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## A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price: Part 10: The Sacrifice of Isaac

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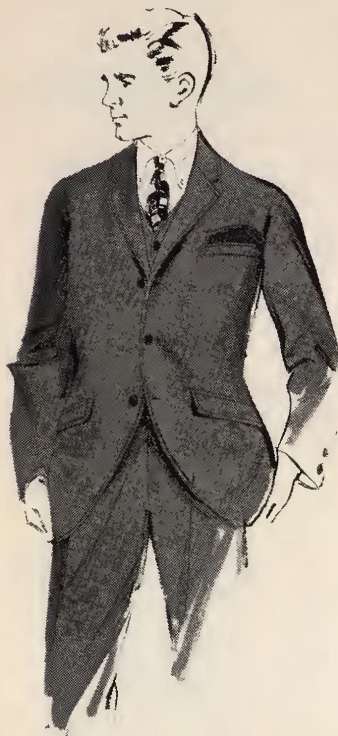
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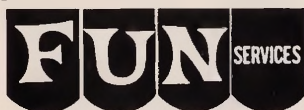
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A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price Part 10

# The Sacrifice of Isaac

By Dr. Hugh Nibley

● *Types and Shadows:* While it is the unique and different in human experience that most engages the modern fancy, the Egyptian, as we have seen, was intrigued by the repeated and characteristic events of life. The most important of these events were ritualized, just as we ritualize the inauguration of a President or the Rose Bowl game, repeating the same plot year after year with different actors. Hence, if Abraham and Sarah went through the same routine with King Abimelech as with Pharaoh, it is not because either or both stories are fabrications, as scholars have so readily assumed, but because both kings were observing an accepted pattern of behavior in dealing with eminent strangers. Likewise, if Abraham was put on an altar-bed like dozens of others, it was because such treatment of important guests had become standard procedure for combating the drought prevailing in the world at that time.

Repeating patterns of history suggest ritual as a means of dramatizing and controlling events, but they exist in their own right—they are not in-

vented by men. In the exodus of the Saints from Nauvoo, thousands of people suddenly found themselves moving west in the dead of winter amid scenes of some confusion. But within three days the entire host was organized into 12 main groups—one under each of the apostles—and companies of 50 and 100. Instantly and quite unintentionally the order of Israel in the wilderness and the Sons of Light in the Judean desert was faithfully duplicated. A student of history 3,000 years from now might well reject the whole account as mythical, since it so obviously reduplicated an established pattern.

To one who is aware of the interplay of pattern and accident in history, the stories of the sacrifice of Isaac and of Sarah are perfect companion pieces to the drama of Abraham on the altar. Take first the case of Isaac, who is just another Abraham: a well-known tradition has it that he was in the exact image of his father,<sup>1</sup> so exact, in fact, that until Abraham's hair turned white, there was absolutely no way of distinguishing between the two men in

spite of their difference of age.<sup>2</sup> "Abraham and Isaac are bound to each other with extraordinary intimacy," writes a recent commentator; "... the traditions regarding the one are not to be distinguished from those concerning the other," e.g., both men leave home to wander, both go to Egypt, both are promised endless posterity and certain lands as an inheritance.<sup>3</sup> What has been overlooked is the truly remarkable resemblance between Isaac on the altar and Abraham on the altar.

First, in both stories there is much made of the preparatory gathering of wood for a "holocaust" that never takes place. Abraham is commanded, "Take now thy son . . . and offer him . . . for a burnt offering." (Gen. 22:2. Italics added.) "Behold, I offer thee now as a holocaust," he cries in the Pseudo-Philo.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, he "bound Isaac his son, and laid him upon the altar on the wood,"<sup>5</sup> sometimes described as a veritable tower, just like the structure that "Nimrod" had built for Abraham.<sup>6</sup> And while the Midrash has Isaac carrying the wood of the sacrifice "as one carries a cross on his shoulder,"<sup>7</sup> so Abraham before him "took the wood for the burnt offering and carried it, just as a man carries his cross on his shoulder."<sup>8</sup> According to one tradition,

the sacrifice was actually completed and Isaac turned to ashes.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, when the princes announced their intention of putting Abraham in a fiery furnace, he is said to have submitted willingly: "If there is any sin of mine so that I be burned, the will of God be done."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Hasidic version has it that "Abraham our father offered up his life for the sanctification of the Name of God and threw himself into the fiery furnace. . . ."<sup>11</sup> The famous play on the words "Ur of the Chaldees" and "Fire [ur] of the Chaldees" was probably suggested by these traditions—not the other way around, since Isaac escapes from the flames in the same way that Abraham does; i.e., the original motif requires a fire, not a city called Ur.

For all the emphasis on sacrificial fire, it is the knife that is the instrument of execution in the attempted offerings of Abraham and Isaac: "And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." (Gen. 22:10.) It was always the custom to slaughter (*zabakh*) the victim and then burn the remains to ashes; the blood must be shed and the offering never struggles in the flames. Many stories tell how the knife was miraculously turned aside as it touched the neck of

the victim, whether Abraham or Isaac: suddenly the throat is protected by a collar of copper, as it turns to marble, or the knife becomes soft lead.<sup>12</sup> But in the usual account it is dashed from the hand of the officiant by an angel who is visible to the victim on the altar but not to the priest.<sup>13</sup> If the wood under Abraham and Isaac was never ignited, neither did the knife ever cut.

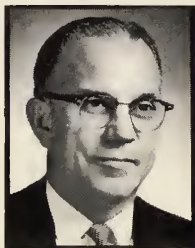
Being bound on the altar, Abraham, as the Book of Abraham and the legends report, prayed fervently for deliverance. Exactly such a prayer was offered as Isaac lay on the altar, but though in this case it was Isaac who was in mortal peril, it was again Abraham who uttered the prayer for deliverance: "May He who answered Abraham on Mt. Moriah, answer you, and may He listen to the voice of your cry this day."<sup>14</sup> And just as the angels appealed to God when they saw Abraham on the altar, so later when they saw Isaac in the same situation they cried out in alarm: "What will happen to the covenant with Abraham to 'Establish my covenant with Isaac,' for the slaughtering knife is set upon his throat. The tears of the angels fell upon the knife, so that it could not cut Isaac's throat. . . ."<sup>15</sup> It is still

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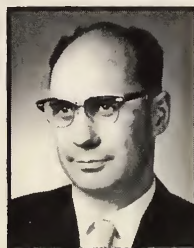
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Abraham for whom the angels are concerned, even though it is the life of Isaac that is in intimate danger. Everything seems to hark back to the original sacrifice—that of Abraham. Thus, at the moment that Isaac was freed from the altar, "God renewed his promises to Abraham,"<sup>16</sup> the very promises that had been given at the moment of Abraham's own deliverance (Abr. 1:16, 19); while he in turn prayed to God "that when the children of Isaac come to a time of distress, thou mayest remember on their behalf the binding of Isaac their father, and loose and forgive their sins and deliver them from all distress."<sup>17</sup> Thus Abraham's prayer for deliverance is handed down to all his progeny.

In both sacrifice stories an angel comes to the rescue in immediate response to the prayer, while at the same time the voice of God is heard from heaven. This goes back to Genesis 22:11f, 15-18, where "the angel of the Lord" conveys to Abraham the words of God speaking in the first person: "And the angel of the Lord . . . said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord. . . ." As the Rabbis explained it, "God makes a sign to the Metatron, who in turn calls out to Abraham. . ."<sup>18</sup> or "the Almighty hastened to send his voice from above, saying: Do not slay thy son."<sup>19</sup> That this complication is ancient and not invented by the doctors, whom it puzzled, is indicated in the "lion-couch" situation in which, as we have seen, the appearance of the heavenly messenger is accompanied by the voice of the Lord of all, which is heard descending from above. It is Abraham who establishes the standard situation: how many times in his career did he find himself in mortal danger only to pray and be delivered by an angel? An angel came to rescue the infant in the cave when his mother had given him up for dead; the same angel came to rescue the child Abraham from the soldiers, saying, "Do not fear, for the Mighty One will deliver thee from the hand of thine enemies!"<sup>20</sup> The same angel delivered him first from starvation in prison and then from death in the flames. So it is not surprising that the angel who comes to rescue Isaac puts a stop to the proceedings by calling out "Abraham, Abraham" (Gen. 22:11f), while Isaac remains passive throughout.<sup>21</sup>

One of the strangest turns of the Abraham story was surely Abraham's refusal to be helped by the angel, with its striking Egyptian parallel.<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly enough, the same motif occurs in the sacrifice of Isaac. For according to the Midrash, God ordered Michael,

"Delay not, hasten to Abraham and

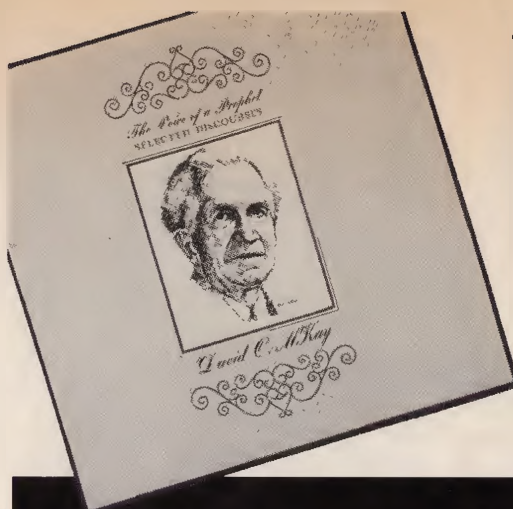
tell him not to do the deed!" And Michael obeyed: "Abraham! Abraham! What art thou doing?" To this the Patriarch replied, "Who tells me to stop?" "A messenger sent from the Lord!" says Michael. But Abraham answers, "The Almighty Himself commanded me to offer my son to Him—only He can countermand the order; I will not hearken to any messenger!" So God must personally intervene to save Isaac.<sup>23</sup> Such a very peculiar twist to the story—the refusal of angelic assistance in the moment of supreme danger—is introduced by way of explaining that it is God and not the angel who delivers; so in the Book of Abraham: ". . . and the angel of his presence stood by me, and immediately unloosed my bands; and his voice was unto me: Abraham, Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah, and I have heard thee, and have come down to deliver thee. . . ." (Abr. 1:15-16.) Everything indicates that this is the old authentic version.

In both sacrifices the role of Satan is the same, as he does his best at every step to frustrate the whole business. As the man in black silk pleaded with Abraham on the altar to be sensible, yield to the king, and so save his own life, even so he addresses him at the second sacrifice: "Are you crazy—killing your own son!" To which Abraham replied, "For that purpose he was born." Satan then addressed Isaac: "Are you going to allow this?" And the young man answered, "I know what is going on, and I submit to it."<sup>24</sup> First Satan had done everything in his power to block their progress on the road to the mountain,<sup>25</sup> and then as a venerable and kindly old man he had walked along with them, piously and reasonably pointing out that a just God would not demand the sacrifice of a son.<sup>26</sup> It was even Satan, according to some, who dashed the knife from Abraham's hand in the last moment.<sup>27</sup> In both stories it is Satan who suggests the sacrifice in the first place,<sup>28</sup> and then does everything in his power to keep it from being carried out. Why is that? The explanation is given both times: Mastema suggests the supreme sacrifice in order to discredit Abraham with the angels, for he is sure that the prophet will back out in the end. As soon as it becomes perfectly clear, therefore, that Abraham is not backing out, Satan becomes alarmed, and to keep from losing his bet he wants to call the whole thing off.

In a recent and important study, A. R. Rosenberg has pointed out that the sacrifice of Isaac has its background in the Canaanitish rite of the substitute king, which rite was "celebrated in

both Persia and Babylonia in connection with the acronical rising of Sirius . . . [as Saturn] the god who demanded human sacrifices."<sup>29</sup> We have already noted that the worship of Sirius played a conspicuous part, according to the Book of Abraham 1:9, in the rites involving the sacrifice of Abraham. In connection with the offering of Isaac, Rosenberg lays great emphasis on a passage from the Book of Enoch: ". . . the Righteous One shall arise from sleep and walk in the paths of righteousness," the figure on the altar being the Righteous One.<sup>30</sup> At once we think of "the weary one" or "the sleeping one" who arises from the lion-couch. What confirms the association is the report that "as Isaac was about to be sacrificed, the *Arelim* began to roar in heaven."<sup>31</sup> For the *Arelim* are "the divine lions,"<sup>31</sup> whose role in Egyptian sacrificial rites we have already explained. Thus, even the lion motif is not missing from our two sacrifice stories.

The close resemblance between the sacrifices of Abraham and Isaac, far from impugning the authenticity of either story, may well be viewed as a confirmation of both. J. Finkel points out that there are many close parallels to the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in ancient literature, and that these are "overwhelmingly ritualistic,"<sup>32</sup> that is, they belong to a category of events that follow a set pattern and yet *really do happen*. "On the mountain of the Temple Abraham offered Isaac his son," according to a Targum, "and on this mountain—of the Temple—the glory of the Shekhinah of the Lord was revealed to him."<sup>33</sup> What happened there was the type and shadow of the temple ordinances to come, which were in turn the type and shadow of a greater sacrifice. The one sacrifice prefigures the other, being, in the words of St. Ambrose, "less perfect, but still of the same order."<sup>34</sup> Isaac is a type: "Any man," says the Midrash, "who acknowledges that there are two worlds, is an Isaac," and further explains, "Not Isaac but in Isaac—that is, a portion of the seed of Isaac, not all of it. . . ."<sup>35</sup> In exactly the same sense Abraham too is a type: ". . . and in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) and in thy seed . . . shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Abr. 2:11. Italics added.) Far from being disturbed by resemblances, we should find them most reassuring. Is it surprising that the sacrifice of Isaac looked both forward and back, as "Isaac thought of himself as the type of offerings to come, while Abraham thought of himself as atoning for the guilt of Adam," or that "as Isaac was being bound on the altar, the spirit of Adam,



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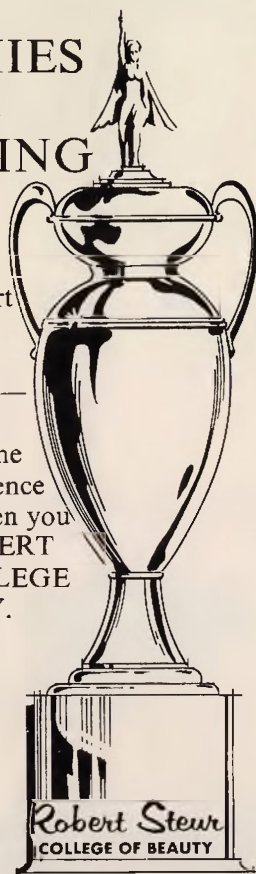
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the first man, was being bound with him"<sup>36</sup> It was natural for Christians to view the sacrifice of Isaac as a type of the Crucifixion, yet it is the Jewish sources that comment most impressively on the sacrifice of the Son. When at the creation of the world the angels asked, "What is man that Thou shouldest remember him?" God replied: "You shall see the father slay his son, and the son consenting to be slain, to sanctify my name."<sup>37</sup> When Abraham performed "the various sacrifices that should once be brought in the Temple, to atone for the sins of Israel," he was shown the whole history of the world, and the coming of the Messiah and the resurrection, and how in the end his own father would be saved by ministrations on behalf of the dead.<sup>38</sup> So, as Joseph Smith has told us, Abraham was perfectly aware of the entire plan of salvation and of his place in it.<sup>39</sup>

The importance of the sacrifice of Isaac as a type of atonement is brought out in many references to the cosmic significance of the ram which took Isaac's place. From its horn was made the *shofar* which was to be blown on New Year's Day forever after to remind the people "of the offering of Isaac as an atonement for Israel."<sup>40</sup> According to Rabbi Eliezer, its left horn announces the redemption of Israel at the New Year, while its right horn will be the trumpet that announces the millennium.<sup>41</sup> Every part of the ram figures in the history of Israel's salvation: Its ashes form the foundation of the inner altar, its sinews make the ten strings of David's harp, its skin is Elijah's girdle, one of its horns is blown on Sinai and the other for the final gathering of all Israel.<sup>42</sup> Like the altar of Isaac, which is supposed to have been the same one on which Adam, Cain, Abel, and Noah sacrificed before and on which David and Solomon were to make offering thereafter,<sup>43</sup> the ram is one of those symbols that binds all times, places, and dispensations together in a single unified plan.

But if Isaac is a type of the Messiah as "the Suffering Servant," Abraham is no less so. Even while he labors to minimize any spiritual resemblance between Christ and Abraham, M. Soggin reluctantly confesses that the historical and literary parallels between the two are most conspicuous.<sup>44</sup> R. Graves has called attention to the various signs and characteristics that show that Abraham himself was a type of the sacred victim as a substitute offering for a king, just as Isaac was.<sup>45</sup> An important point of resemblance between the two sacrifices is the complete freedom of will with which the victim submits. "I know

what is going on," says Isaac on the altar, "and I submit to it!"<sup>46</sup> In time the main significance of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, was on the free-will offering of the victim for the atonement of Israel; we are even told that Isaac at the age of 37 actually "asked to be bound on the Day of Atonement and Abraham functioned as the High Priest at the altar."<sup>47</sup> In the same way, a great deal is made of Abraham's willingness: "I was with thee," says God in the Midrash, "when thou didst willingly offer for my name's sake to enter the fiery furnace."<sup>48</sup> When Abraham refused to escape though Prince Jectan opened the way for him, the Prince told him, "Your blood will be upon your own head," to which the hero cheerfully agreed.<sup>49</sup> According to one tradition, Abraham had the choice of handing over to the king some sort of token or seal (a brick with his name on it?) or giving up his life, and he deliberately chose the latter.<sup>50</sup> The Hasidic teaching was that "Abraham our father offered up his life . . . and threw himself into the fiery furnace."<sup>51</sup> There need be no sense of competition between the merits of father and son here—others too have made the supreme sacrifice—but the significance of Abraham's test on the altar, as R. J. Loewe points out, "is that Abraham in Nimrod's furnace is the first of those who willingly gave up his life for the sanctification of the divine Name."<sup>52</sup> This assigns a very important place in the history of the atonement to the drama depicted in the Book of Abraham and strongly attests its authenticity.

*The Resurrection Motif:* In the Egyptian versions of the "lion-couch" drama, the resurrection motif was paramount. The sacrifices of Isaac and Abraham, apart from typifying the atonement, were also foreshadowings of the resurrection. There are persistent traditions in each case that the victim actually was put to death, only to be resurrected on the spot. We have seen in the Abraham stories how, when no knife could cut his throat, he was catapulted into the fire, which thereupon was instantly transformed into a blooming bower of delicious flowers and fruits amid which Abraham sat enjoying himself in angelic company.<sup>53</sup> This at once calls to mind the image found in numerous (and very early) Oriental seals and murals of the revived or resurrected king sitting beneath an arbor amid the delights of the feast at the New Year.<sup>54</sup> St. Jerome cites a Jewish belief that Abraham's rescue from the altar was the equivalent of a rebirth or resurrection.<sup>55</sup> It is Abraham who leads out in the resurrection:

"After these things," says the Testament of Judah (25:1), "shall Abraham and Isaac and Jacob arise unto life, and I (Judah) and my brethren shall be chiefs of the tribes of Israel."

The stories of the resurrection of Isaac are quite explicit. As Rabbi Eliezer puts it, "When the blade touched his neck, the soul of Isaac fled and departed . . . but at the words 'lay not thy hand . . . ' his soul returned to his body and he stood upon his feet and knew that in this manner the dead in the future would be quickened. And he said: Blessed art thou, O Lord, who quickeneth the dead."<sup>56</sup> Another tradition is that "the tears of the angels fell upon the knife, so that it could not cut Isaac's throat, but for terror his soul escaped from him"—he died on the altar.<sup>57</sup> Another has it that as the knife touched his throat "his life's spirit departed—his body became like ashes," i.e., he actually became a burnt offering;<sup>58</sup> or, as G. Vermes puts it, "though he did not die, scripture credits Isaac with having died and his ashes having lain upon the altar."<sup>59</sup> But he only dies in order to prefigure the resurrection, for immediately God sent the dew of life "and Isaac received his spirit again, while the angels joined in a chorus of praise: Praised be the Eternal, thou who hast given life to the dead!"<sup>60</sup> In another account God orders Michael to rush to the rescue: "Why standest thou here? Let him not be slaughtered! Without delay Michael, anguish in his voice, cried out: 'Abraham! Abraham! Lay not thy hand upon the lad. . . . At once Abraham left off from Isaac, who returned to life, revived by the heavenly voice.'"<sup>61</sup> Isaac is a symbol of revival and renewal—"Is any thing too hard for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14.) At his birth, we are told, both Abraham and Sarah regained their youth.<sup>62</sup> And "just as God gave a child to Abraham and Sarah when they had lost all hope, so he can restore Jerusalem."<sup>63</sup> When R. Graves surmises that "Abraham according to the custom would renew his youth by the sacrifice of his first-born son," he is referring to a custom which Abraham fervidly denounced but which was nonetheless observed in his own family, according to the Book of Abraham (1:30), which reports that his own father "had determined against me, to take away my life." The famous Strassburg Bestiary begins with a vivid scene of the sacrifice of Isaac followed by the drama of the sacrificial death and resurrection of the fabulous Phoenix-bird, the Egyptian and early Christian symbol of the resurrection.<sup>64</sup>

Why the insistence on the death and resurrection of Israel? Because a perfect sacrifice must be a complete sacrifice,

and the rabbinical tradition, especially when it was directed against the claims of the Christians, insisted that the sacrifice of Isaac was the perfect sacrifice, thus obviating the need for the atoning death of Christ. "Though the idea of the death and resurrection of Isaac was generally rejected by rabbinic Judaism," writes R. A. Rosenberg, still the proposition was accepted "that Isaac was 'the perfect sacrifice,' the atonement offering that brings forgiveness of sins through the ages."<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, the blood of the Paschal lamb is considered to be the blood of Isaac,<sup>65</sup> and according to some Jewish sectaries the real purpose of the Passover is to celebrate the offering of Isaac rather than the deliverance from Egypt.<sup>66</sup> It wasn't only the sectaries, however: "In Rabbinical writings all sacrifice is a memorial of Isaac's self-oblation."<sup>67</sup>

*The Uncompleted Sacrifice:* But the stories of Isaac's "resurrection" are scattered, conflicting, and poorly attested, however persistent, and this leads to serious difficulty: "The main problem was, of course," writes Vermes, "the obvious fact that Isaac did not actually die on the altar."<sup>68</sup> The whole biblical account, in fact, focuses on the dramatic arrest of the action at its climax—"Lay not thine hand upon the lad." (Gen. 22:12. Italics added.) It has often been claimed, in fact, that the story of Isaac's sacrifice really records the abolition of human sacrifice, when Abraham decides it will not be necessary.<sup>69</sup> But the validity of the sacrifice, according to the Rabbis, lay in Isaac's complete willingness to be offered, which has been called "the most profound and anomalous religious concept ever known to the human mind," being nothing less than "the cornerstone of the whole Jewish theology of the love of God."<sup>70</sup> Abraham may have known that Isaac was in no real danger when he said, with perfect confidence, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:8), and when without equivocation he told the two young men who escorted them to the mountain: ". . . I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5); Isaac did not know it—it was he who was being tested. But Abraham had already been tested in the same way; if "Isaac . . . offered himself at the Binding," so before his day the youthful "Abraham . . . threw himself into the fiery furnace. . . . If we follow in their footsteps they will stand and intercede for us on the holy and awesome day."<sup>71</sup> Isaac was being tested even as other saints are tested, since, as Rabbi Eliezer puts it, "the testing of the righteous here below . . .


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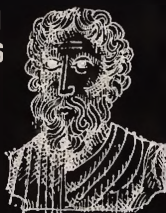
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is essential to the *plan* of the universe."<sup>72</sup> The Midrash, in fact, "strongly emphasized the parallelism between the sacrifice of Isaac and the willing martyrdom of other heroes and heroines," including many who suffered terribly painful deaths.<sup>73</sup> Isaac, in short, belongs to the honorable category of those who were willing to be "Partakers of Christ's sufferings," as all the saints and martyrs have been. (1 Pet. 4:13, etc.)

The second problem raised by the claim that Isaac's sacrifice was the ultimate atonement is that the shedding of blood did *not* cease with it: "If Isaac's sacrifice atones," asks Vermes, "why was further daily sacrifice in the Temple necessary?"<sup>74</sup> Circumcision no less than the Akedah "remains a never-ceasing atonement for Israel, being performed by Abraham himself and 'on the Date of Atonement,' and upon the spot on which the altar was later to be erected in the Temple,"<sup>75</sup> but for all that, no one claims that all the Law is fulfilled in it. "Students of Christian origins have come increasingly to realize," writes Rosenberg, a Jew, "... that the sacrifice of Isaac was to be reenacted by the 'new Isaac,' who, like the old, was a 'son of God.'"<sup>76</sup> The early Christian teaching was that, as he was about to sacrifice his son on the mountain, Abraham "saw Christ's day and yearned for it. There he saw the Redemption of Adam and rejoiced, and it was revealed to him, that the Messiah would suffer in the place of Adam."<sup>77</sup> But the old Isaac, called in the Targum "the Lamb of Abraham,"<sup>78</sup> neither suffered sacrificial death nor put an end to the shedding of blood. His act was an earnest of things to come, and that puts it on the same level as the sacrifice of Abraham.

This explains, we believe, the absence of the story of Abraham on the altar from the pages of the Old Testament. G. Vermes points out that whereas in the biblical version of the sacrifice of Abraham "the principal actors were Abraham and God," other versions, even in very early times, "somewhat surprisingly shift the emphasis and focus their interest on the person of Isaac."<sup>79</sup> Whatever the reason for this shift, it was a very emphatic one: "... the Binding of Isaac was thought to have played a unique role in the whole economy of the salvation of Israel, and to have a permanent redemptive effect on behalf of its people."<sup>80</sup> It completely supplanted the earlier episode of the sacrifice of Abraham on the ancient principle that "the later repetition of an event ... causes the earlier occurrence to be forgotten."<sup>81</sup> The principle is nowhere better illustrated than in

the story of Abraham himself: the names Abram and Sarai are unknown to most Christians, because of the explicit command, "Do not call Sarah Sarai" anymore; "do not call Abraham Abram"—those were once their names, but no more!<sup>81</sup> When Israel finally returns to God and goes to Abraham for instruction, we are told, instead of teaching them himself, he will refer them to Isaac, who will in turn pass them on to Jacob and so on down to Moses—it is from the *latest* prophet of the latest dispensation that the people receive instruction.<sup>82</sup> On this principle, the only words of the Father in the New Testament are those which introduce his Son and turn all the offices of the dispensation over to him. (Matt. 3:17, 17:5, etc.)

It was necessary to overshadow and even supplant the story of Abraham's sacrifice by that of Isaac if Isaac were to have any stature at all with posterity. Scholars long declared both Isaac and Jacob, imitating Abraham in everything, to be mere shadow figures, mythical creatures without any real personalities of their own. Jacob, to be sure, has some interesting if not altogether creditable experiences, but what is left for Isaac? The three stand before us as a trio: "Abraham instituted the morning prayer, Isaac the noon prayer, and Jacob the evening prayer," i.e., they all share in establishing a single body of rites and ordinances.<sup>83</sup> One does not steal the glory of the other. Great emphasis is laid by the Rabbis on the necessary equality of merit and glory between Abraham and Isaac,<sup>84</sup> while each emphasizes some special aspect of the divine economy: Abraham was the Great One, Jacob the Little One, and Isaac who came in between was "the servant of Jehovah who was delivered from the bonds of his Master."<sup>85</sup> The special emphasis on Isaac is as the sacrificial victim. If his sacrifice was "an imperfect type," it was still more perfect than the earlier sacrifice of Abraham on a pagan altar, and in every way it qualified to supersede it. Though it was an equal test for both men, "purged and idealized by the *trial* motivation,"<sup>86</sup> the second sacrifice was the true type of the atonement. In the long and detailed history of Abraham the story of the sacrifice in Canaan could safely be omitted in deference to the nobler repetition, which, while it added no less to the glory of Abraham, preserves a sense of proportion among the Patriarchs.

Abraham gets as much credit out of the sacrifice of Isaac as he does from his own adventure on the altar—he had already risked his own life countless times; how much dearer to him in his

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

**Back to the Lion-Couch:** Recent studies of the sacrifice of Isaac emphasize as its most important aspect the principle of substitution, which is also basic in the sacrifice of Abraham. As J. Finkel expressed it, “evidently the primary aim of the story (of Isaac) was to give divine sanction to the law of substitution.”<sup>87</sup> Isaac was not only saved *by* a substitute, but he himself was substituting for another. “A ram by the name of Isaac went at the head of Abraham’s herd. Gabriel took him and brought him to Abraham, and he sacrificed him instead of his son.”<sup>88</sup> As he did so, Abraham said, “Since I brought my son to you as a sacrificial animal be in thine eye as if it were my son lying on the altar.”<sup>89</sup> Accordingly, “whatsoever Abraham did by the altar, he exclaimed, and said, ‘This is instead of my son, and may it be considered before the Lord in place of my son.’ And God accepted the sacrifice of the ram, and it was accounted as though it had been Isaac.”<sup>90</sup> Himself noble, Isaac was saved by the substitution of “a noble victim.”<sup>91</sup>

But, more important, he himself was a substitute. “In Jewish tradition,” writes A. R. Rosenberg, “Isaac is the prototype of the ‘Suffering Servant,’ bound on the altar as a sacrifice.”<sup>92</sup> Rosenberg has shown that the title of Suffering Servant was used in the An-

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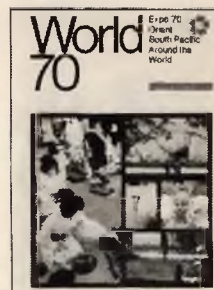
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cient East to designate "the substitute king"—the noble victim. Accordingly, the "new Isaac" mentioned in Macca-bees 13:12 must be "a 'substitute king' who dies that the people might live."<sup>93</sup> The starting point in Rosenberg's investigation is Isaiah 52:13 to 53:12, which "seems to constitute a portion of a ritual drama centering about a similar humiliation, culminating in death, of a 'substitute' for the figure of the king of the Jews." If we examine these passages, we find that they fit the story of Abraham's sacrifice even better than that of Isaac.

Thus beginning with Isaiah 52:13 we see the Suffering Servant raised up on high, reminding us of the scene from the Midrash (Midr. Rab. 43:5): "... they cut cedar and made a great altar (*bemah*) and placed him on it on high and they bowed down in mockery before him and said to him, 'Hear us, Lord!' and the like. They said to him, 'Thou art King over us! Thou art exalted above us! Thou art a god over us!' But he said to them, 'The world does not lack its king, nor does it lack its God!'" (Midr. Rab. 43:5.) Here Abraham both rejects the office and denounces the rites. The Midrash also indicates that the rites of Isaac were matched by heathen practices, his Akedah resembling the binding of the princes of the heathen, since every nation possesses at its own level "a 'prince' as its guardian angel and patron." (Midr. Rab. 56:5.)

The next verse (52:14), the picture of the Suffering Servant with "visage . . . marred," recalls Abraham led out to sacrifice after his long suffering in prison while the princes and the wise men mock. Verse 15, telling of the kings who shut their mouths in amazement, recalls the 365 kings who were astounded to behold Abraham's delivery from the altar. In 53:1 the arm of the Lord is revealed, as it is unbeknownst to the others in the delivery of Abraham. (Cf. Abr. 1:17.) Isaiah 53:2 emphasizes the drought motif, which, as we have seen, is never missing from the rites of the substitute king. In verses 3 to 8 the Suffering Servant is beaten that *we* may be healed—a substitute for all of us. In verse 8 he is "taken from prison and from judgment" to be "cut off out of the land of the living," exactly as Abraham was according to the traditions. Verse 9 reminds us of Abraham in wicked Canaan, and verse 10—"it pleased the Lord to bruise him . . ."—recalls the description of Abraham as a son being mercilessly beaten by a loving father but never complaining. Finally the reward: Because his soul was placed as an offering, he shall see his progeny, his days shall be length-

ened, and he shall prosper greatly (see verses 10-12)—all "because he hath poured out his soul unto death . . ." (verse 12). Such was the reward of Abraham, with the assurance also that by the knowledge gained he would be able to sanctify others. (See verse 11.) In the end the Suffering Servant becomes the great intercessor: "he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (53:12), just as Abraham does, as the great advocate for sinners living and dead. Thus Isaiah 52:13-53:12, while vividly recalling the suffering of Isaac, is an even better description of Abraham on the altar.

The sacrifice of the substitute king is found all over the ancient world. According to Rosenberg, the rite was "celebrated in both Persia and Babylonia in connection with the acronical rising of Sirius," sometimes identified in this connection with Saturn, "the god who demanded human sacrifice."<sup>94</sup> The Book of Abraham has already apprised us of the importance of Sirius (*Shagre-el*) in the sacrificial rites of the Plain of Olisheim, and it even labors the point that human sacrifice was the normal order of things in Canaan in Abraham's day. We have taken the position from the first that Abraham was put on the altar as a substitute for the king, an idea first suggested by the intense rivalry between the two, as indicated both in the legends and in the Book of Abraham. Since the series in the *Era* began, Rosenberg's study of the sacrifice of Isaac has appeared, with the final conclusion that in the earliest accounts of that event "both the Jewish and Christian traditions stem ultimately from the ancient Canaanite cult of Jerusalem, in which periodically the King, or a substitute for the King, had to be offered for a sacrifice."<sup>95</sup> It was to just such a cult—in Canaan—that we traced the sacrifice of Abraham, and that is why we have been at such pains to point out the close and thorough-going resemblances between the two: they are essentially the same rite and have the same background. If the one reflects "the ancient Canaanite cult" in which "a substitute for the King had to be offered," so does the other. Rosenberg says the sacrifice of Isaac most certainly goes back to that cult, and the Book of Abraham tells us flatly that the sacrifice of Abraham does. Certainly the Abraham story in its pagan setting is much nearer to the original substitute-king rite in all its details than is the Isaac story, which is a sizable step removed from it. The substitute sacrifice is a red thread that runs through the early career of the Prophet: The life of the infant Abra-

ham when his brother Haran substituted a slave child to be killed in his place;<sup>90</sup> then Haran himself died for Abraham in the flames;<sup>91</sup> and then Abraham was saved from the lion-couch when the priest was smitten in his stead (Abr. 1:17, 29); finally his life was saved by his wife Sarah, who was willing to face death to rescue him again from the lion-couch. This last much-misunderstood episode deserves closer attention.

(To be continued)

#### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> B. Beer, *Leben Abraham's*, p. 47; L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1, p. 262; for Rashi's explanation, G. Abrahams, *The Jewish Mind*, p. 51, n. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> M. J. bin Gorion, *Die Sagen der Juden*, I, 325.
- <sup>3</sup> H. Seebass, *Erzvaeter Israels*, p. 105.
- <sup>4</sup> G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), pp. 199f for text.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- <sup>6</sup> Beer, *op. cit.*, pp. 66, 182.
- <sup>7</sup> I. Levi, in *Rev. des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 59 (1912), p. 169.
- <sup>8</sup> Bin Gorion, II, 300.
- <sup>9</sup> Beer, p. 67.
- <sup>10</sup> Pseudo-Philo, VI, 11. Cf. Isaac's speeches in Beer, p. 65.
- <sup>11</sup> N. N. Glatzer, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 178.
- <sup>12</sup> Bin Gorion, II, 303.
- <sup>13</sup> Beer, p. 67: Sometimes Abraham lets the knife fall, and sometimes it is not the angel but Satan who dashes it from his hand. Cf. bin Gorion, II, p. 287.
- <sup>14</sup> Vermes, p. 195.
- <sup>15</sup> Ginzberg, *L. J.*, Vol. 1, p. 281.
- <sup>16</sup> Pseudo-Philo, 32:2-4; complete Latin text in Vermes, pp. 199-200.
- <sup>17</sup> Ginzberg, *loc. cit.*; see next note.
- <sup>18</sup> Targums cited at length in Vermes, pp. 149-50.
- <sup>19</sup> Pseudo-Philo, *loc. cit.*
- <sup>20</sup> Maase Abraham, in Jellineck, *Beth ha-Midrash* I, 28.
- <sup>21</sup> Bin Gorion, II, 287.
- <sup>22</sup> Discussed in the *Era*, Vol. 72 (August 1969), p. 76. In all the apocryphal accounts of Abraham on the altar he refuses the assistance proffered by the angel, saying that God alone will deliver him. Maase Abraham, in Jellinck, *Beth ha-Midrash* I, 34, and Midrash de Abraham Abinu, *ibid.*, p. 41; Ka'b el-Ahbar, text in *Rev. des Etudes*, Vol. 70 (1920), p. 37.
- <sup>23</sup> Beer, p. 68.
- <sup>24</sup> I. Levi, in *Rev. des Etudes Juives*, Vol. 59, p. 169.
- <sup>25</sup> Ginzberg, *L. J.*, Vol. 1, pp. 276-77.
- <sup>26</sup> Beer, p. 62, citing S. ha-Yashar, 77-79, and Midrash.
- <sup>27</sup> Bin Gorion, II, 287.
- <sup>28</sup> Levi, *op. cit.*, pp. 166f.
- <sup>29</sup> R. A. Rosenberg, in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 84 (1965), p. 382.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385, quoting the Book of Enoch 92:3, which Rosenberg calls "the most important text yet discovered of the Jewish apocalyptic literature."
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 382.
- <sup>32</sup> J. Finkel, in *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research*, Vol. 3 (1930), p. 15.
- <sup>33</sup> Vermes, *op. cit.*, p. 195.
- <sup>34</sup> J. Danielou, in *Biblica*, Vol. 28 (1947), pp. 392-93.
- <sup>35</sup> M. Braude, *Midr. Ps.*, 105:1.
- <sup>36</sup> Bin Gorion, II, 307-8.
- <sup>37</sup> Vermes, p. 201; Beer, p. 68.
- <sup>38</sup> Ginzberg, *L. J.*, Vol. 1, pp. 235-37.
- <sup>39</sup> *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, pp. 59-60, 181; cf. *Apocalypse of Abraham*, chapters 11 and 12.
- <sup>40</sup> I. Levi in *R.E.J.*, Vol. 59, pp. 169-71; Beer, p. 186.
- <sup>41</sup> Pirke R. Eliezer, Ch. 31, pp. 229f.
- <sup>42</sup> Ginzberg, Vol. 1, p. 283. So also the donkey was likewise the same beast that would later be ridden by Balaam, Moses, and the Messiah; Beer, p. 61.



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- 43 M. Levittes, *Matmonides*, VIII, p. 10.
- 44 J. Soggin, in *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, 89 (1964), pp. 732f.
- 45 R. Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Vintage, 1958), p. 355.
- 46 D. S. Shapiro, in *Tradition*, Vol. 4 (1962), p. 218, discusses this.
- 47 P. R. Eliezer, Ch. 31, p. 227.
- 48 Midrash Rab. Gen., 39:8; Ps. 110:3.
- 49 Pseudo-Philo, VI, 10; bin Gorion, II, 78.
- 50 Bin Gorion, loc. cit.
- 51 N. N. Glatzer, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 178.
- 52 R. J. Loewe, in A. Altmann, *Biblical Motifs*, p. 166, with Tanhuma text supplied in note 35.
- 53 So in the *Maase Abraham*, in Beth ha-Midrash, I, 34. According to the Sefer ha-Yashar, 8, "Abram walked in the midst of the fire for three days and three nights," cit. Vermes, p. 73. Ka'b el-Ahbar, *Qissat Ibrahim Abinu*, in *Rev. Et. Juives*, Vol. 70 (1920), p. 42; cf. *Midrash de-Abraham Avinu*, in Beth ha-Midrash, I, 40-41. According to Tha'labi (Qissas, p. 55), it was the "Angel of the Shadow" who sat with Abraham in the fire, i.e., he was sacrificed.
- 54 A. Moortgat, *Tammuz* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1949), pp. 63, 114, 139-142.
- 55 In Beer, p. 113.
- 56 P. R. Eliezer, Ch. 31, 38A.i.
- 57 Ginzberg, Vol. 1, p. 281.
- 58 Beer, p. 67.
- 59 G. Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition*, p. 205.
- 60 Beer, p. 69.
- 61 Ginzberg, Vol. 1, pp. 281-82; in another version Isaac's spirit went to paradise for three years before returning, *ibid.*, pp. 285-87.
- 62 *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 208.
- 63 Cavalletti, in *Studi e Materiali*, 35: 263.
- 64 *Cahier des Curiosites Mystiques*, Vol. 1 (1874), pp. 152-55.
- 65 R. A. Rosenberg, in *J.B.L.*, Vol. 84, p. 388.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 386, citing Jubilees 18:18.
- 67 Vermes, op. cit., p. 209.
- 68 *Ibid.*, p. 205.
- 69 So Z. Mayani, *Les Hyksos et le Monde de la Bible* (Paris: Payot, 1956), p. 21.
- 70 Vermes, pp. 193, 221.
- 71 N. N. Glatzer, *Faith and Knowledge*, p. 178.
- 72 Beer, p. 57.
- 73 Vermes, p. 204.
- 74 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 75 Ginzberg, Vol. 1, p. 240.
- 76 Rosenberg, p. 388.
- 77 Cave of Treasures 29:13-14.
- 78 Rosenberg, loc. cit., citing Targ. Levi 22:27.
- 79 Vermes, p. 193.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 208.
- 81 Holtzmann, *Toseptakraktat Berakot*, in *Ztschr. f. Alttest. Wiss.*, Vol. 23 (1912), pp. 12f.
- 82 Beer, p. 206.
- 83 M. Braude, *Midr. Ps.* 55:2.
- 84 See above, notes 37, 46-48, 70, 71, for examples.
- 85 Vermes, p. 203, cit. Targ. Job 3:18.
- 86 J. Finkel, in *Proc. Am. Acad. Jew. Research*, Vol. 3 (1930), p. 14.
- 87 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 88 Bin Gorion, II, 295.
- 89 Beer, p. 70.
- 90 Ginzberg, Vol. 1, p. 283.
- 91 Finkel, p. 12.
- 92 Rosenberg, in *J.B.L.*, Vol. 84, p. 385.
- 93 *Ibid.*, pp. 383, 385.
- 94 *Ibid.*, p. 382.
- 95 *Ibid.*, p. 388.
- 96 Beer, p. 15; M. Sprengling (ed.), *Barhebraeus' Scholia on the Old Testament* (Univ. of Chicago, 1931), p. 49, comments on Gen. 11:28. That Haran died as a substitute for Abraham is clearly indicated in *Midr. in Beth ha-Midrash* I, 40; S. ha-Yashar (text in Vermes, p. 72); Ginzberg, *L.J.*, Vol. 1, p. 216; bin Gorion, II, 96f; Beer, pp. 15-17; cf. Bar Hebrews, *Scholia* to Gen. 11:2; *Midr. Rab.*, Noah 38:13.

The true purpose of life is the perfection of humanity through individual effort, under the guidance of God's inspiration.  
—President David O. McKay