

Chapter Fifteen

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 *yāḥîd* (“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.”

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

only when he has endured a brutal confrontation with nothing short of death itself. The midrashic equation underlying the heavenly announcement of Mark 1:11 and its parallels makes explicit the theology of chosenness that lies at the foundation of the already ancient and well-established idea of the beloved son: the chosen one is singled out for both exaltation and humiliation, for glory and for death, but the confrontation with death must come first.

It is in the proleptic glimpse of Jesus' future glory vouchsafed to his disciples that we next hear the identification of him as the beloved son in the Synoptic Gospels:

Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." (Mark 9:7; cf. Matt 17:5; Luke 9:35)

In this narrative (Mark 9:2–8 and parallels), traditionally known as the Transfiguration, the last sentence adds a new note to the theme of the beloved son in the New Testament. Though marked for sacrifice and thus unspeakable humiliation, the son is also invested with *authority* and thus destined to receive the homage of others. In this case, the affinities with Isaac are less to the point than those with another of the beloved sons in Genesis, Joseph, whom "Israel loved . . . best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age" (Gen 37:3). As we have argued in chapter 13, the tale of Joseph in Genesis 37–50 is, in part, the story of how its hero came to earn the privileged status that had been granted him in childhood, how, through multiple symbolic deaths (the first of which his father takes to be a literal death), Joseph was catapulted into a position to issue directives to his older brothers—and to see them heeded. We can go further: the Gospel story of the Transfiguration functions as a rough analogue to Joseph's report to his brothers and his father of his dreams of domination (37:5–11). In each case, the narrator presents us with a vision of the coming grandeur that seems preposterous at the moment—Joseph's brothers and parents prostrating themselves before him in Genesis, Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah in the Gospels (Mark 9:4–6 and parallels). And, in each case, what falls between the vision and its realization is the crucial event—a confrontation with death, as the one designated as the beloved son is betrayed and abandoned, never to be seen again. Or so it would appear.

What the Joseph story more than any of the other tales of the beloved son contributes to the Gospels is the theme of the disbelief, resentment, and murderous hostility of the family of the one mysteriously chosen to rule. In the Christian story, this theme is concentrated in the figure of Judas, who betrays Jesus in exchange for thirty pieces of silver (Matt 26:14–16, 20–25,

47–56 and parallels). It would seem more than possible that the episode of Judas has been molded upon the sale of Joseph for twenty pieces of silver in Gen 37:26–28 (if "they" in v 28 is understood to be the brothers rather than the Midianite traders), an arrangement suggested by none other than his brother Judah. The names are the same. The number in Genesis correlates with Lev 27:5, which fixes the worth of a male between five and twenty years of age at twenty shekels. It will be recalled that Joseph is seventeen when he is sold into slavery (v 2).

The sum in the Gospels may derive from Zech 11:12, an obscure text in which a shepherd is paid thirty silver shekels. Note that in the same passage the shepherd breaks his staff named "Unity, in order to annul the brotherhood between Judah and Israel" (v 14). This alone would suggest (at least to the midrashic mind) some affinity with the story of Joseph, in which, as we have seen, Judah is Joseph's most important brother and the one among the twelve who takes the lead in healing the catastrophic rift in the family. Ezekiel 37:15–28 may have aided in the association of Zechariah 11 with Genesis 37, for in that passage God likewise speaks of two sticks, one representing Judah and one representing Joseph, and orders the prophet to join them, symbolizing the reunion of the separated brothers. In light of these biblical precedents, it was not an unlikely move for the Gospels to associate the fatal rift among the twelve disciples with the betrayal of Joseph, their father's beloved son and the one among the twelve destined to rule despite his brothers' enmity and perfidy.⁵

The theme of authority draws the traditions of the beloved son into relationship with another important stream in Jewish tradition, that of messianism. This stream originates within the royal theology of the Judean dynasty, the House of David. In the Hebrew Bible, its most characteristic literature centers on the divine commission to the Davidic king or heir-apparent, the latter in some cases only a newborn or even as yet unborn. The practical point of such literature is often to elicit homage for the king in a moment in which his rule seems shaky. Psalm 2, for example, paints a scenario in which nations and their rulers intrigue together "against the LORD and His anointed" (v 2), the last word being the Hebrew term of which "messiah" is simply a crude transliteration. In response, YHWH gives forth a mocking laugh from his heavenly throne, terrifying the conspirators with his reiteration of the threatened king's divine commission:

"But I have installed My king
on Zion, my holy mountain!" (Ps 2:6)

The king himself then speaks, reciting the terms of that commission:

⁷Let me tell of the decree:
the LORD said to me,
"You are My son,
I have fathered you this day.

⁸Ask it of Me,
and I will make the nations your domain;
your estate, the limits of the earth.

⁹You can smash them with an iron mace,
shatter them like potter's ware." (Ps 2:7-9)

The dominion of the king enthroned upon Zion is a function of his status as the son of YHWH.⁶ How literally this status was understood is difficult to know. A minimalist position would see in the decree rehearsed in v 7 only a metaphor that conveys the unique covenantal relationship of the Davidic king with Israel's ultimate suzerain, their God YHWH. For the language of fatherhood and sonship in the biblical world doubled as the terminology of suzerainty and vassalage (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 16:7 and Ps 89:27-29). A maximalist position would not deny the covenantal denotation, but it would see in this language something more than the frozen forms of diplomatic convention: it would see a living metaphor, a dynamic communication of the heavenly source of the earthly king's authority. The rule of the Davidic king enthroned upon Mount Zion is a manifestation of the universal dominion of the God of Israel. The former issues from the latter like a son from the father who begot him, and for those who refuse to "listen to him," as the story of the Transfiguration puts it in reference to the beloved son, this has catastrophic consequences.

The emphasis in some of the messianic oracles in the Hebrew Bible upon the birth of the king speaks persuasively for the maximalist interpretation of the divine sonship of the ruler from the House of David:

⁵For a child has been born to us,
A son has been given us,
And authority has settled on his shoulders.
He has been named

"The Mighty God is planning grace;
The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler"—

⁶In token of abundant authority
And of peace without limit
Upon David's throne and kingdom,
That it might be firmly established
In justice and in equity
Now and evermore. (Isa 9:5-6)

The prince is not merely an ordinary person elevated to regal status through covenant with YHWH. He is, rather, a miraculous figure, and his accession is an event that transforms ordinary reality and ushers in the reign of justice traditionally associated with YHWH's own lordship. It is possible that oracles like the one excerpted above were recited not at the heir-apparent's literal birth, but upon his enthronement, at which point, as Psalm 2 would suggest, he assumed the status of God's son, exchanging, as it were, human for divine paternity.⁷

Regardless of the king's chronological age at the time, the miraculousness and giftedness of his birth establish another link with the tradition of the beloved son in the Book of Genesis. For, as we have observed, the men there so designated are rather consistently born to barren women—Isaac to Sarah, Jacob to Rebekah, Joseph to Rachel—and in each case the birth is owing to God's intervention. In the case of Isaac, the supernatural character is underscored through the emphasis placed upon his mother's advanced age at the time of his birth (Gen 18:11), ninety in the reckoning of the Priestly source (17:17).

The notion that heroic figures are born outside the course of nature, to barren mothers, is not unique to the account of Israel's origins. It can be found also in the stories of Samson and Samuel (Judges 13; 1 Samuel 1), two of the nation's most renowned deliverers. One function of these stories is to legitimate the special status of the person to whom miraculous birth is attributed. His authority is not something that he has usurped: a gracious providence has endowed him with it, thus to benefit the entire nation. As Isa 9:5 puts it, "a child has been born to us,/A son has been given us" (emphasis added). In the case of Isaac, Jacob, and perhaps Joseph as well, what the stories legitimate is the lineage that descends from them. Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau carry on the chosen line of their fathers. Given the royal connections of the tribe of Joseph in the north, the story of Joseph may originally have played a similar role, perhaps at the expense of the House of Judah, from which the Davidites hailed: the true monarchy is Josephite, not Judean. But given the emphasis in Genesis 37-50 on authority, one might also see in Joseph's birth to a barren woman something akin to the miraculous (re)birth of the Judean kings so prominent in the messianic oracles of the Hebrew Bible. Precisely because the beloved son rules by the grace of God, it is by that grace and in startling defiance of common experience that his birth comes about.

The New Testament equivalent of this Israelite notion of the birth of the beloved son to a barren woman is the story of the virgin birth of Jesus (Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38),⁸ an idea whose prominence in later Christian dogma

obscures the fact that it seems to have been unknown outside Matthew and Luke. In the former, the idea is midrashically linked to Isa 7:14, which speaks of a "young woman" (*almā*) giving birth to a son named "Immanuel." The midrash in question seems to depend upon the Septuagint rendering of *almā* as *parthenos*, a Greek word that often denotes a virgin (Matt 1:22–23). In the case of Luke, the idea of the Virgin Birth is associated with the titles "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God" and with Jesus' claims upon the Davidic throne (Luke 1:32–35). Underlying this is an extremely literal understanding of the Judean royal theology and its characterization of the Davidic king as YHWH's son. Within the overall structure of the Gospels, however, the two vocabularies of sonship, that of the beloved son and that of the Davidic king as the son of God, reinforce each other powerfully.⁹ They yield a story in which the rejection, suffering, and death of the putatively Davidic figure is made to confirm rather than contradict his status as God's only begotten son.¹⁰

It would seem to have been the timing of Jesus' execution that accounts for the Gospels' identification of him with the beloved son. One of the few things upon which all four canonical Gospels agree is that his death occurred in the season of Passover. Precisely when within that season is another matter. According to the three Synoptics, Jesus was executed on the first day of Passover. Since Jewish festivals begin at sundown, this means that the Last Supper occurred on the evening the holy day began and thus likely had a paschal purpose (Matt 26:17–20; Mark 14:12–17; Luke 22:7–15). The Gospel according to John, however, dates the crucifixion to the day *before* Passover, that is, to the day at the end of which the festival would begin, with the sacrifice of the paschal lambs (John 13:1; 18:28). This would seem to mean that the Synoptics and John differ as to the year in which the trial of Jesus took place. The Synoptics assume a year in which Passover began on a Thursday evening, whereas John assumes one in which the holy day began on a Friday evening.

John's chronology therefore precludes his interpreting the Last Supper as paschal in a strict sense. Thus, the words of consecration prominent in the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper ("Take this; this is my body . . . This is my blood" [Mark 14:23–24; cf. Matt 26:26–28; Luke 22:14–20]) are altogether missing from the Fourth Gospel. This should not be taken to mean, however, that John does not interpret the end of Jesus' life as sacrificial. It does mean that the association of Jesus' body with the paschal lamb will be made explicit not at the Last Supper but at Golgotha, on the cross itself:

³¹Now since it was preparation day, in order that the bodies might not remain on the cross on the sabbath, for the sabbath day of that week was

a solemn one, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken and they be taken down.³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus.³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs,³⁴ but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out.³⁵ An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may (come to) believe.³⁶ For this happened so that the scripture passage might be fulfilled:

"Not a bone of it shall be broken." [Exodus 12:46; Num 9:12]

³⁷And again another passage says:

"They will look upon him whom they have pierced." [Zech 12:10]

(John 19:31–37)

The first scriptural quotation refers to the paschal lamb. It appears here in order to demonstrate that Jesus' passing away earlier than the two men with whom he was executed was providential. Had he remained alive and thus suffered the broken legs, he would have been rendered unfit to serve as the sacrificial offering of the first night of Passover. In John's thinking, Jesus' body has thus rather literally taken the place of the lamb consumed by the worshipers at the sacred Passover banquet. Regardless of the intention of the Romans and Jews who carried it out, the crucifixion of Jesus was, in the Johannine view, a *sacrifice*, the offering of the son of God in place of the paschal lamb.

The second scriptural quotation, Zech 12:10, is brought in order to make sense of the Roman soldier's thrusting his lance into the dead man's side: according to the evangelist, this, too, fulfills a prophecy. Here it is useful to remember that the relevance of a verse often extends beyond the words that the midrashist cites. In the case of Zech 12:10, it is highly suggestive to note the words that follow those cited in John 19:37:

. . . wailing over them as over a favorite son and showing bitter grief as over a first-born. (Zech 12:10c)

We have already had occasion to observe that the word here rendered "favorite son" (*yāhîd*) seems to have been, at least on occasion, a technical term for the son sacrificed as a burnt offering. It is, once again, the term applied fully three times to Isaac in the *aqedab* (Gen 22:2, 12, 16). In the Septuagint to Zech 12:10, *yāhîd* is rendered exactly as in the Septuagint to those three verses, *agapētos*, "beloved one." It would thus seem likely that John is here reflecting the old equation of the first-born and beloved son with the paschal lamb but

asserting a relatively new equation as well—the Christian equation of the first-born and beloved son and paschal lamb with the figure of Jesus.

The threefold identification of the beloved son, the paschal lamb, and Jesus would seem also to underlie John's version of the baptism of Jesus:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

On the one hand, John the Baptizer's words upon first setting eyes on Jesus contrast markedly with the heavenly proclamation that the Synoptic Gospels all report at the same point in the story: "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22). If, on the other hand, the author(s) of the Fourth Gospel had assumed the equation of the beloved son with the paschal lamb, then the dissonance between the two proclamations, though still significant, is of lesser import. Here the end of John the Baptizer's little speech that opens with John 1:29 is revealing: "Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God" (v 34). The implication that the "Lamb of God" is to be equated with the "Son of God" once again takes us back to the ancient Israelite rite by which a sheep substitutes for the first-born son destined for sacrifice (Exod 34:20). This is a rite that, as we have seen, is crucial to both the binding of Isaac (Gen 22:13) and the Exodus from Egypt (Exod 13:11–15). In a certain sense, the dynamics underlying this ritual-mythical pattern come full circle in this New Testament material: the son takes the place of the sheep who took the place of the son. The Jewish parallels suggest, however, that the sheep and the son should never be conceived of as totally separate, that the ransom and the one redeemed were always tightly associated. Recall the late midrashim that report that the ram sacrificed in Isaac's stead was itself named "Isaac."

The Johannine account of the crucifixion of Jesus, with its explicit reference to Exod 12:46 (John 19:36), provides powerful additional evidence that the "Lamb of God" of John 1:29 is paschal. It might be retorted, nonetheless, that since the paschal lamb was never a sin offering, the clause "who takes away the sin of the world" argues for a different animal, such as the sheep of Lev 4:32–35, offered by a commoner in expiation of wrongdoing. The latter is, however, not necessarily a lamb, and we must not assume that the fine technicalities of sacrificial classification weighed heavily upon the minds of the evangelists as they drew upon biblical materials for their own purposes. More importantly, the unclassifiable passover sacrifice of Exodus 12 does indeed have much in common with a sin offering, for it is through the blood of the lamb that lethal calamity is deflected, as the mysterious Destroyer is prevented from working his dark designs upon the Israelite first-born (vv 21–

23). It is not at all hard to imagine that in the heated apocalyptic Judaism that served as the matrix of Christianity, the Destroyer would be transmuted into a personification of the Israelites' own mortal sins, and the blood of the paschal lamb would be seen as effecting not only escape from death, but purification from moral pollution as well.

A close analogy to the process here reconstructed is patent in Rev 12:10–11. There it is the blood of the lamb that overpowers the "accuser" (*katēgōr*, a title of Satan) and enables the Christ to come into power. Like Prince Mastema, the diabolical figure who institutes the aqedah (and thus, indirectly, Passover as well) in Jub 17:15–16, this "accuser" has a striking analogue and perhaps also his root in the eerie Destroyer of Exod 12:23. In all these instances, Jewish and Christian alike, it is the offering of the sheep or the son identified with it that defeats the demonic forces and brings blessing out of near-catastrophe, life out of the jaws of death.

As a reference to the Passover offering, the "Lamb of God" of John 1:29 correlates nicely with the explicit identification of Jesus with the paschal lamb in 19:36. The location of these two verses in the Gospel's narrative is telling: the man introduced as the lamb that takes away the sin of the world dies according to the laws governing the offering of the paschal sacrifice. Thus has the evangelist placed the earthly story of Jesus within brackets drawn from the story of Passover—the story of how the preternatural forces of death were foiled and the doomed first-born miraculously allowed to live.

Probably the earliest identification of Jesus with the paschal lamb occurs in a document that predates both the Synoptic and the Johannine Gospels:

⁶Your boasting is not appropriate. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens all the dough? ⁷Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore, let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:6–8)

Here the apostle Paul, writing in about the year 54 C.E., employs an allegory of the sort one finds occasionally among the rabbis but more frequently in Hellenistic Judaism. Its basis is the law of Passover in Exodus 12—not so unlikely a topic since Paul seems to be composing his letter to the Corinthians about the time of Passover and Easter.¹¹ His allegory identifies the leaven forbidden to be eaten or even seen during the week of Passover with boasting, malice, and wickedness and urges his correspondents to prepare for the holiday by ridding themselves of the proscribed substance, as Exod 12:15 mandates. The genesis of the allegory lies in the last clause of 1 Cor 5:7: "For our paschal