

Chapter One

Child Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible:

Deviation or Norm?

²⁸You shall not put off the skimming of the first yield of your vats. You shall give Me the first-born among your sons. ²⁹You shall do the same with your cattle and your flocks: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me. (Exod 22:28–29)

Of all the passages in the Bible that have been deemed offensive, none has been deemed so more often than this one, and none has generated greater resistance to a literal interpretation. That the God of justice and mercy should demand the first-born of herd and flock is a common stumbling-block for moderns. That he should demand the same of human families has been judged an offense much longer, indeed from biblical times themselves.

Among critical scholars of the Bible—that is, scholars who are prepared to interpret the text against their own preferences and traditions, in the interest of intellectual honesty—there is no consensus as to how to understand the second clause of Exod 22:28: “You shall give Me the first-born among your sons.” But most would surely accept the reasoning of Roland de Vaux that “it would be absurd to suppose that there could have been in Israel or among any other people, at any moment of their history, a constant general law, compelling the suppression of the first-born, who are the hope of the race.”¹ And, indeed, as he states it, de Vaux’s position is almost impossible to impugn. Were the norm constant and general, the Bible would surely provide ample testimony, in both law code and narrative, to its existence, and we should not be left guessing. But de Vaux goes further, denying that the biblical writers ever mandate or even accept child sacrifice. Rather, according to de Vaux and the majority of scholars, the gift of the son to YHWH , God of Israel, in Exod 22:28b and similar passages is really not the same as the gift of the first-born male of the cattle

and the flocks. The latter are to be sacrificed; the former are to be redeemed, as specified in several passages in the Pentateuchal law codes, for example: "19Every first issue of the womb is Mine, from all your livestock that drop a male as firstling, whether cattle or sheep. 20But the firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. And you must redeem every first-born among your sons" (Exod 34:19–20). In sum, that shocking last clause in Exod 22:28 only states the general principle, that the first-born son is to be given to God. The particulars as to how this is to be done appear later, in the separate legal corpus of Exodus 34.² It is to be done through redemption, with a sheep perhaps replacing the doomed son.

De Vaux's argument against a literal reading of Exod 22:28–29 would be stronger if those verses were followed by a provision for redemption on the order of Exod 34:20. This is, in fact, the case in Exodus 13, which begins with a demand that every first-born son of man and beast among the Israelites be consecrated to YHWH (v 2) but includes soon thereafter the requirement to "redeem every first-born male among your children" (v 13). Though Exodus 34 and 13 thus show faithful YHWHists how they might—indeed, *must*—evade the sacrifice of their first-born sons, these texts also point up by contrast the *absence* of any such provision in the corpus of law in which Exod 22:28–29 appears.

If it is, in fact, a mistake for us to read the requirement to sacrifice the first-born son in Exod 22:28–29 independently of the provisions for redemption that appear in other textual units, it is a mistake of a sort that numerous Israelites seem to have made. For prophetic literature, at least in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E., is vehement in its opposition to child sacrifice, which it sees as emblematic of idolatry, for example:

⁵They have built shrines to Baal, to put their children to the fire as burnt offerings to Baal—which I never commanded, never decreed, and which never came into My mind. ⁶Assuredly, a time is coming—declares the LORD—when this place shall no longer be called Topheth or Valley of Ben-hinnom, but Valley of Slaughter. (Jer 19:5–6)³

That YHWH did not command his people to offer sacrifices to his great rival Baal need hardly have been mentioned.⁴ The point, rather, seems to be that child sacrifice is something that YHWH finds unacceptable, so that those who indulge in the practice must be worshiping another god. The threefold denial of the origin of the practice in YHWH's will—"which I never commanded, never decreed, and which never came into My mind"—suggests that the prophet doth protest too much. Could it be that Jeremiah's hearers saw themselves not as apostates or syncretists but as faithful YHWHists following the ancient

tradition of their religion? If the practitioners of child sacrifice, unlike Jeremiah, thought that YHWH did indeed ordain the rite, then we may have here some indirect evidence that the literal reading of Exod 22:28b ("You shall give Me the first-born among your sons") was not absurd in ancient Israel, as de Vaux and most modern scholars think, and that the practice in question was not always idolatrous, as Jeremiah insisted it was. To be sure, *'āšer lō'-šiwvītī* ("which I never commanded") does not necessarily imply that the audience thought the practice in question to have been ordained by YHWH. John Day points to the same expression in Deut 17:3 in connection with an astral cult as evidence that it is better rendered as "which I forbade."⁵ If so, then Jeremiah provides no evidence, even obliquely, for an Israelite belief that it was YHWH and not some other deity who instituted child sacrifice in Israel. But the last of the three denials in Jer 19:5 ("which never came into my mind," *wēlō' 'ālētā 'al-libbī*) would be pointless if the author intended to say only that YHWH forbade the rite in question. It appears, instead, that Jeremiah's attacks on child sacrifice are aimed not only at the practice itself, but also at the tradition that YHWH desires it. Jeremiah wanted child sacrifice to be considered idolatrous in every instance, and, as the majority opinion of scholars shows, history has abundantly granted him his wish.

A passage in Ezekiel can be adduced in further support of our contention that only at a particular stage rather late in the history of Israel was child sacrifice branded as counter to the will of YHWH and thus ipso facto idolatrous:

²⁵I, in turn, gave them laws that were not good and rules by which they could not live: ²⁶When they set aside every first issue of the womb, I defiled them by their very gifts—that I might render them desolate, that they might know that I am the LORD. (Ezek 20:25–26)⁶

At first blush, the meaning of these verses seems clear: the sacrifice of the first-born is indeed an abomination, just as Jeremiah thought. But, whereas Jeremiah vociferously denied the origin of the practice in the will of YHWH, Ezekiel affirmed it: YHWH gave Israel "laws that were not good" in order to desolate them, for only as they were desolated, only as they were brought to humiliation, could they come to recognize YHWH and obey his sovereign will. Here, as often in the Hebrew Bible, God's goodness conflicts with his providential designs: he wills evil in order to accomplish good. The evil that he once willed is the law that requires the sacrifice of the first-born. The good toward which this aims is Israel's ultimate recognition and exaltation of him as their sole God.

That human sin can play a positive role in the larger providential drama is a difficult notion at best. Combining this with the blunt statement that

YHWH did indeed ordain child sacrifice, Ezek 20:25–26 has over the centuries had most exegetes running for cover. The simplest way out of the embarrassment is to downplay or explain away the words “I, in turn, gave them laws that were not good” (*wəḡam-’ānî nātattî lābem ḥuqqîm lō’ tōbîm*). The trend starts already in antiquity. Targum Jonathan, an Aramaic translation of the prophets, renders Ezek 20:25 as follows:

I, in turn, when they rebelled against My word and refused to accept My prophets, put them far away and handed them over to their enemies. They went after their own foolish inclination and adopted decrees that were not good and laws by which they could not live.

In other words, God did not give them bad laws at all, but only punished them for their rebelliousness by allowing them to follow their own base instincts. With various minor modifications, this interpretation comes as close to being standard as any position in the history of interpretation ever does. Its enduring appeal lies in its shifting of ultimate responsibility for the sacrifice of the first-born from God’s decree to Israel’s rebellion.

Among modern scholars, the dominant tendency is to associate the disquieting assertion of Ezek 20:25–26 with texts that both condemn a person for his behavior and yet attribute that behavior to God. Most famous among these are those passages in Exodus in which God is said to harden Pharaoh’s heart so that Pharaoh will fail to heed the very demand that God bids Moses to make of him.⁷ The theological point here is that God is even behind Pharaoh’s resistance to God; nothing is outside divine control. The goal is remarkably close to that of Ezek 20:25–26: through the succession of plagues that God inflicts upon Pharaoh, whose obstinacy he has himself decreed, Pharaoh—and the whole world with him—will be brought to a recognition of YHWH: “I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that My fame may resound throughout the world” (Exod 9:16). As de Vaux puts it, in speaking of Ezek 20:25–26, “all the actions of men, even bad actions, enter into the plans of God, to whom they have a reference as to the first cause.”⁸ The problem, in short, is solved by resort to a theory of double causality. The ultimate cause is God, whose plans are good; the proximate cause is the human agent, whose deeds are evil. How the two levels of causation can be reconciled is a theological conundrum that exegetes usually do not address.

Though this understanding of Ezek 20:25–26 has much to commend it, there is one aspect of the text to which it does not do justice. The anomaly is nicely stated by one of the most recent proponents of this most common interpretation, Ronald M. Hals:

Further, it is starkly idiosyncratic that God responded to his people’s subsequent disobedience of his commandments by giving them bad laws as a punishment. Where else are God’s laws ever seen in such a light? One can only conjecture that the mistakenly and syncretistically literal interpretation of such commands as Exod 34:19, “All that opens the womb is mine” (see also Exod 22:28), which ignored the subsequent clarification, “All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem” (Exod 34:20), was viewed as some kind of divine hardening of Israel’s own heart, a shockingly bold affirmation of divine all-causality outdoing even Micaiah ben Imlah (see 1 Kgs 22:19–24) in seeing no problem in a false word from YHWH which aimed at Israel’s doom.⁹

“Where else are God’s laws ever seen in such a light?”—this is exactly the problem. It is also the reason that efforts to assimilate Ezek 20:25–26 to the model of the hardening of the heart are less than convincing. For the assertion in Ezekiel 20 is not that God left a wayward Israel to their own devices, or that he froze them in a posture of defiance like that in which he froze Pharaoh. Rather, the point is that because the people in their rebellion refused to obey YHWH’s life-promoting laws (especially those governing the Sabbath [vv 21–24]), he, in turn, saddled them with bad laws that would, nonetheless, ultimately serve his sovereign purpose. The product of his punishment is not a perverted will, as in the case of Pharaoh, or a deceitful oracle, as in the incident about Micaiah to which Hals refers, but rather *the laws themselves*. In a sense, the best way to understand Ezekiel’s point is by inverting the theory of double causality: the ultimate cause of the “laws that were not good” was Israel’s rebellion; the proximate cause was divine revelation.

Hals misses the key point that the laws referred to in Ezek 20:25 were God’s quid pro quo for Israel’s apostasy and disobedience. Instead, he constructs a scenario in which God punishes Israel by perverting the Israelites’ hermeneutics. As a result, they devise on their own the putative “mistakenly and syncretistically literal interpretation” of the laws of child sacrifice, missing altogether the provisions for redemption of the first-born. But Ezekiel never mentions those provisions, either, and there is no reason to think that he regards the practice of the sacrifice of the first-born as contrary to God’s will in the time for which God ordained it. In other passages, in which the target of Ezekiel’s preaching is child sacrifice in general, he sees the recipient of the offering as other deities.¹⁰ But here in 20:25–26, where the subject is specifically the offering of the first-born, there is no reason to believe that its recipient was anyone other than the God who gave them the “laws that were not good” in the first place. Those laws are YHWH’s retaliation for idolatry, but they are

redemption (such as Exod 34:19–20). “Shall I give my first-born for my transgression?” (*ba’ettēn bēkôrî piš’î*) is not far from “You shall give Me the first-born among your sons” (*bēkôr bānēkā titten-lî*). Moreover, mention of the first-born son in each pericope occurs alongside mention of animal sacrifice (Mic 6:7; Exod 22:29). This makes it all the less likely that we are to retroject the provisions of redemption of Exodus 34 and elsewhere into the law of the first-born son in Exodus 22. Rather, what the latter articulates is an ideal of sacrifice, the Israelite father’s offering to God of what is most beloved to him, his first-born son, the first fruit of his body presented lovingly to his lord.

There is one text in the Hebrew Bible in which an Israelite father—indeed, the father of all Israel, the Patriarch Abraham—is commanded to offer his son—Isaac, the first-born of Sarah and sole heir to the covenant with YHWH. This text, Gen 22:1–19, will occupy our attention in chapters 11 and 12. Here the point to be made is that whatever the ambiguities of the legal and prophetic materials on child sacrifice, Gen 22:1–19 is frighteningly unequivocal about YHWH’s ordering a father to offer up his son as a sacrifice: “And He said, ‘Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you’” (Gen 22:2). For scholars like Moshe Greenberg, who paraphrases Ezekiel’s view of child sacrifice by calling it “at once a murderous pagan practice and an abomination worthy of severest condemnation,”²⁴ the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac ought to be a major challenge. For here it is not the wayward people but the faithful God who demands the immolation of the favored son, and not as a punishment in the manner of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, either, but *as a test of true devotion*. Were the practice of child sacrifice always so alien to YHWH, so “worthy of severest condemnation,” would there have survived a text in which it is this act and no other that constitutes YHWH’s greatest test of his servant Abraham? If, as Jeremiah puts it, “burn[ing] their sons and daughters in fire” is something which YHWH “never commanded, which never came to [His] mind,” then how shall we explain the *aqedah*, the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22?

One solution commands a consensus of extraordinary breadth: that the point of the story is seen not in the initial command to Abraham but in the rescission of it relayed by the angel of YHWH from heaven itself: “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me” (Gen 22:12). As Shalom Spiegel puts it, “the primary purpose of the Aqedah story may have been only this: to attach to a real pillar of the folk and a revered reputation the new norm—abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead.”²⁵ Oddly, Mosca, who sees child sacrifice even in Isaiah and Micah,

agrees with Spiegel on the *aqedah*. “Its original purpose,” he writes, “may well have been to explain why YHWH no longer—or never—demanded the sacrifice of the first-born son.”²⁶

As an etiology of the redemption of the first-born son through the death of the sheep, however, the *aqedah* is, it seems to me, most ineffective. For although Abraham does indeed spot and then sacrifice a ram just after hearing the gruesome command rescinded (Gen 22:13), he is never actually commanded to offer the animal, as he was commanded to sacrifice his only beloved son, Isaac. And, in fact, so far as we know, Israelite tradition never explained the substitution of the sheep for the first-born son by reference to the *aqedah*; it was the tenth plague upon Egypt that served that role, with the paschal lamb spelling the difference between life and death for the Israelite first-born males (Exodus 12–13). The sacrifice of *that* sheep is commanded emphatically and repeatedly. But more importantly, it is passing strange to condemn child sacrifice through a narrative in which a father is richly rewarded for his willingness to carry out that very practice. If the point of the *aqedah* is “abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead,” then Abraham cannot be regarded as having passed the test to which Gen 22:1 tells us God is here subjecting him. For Abraham obeys the command to sacrifice Isaac without cavil and desists—knife in hand, Isaac bound on the altar over the firewood—only when the angel calls to him from heaven. And the burden of the angelic address is not that the slaughter of Isaac is offensive or that the ram is a preferable victim, but that it is Abraham’s *willingness to sacrifice his son* that verifies his fear of God. A second angelic address then specifies the reward for having passed the test with flying colors:

¹⁶By myself I swear, the LORD declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, ¹⁷I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. ¹⁸All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command. (Gen 22:16–18)

No interpretation of the *aqedah* can be adequate if it fails to reckon with the point made explicit here: Abraham will have his multitudes of descendants only because he was willing to sacrifice the son who is destined to beget them. Any construal of the text that minimizes that willingness misses the point.

The *aqedah* is often associated with Judg 11:29–40, which tells of the military hero Jephthah’s vow to sacrifice, again as a burnt offering,²⁷ whatever comes out of his door to meet him if he returns in safety from combat with his Ammonite foes. To Jephthah’s shock, it is none other than his daughter,

like Isaac his "only child,"²⁸ who greets him, with timbrel and dance no less, upon his return in triumph. Vows being irrevocable, Jephthah carries his out. And so Jephthah is both like and unlike Abraham. Like the great patriarch, he is willing to sacrifice his "only" child. But whereas Abraham was commanded to do so and then spared, Jephthah was never commanded but actually performed the horrific act.

Among the features of the *aqedah* unparalleled in the tale of Jephthah's daughter is the lucidity of the former. Many critical features of Judg 11:29–40 remain unclear and therefore subject to continuing scholarly controversy. Some have even doubted that Jephthah sacrifices his daughter there at all, preferring to see in her request to "bewail [her] maidenhood" (v 37) a different form of donation to the deity—consecration as a lifelong celibate priestess.²⁹ Though it must be conceded that the prominence given the daughter's virginity in vv 37–40 is problematic, it remains true that Jephthah vowed to bring a burnt offering and carried out by means of her just what he vowed.³⁰ Less clear is the narrator's attitude toward the act in question. Rabbinic tradition sees in Jephthah's sacrifice a punishment for his rashness in making the vow, and not without grounds in the text.³¹ We can all wish that the hero had formulated his vow more precisely, taking into account that it might be his own daughter who would come out of his house to greet him, as he was to find out too late. But what is missing in this story is any indication that child sacrifice, painful to father and offspring alike, was inappropriate from *God's* standpoint. Quite the opposite: Jephthah's actions are intelligible only on the assumption that his daughter—he had no son—could legitimately be sacrificed as a burnt offering to YHWH. Had she not been fit to sacrifice, the vow would have been unfulfillable, as he obviously wishes were the case (v 35). The tone of the narrative thus is one of great pathos rather than moralistic judgment. Jephthah and his unnamed daughter are figures reminiscent of the great protagonists of Greek tragedy (Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Aulis* comes to mind immediately). If he has a flaw, it is the rashness and imprecision with which he pronounces his vow, not his willingness to carry it out by sacrificing his daughter to the God who delivered the Ammonites into his hands.

If the tale of Jephthah provides some support for the existence of child sacrifice within the YHWHISM that left us the Bible, though less than the *aqedah*, the story of Mesha is more problematic than either text. King of Moab in the mid-ninth century B.C.E., Mesha finds himself on the losing end of a war with the Kingdom of Israel:

²⁶Seeing that the battle was going against him, the king of Moab led an attempt of seven hundred swordsmen to break a way through to the king

of Edom; but they failed.²⁷ So he took his first-born son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him up on the wall as a burnt offering. A great wrath came upon Israel, so they withdrew from him and went back to their own land. (2 Kgs 3:26–27)²⁸

For those who see child sacrifice as "pagan" (to use Greenberg's term), this passage may seem at first to pose no problem: a Moabite king engages there in precisely the sort of rite that, according to prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, typifies idolatry and all that is repugnant to the traditions of Israel. It should not go unnoticed, however, that the terminology of Mesha's sacrifice of his first-born son is almost identical to the language of YHWH's initial command to Abraham in Genesis 22 and to that of Jephthah's vow.³³ At the very least, this argues for more continuity between Israel and its neighbors to the east in the ninth century than the crude dichotomy of Israelite and "pagan" would suggest. More serious is the great "wrath" (*qesep*) that falls on Israel in v 27, for there the implication is clear: Mesha's sacrifice worked. By immolating his first-born son and heir apparent, the king of Moab was able to turn the tide of battle and force the Israelites to retreat. Rationalistic commentators conjure up a panic in the camp of the Israelites as the latter learn of this horrid act.³⁴ But the term *qesep* indicates a force external to the people involved. More likely, therefore, is the supposition that the author saw Mesha's sacrifice of his first-born son as having a profound effect upon the deity to whom it was offered, in this case presumably the Moabite national deity Chemosh (whose name is, nonetheless, conspicuously absent from the text).³⁵ At the least, 2 Kgs 3:26–27 suggests that Israel in the mid-ninth century was not so divorced from the theology of child sacrifice as the great prophets who were to preach two and a half centuries later wanted them to be. At the most, it suggests the full acceptability of this act even to the Israelite author of this narrative.

In their different ways, each of the three texts that we have been examining—the binding of Isaac, the vow of Jephthah, and Mesha's sacrifice—sheds light on the issue of just how we are to take that disturbing last clause in Exod 22:28: "You shall give Me the first-born among your sons." Earlier, I argued that the absence of textual and archaeological evidence for a general practice of child sacrifice in ancient Israel does not require us to interpret "give Me" there as indicating some other form of donation than sacrifice.³⁶ In the Hebrew Bible, as elsewhere in the cultural world in which it was composed, law often articulates a theological and moral ideal; it does not always stipulate a practice that all can reasonably be expected to undertake. The theology underlying Exod 22:28b is that first-born sons, like the male first-born of animals and the first fruits of the soil, belong to YHWH; they are not

the father's, to do with as he sees fit.³⁷ The clause leaves unclear *whether* YHWH will exercise his proprietary claim on the first son and *how* the father is to honor the claim, should YHWH choose to do so. The aqedah suggests that YHWH might exercise his claim through an oracle, demanding of the father that he make of his son a burnt offering, that is, a sacrifice in which the son is, with the exception of the skin, totally consumed in the fire. The end of the aqedah suggests that God may relent and choose to forgo his option on the son, allowing a sheep to take the place of the human victim. But there is, as I have been at pains to point out, nothing in Genesis 22 to support the idea that God could not command the sacrifice of the son or that an animal is always to be substituted. Were the latter condition to obtain, the Israelite hearer or reader could rest content that God would never test him as he tested Abraham. But this implies that Abraham's piety was not to be taken as paradigmatic—a most unlikely interpretation.

The story of Jephthah and his daughter suggests, though with less clarity than the aqedah, another way a father might donate his first-born to YHWH: through fulfillment of a vow uttered in extremis. If, with the Talmudic rabbis, we deem Jephthah's vow altogether reckless, then we should not see YHWH as here exercising a claim upon the hero's only child: the whole sorry mess is the father's doing. Whereas the rabbis, however, saw Jephthah's vow as invalid, the Bible seems not to fault him for honoring it once it was uttered. In fact, both he and his daughter are portrayed as devoutly upholding YHWH's law that "if a man makes a vow to the LORD . . . he must carry out all that has crossed his lips" (Num 30:3). "I have uttered a . . . vow to the LORD and I cannot retract," Jephthah, grief-stricken, tells his doomed daughter. "Father," she poignantly replies, "you have uttered a vow to the LORD: do to me as you have vowed, seeing that the LORD has vindicated you against your enemies, the Ammonites" (Judg 11:35–36). This last comment suggests that God may have been exercising his claim upon the first-born in this tale after all. For Jephthah's vow was always conditional upon victory (vv 30–31), and YHWH, in granting the victory, doomed whatever would come out of Jephthah's house to meet him as he returned from battle. The key question is this: is YHWH also behind his daughter's being the first to greet her triumphant father? If not, if this is only a tragic coincidence, then the sacrifice, though evidently totally acceptable to YHWH, was not at his initiative. But if Jephthah's daughter's being the first to meet her father is providential, then it is precisely through this vow that YHWH exercises his claim upon Jephthah's first-born child. In sum, YHWH is indirectly implicated in Jephthah's sacrifice through the sacral norm that vows must be executed at whatever cost and through his awarding Jephthah his victory over Ammon. Whether YHWH is *directly* involved

depends upon whether we reckon the role the daughter plays to a hideous coincidence or to the hidden and terrifying hand of providence.

In the case of Mesha, we see a father sacrificing his first-born son, but without any of the strange twists that the stories of Abraham and Jephthah take. It is conceivable that Mesha performed his grisly deed in fulfillment of a vow similar to Jephthah's, with Israel taking the place of Ammon as the enemy whom the deity is begged to consign to defeat. If so, then, as in the case of Jephthah, the vow worked. But whether the sacrifice of Mesha's unnamed son is votive or not, the theology of warfare in the biblical world indicates that at least indirectly, the deity must be seen as lying behind the event. For it was he rather than any earthly figure who determined the outcome of battle, so that when Mesha's sortie failed, he knew that he was not standing in the deity's favor. Given the extremity of the situation, only an extreme act of devotion could turn the tide, and none surpasses a royal father's immolation of "his first-born son, who was to succeed him as king" (2 Kgs 3:27). The failure of the sortie of v 26 was, in Mesha's eyes, the deity's way of telling him that he was at last exercising his claim on the first-born. The sudden Israelite retreat in v 27 is proof that Mesha's theological interpretation of the situation was not in error.

"You shall give Me the first-born among your sons" (Exod 22:28b). Most fathers did not have to carry out this hideous demand. But some did. Abraham knew it was his turn when he heard God in his own voice, ordering the immolation of Isaac. Jephthah knew when it was his only child who met him at his home on that day of triumph turned to tragedy. Mesha knew when all earthly strategy failed to break Israel's siege and only the supreme sacrifice could reverse the dire situation.

The Displacement of Isaac and the Birth of the Church

The identification of Jesus of Nazareth with “the beloved son” on which our discussion has focused comes early in the Synoptic Gospels. It is first made through a heavenly announcement during Jesus’ ablution at the hands of John the Baptizer:

“You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22; 2 Pet 1:17)

The wording recalls the designation of Isaac in the aqedah, wherein the Hebrew term *yāhîd* (“favored one”) is consistently rendered in the Septuagint as *agapētos*, “beloved” (Gen 22:2, 12, 16), the very term that appears in this heavenly announcement.¹ “Take your beloved son, the one you love,” the Septuagint renders Gen 22:2, “and offer him up there as a burnt sacrifice.” In light of the mounting importance of the aqedah in the Judaism of the Second Temple period, it is reasonable to suspect that the early audiences of the synoptic Gospels connected the belovedness of Jesus with his Passion and crucifixion. Jesus’ gory death was not a negation of God’s love (the Gospel was proclaiming), but a manifestation of it, evidence that Jesus was the beloved son first prefigured in Isaac. As we shall see, the point was vital to the self-definition of the nascent Christian community.

The announcement of Mark 1:11 (and the parallels) is no less indebted to another Jewish text with rich resonances²:

This is My servant, whom I uphold,
My chosen one, in whom I delight,
I have put My spirit upon him,
He shall teach the true way to the nations. (Isa 42:1)

This is only one of several passages in Isaiah 40–55 that speak of the enigmatic figure of “the servant of YHWH.” The most developed of these is Isa 52:13–53:12, which depicts the servant as an innocent, humble, and sub-

missive man who was, nonetheless, persecuted, perhaps even unto death. These persecutions were not meaningless, however: they served a redemptive role, for through them the servant atoned vicariously for those who maltreated him. Isa 52:13–53:12 came to exert an extraordinary influence upon the way that early Christians reconceived Jesus after his execution (see, for example, Acts 8:26–35), enabling him to accomplish through his death the cosmic transformations denied him in life. The identification of Jesus with the suffering servant of the Book of Isaiah thus became a mainstay of Christian exegesis. It was not shaken until the twelfth century, when Andrew of St. Victor, anticipating modern critical study, interpreted the servant as a representation of the Jewish people as they suffered during the Babylonian exile. In light of the longstanding Christian investment in the figure of the suffering servant, it is no cause for wonderment that some Christians reacted negatively to Andrew, accusing him of “judaizing.”³

Whether the interlacing of Gen 22:2, 12, and 16 with Isa 42:1 was original to the evangelists or a legacy of prior Jewish exegesis is unknown.⁴ Either way, the equation of Isaac with the suffering servant has its own potent midrashic logic. For if the binding of Isaac had already been reconceived as foreshadowing the sacrifice of the paschal lamb and the liberation and redemption that it heralds (Jub 17:15–18:19), the suffering unto death of the servant of YHWH had also been analogized to the condition of a sheep about to be slaughtered, and in Scripture itself:

He was maltreated, yet he was submissive,
He did not open his mouth;
Like a sheep being led to slaughter,
Like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her,
He did not open his mouth. (Isa 53:7)

The servant’s acceptance of his fate conforms, as we have seen, very much to the image of Isaac as it develops in some important Jewish sources from the first century C.E. That these two revered figures, both obedient unto death, should have been identified with each other and, in Christian sources, with Jesus after his humiliating demise, is hardly surprising. It may well be that the catalyst for this second midrashic equation was the prior identification of Jesus with the paschal lamb, an intertextual move that, as we shall discover, predates the composition of the Gospels.

The application to Jesus of the two not dissimilar Jewish traditions of Isaac and the suffering servant sounds an ominous note, easily missed by those who interpret God’s love in sentimental fashion: like Isaac, the paschal lamb, and the suffering servant, Jesus will provide his father in heaven complete pleasure