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The Christianizing of Abraham: The Interpretation of Abraham in Early Christianity

ROBERT L. WILKEN

THE AUTHOR TRACES THROUGH VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SIGNIFICANCE of the story of Abraham in the early church in support of his thesis that each generation interprets the Scripture from the perspective of its own historical circumstance. The author is associate professor of the history of Christianity at the University of Notre Dame.

Few scenes are more frequent in early Christian art than Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. The scene occurs as early as the second century on the wall frescoes in the Roman catacombs, it is carved into several dozen sarcophagi during the first four or five centuries of the Christian era; set in mosaics it adorns basilicas in Rome and Ravenna; it is etched on gold cups and rings, and painted on bowls and plates in North Africa, Syria, and Asia Minor. The sheer frequency of its appearance is noteworthy.¹ But what is more striking is that the sacrifice of Isaac plays no important role in the New Testament. It is mentioned only twice and then in passing. "By faith Abraham, when the test came, offered up Isaac" (Heb. 11:17). "Was it not by his action, in offering his son Isaac upon the altar, that our father Abraham was justified? Surely you can see that faith was at work in his actions, and that by these actions the integrity of his faith was fully proved?" (James 2:20-22)

In the New Testament there are fuller discussions of Abraham, as for example

¹ See I. Speyart van Woerden, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac," *Vigiliae Christianae* 15 (1961), 214-255.

Rom. 4, Gal. 3, and John 8, but where Abraham is discussed the sacrifice of Isaac is not mentioned.² New Testament writers are more interested in Abraham as the father of the people of God, the man who trusted God's promise that his seed would be blessed and his descendants numbered as the stars in the heavens. The words cited by Paul in Rom. 2, "his faith was counted to him as righteousness," come originally from Gen. 15 where Abraham was told by Yahweh to look up in the sky and count the stars. The New Testament emphasis on Abraham's faith arises not out of a consideration of the sacrifice of Isaac, but of the promise to Abraham's seed.

² Some scholars have argued that the sacrifice of Isaac lies behind certain New Testament texts, as for example Rom. 8:32, "he did not spare his own son," and others. For a discussion of the sacrifice of Isaac in the New Testament see Nils A. Dahl, "The Atonement — an Adequate Reward for the Akedah? Rom. 8:32," *Neotestamentica et Semitica* (Matthew Black Festschrift), ed. E. Willis and M. Wilcox (Edinburgh, 1969). On Abraham see O. Schmitz, "Abraham im Spätjudentum und im Urchristentum," in *Aus Schrift und Geschichte, Theologische Abhandlungen A. Schlatter dargebracht* (Stuttgart, 1922), pp. 99-123. Also Theodor Klauser, "Abraham" in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, I, 18-27.

Isaac's offering occurs seven chapters later in Gen. 22.

Not only does the sacrifice of Isaac achieve greater prominence in the patristic interpretation of Abraham than in the New Testament interpretation, but the sacrifice is also taken in a quite different sense than it is within the New Testament. What impressed the fathers was the Christological dimensions of the offering of Isaac. As early as the mid-second century, Melito, bishop of Sardis in western Asia Minor, set forth the main lines the patristic interpretation would take. He wrote: "In the place of Isaac, the righteous, a ram appeared as victim so that Isaac might be freed of his bonds. By sacrificing the ram he [Abraham] liberated Isaac. In the same way the Lord, by becoming a victim, liberated us; by his being bound he freed us, and by his being sacrificed he redeemed us. . . . For 'as a ram he was bound,' Isaiah says of our Lord Jesus Christ, and 'as a Lamb he was shorn' and as a piece of cattle he 'was led to the slaughter' and as a lamb he was crucified and he carried the wood upon his shoulders when he was led forth to be sacrificed as Isaac was by his father. But Christ underwent the suffering and Isaac did not, for he was only a prefiguration of him who would suffer."³

The Christological interpretation is the most frequent in early Christian literature, but it is not the only one. From the early second century to the middle of the fifth century, Abraham exercised a powerful attraction on the Christian imagination as Christian preachers and exegetes and teach-

³ Melito of Sardis, Fragment 9 in Othmar Perler, *Méliton de Sardes, Sur la Pâque et Fragments* (*Sources Chrétiennes*, No. 125, Paris, 1966), p. 234.

ers were working out the main lines of Biblical interpretation which would shape the next thousand years. Origen, writing in the early third century, devoted a large section of his homilies on Genesis to the figure of Abraham; Ambrose in the fourth century wrote two books on him; Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, and others preached about him regularly; Cyril of Alexandria in the early fifth century discusses him extensively in a book on Genesis and in an Easter sermon; Augustine devotes a dozen chapters to him in *The City of God*, and numerous other writers hold him up as a model and example for Christians.

Because of his graciousness to the three visitors at Mamre, Abraham was thought to be a symbol of hospitality. To others he symbolized God the Father, for just as Abraham willingly gave up his son Isaac, so God, because of His love for men, willingly gave up His only Son that men might be saved. Abraham was thought to be the first Christian, for he trusted in God without being circumcised. He was contrasted with Moses who was thought to be the founder of Judaism, whereas he was the first to point to the new way which was to come in Christ.⁴

Some writers, following Jewish tradition, presented Abraham as the great representative of monotheism, the man who first decisively turned away from the worship of idols, from astrology, and from the

⁴ On the early Christian interpretation see Theodor Klauser, *RAC*, I, 21—22. See also the special issue of *Cahiers Sioniens* (Paris, 1952) devoted to Abraham in the Bible, in the early church, in Judaism, in Islam, et al. Also David Lerch, *Isaaks Opferung Christlich Gedeutet* (Tübingen, 1950), and Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality* (Westminster, Maryland, 1960).

worship of the sun and the moon and the stars. Since Abraham was known to have come from Ur of the Chaldees in Assyria, a land noted in ancient times for the cultivation of astrology, it seemed natural to contrast his former superstitious ways and his false worship with his new worship of the one true God. Several Christian authors, taking this view one step further, argued that Abraham is the prime example of a man who knew that God was so beyond man's knowledge and comprehension that He could not be discovered by the senses as the Chaldeans and others had thought. Rather, to know God man must rise above the things he sees with his eyes, touches with his hands, or hears with his ears to soar into that realm where alone God can be discovered and known. As man mounts up to these heights his eyes finally rest on the source of all beauty, God who is without beginning, infinite, who is greater and more sublime than any tokens or traces he has left on earth.⁵

In the midst of such heterogeneity of views and such diversity of interpretation, one is prompted to ask: Will the real Abraham stand up? Whose view is the correct one? Which is closer to the Abraham of Genesis, or even to the Abraham of Paul or John? Is there a true and authentic Abraham or can he become whatever strikes one's fancy?

The variety of interpretations arises in part from the figure of Abraham as it is presented in Genesis. Except for Moses, Abraham is the most elaborately and richly drawn portrait in the Pentateuch. Indeed in the whole of the Bible he has few rivals. His life and experiences provide

rich and fertile ground for the imagination of the preacher or teacher; and Biblical commentators have employed this one to the full. Consider only some of the things which marked his life: he traveled over large sections of the ancient Near East, from Arabia to Mesopotamia to Egypt; he lived for a time in ancient Sodom; he married a beautiful woman who was desired by a king and a Pharaoh; he was a warrior who defended his nephew Lot; he had a child by his slave girl; he experienced a unique vision of God; he received an extraordinary promise that his seed would be blessed, and that the number of his descendants would be as great as the stars of the heavens; he made a covenant with God sealed with circumcision; he and his wife had a son when they were a hundred years old; when this son is only a young boy God asks Abraham to sacrifice the child as a burnt offering. And the stories go on and on.

It is not surprising, then, that Abraham became an almost primal symbol for Christians and later for Muslims.⁶ The Muslim tradition about Abraham centering on Abraham's belief in the one God is perhaps even richer than the Jewish or Christian interpretation. Abraham, it seems, will not and cannot be comprehended in one ideal, one motif, one theme, or by one people or religious tradition. In ancient Israel he was remembered as the founder of the race. He stood at the beginning of the history of saving events which led up to and culminated in the Exodus. "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were dug; look to your father Abraham and to Sarah who

⁵ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, 2.84—89 (Jaeger, I, 251—253).

⁶ See Klauser, *RAC*, I, 18—19 and *Cahiers Sioniens* (Paris, 1952).

gave you birth . . ." (Is. 51:1-2). But even within ancient Judaism, to say nothing of the developments during the Talmudic period, Abraham came to mean many different things, especially as Israel went through new vicissitudes and had new experiences as it adapted to differing historical situations. Every time people take a fresh look at Abraham they discover new things about him.

Christians have done the same. In the earliest period the writers of the New Testament discovered aspects of Abraham that had not been seen or expressed before. By giving Abraham's faith a new point of reference in Christ, and by spiritualizing the promise to the descendants they gave to his life and his faith a new significance. Because the New Testament writers gave Abraham such a prominent role in their understanding of God's promise to mankind, they gave to later preachers and teachers a new starting point. The writers of the first four or five centuries after the New Testament, as well as the artists and craftsmen who carved and painted and sculpted Abraham, had not only the story of Abraham recorded in Genesis and the Jewish interpretations, they also had the New Testament as a basis for their views of Abraham.

What this suggests is that the proper question for us to ask is not "How accurately do the fathers reproduce the account in Genesis," or "How faithfully do they interpret the original meaning without moralizing or allegorizing?" But rather we should ask, "How do they, in their new situation and with the earlier understandings of Abraham at their disposal, appropriate and adopt that which they have received to give it meaning in their day?

What do they make of this tradition in their new setting?"

Viewed in this light even some of the more curious interpretations of Abraham appear plausible. For example, Abraham is mentioned in a liturgy for the barrenness of women because of his faith that Sarah would bear a child. He is also mentioned in connection with the blessing of a marriage for the same reason.⁷

It is not enough, however, simply to note the variety of interpretations, though it is surely instructive to ponder the richness of Biblical interpretation in the patristic era. The more important consideration is how Greeks and Romans and Syrians and others who were not Jews and who were urban men living in the great cities of the Roman Empire made this ancient Semitic Bedouin a credible and compelling witness to the Christian faith. For, let us remember, to men of that age Abraham seemed as distant and inaccessible a figure as he appears to us today. Let us consider two of the major interpretations of Abraham from the patristic era to see how Christians of that age found new meaning in his life and witness.

1. *The Christological Interpretation.* From the beginning of Christianity the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) were cited in support of Christian beliefs. But the Hebrew Bible and the Greek translation (Septuagint) were known to be Jewish books even though Christians used them. Jews continued to appeal to them in support of their beliefs. For many Christians, especially those living in areas where there were strong Jewish communities, it

⁷ See *Cahiers Sioniens* (Paris, 1952), and "Abraham," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1901), I, 83—87.

was essential to demonstrate that the events recorded in the Jewish Scriptures and the heroic figures of Jewish history could be interpreted in accord with Christian belief. The most obvious way of accomplishing this end, many Christians thought, was to stress the Christological character of the Jewish Bible. That is, many Christians thought it insufficient to show broad lines of continuity between ancient Israel and the Christian faith, as for example by accenting a common belief in monotheism. The only credible link between Israel and Christianity was thought to be found in Christ, and this meant that every major event and person in Israel's history was to be taken Christologically, whether it be the Exodus, King David, temple sacrifices, circumcision, or the exile. The meaning of Israel's history was to be found in Christ. And if this were so, Abraham could not be simply a figure who looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promise for the Jews. Abraham had to be part of the history of salvation leading up to Christ. He was thought to be the first believer in Christ. Irenaeus, a pastor writing in Gaul in the second century, said that the faith of Abraham and the faith of the apostles is "one and the same."⁸

Melito, whom we cited earlier, illustrates the peculiar situation of Christians in the second and third centuries. Melito lived in Sardis, a Greek city in western Asia Minor where he was bishop ca. A. D. 150—180. His congregation was small and relatively new to Sardis, but the Jewish community had been there for some four or five hundred years. From archaeological evidence we know that the Jewish community there

was large, well established, and highly influential. In fact, the Jews had achieved such stature in Sardis that they owned an enormous synagog and some served on the city council. The synagog, some 300 feet in length, occupied a prominent place on the main street and was surrounded by shops and public buildings. From Melito's writings we know that he was unusually hostile to Judaism and this suggests that he felt, as a Christian pastor, that his own congregation was threatened by the larger and stronger Jewish community in the city. In such a setting the Christian claim that their interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) was the only one would have sounded presumptuous and unworthy of serious consideration.⁹

In the light of the relation between Christianity and Judaism in Sardis it is not surprising that Melito should discuss the sacrifice of Isaac. For in Jewish tradition the Akedah Isaac (the Binding of Isaac) is a major theme which occurs in Jewish worship, exegesis, theology, and art. Some indication of its importance can be seen at Dura Europos, a synagog excavated in Mesopotamia in the third century A. D., where the Akedah Isaac is the only Biblical scene to be painted on the Torah shrine. At a somewhat later date it also

⁹ On Judaism in Sardis see D. G. Mitten, "A New Look at Ancient Sardis," *Biblical Archaeology* 29 (1966), 38—68; continuing reports in the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, most recently G. M. A. Hanfmann and Ruth Thomas, "The Thirteenth Campaign at Sardis (1970)," *BASOR* No. 203 (October 1971); also A. T. Kraabel, *Judaism in Western Asia Minor under the Roman Empire* (Ph. D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1968) and his "Melito the Bishop and the Synagogue at Sardis: Text and Content," *Studies Presented to George M. A. Hanfmann* (Cambridge, 1971), 77 ff.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.a.1 (Rousseau, *Sources Chrétiennes* No. 100), p. 676.

occurs on a floor Mosaic at the synagog Beth Alpha in Palestine.¹⁰

What then did the Binding of Isaac mean to the Jews? By the end of the second century of the Christian era the Akedah Isaac had come to be one of the primary Biblical events which expressed God's continuing love and care for His people. The Jews thought that Isaac had knowingly and willingly participated in the sacrifice and his sacrificial action as well as Abraham's trust in God's promise became the basis for God's mercy to Israel. "When the people of Israel come to a time of distress, they pray to God to remember the binding of Isaac and to forgive their sins and deliver them from distress," says one of the Targums on Gen. 22. At an earlier period the story had emphasized the example of martyrdom, but by the second century it came to symbolize God's relationship to His people. "Remember in our favor, O Lord, our God, the oath which you swore to our father Abraham on Mt. Moriah; consider the binding of his son Isaac upon the altar when he suppressed his love in order to do your will with a whole heart. Thus may your great love suppress your wrath against us . . ." (Ta'anith II, 4). Although there is no direct evidence from the Jews of Sardis as to how they understood the Binding of Isaac, it must have been seen as a testimony of God's mercy, forgiveness, and providential care of His people.¹¹

¹⁰ See Carl Kraeling, *The Excavations at Dura Europos: The Synagogue* (New Haven, 1956) and Eleazar Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha* (London, 1932).

¹¹ For the Jewish interpretation of the Binding of Isaac, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York, 1967), Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden, 1961), pp.

Melito, however, as a Christian believed that God's love had now been given new expression in Jesus Christ, and that it was Christ who was the basis of God's mercy and forgiveness. If Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was to be rightly understood, he thought, it must be seen to point to Christ and the church, not to Israel. The true meaning of Abraham's sacrifice is not to be found in Isaac or Abraham, for they only foreshadow what is to come. Thus Melito shows how each detail of the sacrifice can be interpreted Christologically. "As a ram he [Christ] was bound . . . and as a Lamb he was shorn . . . and as a lamb he was crucified and he carried the wood upon his shoulders when he was led forth to be sacrificed as Isaac was by his father." Like Isaac, Christ was bound, He was led to the cross, He suffered silently, He bore the wood of the cross as Isaac bore the wood for the fire. The only difference is that Christ actually suffered and Isaac did not, and this suggests the superiority of Christ over Isaac. "Christ underwent the suffering and Isaac did not, for he was only a prefiguration of him who would suffer." In Christ we see a "new mystery," says Melito.¹²

Melito's interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac illustrates how the figure of Abraham was interpreted anew within early Christianity to give it meaning to a new generation of believers. As a new religion, Christianity was seeking to legitimate its faith and to give it a firm footing within the Scriptures. If the sacrifice of Isaac was thought by Jews to be a primary symbol of God's faithfulness to Israel, Melito

193—227, and R. Le Déaut, *Le nuit paschale* (Rome, 1963), pp. 133—208.

¹² Perler, op. cit., frg. 9, p. 234.

wanted to show that it pointed to God's new work in Christ and his love for the church. If Christianity was to make its way in the world, it was essential that the events recorded in the ancient Jewish Scriptures be interpreted in accord with Christian belief and be seen afresh in light of the new revelation Christians had known in Jesus. The meaning of Abraham and Isaac found its fullest meaning in the sacrifice and death of Jesus.

What Melito does with Abraham and Isaac is what Christians and Jews have been doing and continue to do as they return over and over again to the Bible. As Judah Goldin, a Jewish scholar, wrote in the preface to a book on the Jewish interpretation of Abraham and Isaac: "The Scriptures are not only a record of the past but a prophecy, a foreshadowing and foretelling of what will come to pass. And if that is the case, text and personal experience are not two autonomous domains. On the contrary, they are reciprocally enlightening; even as the immediate event helps make the age-old sacred text intelligible, so in turn the text reveals the fundamental significance of the recent event or experience."¹³

2. *Abraham as a Model for Christian Life.* Men need models, and if they do not have them they will create them. Whether they come from the immediate past—for example, Martin Luther King, John Kennedy, or Malcom X—or from the living, or whether they come from national history or the far distant past, each new generation must rejuvenate its models and re-interpret them in light of its unique hopes and dreams. What a community or a so-

¹³ Judah Goldin in Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York, 1967), pp. xv—xvi.

ciety prizes most highly is not expressed simply in values or beliefs, it is also embodied in historical and mythical personages. One can, for example, write a history of American hopes and ideals by noting the changing images of George Washington or Thomas Jefferson. The same can be done for religious traditions. Consider the changing images of Martin Luther: a reformer who stood firm against papal tyranny; the teacher and educator; the national symbol embodying German character; the existentialist who anguishes over his soul's fate. Even Jesus has appeared at times as an ascetic, at other times as a teacher of brotherhood between men; at yet other times as a social reformer, as a critic of religious institutions; and today as the darling of the Jesus freaks.

The early Christian communities needed models, but they were reluctant to seek them in the poems of Homer or the myths and legends handed on in the popular culture. Greek and Roman culture offered figures who could be put to Christian use and who were better known to men than the figures from Jewish history: Socrates standing firm for truth against the city officials in Athens, Brutus sending his son to death, Diogenes giving up all his goods. But Christians rejected these and went instead to the Jewish Scriptures, in part because as a new movement the Christian tradition had itself not created figures of historical dimensions, and in part because Christians considered Jewish tradition their own.

For these early Christians, Abraham came to represent the prime example of a man who trusted fully in God's promise and willingly obeyed God's commands no matter what the circumstances or how

drastic the consequences. Within the cultural milieu of the Roman Empire these aspects of Abraham's character were stated as follows: he overcame his inclination to follow his natural feelings and instead devoted himself to the higher good, the spiritual good, that is, to God. Abraham was forced to choose between his paternal feelings toward his son, the natural bond created by the flesh, and his devotion to God, a spiritual bond created by God. He had to choose between the love of God and the love of Isaac.¹⁴

Viewed in this light the details of the sacrifice of Isaac took on extraordinary significance. The ancient story took on new life as men and women explored the personal and psychological aspects of Abraham's struggle, much as Kierkegaard was to do in the 19th century in his classic work on Abraham, *Fear and Trembling*. Origen stressed this insight in a series of sermons on Genesis. He wrote: "God said, 'Take your son, your very dear son, the one you love.'" "It did not suffice," says Origen, "for God to say 'son' but he said 'very dear son.' Why did he add 'the one you love?'" This was done to give "even greater proof to men of Abraham's obedience. By the expression of tenderness and affection, repeated over and over, God roused in Abraham his paternal sentiments in order that the father, by vividly remembering his love, would hesitate to sacrifice." The "whole army of the flesh," i. e., Abraham's love for his son, stood "in revolt against the faith of the spirit."¹⁵

¹⁴ See Walter Voelker, "Das Abrahambild bei Philo, Origenes und Ambrosius," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* (1931), pp. 199 to 207.

¹⁵ Origen, *Homily on Genesis*, 8.2.

The details of the ascent to the mountain attracted interpreters. Why, they asked, "did it take three days for Abraham and Isaac to reach the place of sacrifice?" This was done to give Abraham three days in which he would travel with his son, eat with him, talk with him, even sleep with the young boy huddled up next to his bosom. During that time Abraham contemplated, and would be tormented, by what was to come. Abraham would be allowed time, says Origen, "to confront, in the course of the journey, the paternal feelings and his faith, the love of God and the love of the flesh, the attraction of the things of the present and the expectation of things to come."¹⁶

After these comments Origen addresses his hearers directly and singles out the fathers in the congregation. Some of you, he says, have lost sons in the ordinary course of life, sons whom you loved very dearly. Those of you who still grieve over your loss can learn much from Abraham. For the Biblical account of his firmness and strength of soul reminds us how paltry our own faith and devotion. You have lost children through natural causes, and you act as though this loss was greater than the loss of God, but Abraham was asked to choose between God and his son, and to demonstrate his faith by an act of his own hand. He gave generously of his son. If you wish to be the children of Abraham, do his works. "Show that your faith in God is stronger than your human feelings. For Abraham, though he loved his son, preferred the love of God to human love."¹⁷

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.7.

The Abraham of the early Christian fathers, sketched here in only two of a number of differing interpretations, was a new Abraham, in some ways like that of earliest Christianity, in some ways reminiscent of the Abraham of Philo the Jew, but definitely distinct from both. He was a new Abraham, because those who turned to him for inspiration, for guidance in their lives, and to understand more fully their faith, were different men from those who had preceded. They lived at a different time with new tasks and responsibilities and with a somewhat different vision of God and His relation to mankind than their predecessors had.

What these few observations on the interpretation of Abraham in the early church suggest is that the relationship between the interpreter and the text is shaped by a variety of historical and theological factors which give to each generation of interpreters a somewhat different character. It is not adequate to say that the interpreters of the patristic era, and this is the case for interpreters in any age, were simply restating the meaning of the Biblical text. It is more accurate to say

that the Biblical text became the vehicle by which they interpreted the relation of God and man in a new age and a new situation. It is only in modern times that Biblical interpreters have created the idea that they somehow stand in splendid scholarly isolation and objectively state the meaning of the text. The interpreter stands in a relationship to God, to earlier Christian tradition, and to his own age, and it is these factors, not all of equal importance, which give each generation its unique character.

The interpreters of Abraham in antiquity (as those who live today) dealt imaginatively and often boldly as they shaped a new Abraham for their times, because they were convinced that they worshiped the same God as Abraham, that they too believed and trusted in God's promise. As Abraham was remaking their lives, so they were remaking his. It is this boldness which is the surest sign of life and vitality in the early church; this boldness is also the reason why their views on Abraham, now some 15 hundred years old, still interest us today.

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