

## Isaac in the Eucharist

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### **Abstract:**

The story of Abraham's celebration and risk of Isaac is central to traditional Christian thought and worship, and with it the question of religious violence. Traditional Christian interpreters see the *Trinity* in a festive meal at which Abraham celebrates the promise with three mysterious visitors. They see *Jesus* in Isaac. And they enact the entire story when they take *communion*.

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### **Article:**

The story of Abraham's celebration and risk of Isaac is central to traditional Christian thought and worship, and with it the question of religious violence. Traditional Christian interpreters see the Trinity in a festive meal at which Abraham celebrates the promise with three mysterious visitors. They see Jesus in Isaac. And they enact the entire story when they take communion.

Between the promise of a son, and the ransom of Isaac, another episode intervenes, the hospitality of Abraham. In Genesis 18, three visitors appear to Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre, and Abraham makes them a great feast of cakes of meal, a calf, curds and milk. The three visitors repeat the promise of the covenant. Now in Genesis 18 some passages refer to three men and some passages refer to two angels and the Lord. This shifting back and forth between the three and the Lord has caused some traditional Christian interpreters to see the Trinity here. Furthermore, since the members of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, one God, are here feasting with human beings, these interpreters see a foretaste of the feasting or celebrating or dancing that God intends human beings to share when they come to participate in God's own trinitarian life. Jesus says, "The kingdom may be compared to a father who gave a feast for his son." [6] This is the feast that God has prepared for his people from before the foundation of the world, and to which they look forward at the end—the feast that Abraham shares with God under the oaks of Mamre and at the reception of the promise.

Abraham receives a promise that by him all the nations of the earth shall be a blessing one for another (Gen. 12:3b "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"; Gen. 18:18, as God considers what to tell Abraham about Sodom, "Seeing that . . . all the nations of the earth shall be

blessed in him"). Abraham celebrates with three visitors at a festive meal. Abraham exposes his son to the knife. Abraham receives a ram to restore the son. Christian interpreters have often read the sequence meal-sacrifice-restoration in the context of another meal, sacrifice, and restoration: namely the last supper, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus. Christians celebrate that sequence as often as they take bread and wine in memory of him. Thus too they enact the hospitality of Abraham, the binding and ransom of Isaac as often as they do it.

But the story does not end with a festive meal. The meal precedes a sinister episode in which the feasting exchange of gift and gratitude is exposed to traditions of first-born sons sacrificed to Moloch. [7] The critics of religion are right: religion, like love, is highly ambiguous; the highest form of human activity becomes, under conditions of sin, precisely the most dangerous. [8] Can God deal with this feature of human beings, or does holiness tie God's hands? The text does not portray God as stopped or thwarted or pulled up short by the ambiguities of human loves and loyalties, or even by human religious tendencies to violence. God exposes the worst that human beings can do, so that it can be healed. God risks telling Abraham to sacrifice his son in order to show Abraham what to offer instead. God provides a ram—a ram that according to rabbinic interpretation God had prepared for the covenant since before the creation of the world. The initial command is chilling, as if to say "OK, go ahead." But the story as a whole enacts a dramatic irony and relief. God transforms the Molochite impulse to violent sacrifice into the peaceful offering of praise and thanksgiving. This transformed offering becomes the Jewish tamid (daily sacrifice), its verbal re-enactment in synagogue liturgy, and the Christian Eucharist. [9]

The New Testament does not soften but intensifies that pattern. God imitates Abraham: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Jesus cries out from the cross as if in the voice of Isaac, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And yet Jesus and the Father, like Isaac and Abraham, are oddly not at odds. Jesus like Isaac is willing. Abraham and Isaac, Jesus and the Father are at one in pursuing the promise. This feature of the stories is so odd that Christians come to say that both Jesus and the Father are (with the Holy Spirit) together one God, so that God's sacrifice is first of all a sacrifice of himself.

Thus we return to the feast. "This is my body," Jesus says over the bread at his last supper, "given for you." God would renew the feast even on the night in which he was betrayed. [10] A vain attempt, perhaps - a deathbed wedding. But God risks the worst that human beings can do - crucifixion, child sacrifice - and transforms it into yet another invitation to the feast, another occasion of gift. God gives back for love the son that Moloch would kill; God gives back for feasting the body the Romans would break. When Christians break the bread of communion, it is the breaking of God's own body that they enact. By God's dramatic irony it does not so much break apart, as break open: the Trinity takes this occasion to lay itself open, and human beings, with Abraham and Sarah under the oaks of Mamre, join Father, Son, and Spirit in feasting. Surely the feast of Abraham will turn hostility into hospitality, as in the 23rd Psalm (v. 5), "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." Then the promise will be fulfilled that by the name of Abraham all the nations of the earth shall be - not curses - but blessings to one another. [11]

## Footnotes

[6] Mt. 9:15, 22:1-14; Lk. 14:16-24, Mt. 8:11, Lk. 13:29, 5:34, Mk. 2:18-22, Is. 62:5, Rev. 19:9; Prodigal Son, Lk. 15:22-3.

[7] See Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1993).

[8] For a Christian critic of religion who takes this view, see Karl Barth, "The Revelation of God as the *Aufhebung* of Religion," in *Church Dogmatics*, , vol. I, part-volume 2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), pp. 280-362, esp. 280-96. Two caveats: 1) Barth's critique of religion is supersessionist and anti-Judaic, although it need not be. 2) The standard translation covers up the positive senses of "*Aufhebung*" with the translation "abolition." Garrett Green is preparing a new, freestanding translation of this section that overcomes that defect.

[9] Cf. Rowan Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice: The Roots of a Metaphor* (Bramcote, Nottinghamshire: Grove Books, 1982), pp. 14-17.

[10] For a similar exposition of this passage to a different purpose, see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 249-68.

[11] Cf. Kendall Soulen, "YHWH the Triune God," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999): 25-54.