

Interpreting Scripture in Faith

(Lk 3:15-16, 21-22) [See also Mt 3:13-17 & Mk 1:9-10]

The people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my *beloved* Son; with you I am well pleased."

There is a great deal that can be said about this passage, so to keep this examination brief, I focus on one word, "beloved." This word connects this passage with another son of promise who figures prominently in the Old Testament. In Genesis 22:1 God said to Abraham:

"Take your son, your only begotten son Isaac, whom you *love*, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

This is the first time the word "love" is used in the Bible. The first time the word "love" is used in the New Testament is in Matthew's parallel account of Jesus' baptism by John when the Father calls Jesus his "*beloved* Son" – the same expression used by Luke and Mark. This connection with Isaac is significant.

The Genesis account of the offering of Isaac centers on Abraham's amazing faith and trust as he obediently leaves early the next morning with Isaac and two servants to sacrifice his son. The journey lasted three days. The text records no conversation between the two men until they arrive at Moriah. When they arrive, Isaac asks Abraham:

"My father... Behold, the fire and the wood [and implies, we have the dagger]; but where is the lamb for the burnt offering" (Gen 22:7)?

We can imagine how Abraham's heart sank when he heard these words. Yet he gave this amazing reply:

"God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." The text simply adds: "So they went both of them *together*" (Gen 22:8).

The use of the word "together" captures their oneness in spirit and determination to submit to God's will. How else could Abraham have bound Isaac and laid him upon the altar (Gen 22:9). Isaac was a man in the full vigour of life. The Jewish historian Josephus gives his age at 25, and

the Rabbis list his age at 37. Even in his teens Isaac could have easily resisted his very elderly father. This conclusion finds strong support in the rabbinical literature: the targums,¹ Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, *IV Maccabees*, and Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*.²

Josephus' account³ has all the elements of the Targumic tradition that focuses "on Isaac's merit and on his voluntary self-surrender."⁴ In *IV Maccabees*, Isaac is presented as the proto-martyr: "Isaac offered himself to be a sacrifice for the sake of righteousness."⁵ Philo's interpretation of Isaac's sacrifice is found in his discussion of the Song of Deborah. He makes three points:

1. Isaac freely and enthusiastically offered his life.
2. His sacrifice is related to other sacrifices accepted by God for the sins of men.
3. Isaac was aware of the beneficial effect of his self-sacrifice upon future generations.⁶

In summary, "Philo believed that by Isaac's unique example God conferred upon human nature its true dignity, the dignity of a divinely required and freely offered self-sacrifice. The blessing resulting from it would extend to all men for ever, and they would understand that they possess the same humanity which was made holy by Isaac's sacrifice."⁷

This understanding finds an echo in rabbinic interpretation of Psalm 8:4-9:

"What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him, etc.?"

Philo understood that the word "man" stood for Abraham and "son of man" referred to Isaac. The rabbis taught that it was through the merits of Isaac's willing submission that mankind received a dignity among God's creatures that even the angels envied:

"When the Holy One, blessed be He, sought to create the world, the ministering angels said to Him: 'What is man that You should remember him? He replied: You shall see a father [Abraham] slay his son, and the son [Isaac] consenting to be slain, to sanctify My Name'."⁸

Geza Vermes⁹ notes that *IV Maccabees* sees the self-offering of Jewish martyrs as "an

¹ Targums are ancient Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Old Testament that emerged after the Babylonian captivity when Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the spoken language of the Hebrew people. These translations were often accompanied with interpretations designed to make the meaning of passages clear to a contemporary audience. Therefore the targums are an invaluable source of Jewish interpretations of the Old Testament.

² Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, pp. 194-197; G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, Vol. 1, p. 539.

³ *Antiquities of the Jews*, Chapter XIII, 3-4.

⁴ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 198.

⁵ *IV Maccabees*, xiii, 12 cited in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 198.

⁶ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 200.

⁷ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 201.

⁸ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 201.

⁹ Geza Vermes is a noted authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls and the ancient works in Aramaic.

atonement for the sins of Israel.”¹⁰ Furthermore he adds: “Philo contributes the belief that Isaac’s unique sacrifice is infinitely worthier than the offering of a lamb for the sins of men, and that the merits of his deed will be known to all the peoples for ever.”¹¹ He also makes the connection between the Suffering Servant of Isaiah and the offering of Isaac. This connection is evident, for example, in the Targum of *Job, iii, 18* where Isaac is identified as “the Servant of the Lord” precisely because of his self-offering.¹² Vermes notes that the “Palestinian Jews considered Isaac’s sacrifice as the sacrifice *par excellence*, whose lasting benefits would be felt for all time” precisely because of “the free consent of the victim.”¹³

The rabbis believed that through the redemptive merits of Isaac’s sacrifice “the firstborn sons of Israel were saved at the time of the Passover,” and “the Israelites were saved when they entered the Red Sea.”¹⁴ In addition it was believed that Isaac’s merits extended beyond the barriers of history to the resurrection of the dead.¹⁵ Thus, “the merits of his sacrifice were experienced by the Chosen People in the past, invoked in the present, and hoped for at the end of time.”¹⁶

The rabbinic writings also give the meaning of the twice-daily sacrifices of two lambs in the Temple. It was a perpetual reminder of the event it symbolized, namely, the sacrifice of Isaac.¹⁷ “According to ancient Jewish theology, the atoning efficacy of the *Tamid* [continual] offering, of all the sacrifices in which a lamb was immolated, and perhaps, basically, of all expiatory sacrifices irrespective of the nature of the victim, depended upon the virtue of the Akedah [the binding of Isaac], the self-offering of that Lamb whom God had recognized as the perfect victim of the perfect burnt offering.”¹⁸

The evidence also shows that there was a well-established association of the sacrifice of Isaac and the Passover before the beginning of the Christian era. Indeed, it was believed that “the saving virtue of the Passover lamb proceeded from the merits of that first lamb, the son of Abraham, who offered himself upon the altar.”¹⁹ In the Palestinian Targums “the night of the Passover is a memorial of Creation, of the Covenant with Abraham, of the birth of Isaac, of his *Akedah*, of the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, and finally of the coming of messianic

¹⁰ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 202.

¹¹ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 202.

¹² *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 203.

¹³ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 206.

¹⁴ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, pp. 206-207.

¹⁵ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 207.

¹⁶ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 208.

¹⁷ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, pp. 209-210.

¹⁸ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 211.

¹⁹ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 215.

salvation.”²⁰

This leads to the following conclusions.

1. In the first century AD there was a belief that the merits of the offering of Isaac came from Isaac’s self-offering.
2. The offering of Isaac was a true sacrifice that laid Israel’s chief claim to forgiveness and redemption. All other sacrifices, including Passover, reminded God of Isaac’s self-offering and drew from his merits.
3. Finally, in the sacrificial worship of ancient Israel there was a bond linking the binding of Isaac with both the Passover and the ultimate salvation through the Suffering Servant.²¹

The Akedah and the New Testament

Scholars have pointed out the relationship of the binding of Isaac and the Sacrifice of Jesus. In particular St. Paul’s doctrine of Redemption is basically a Christian version of the Akedah as understood in rabbinic theology, but taken to a transcendent level. Paul, for example, made the connection between the self-offering of Isaac and Isaiah’s Suffering Servant that was memorialized in the Passover as foreshadowing the sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God. Consider the following passages:

Rom 5:9 – “We are justified by his blood.”

Rom 8:32 – “He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him?”

1 Cor 5:7 – “For our paschal lamb Christ, has been sacrificed.”

1 Cor 15:3 – “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.”

Peter makes a similar connection in his speech after he cured the cripple beggar:

Acts 3:25-26 – “You are the children of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your ancestors when he said to Abraham, ‘In your *offspring* all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ [Gen 22:18]. For you first, God raised up his *Servant* [Isaiah’s Suffering Servant] and sent him to bless you by turning each of you from your evil ways.”

John also made a connection between Jesus and the Pascal lambs in his Gospel:

Jn 1:29 – “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

Jn 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

These statements are seen as the ultimate fulfilment of the words Abraham spoke to Isaac when he asked: “Father! Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the

²⁰ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, p. 216.

²¹ *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, pp. 217-118

holocaust” (Gen 22:7)? “Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust’” (Gen 22:8). The heavenly Father did provide the ultimate sacrifice in the Person of the Divine Son made flesh, but unlike Isaac who merely offered his life and was spared, Jesus offered his life and accepted a painful and humiliating death. It is particularly striking that in order to roast the lamb according to the prescriptions of Passover, one rod would traverse the length of the sacrificial lamb and the other rod would cross through the rib cage in effect crucifying the lamb!

Although the Passover was the great annual commemoration of Isaac’s sacrifice and the freedom of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt, the offering of Isaac was commemorated twice daily on the great bronze altar that stood before the holy place. It towered 15 to 20 feet, symbolizing Mt. Moriah where Isaac carried the wood of his sacrifice. In remembrance of that event a priest would carry the wood of the sacrifice twice daily: shortly before 9:00 AM and shortly before 3:00 PM. It is no coincidence that Jesus was staggering up Calvary with his cross before the morning sacrifice. St. Mark tells us Jesus was crucified at 9:00 AM – the third hour (Mk 15:25), and he died while the second lamb was sacrificed at 3:00 PM – the ninth hour (Mk 15:34).

As these lambs were sacrificed, the Levites sang a litany of 18 blessings.²² Of these the fifteenth blessing is particularly poignant:

*Cause the shoot of David [Jesus] to shoot forth quickly, and raise up his horn by your **salvation** (in Hebrew **yesu’a** – Jesus’ name). For we wait on your **salvation (yesu’a)** all the day. Blessed are you, Lord, who causes the horn of salvation to shoot forth.*

Conclusion

This brief examination of the word “beloved” and its connection with Genesis 22 helps us understand that in the Genesis narrative Abraham represented the Father and Isaac was type of Jesus (*yesu’a*). So while the self-offering of Isaac was pleasing to God, it was the unique sacrifice of the divine “beloved Son” that redeemed and brought innumerable blessings on the human race, including Abraham and Isaac.

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²² Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer*, pp. 72-77.