure are the *verbal* parallels in vs t and 11, where the divine call and response come in the same words (except that the second call gives Abraham's name twice instead of only once¹²), and in vs 4 and 13, where the words 'Abraham lifted his eyes and saw ...' are identical. One notes that these two repetitions fall in the same sequence.

If the narrative be divided into two halves, using these verbal repetitions as a guide, other similarities can be seen. As to *formal* similarities, both vs 2 and 12a consist of instructions, and vs 7–8 and 15–18 both consist of speech. The



Genesis 22:1*-14, 19* as Concentric Narrative

Figure 1

former is perhaps unexceptional, as it is logical to find divine instructions following the divine call, but the two sections are intimately related *thematically*, since 12a cancels the instructions given in 2. And then in vs 9 and 19 Abraham arrives at his destination. To be sure, vs 9–10 comprise other material as well, but we see that a story about a journey out from home and back again lends itself naturally to a two-part structure.

When we move beyond verbal and formal links, other *thematic* links between the two halves can be observed. Vs 3 and 12b are both about obedience: in 3 Abraham obeys God, and in 12b God praises his obedience,

1 'Abraham, Abraham' ... 'Yes, Lord.'	A Divine Call and Response	11 'Abraham, Abrham' ... 'Yes, Lord.'
2 'Take your son... and offer him ...'	B Instructions (offer/don't offer)	12 'Do not lift your hand against the lad.'
3 Abraham;s obedience to God Preparation, departure	C Obedience = Fear of God	'I am convinc ed that you fear God.'
4 Abraham lifted his eyes and saw... the place	D Visibility (something important)	13 Abraham lifted his eyes and saw ... a ram
5 'We will worship and come back.' Arrangements	E Worship	14 The name of the place: YHWH sees YHWH is Seen
7 Dialogue: Promise of an animal 'God will see ...'	F Promise	15 Speech: Promise of progeny and blessing
9 They reached the place ...	G Arrival	19 Abraham returned to his squires, and to Beersheba

Genesis 22:1–19 as Bipartite, Parallel Narrative

identifying it with the 'fear of God'; both 5–6 and 14 are about worship, and the speeches in vs 7–8 and 15–18 both contain a promise. The chart Figure 2 gives a schematic depiction of the parallel structure.

(c) A Double Structure

The *verbal* repetitions used to postulate these two structures within the story are objectively present in the text; so are the reverse sequence which suggests the concentric pattern, and the linear sequence of the two verbal parallels suggesting the two-part structure. The *formal* and *thematic* similarities involved in filling out the parallel pattern do bring into play the interpreter's skill in characterizing and epitomizing the segments in question, and are thus less objective. Nevertheless, the resultant pattern of correlations between the two halves does not involve forcing or distorting the text's sense. The point is that the postulation of the two patterns would seem to be securely grounded in the text itself; they should therefore play a significant role in the text's interpretation.

There is nothing exceptional in finding either a concentric or a parallel pattern in a segment of biblical material; both are well-established, although, of course, the structure of each contributes to the story's meaning in quite different ways. A concentric story, by virtue of its palistrophic pattern, draws the reader's attention into the narrative's centre. Something essential — perhaps even its most important feature — may be found there. The rest of the story circles around it, and a certain thematic unity may be expected. The parallel structure has the effect of placing a number of items on an equal footing with one another, so that a certain thematic diversity may be expected. In addition, it presents those items in pairs which are in some way equivalent to each other. Such a pattern can suggest *stimulus* and *response*; it can suggest *definition*, in which the second item extends, explains, elucidates the first; it can even be a story of *replacement*, in which the second item in the pair takes the place of the first.

But what would be unusual is to find both patterns, side by side, in the same pericope. The simplest explanation for this situation is that the concentric narrative once had an independent existence, and was later taken up into a narrative which was being formed according to a different pattern.

(d) A Story Re-used

Such a thing could come about if a writer wished to make use of an earlier Abraham story, but in a way which extended, complemented, or even modified some of its emphases, while at the same time preserving the essential story and

its artful form. This would require adding new material and restructuring the story to create the new perspective. In the case of the Abraham-and-Isaac story, the two sets of verbal parallels in vs 1 + 11 and 4 + 13, all standing outside the repetitions which provide the concentric structure, afforded an opportunity to re-compose the story along bipartite, parallel lines. The present distribution of material in the story suggests some such enlargement. In a concentric story, one would expect a rough spatial or proportional symmetry, since part of the hermeneutic effect of its structure is that what is central to the story's meaning and impact stands at its centre; but our story is disproportionately long in the second half. That is, the second part of the story occupies eleven verses to the eight of the story up to that point. To quantify it more precisely, the story has 307 words in Hebrew, and uses 175 of them from the second 'my son' through to the end (about 57%).¹³

Now, as it happens, historical criticism has long seen several verses toward the end of this story as secondary. They are vs 15–18, which Gunkel called a postscript (*Nachtrag*), explaining that in an earlier story Abraham's reward was simply that he got to keep Isaac ('... more than enough for the father's heart'.) But later on, someone who thought this recompense insufficient 'appended in addition a grand promise'.¹⁴ Wellhausen called it 'an addition, without originality, full of allusions'.¹⁵ The grounds for these opinions included the 'second time', which seemed strangely suspicious, and vocabulary such as 'YHWH's oracle', which is characteristic of the prophetic writers. To these we may now add the above inference from the concentric *indicia*, that the second 'half of the story as it now stands is disproportionately long.

If, for the moment, vs 15–18 be omitted, the story is shortened to 253 words and is no longer overloaded in its second part. The centred material — the fourteen Hebrew words standing between two occurrences of *bēnî* 'my son' — stands very near the precise centre of the story. To be exact, there are 118 words preceding them, and 121 words following them.¹⁶ Thus, although recent scholarship tends to regard the story as more or less a unity,¹⁷ I infer that the present form of Gn 22:1–19 may well rest on an earlier story, still visible to us through a concentric structure with its precise repetition and placement of paired expressions and with its centring of Isaac's question and Abraham's answer. This earlier story would not have been part of the present patriarchal narratives, nor necessarily even of the hypothetical E document, but a free-standing story with its own interests and emphases, probably devoid of geographical and chronological particularity. When it became part of a larger narrative sequence it may have been changed in certain ways, although all forms of the text known to us (that is to say, the Masoretic Text and the various versions) bear witness only to the canonical form of the story.

Accordingly, I make no argument to associate the concentric story with a particular date or literary stratum, nor do I think it particularly useful to talk about it in its presumed original form. The latter is only a scholarly inference, made on plausible grounds but remaining an inference. Strictly speaking, the concentric story does not exist, except as a learned hypothesis, and the interpreter's primary attention ought to be directed to the actual text rather than to a hypothetical *Urtext*.¹⁸ At the same time, because the concentric pattern is clearly visible in the present narrative, the interpreter is justified in discussing the intent and meaning of that particular feature. This is required, even without the assumption that vs 1-14, 19 are an earlier and recoverable story, since its concentricity suggests a particular interpretation of the events which it relates.

1. Interpreting the Concentric Material

The starting point is to note that the two statements which form its precise centre raise a tension which must be resolved later in the story. When Abraham says that God will look him out an animal (see note n above), we know that the story cannot close without a report of how that happened. Thus the centre points ahead to vs 1-14, and those verses echo the centre by the finding of the ram and by the word plays on *yr'h*. While there may be more here than is suggested by the axis between vs 7-8 and 13-14, there cannot be less, and the concentric shaping suggests that this is in fact the material's central point.

It follows that this is cultic material. A sacred site receives a name, and a proverb about 'YHWH's mountain' is given an origin. There, we hear, YHWH 'is seen', that is, 'appears', a specialized term for the divine presence. A location hallowed by sacrificial actions and by the divine presence is in view. The vocabulary confirms this. The most frequently-repeated words have cultic associations, except for the word 'son' which, at ten occurrences, is the most frequent. Other repeated words are 'burnt offering' (six times), 'kindling' (five times), 'place' (four times), 'offer up' (two times). Note also that both *śeh* 'animal' and *'ayil* 'ram' are links to cultic interests, as is the verb *šāḥaṭ* 'slaughter'. Nearly every verse has one or more of these words in it.¹⁹ And I have already argued above for a link between our story, in which YHWH 'appears' in connection with a 'ram' for a 'burnt offering', and the cultic texts Lv 8-9 and 16.

(a) The Liturgy as God's Gift

A cultic narrative, then; but to what point? It might be an aetiology for a particular sanctuary; and the Chronicler sought to connect it with Solomon's

temple by use of the name 'Moriah' (2 C 3:1).²⁰ In the present context of the canonical scriptures, this association (although literarily secondary and historically improbable) must be part of the story's reference. Within the story itself, the site's location and identity are unclear, and its name, 'YHWH Yir'eh', is otherwise unknown.

Now, although the aetiology of the place name and of the proverb in vs 13–14 clearly are triggered by the occasion of Isaac's sparing, the use of imperfective verb forms points well beyond that one event. 'The Lord Sees' is the name, not 'The Lord Saw'.²¹ The imperfective form shows that God's continuing attention to the people is in view. And a proverb, by definition, refers to something which always or at least very often takes place. Once a proverb has been coined, we have left the realm of what did once happen and are in the timeless realm of what usually happens. The story, therefore, has the entire sacrificial economy in view. The ram stands for the entire apparatus of offerings burnt and otherwise by which relationships between people and the Lord may be stabilized. 'YHWH Yir'eh' is the name of every site where offerings go up in smoke and where the Lord appears to support and instruct the people of God. When the Chronicler used the name Moriah to link this story with Solomon's temple, it was only to appropriate the story for an extended reference already present in it.

But the most significant thing is the implication that the cult is God's own provision. In the sacrificial economy, the animal being offered to God must be brought by the worshipper. If it is for a sin offering, the worshipper brings it because it is his / her own sin which must be expiated. If it is for a burnt offering or an offering of well-being, it must be brought on the principle that the worshipper gives to God what God has already given, in recognition of human dependence on the Creator and in gratitude for God's providential oversight. This belongs to the essence of the whole system of sacrifices and offerings: the worshipper brings the offering. (Indeed, it is this feature which makes possible the perversion of the sacrificial system in which it is assumed that the worshipper can control or manipulate the deity: by bringing more costly gifts, people may purchase greater boons or concessions from God. And it also underlies the apparently opposite fact that people sometimes brought imperfect animals, of less or no use to themselves, since perfunctory performance of religious obligations should cost as little as possible.)

In our story, Abraham has brought what God asked, but the sparing of Isaac has left him in an embarrassing situation. He is there at the altar with no offering. His words to Isaac at the centre of the story, 'God will see to his own animal for the burnt offering', now take on prophetic significance as there is suddenly a ram to take Isaac's place. This is the beauty of the ram's appearance:

God supplies, to be given back, the gift which Abraham was unable to give. The story thus suggests that the entire cult by which people come into reconciliation with God is God's own provision. As the ram was God's gift to himself, made because Abraham was unable to give it, so also the entire cult is God's gift to himself. The means of reconciling people to God and maintaining them in a right relationship with the divine has been provided by the One who receives the gifts.

In terms of the history and phenomenology of religion, and especially amongst Christians, the Old Testament cult has sometimes been seen as arising out of human need to approach God, and therefore as humanistic and perhaps even manipulative. I do not think we are in a position to give an objective, historical answer to the question, 'How did sacrifices originate?'. But the theology of this story is that Israel's particular set of conventions and procedures has been provided by God, so that people might not live in sin and estrangement. Those who suspect that in the Old Testament the God and Father of Jesus Christ does not appear should rather see here the same God 'who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.'

(b) The Liturgy as God's Presence

But the place name and the proverb go even beyond this, for they further imply that it is precisely in the cult that the divine presence is made known to the people of God. 'On the Lord's mountain, he is seen.' The provision of the cult is therefore also the provision for God's self-manifestation; it is the provision for God's own presence. G. von Rod once sought to show that the Old Testament had two notions of God's relationship with the people: one is the idea of visitation, in which God 'meets with' them at the Tent of Meeting in a dazzling show of authority, and the other is the idea of presence, in which God is perennially with them, invisibly enthroned on the covenant-chest.²² The Isaac story affirms rather that in the correct operation of the cult, God is always present with the people. The gift of the cult is the gift of God's own self, and in its ongoing practice God's gift includes the divine presence.

(c) The Attitude and the Act

There is a third and rather less obvious implication, arising out of the curious fact that the narrative speaks as if Isaac had actually been offered up to God. Naturally, we know this is not so, as v 13 plainly says that Abraham offered the ram 'in place of his son'.²³ Nevertheless, the following features of the story deserve notice.

1. The story says that Abraham ‘did not hold back’ his son from God (v 12). The Hebrew uses the perfective form of the verb, implying that the action is regarded as completed. Of course, we read those words to mean that Abraham complied with God’s request, even to raising his arm to kill Isaac. But the identical verb form would have been equally appropriate if Abraham had killed Isaac, and so it is allusive and suggestive: it is as if he had really done it.
2. The personal name Isaac does not occur after v 9. The expressions ‘your son’ and ‘his son’ occur four times in the first nine verses, always together with the name Isaac (vs 2, 3, 6, 9). (One does not expect the personal name in the direct address ‘my son’ of vs 7 and 8.) In the remaining verses, these expressions occur three times, never with the personal name (10, 12, 13). Once Isaac has been laid up on top of the wood, his name never recurs in the story. Its absence is suggestive; the omission is deictic.
3. Finally, the story concludes as if Isaac were not there. V 19 says that ‘Abraham’ (not ‘Abraham and his son’) returned to his squires; the verb *wayyāšob* is a singular. It goes on to say, ‘They got up and went along together,’ but the grammatical referent of ‘they’ is Abraham and his squires. It is especially striking that the text, *wayyēlēkū yaḥdāw* ‘they went along together,’ uses the identical words as vs 7 and 8, but without the *šēnēhem* ‘the two of them’ of the story’s centre. The narrative comes to a conclusion as if Isaac were not there, and by the omission of *šēnēhem* invites the reader to ask, ‘Is Isaac really with them?’ Of course, the reader knows that Isaac really is there, but at the same time, the story speaks as if he were not.

Thus, the story clearly reports that Isaac was spared, and yet, in three different ways, sends out signals which are in tension with that report. Was Isaac spared or not? Did he return or not? The tension between the report and these intimations suggests that the intent and willingness to offer Isaac is seen as equivalent to actually doing it. Abraham’s inner state of responsiveness to God’s command is the equivalent of an outward act in which Isaac was returned to God as a sacrifice. The attitude of the worshipper is of equal importance with the acts of worship, and if one had to choose between having either one without the other, the attitude of loyal responsiveness would be the more important.

There seems to be no real objection to such an idea, which would be thought congruent with certain prophetic attitudes towards the cult.²⁴ It is perhaps more surprising to find this view in a story with pronounced cultic affinities. A naive understanding of liturgy could easily see its ceremonies as ends in themselves: the actions themselves would be primary, and the attitude of the worshipper less so. If it is correct to infer equality of attitude with act as a theologoumenon of

the concentric material, it follows that this cultic story is not a naive one. A sophisticated understanding of the cult knows that the inner movements of the person are more important than the mechanical performance of cultic acts. We recall that Gn 15:6 says that Abraham believed God and God reckoned it to him as righteousness.

This story, then, which I interpret as an aetiology not of a certain sacred site or of a particular sacred rite, but of the entire cultic economy, also intimates that responsiveness, devotion and loyalty are essential concomitants of all cultic practice. The wise priest who teaches the ways of sacrifice²⁵ has a narrative of great ironic²⁶ value. ‘Did Isaac go home with Abraham?’ he can ask. ‘Why isn’t Isaac named in the second part of the story?’ ‘Did Abraham really offer Isaac?’ And the listeners to the story must think about the relationship between the heart and the hand.

2. Interpreting the Parallel Story

But the concentric form of the material, elegant and consciously-shaped, is not the form in which Genesis gives us the Abraham-and-Isaac narrative. According to the argument made above (p 315-317), at some stage a tradent has added to it the divine promise found in vs 15-18. The effect of this addition is to overload the concentric material in its second half, destroying its symmetry. Although all of the concentric signals are still there, the final story now has a different structural framework. It has become a two-part story in which the second half corresponds to the first in verbal and thematic similarities. (Please refer back to Figure 2.) And so the question is, What effect does the altered structure have on the story’s interpretation?

(a) Cultic De-emphasis

For one thing, it de-emphasizes the cultic aspect. What was originally the central feature of the narrative has now become one of seven items in the structure: Abraham’s presentation of a burnt offering and the cultic aetiologies associated with it no longer complete the question-and-answer of vs 7-8, but now stand opposite Abraham’s declaration, ‘We will worship and then come back’, and the subsequent transport of son, kindling, fire and blade towards the site (section E). Of course, this equivalence asserts that a burnt offering at a site where the Lord appears (second half of the present story) is indeed worship (*hištaḥāweh*, first half), but this concern is no longer the central theme of the narrative. Instead, although all the signals which shape the concentric story so as to make the cultic theme its most essential feature are still present, the story’s

new parallel structure relegates the cultic motif to a less prominent role in the narrative.

(b) The People of God

For another thing, the final form of the story throws emphasis on the community of covenant people who were to come after Abraham. The sand and the stars belong only to the final form of the story. In section F the promise of an animal (first half) is fulfilled or completed by the promise of divine favour and blessing which guarantee the prosperity of Abraham's descendants (second half). The divine plan is thus seen to be much larger than merely to give an animal to spare Isaac, or even to provide the cult; rather, it is that large plan which was adumbrated in Gn 12 and has already been reiterated three times (13:14-18; 15; 17).

But there is much more. In the concentric story, the promise of an animal stands at the exact centre and draws our attention ineluctably towards v 14, the actual offering of the ram and the naming of the place. But now, as part of section F of the parallel narrative, the promise of an animal finds its echo and complement in the promise which speaks largely of the future and of the role Abraham's posterity are to play in that future. The difference is not trivial. In the concentric material, the promise of an animal reaches out from the centre to be completed in the whole cultic economy, of which the ram is suggestive. But in the present form of the story, the promise, 'God will see to his own animal ...' finds its echo in the promise which says that God will see to his own people (section F). The gift of a future for Abraham's posterity now replaces the gift of the sacrificial economy. The people of God replace the cult.

(c) Obedience

Again, the parallel form of the story is one which stresses obedience. This is clear in at least two ways. First, the messenger's declaration to Abraham, 'I am convinced that you fear God' (section C) stands opposite the description of Abraham's initial response to the command to sacrifice Isaac. In a series of six preterite verbs (v 3) the story reports the actions necessary to do what God asked. The word 'obey' is not used here, but the story's structure tells us that to be one who 'fears God' means to do what God asks.

Second, this structural intimation finds overt expression within the promise of vs 15-18. The promise can be made, the messenger says, 'because (*ya^can ʔāšer*) you did this ...' and he repeats it at the end, '... because (*ʕēqeb ʔāšer*) you listened to what I said'. The latter expression, *šāma^c bēqôl*, is very common in the sense of 'obey'.²⁷ The addition of vs 15-18, therefore, shifts the

story's emphasis decisively towards a toratic piety in which obedience to God plays a more important role than the cult. It has long been said that the conditional promise to the patriarchs is the latest of all forms of the promise.²⁸ I am not greatly interested in the date of this passage, but it would be easy to suppose that it belongs to a time in Israel's history when the temple and its cult no longer stood and its place had been taken by torah.

(d) Effects of Obedience

There is a further point, related to the preceding. It is that obedience on the personal and individual level has consequences on the level of God's larger programme.

The concentric story is about a very individual decision, one without consequences for the social and political life of Abraham's time. The biblical traditions do show us that Abraham knew how to make that kind of decision, too; witness his decision to pursue the king who had pillaged Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 14). But the offering of Isaac as a sacrifice was not that kind. It affected no one but a childless old couple and their faith for the future. As a cultic story it provides an aetiology for the belief that God appears at the sacred site, and by extension, a theology of the cult as God's own gift, but it makes no links beyond itself with history or with God's wider action. It is a timeless story.

But the addition of the promise vs 15–18 links up the intensely personal obedience of Abraham not only with the multiplication of his posterity, but also with that posterity's hegemony over their foes and with their enviable prosperity. And when this narrative is mortared into the history of salvation, this particular promise joins its other expressions to imply as well the land of promise, the covenant, and even the exodus (ch 15). Thus Abraham's obedience is linked not just to a timeless liturgy, but to an ingressive and progressive divine movement, to a plan that was of more than human origin, to the actualization of a design in which Israel should be a light to the nations.

There is a mysterious inner linkage here. It is more than that Abraham will after all have grandchildren. To be sure, that is a natural consequence of Isaac's sparing, but the promise is much richer. No mere biological succession can account for the promise of God's blessing, of prosperity, of covenant, of redemption, of influence. Naturally, these promises are in the divine plan and have not been induced by Abraham's obedience; they have already been expressed in chapters 12 and following. But our story does specifically effect a link between these goals and the personal, virtually unseen integrity of Abraham's obedience to his God. In the mysterious interplay between divine sovereignty and human instrumentality, even an a-social, a-political decision,

made at God's behest, can be of substantive importance. Just as Abraham discovered that to obey God could not possibly jeopardize his own best good, so the story asserts that to obey God cannot possibly be inimical to God's larger plan; indeed, it is by such profound personal obedience that the larger plan moves ahead.

(e) God and Abraham

One way of putting the difference between the two forms of the material would be to say that the concentric story is God's, while the parallel story is Abraham's.

It is true that in the concentric story, Abraham appears in marvellous, uncomplaining response to God's command, and that the messenger praises him as one 'who fears God'; but the pattern throws the primary emphasis on the God who sees and who appears. Abraham functions as a worshipper who sacrifices a burnt offering; but even that animal is a gift from God. The story does not stress cultic piety, but rather God as the giver of the cult with which the divine self-giving is bound up. 'YHWH sees ... YHWH appears.'

And, at the same time, God is still very much a part of the parallel story; but with the de-emphasizing of the sacrificial system, God's particular role in the concentric story has also been somewhat depreciated. And by means of the addition and the restructuring of the story, Abraham and the piety of obedience to the divine command figure much more largely. Not for a moment would I argue that the divine sovereignty has been diminished, but human responsiveness comes to have a substantive role in the implementation of God's plan, a role which is hardly more than intimated in the concentric material. If the earlier story leans towards monergism, the canonical story leans towards synergism, giving human obedience an explicit importance. 'You did this thing ... you did not withhold ... you listened to what I said.'

III / The Church's Use of the Story

It has been common for the Abraham-and-Isaac story to be used in the church in Lent or even in Holy Week, with the presumed understanding that Isaac prefigures Christ in the death of an only and beloved son. The New Testament does not make this identification by name, as it does with some other Old Testament figures, but there are undoubtedly hints that Christ's death stood in some such typological relationship with Isaac.²⁹ The Septuagint supports this connection by its use of *agapētos* 'beloved' of Isaac (vs 2, 12, 16), an adjective applied also to Jesus (Mt. 3:17, 17:5, etc.). This reading of the story has such

deep roots in the church's interpretive tradition that it is unlikely ever to disappear; its presence in the highly-touted 'Common Lectionary,' even after critical biblical scholarship has rejected typological readings for well over a century, implies as much. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for saying that this understanding of Gn 22 is not entirely satisfactory. For one thing, the typology itself is more imperfect than many such readings, and for another, this interpretation fails lamentably to do justice to the theological richness of the Old Testament story.

To take those points in order. (1) Isaac is not a very good type of Christ, since he did not actually die. The essence of the type-antitype relationship is that there be some central feature in common between the Old Testament person and event and its counterpart in the New. Thus, John 3:14-15 links the copper serpent of Nu 21:9 to Christ's death on the cross. The serpent was mounted on a standard and those afflicted with snake-bite could look at it and recover; 'even so must the Son of Man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life' (KJV). The essential features are the elevation and the saving effect of both the copper serpent and of Christ.

To be sure, Isaac was Abraham's only-and-beloved son, as the New Testament believes Jesus was of God. And when Abraham loaded the wood for the sacrifice on Isaac's back, the parallel with Jesus' carrying the cross immediately suggested itself.³⁰ But, in fact, Isaac did not actually die, and so the typology fails at what, theologically, must be the most important point. It is perhaps for this reason that the New Testament's use of Gn 22 is allusory only, and that to the point of reticence. If pressed with even the least rigour, the typology would be forced to yield up support for all those theories which assert that Jesus did not really die at all.³¹

Indeed, if one wants to ransack the story for a type, there is a better one than Isaac, and that is the ram. Among others, Tertullian noted this and made use of it.³² And, although I tend to eschew typology, especially where the New Testament has not thought of it first, I think this correspondence does suggest an essential feature of the concentric material, viz. that God provides the gift which brings people into a right relationship with the divine. The same point (without its Christian reference, of course) has been made by Israel's leading contemporary poet, Yehuda Amichai, in his droll poem 'The True Hero of the *Aqedah*,' which concludes

The angel went home.
Isaac went home.
Abraham and God went home too.
But the true hero of the *Aqedah*
Was the ram.

(2) But a more serious objection to the traditional Holy Week appropriation of the story is that it fails to grasp and expound the story's profound theology. At once the question arises, 'which story (the concentric or the parallel) shall we expound?'³³ To ask the question is to evoke a large debate now swirling in biblical interpretation.³⁴ With reference to the present story, I have two points to make.

The first is that the interpreter's primary responsibility is to the given text in its palpable reality. The story, Gn 22:1-19, exists in that form and only in that form. It is, structurally, as I have argued, a bipartite, parallel structure. There is no concentric story. No manuscript in any language provides us with it. What this article has spoken of as the concentric story is a reconstruction based on certain assumptions about narrative consistency and integrity and about the bible's growth and transmission. If these assumptions are incorrect, then the reconstruction falls; it is subject to dissolution by further discoveries or alternative presuppositions. Why should we expound the hypothetical instead of the real? No exposition of the story which omits the promise can be considered true to the text.

The second is this. The exposition of the full story need not neglect the force of the concentric material, since the marks which suggest its existence are still present in the given form of the text. To be sure, a symmetrical concentricity is not present, but the multiple bracketing of the key dialogue in vs 7-8 is still very apparent. The central theological inferences from that story (above pp. 317-21) may still be found in the given text, and, indeed, I would argue that postulating the original form of the story helps identify them more easily.

With an eye to those inferences, the story is pertinent to Christians during Lent and Holy Week, although not in the manner of the traditional typology. The most fundamental inference is that God provides, to people who have no such means of their own, the gift which they present and which will bring them into a right relationship with God. Christians should accept this as true about God on the basis of the narrative in Gn 22. We are 'saved if we do and saved if we don't' ... or, at least, if we don't. The link between this story and the New Testament is not some superficial resemblances between Jesus and Isaac or the rain, but *the fundamental likeness in the way God operates*. 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself ...' (2 Cor 5:19).

But this application to Holy Week is a particular form of a larger set of ideas which must not be overlooked. The story speaks of the cult and of the occasions on which God sees and appears. The same inference from the concentric material suggests that whenever the people of God, be they Jewish or Christian, gather for worship, they may count on the presence of God with them. God has a stake in the gathering and worship of the believing community. Of course,

neither Christians nor Jews now approach God with burnt offerings, as the story has in mind. Christians count on the divine presence because they approach God in the name and merits of Jesus Christ; Jews would do so because they gather around the torah, a move which the final form of the story already suggests in its emphasis on obedience.³⁵

But if the story is expounded in this way, we hear only a part of its truth, and that a truth which, though preserved, has been qualified and enlarged in the actual form of the text. The interpreter has not proclaimed the fulness of this story's implications until the parallel story in its distinctiveness has been expounded. These implications have already been suggested above (pp. 321–24), but one must note especially the story's linkage of individual obedience to the ongoing of the divine plan. The actual story is programmatic in a way the hypothetical one is not. It contains a long and large vision for the people of God and calls for faithfulness and obedience of Abraham's sort so that (to put it in Christian terms) the Kingdom of God may come. In the diaspora in which we all live, toratic piety (responsiveness to God's instruction and guidance) is of equal importance to cultic piety (devout participation in the divine ordinances). It is thus, in the final form of the story, not just Abraham to whom God appears nor those who bring sacrifices to turn into smoke, but the people of God. Torah takes its place alongside of the cult as God's gift, and it is the people of loving and loyal responsiveness whom God sees and to whom God appears.

The story is one which brings together divine sovereignty and human spiritual heroism. A story about the father of three world religions calls upon us to make the human response of trusting obedience through which God's long-range plan moves forward.

* * *

The future is one of sand and stars, in which the people of God are too numerous to count. The wood which would consume that hope is everywhere about us. It is therefore good for us to hear the saving word:

the Lord sees.

Notes

1 Quoted in David Frost, *Making the Liturgical Psalter*, Grove Liturgical Study No 25 (Bramcote, Notts.: 1981):19.

2 *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

- 3 See M. Rosenbaum and A.M. Silbermann, translators, *Pentateuch with ... Rashi's Commentary* (London: 1929), *ad. loc.*
- 4 Most lectionaries call for Gn 12:1–3 to be read without the necessary context of 11:26–32; the latter should always be included, despite its preoccupation with genealogical and geographical detail.
- 5 Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament* (Philadelphia: 1986): 135.
- 6 See note 2 above.
- 7 I grant that to speak canonically, these customs have not yet arrived in the pentateuch's narrative sequence; but it seems likely that they were known at the time the story took its present form. I doubt that the story alludes to the redemption of the firstborn, for Ex 13:13 does not specify how this shall take place, while Nu 3:46–47 and 18:15–16 prescribe a monetary payment of five shekels.
- 8 The Hebrew *mimma'al hā'ēšim* is unique; elsewhere *'al hā'ēšim* (Lv 1:8 *et passim*).
- 9 For Lent 2 the reading is 22:1–2, 9–13. For Pentecost 3 the reading is 22:1–18.
- 10 George Coats argues for vs 15–18 as essential to the 'arc of tension' in the story; see 'Abraham's Sacrifice of Faith,' *Interpretation* 27(1973):389–400, especially 395.
- 11 Rémi Lack ('Le sacrifice d'Isaac – Analyse structurale de la couche élohiste dans Gn 22,' *Biblica* 56[1975]:1–12) has made an analysis of this story along structuralist lines, suggesting a concentric pattern with the words 'God will provide' in the centre. It is apparent that I have reached a conclusion similar to his but independently and on somewhat different grounds. The signals which serve as framing or centring devices for him are single verbs, *hlk*, *lqh*, *r'h*, and *'lh*. He finds these announced in v 2 and then spread out in vs 3–13b. I have the following observations to make on his analysis.
- a. The verb *r'h* does not actually occur in v 2, but must be placed there by an emendation of the text for which Symmachus and the Vulgate could be cited (Lack does not do so). This may be correct and I am not opposed to it in principle, but it does represent an arbitrary change in the text.
 - b. The pattern which he traces is not fully self-consistent. For example, some of the elements forming the first half of Lack's pattern do not find a complementary mention in the second half of the pattern. Thus, *hlk* in v 3 is not resumed in the echo in v 11. And the three (according to Lack, four) verbs in v 2 are answered by only two of them in vs 13b–14 in the second half. Again, there are occurrences of some of these four verbs which stand outside the concentric pattern which Lack traces. For example, *'lh* occurs in v 3, but he has dropped this clause from the story; it occurs again in v 6 without being taken up into his pattern. The verb *hlk* occurs also in v 19.
 - c. There are verbs repeated in the story other than those which he has chosen to form the concentric pattern: *ʾmr*, for example (2, 3, 9, 14), *qwm* (3, 19), *šwb* (5, 19), *ošym* (6, 9), *šlh* (to, 12), *qr'* (11, 14). The question of method is, How do we know which of the narrative's repeated words are important for the story's structure? How can Lack avoid the risk of selecting just those repeated verbs which result in a concentric pattern?
 - d. The use of clauses or phrases – that is, groups of words – is a more telling and objective signal than the use of individual words. The verbs *hlk* and *lqh* are among the Hebrew bible's most frequent, and occur in a great many stories. Their presence in a given narrative is a less convincing mark of design than is the presence of word-groups which occur nowhere else in this story or in any other narrative of the bible.
 - e. Finally, of Lack's four verbs, two have no particular thematic importance in the story (*hlk*, *lqh*). By contrast, the clauses and phrases cited in the present essay point towards important thematic elements in the story, especially the only son and the place designated by God.

- 12 The Greek story doubles the personal name at both places in the story, but MT's form saves the more urgent appeal for the moment of intervention, almost as if God had not expected Abraham to go so far.
- 13 Counting each vocable, including *ʔet* and *nā̄*?
- 14 *Genesis*, 6 Auflage (1964):239.
- 15 *Die Komposition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (1899):18.
- 16 Any who prefer mathematical exactness may consider altering the text by removing alleged redactional elements. For example, the opening words of the story, *wayēhî ʔaḥar haddēbārîm hāʔēleh* 'After these things' could have been added to connect this narrative with the other Abraham narratives. (With the removal of these words, the story would open with a disjunctive clause; for the 'terminative or initial' disjunctive clause, 'indicating either the completion of one episode or the beginning of another', see T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* /New York: 1971:164. For a reference to earlier difficulties with this sentence, see Skinner, ICC [1912]:328 note.) And, since the story itself contains no references to a geographical starting point for the journey, the references to Beersheba in v 19 might be redactional made to bring Abraham back to the place where Gn 21:22–34 has left him. Without the last seven Hebrew words of v 19, the story would end with the words, 'They got up and went along together', closing as placelessly as it opens. With these additional words removed from the story – four from the first half and seven from the second half – the centred material would stand in the exact centre by word count: 114 words on each side.
- At the same time, to make any deletions of this sort is a subjective procedure. R. Kilian, for example, postulates more extensive redactional activity than this, and removes neither the opening nor closing words of the story as I have suggested (*Isaaks Opferung*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 44, 1970). If he is correct, or if both he and I are wrong, the putative original story would have been different. And so I do not place any weight on a highly calibrated concentricity, since, even without that exactness, the story would still be a generally-concentric narrative.
- 17 See the summary by Alastair Hunter, *JSOT* 35(1986):22–23 n. 16.
- 18 Another reason is that we cannot know whether the concentric story has been changed in important ways in the process of its incorporation into its present narrative. Its most frequently-occurring vocabulary have affinities with cultic texts in the pentateuch. If we should argue that in its earlier and independent form, it drew on the same lexicon, we should have to claim that it had reference to an earlier and hypothetical corpus of priestly texts and traditions. Such an argument could indeed be made, as there is a general disposition to see the pentateuch's cultic material as more ancient than its present recension; but we have then become doubly hypothetical, explaining a posited text on the basis of another posited text. Such an argument can be neither verified nor falsified, and ought better not be undertaken at all.
- 19 See now Alastair Hunter, '... the extent to which the vocabulary of the Levitical sacrificial system of whole offerings informs the account is very striking' (*JSOT* 35[1986]:23).
- 20 This is more likely than that Gn 22 has made use of the Chronicler, since if this were the direction of influence, it is hard to understand why Genesis says 'the land Moriah' instead of 'the mountain Moriah'; whereas the Chronicler would have been obliged to attach the name to a 'mountain', since he was appropriating the Genesis story for the temple mount.
- 21 The LXX's aorist *iden* implies 'The Lord Saw.'
- 22 'The Tent and the Ark,' *The Problem of the Hexateuch* (Edinburgh: 1966):103–24. It is striking that this essay has no discussion of *nirʔeh* 'appear'.

- 23 This idea would be further strengthened if Chaim Rabin's suggestion were adopted which understands *ʾaḥar* in v 13 to mean 'substitute'. See 'Etymological Miscellanea', *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 8(1961):387. See also note 31 below.
- 24 On the messenger's 'Now I know' (v 12), Skinner says, '... the essence of sacrifice is the moral disposition,' citing Ps 51:18–19 (*op. Cit.* p. 330).
- 25 For the priest as responsible for giving instruction, see Jr 2:8, 18:18, Ez 7:26, Zp 3:4, Ma 2:4–7. 26 I use the term in its Socratic sense of asking questions in order to lead to understanding.
- 27 M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: 1972)337 #18a, ... already a cliché in JE.'
- 28 C. Westermann, 'Promises to the Patriarchs', IDBS:96ob. It does seem to me that Westermann, in keeping with many critical scholars, tends to play down the contingent elements in this promise by dating it late in his reconstructed development of the patriarchal promise.
- 29 See, e.g.: I.E. Wood, 'Isaac Typology in the New Testament,' *NTS* 14(1968):583-89; Max Wilcox, "'Upon the Tree": – Deut 21:22–23 in the New Testament,' *JBL* 96(1977):85–99.
- 30 'First, then, Isaac, when he was given up by his father as an offering, himself carried the wood for his own death. By this act he even then was setting forth the death of Christ, who was destined by His Father as a sacrifice, and carried the cross whereon He suffered' (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* III:18).
- 31 For the assertion that Isaac actually did die, in both Jewish and Christian sources, see Norman Hillyer, 'The Servant of God', *EQ* 41(1969):147–48.
- 32 E.g., 'Answer to the Jews,' ch. 13.
- 33 For the suggestion that all stages of this story's development may be pertinent to the church, see J.-L. Duhaime, 'Le Sacrifice d'Isaac (Gn 22, 1–19): l'héritage de Gunkel,' *Science et esprit* 33(1981):155–56.
- 34 For a masterful essay on the current tension in biblical studies between historical and hermeneutic interests, one generally supportive of the latter, see Frank Kermode, 'The Argument about Canons,' in Frank McConnell, *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (Oxford: 1986):78–96.
- 35 I do not mean that this is the interpretation that Jewish interpreters usually give of the story, but that this is a legitimate application of the story in its own right. Judaism has generally focused especially on Isaac, whom it sees as representative of itself, always given up to death and always miraculously delivered by God; this seems to be why the Aqedah is a stated reading in Judaism at the time of the New Year. For the legends and lore of the Aqedah in the Jewish tradition, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, Judah Goldin, translator (New York: 1967).