

Self-Consciousness and Conversation: Reading Genesis 22

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The major task of biblical scholarship in the last one hundred years has been to establish historical contingency as a principle of interpretation. The application of scientific method to the question of the composition of the biblical texts has enabled us to view them as products of ancient Israel's culture and yielded insight into the complex social processes through which they emerged. The present essay seeks to supplement that line of investigation by drawing attention to another dimension of the historical or cultural conditioning of the text: namely, that which unfolds when it is read. The same forces which gave rise to historical study of the Bible also produced the discipline of literary criticism, whose concern is systematic reflection on the activity of reading itself. In the past two decades, "literary readings" of biblical texts have proliferated in response to what some scholars perceive to be the sterility of the historical approach. Yet to date, biblical scholars have benefited only slightly from the insights of literary theorists, whose own art or science has evolved as a slightly older contemporary of critical biblical study. It is my contention that attention to literary criticism poses questions about our treatment of the biblical text no less fundamental than those occasioned by the refinement of the historical and social sciences.

The current generation of professional readers is characterized by a preternatural degree of self-consciousness, and it is precisely that which makes their discussions important for biblical scholars. Literary critics challenge us to acknowledge the complexity of our responses to the text and the way in which those responses are conditioned by participation in certain traditions of reading. This essay reflects on the activity of reading by looking at three interpretations of a single biblical text, Genesis 22 (the Sacrifice or Binding of Isaac). Its principal aim is to induce self-consciousness: not to suggest a new interpretation, but rather to highlight the presuppositions underlying those that are

already established. A secondary purpose of this study is to suggest that such self-consciousness is an important factor in the fostering of conversation among different religious communities, communities which are in large part defined by different ways of reading Scripture. Because the three perspectives treated here have been influential among Protestant Christians and Jews, what follows may contribute something to the dialogue between those groups.

Stated in their briefest form, those three perspectives are the following:

1. This story is about Israel's repudiation of the ritual practice of human sacrifice.
2. This story is about Abraham, the hero of existential faith.
3. This story is about Isaac, the victim who is faithful even to death.

Moreover, I suggest that those interpretations represent three distinct ways of construing the task of reading itself. Their comparison invites and perhaps requires some evaluative judgment about what constitutes a "good reading" of this particular text. But a more significant result of this study would be to promote among those who stand in different interpretive traditions both a self-consciousness and a mutual understanding that enable them to work more effectively at their common theological task.

Literary Criticism and Biblical Interpretation

The modern science of literary criticism is a child of Romanticism, born out of post-Enlightenment Europe's infatuation with the past. Like all infatuations, it was fueled by the lover's giddy sense of having some unique capacity for appreciation of the beloved. For the Romantics, this meant using the new tools of historical research to reconstruct the world that had produced the Western classics and the Bible. The spirit of Romanticism inspired Friedrich Schleiermacher's articulation of the first general hermeneutical theory. In his view, it was the interpreter's function to situate contemporary readers "both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author."¹ This sharing in the author's mental processes entailed both a thorough knowledge of language and literary conventions, and also a "divinatory method" whereby "the interpreter transforms himself, so to speak, into the author, . . . seek[ing] to gain an immediate comprehension of

1. F. D. E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (AAR Texts and Translations 1; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977) 112. This is a translation of H. Kimmerle's edition of the notes and lectures composed by Schleiermacher between 1805 and 1833.

the author as an individual."² The goal of Romantic hermeneutics, then, was to shine the light of historical consciousness onto the world behind the text, to probe the mind that had first given it utterance, through the art and science of interpretation to reveal aspects of meaning of which even the author might have been unconscious. A burst of scientific activity—in the new disciplines of archaeology, cultural anthropology, sociology, linguistics, comparative religion—made available a wealth of material for reconstruction and assessment of the past. W. Robertson Smith³ and Julius Wellhausen⁴ pioneered the application of historical method in biblical study, suggesting that the customs and social institutions of Arabic culture were related to those of ancient Israel. Such seemingly disparate activities as the Grimm brothers' collecting of European folktales and the excavation of Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh provided the inspiration for Herman Gunkel's project of tracing the patterns of Israel's popular (i.e., oral) literature.⁵ His great contribution was to temper the Romantic ideal of uniqueness, turning biblical study away from an individualistic focus on authors and sources and pointing instead to the way in which the stereotyped speech forms were reinterpreted and preserved through repeated usage in public life.

Romanticism, then, gave rise to the first movement of modern literary criticism; and for a century, revitalization of the past remained the established goal of literary criticism. But just after the First World War, a shift in focus was discernible, when "the New Critics" (I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot being most notable among them) began to challenge the Romantic preoccupation with what lay behind the text. They argued that the proper focus of the interpreter's attention was the actual words of the text and not what could be surmised from other sources about the author's psyche or (in the case of anonymous texts) the religious and cultural disposition of a nation.

Regarding the text in its suprahistorical purity, the New Critics accorded a kind of revelatory status to those works deemed worthy of inclusion in their canon. But if the quasi-religious suppositions of this

2. Ibid. 150.

3. *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885).

4. *Reste arabischen Heidentumes* (Skizzen and Vorarbeiten 3; Berlin: Georg Reiner, 1887).

5. "Die Israelitische Literatur," in *Die Kultur der Gegenwart, I/ VII: Die Orientalischen Literaturen* (ed. Paul Hinneberg; Berlin: Teubner, 1906) 51-106; "Fundamental Problems of Hebrew Literary History," in Gunkel's *What Remains of the Old Testament* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1928) 57-68.

approach⁶ are not widely known or shared, nonetheless its location of meaning in the work itself, viewed within the context of a literary corpus rather than of historical setting has become so familiar as to seem to many the natural way to read. In biblical studies, the effect has been felt in the production of "close readings,"⁷ which, without denying the existence of various editorial layers, uphold the integrity of the final form of the text.

The last two decades⁸ have seen the obliteration of the consensual focus on the text itself, conceived as a self-contained repository of meaning. If the text-centered critics challenged the possibility or relevancy of entering into the world behind the text, the present generation questions the very existence of the text itself as an historically fixed phenomenon. The act of reading is not aptly imaged as a form of acute listening, nor is meaning a fixed quantity which the text delivers up when we position ourselves correctly before it. Rather, meaning emerges from a dance between the interpreter and the text. It follows, then, that the interpreter's activity is no less creative than the author's own. Indeed, the text depends on the reader not just for illumination but for its very existence: "Interpretation is the source of texts, facts, authors, and intentions."⁹ The rhetoric of poststructuralist heroism becomes most extreme with the Deconstructionists, for whom interpretation is a dance over the abyss of meaning.

Each of these three movements in literary theory sets forth a distinct point of orientation for the task of interpretation: first, toward the historical situation lying behind the text; second, toward the text itself; third, toward the reader's own situation and concerns. What different results these three perspectives may yield will be evident in the following readings of Genesis 22.

6. Terry Eagleton argues that "English studies" arose in an attempt to identify a cultural tradition that could withstand the social and spiritual depredations of industrialism (*Literary Theory: An Introduction* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980] 17-53). John Barton discusses the theoretical foundations of the New Criticism and structuralism, as well as their implications for biblical scholars, in *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1984).

7. The term is associated with the "practical criticism" of F. R. Leavis, who was an associate of Richards at Cambridge and shared many of his concerns.

8. Within the typology presented here, structuralism may be subsumed under the "text-centered" approach. This rebellious child of the New Criticism sought to dispel the aura of mystery surrounding the work of interpretation by showing how meanings are encoded in a system of intratextual relations. It is doubtful, however, that the structuralists, whose decodings do not generally correspond to any conscious understanding of the ordinary reader (or writer!), have solved the problem of ineffability.

9. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) 16.

Reading I: An Historical Approach

Early in the present century, the interests of historical criticism and liberal Protestantism converged to find in this story an account of Israel's repudiation of the practice of human sacrifice. S. R. Driver comments:

And so the narrative teaches two great lessons. On the one hand, it teaches the value set by God upon the surrender of self, and obedience; on the other, it demonstrates, by a signal example, the moral superiority of Jehovah's religion above the religions of Israel's neighbours.¹⁰

This reading has some plausibility. It is consonant with the extra-biblical evidence of child sacrifice in the ancient Near East and with other biblical texts which record Israel's (official) abhorrence of the practice.¹¹ Moreover, it might be argued that the story serves the larger purpose of the patriarchal saga in demonstrating Israel's fitness to bear YHWH's peculiar blessing. Israel's moral maturity is represented in the person of Abraham, who breaks with the destructive influences of the tradition and enters faithfully into a new arena of ethical responsibility.¹²

Yet the present form of the narrative presents problems for such an historical approach in at least four respects:

First, there is no suggestion that the command to sacrifice the boy accords with established human custom: "After these things, God put Abraham to the test." The notion of testing implies that these events proceed from a divine initiative and, further, that the following command is wholly extraordinary and directed specifically at proving the quality of Abraham's adherence to God's word.

10. *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1904) 222; cf. recently J. Crenshaw: "In short, a polemical thrust pervades the story *in its present form*; it argues for the position that God does not require human sacrifice" (*A Whirlpool of Torment* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 26; italics mine).

11. Lev 18:21, 20:2; Deut 12:31; 2 Kgs 3:27; 17:31. However, the fact that it was not a legitimate part of the cult (at least from the perspective that achieved canonical status) does not mean that child sacrifice was completely absent from Israel. The Deuteronomists charge both the northern and the southern kingdoms with that abomination (2 Kgs 16:3; 17:17; cf. Mic 6:7) and credit Josiah with dismantling of the *tōpet* ("roaster") in the Valley of Ben Hinnom (2 Kgs 23:10), against which Jeremiah inveighs (7:31; 19:5; cf. also the heavily ironic Ezek 20:26). Cemetery precincts at Phoenician settlements in Sicily, Sardinia, and Tunisia offer clear archaeological evidence for the practice (see L. E. Stager and S. R. Wolff, "Child Sacrifice at Carthage," *BAR* 10/1 [1984] 31-51), and R. de Vaux suggests that from these neighbors it passed over to Israel in times of syncretism (*Ancient Israel* [2 vols.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965] 2.441-46).

12. That the narrative is concerned to represent Abraham as possessed of a refined moral sense is not, in fact, a view with which I would agree. My point is merely that the argument could plausibly be mounted.

Second, it is hard to understand the lack of historical reference in a story that supposedly represents one of the key moments in the evolution of Israelite religion. If the aboriginal form of our story was a pre-Israelite saga about a shrine where animal victims were substituted for humans,¹³ then the present narrative stands at a great distance from its origins. Israel has allowed that pagan shrine to sink into oblivion; we have only a vague reference to an otherwise unknown place called "the land of Moriah" (22:2).¹⁴

Third, the present narrative gives no evidence of Abraham's struggle with the problem of ethical discernment: he shows no doubt about what God requires of him, nor does he discover that he heard the demand wrong the first time.

Fourth, and most problematic for the historical interpretation: God utters no general repudiation of child sacrifice. On the contrary, the story ends with a promise of blessing, bestowed specifically because of Abraham's willingness to go to this extreme of obedience (22:16-18).

In a narrative as carefully styled as this one, it is difficult to escape the impression that the author¹⁵ has deliberately directed our attention away from the historical and ethical issue as the context for interpretation.

Reading II: A Text-Centered Approach

Another reading of this passage follows the second critical perspective, that of text-centered interpretation. In contrast to an historical approach, here the context for interpretation is purely literary: we read this passage in terms of the larger narrative of which it is a part, looking for internal clues to its meaning. Viewed from this perspective, the words of God's command to Abraham would seem to point

13. H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910 [repr. 1964]) 242.

14. The Chronicler's reference in 2 Chr 3:1 associates the place with David rather than Abraham. G. von Rad suggests that "the land of Moriah" is a late insertion here, intended to claim this story as part of the ancient tradition of Jerusalem (*Genesis* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974] 240), although the geographical details of the present story do not support this identification (cf. N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary/McGraw-Hill, 1966] 159-60).

15. The traditional means of identifying the Pentateuchal narrative sources fail with this text, in which, despite its stylistic unity, there appear both the Tetragrammaton and the generic name of God, generally considered to be here a mark of the "E" source. E. A. Speiser observes: "... based on style and content, the personality behind the story should be J's. Since the crystallized version was such as to be cited and copied more often than most accounts, it is possible that a hand which had nothing to do with E (conceivably even from the P school) miswrote Elohim for Yahweh in the few instances involved, sometime in the long course of written transmission" (*Genesis* [Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964] 166).

backward as well as forward, evoking certain memories that are crucial for our understanding of these immediate events.

“And God said, ‘Take your son, your only child, whom you love . . .’” (22:2). In a long moment, even before Isaac is named, we recall the special history and the quite unnatural hopes that attach to him, hopes which rest solely on God's promise that through this child of barrenness and old age will offspring numberless as the dust or the stars come forth to inherit the land of Canaan.

Yet in one sense, the command does not seem to fit the history, for Isaac is not an only child to Abraham. Indeed, his mother's anxiety over the fact that he has an older brother, albeit the son of a concubine, is a prominent theme in this narrative. In order to resolve the contradiction, the Hebrew *yěhîdkā* is sometimes translated as "your beloved/favored child."¹⁶ It seems more likely, however, that the narrator has chosen a word that specifically denotes singularity¹⁷ in order to highlight one part of the background of this event. In the previous chapter, we heard of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. Then, too, Abraham rose early, gathered provisions for the journey, and placed it on Hagar's shoulder, as he would later load on Isaac the wood for his own immolation.¹⁸ The crucial point for our story is that now, as far as Abraham knows, he does have only one son. He sent a woman and a child off into the wilderness of the Negev, with a single skin of water. Although he has God's promise that Ishmael will survive to father some distant nation, there is no indication that Abraham ever saw Ishmael, his firstborn, again. Now there is no mistaking the fact that it is upon Isaac alone that the hope for a future rests.

"And go forth (*wělek-lěka*)." That is the same charge with which God called Abraham to leave all that was familiar and set out for some unknown, unspecified place: "Go forth from your homeland, and from your birthplace, and from your kin to the land which I shall show you" (Gen 12:1). In each case, the command drums out a terrible triple beat, emphasizing the preciousness of what must be given up in order to serve this God. But in the first instance, the harsh demand is qualified by a promise of blessing: "Go forth . . . and I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great and you shall be a blessing" (12:2). This time, however, the charge to

16. So Speiser and JPS, with the LXX.

17. The midrash recognizes this, observing that each boy is to his mother an only son (*Gen. Rab.* 55:7).

18. For further correspondences between Gen 21 and Gen 22, see Crenshaw, *Whirlpool* 18 n. 31.

immolate the only son stands alone, in blatant contradiction to the promise of countless offspring.¹⁹

"And after these things, God put Abraham to the test." After these things: the wild promise that alienated Abraham from everything he had known before, Isaac's impossible conception, the further alienation of Ishmael. It is against the background of those events that we are to view this ordeal, whose object is to show whether Abraham can hold to God so tightly that he is willing to let go of everything else, even the beloved child who is his only hope to see God's promise fulfilled. In the Hebrew Bible, no one but Job²⁰ is so baldly confronted with God's tyrannical²¹ right to lay claim to all that we have.

In contrast to the history-of-religions approach, this second reading of the narrative identifies the key issue as obedience rather than ethical discernment. The question for Abraham is not whether God speaks more truly through the tradition or his own conscience, but rather whether he will submit to a clear word from God which contradicts all that he has previously known of this God and received from God's hand. Far from showing the awakening of new ethical insight, this story portrays in the starkest terms Abraham's blind unreasoning faith; as Luther says, here Abraham is called to perform the "mortification" of his own reason and will.²²

That irrational certainty with which Abraham journeyed to Moriah is the theme of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. The thing that rivets Kierkegaard's attention, and also appalls him, is precisely Abraham's transcendence of ethical behavior: in his awful willingness to commit the abomination commanded by God, Abraham becomes "an emigrant from the sphere of the universal,"²³ abandoning ordi-

19. In Genesis 22, the promise of blessing is reiterated only in v 17, where, as noted above, it now stands in causal relation to Abraham's proven merit (v 16). The tone of this section (vv 15-19) differs from the restrained style of vv 1-14; von Rad comments enigmatically, "This second speech of God is certainly an addition to the ancient cultic legend, though scarcely a later one" (*Genesis* 242).

20. The midrash explores the theme of Abraham's testing, using diction drawn from the Book of Job (*Yashar Wa-Yera* 43b; see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1937] 1.271-74 and 4.248-50).

21. The Greek term *tyrannos* refers to a ruler, whether good or bad, whose absolute power is not limited by law or constitution. The divine speeches in the Book of Job are Israel's grand refutation of an understanding of "covenant faith" that would restrict God within a legal system.

22. *Lectures on Genesis*, ad Gen 22:3. Both the great Reformers anticipate Kierkegaard in playing on the image of blindness to characterize Abraham's astonishing faith. Calvin says that Abraham moves toward his son's slaughter "as with closed eyes" (*Genesis*, ad Gen 22:2, 4); Luther observes that the whole field of domestic responsibility is excluded from his vision.

23. *Fear and Trembling* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955) 124.

nary human responsibility in order "to stand in an absolute relation to the absolute."²⁴ The agonizing paradox, that God should require the sacrifice of the blessing itself, cannot be explained; it is comprehensible only to one who has taken that same journey. For Kierkegaard, who found in Abraham's riddle the key to his own sacrifice of a prospective marriage, "Silence is the mutual understanding between the Deity and the individual."²⁵

If Kierkegaard's reading represents a text-centered mode of interpretation it also presents a very strong view of the text as it confronts the reader with the coercive power of God's Word, here exercising that power with an offensiveness that brooks no mitigation. While it is not Protestants alone who adopt a text-centered stance for biblical interpretation,²⁶ that position is evidently congenial with a theology whose essential tenet is the transformative and saving power of the Word as experienced in Scripture. Kierkegaard's work can be seen as a brilliant reapplication of that principle in opposition to the rationalizing tendencies of his Christian contemporaries, to whom he staunchly asserted the unreasoning, coercive power of the divine Word.²⁷

24. Ibid. 122.

25. Ibid. 97.

26. With some exceptions (cf. note 10 above), the current consensus among both Christian and Jewish scholars supports the view that the narrative as we have it is designed to demonstrate Abraham's obedient faith, and this consensus indicates how far biblical criticism has moved toward a concern to balance historical investigation with literary sensitivity. The commentaries of E. A. Speiser and G. von Rad exemplify such a balance.

27. There is evident contrast between Kierkegaard's representation of the one whose subjectivity is heightened and transformed through encounter with God's Word, and the New Critics' posture of objective witness to meaning. The contrast points to the fact that a typology of readings based on secular critical theory may sensitize us to some of the assumptions underlying different interpretive styles but is not finally adequate to the singularly strong claim of textual authority and depth of personal commitment which scriptural interpretation entails within the believing community. This limitation is evident also in the following section (cf. n 36). It should be noted also that the three points of orientation for interpreters set forth above (viz., the historical situation behind the text, the text itself, the reader) do not exhaust the possibilities among contemporary secular critics. For example, Wayne Booth, whose work is, in my opinion, of importance for biblical scholars, follows Wolfgang Iser in locating the "literary work" and the focus of critical attention in the space of interaction between text and reader (*The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* [Berkeley, 1988] 90). Booth's high view of the authority of the "implied author" as embodied in the text (*Critical Understanding: The Powers and Limits of Pluralism* [Chicago, 1979] 275-78) situates him, I believe, broadly within the category of "text-centered" critics, but his sensitivity to the ways in which the reader's experience is broadened and character shaped by the text exposes the narrowness of the New Criticism's abstract concern for meaning.

Reading III: A Midrash on Isaac

The first two readings agree on one point: this is a story about Abraham's faith; and in this they follow the majority of Jewish and Christian interpreters since ancient times. But there has been a secondary yet persistent line of interpretation which considers that Isaac's faith, too, was tested on Moriah, that he participated in his sacrifice as a conscious and willing victim. The notion that Isaac suffered willingly is implicit in the early Church's identification of Isaac as a type of Christ.²⁸ But it is the rabbinic midrash that shows Isaac's full development as a model of faith. As usual, the midrash finds in the spare biblical narrative the starting point for its speculation. We are told that Isaac is a "youth" (*na'ar*)—more than a child—and therefore presumably had the physical power to resist his centenarian father, had he been of a mind to do so.²⁹ Playing on this hint, the Rabbis break the silence which the biblical narrator imposed upon Isaac. Through the medium of midrash we hear Isaac begging to be bound well, lest in his death struggle he violate the integrity of the sacrifice and of his own willing soul.³⁰

Yet the most striking amplification of the biblical text is not Isaac's words, but rather his blood. It was an early discovery; the first generation of rabbinic commentary speaks of "the blood of the binding of Isaac."³¹ And here again, the midrash proceeds from what is missing in the text. For there is a peculiar gap in this narrative: we hear (22:19) that Abraham left the mountain and went back to the attendants camped below; but there is no mention of Isaac's return from Moriah. And why not? Probably, the Rabbis reasoned, because he didn't go

28. See Gal 3:16 and especially Rom 3:32, whose language recalls LXX Gen 22:12, 16. With a philological play on Isaac's name ("he laughs"), Clement of Alexandria uses this narrative to portray Isaac as a prophet of the crucifixion: "Isaac only bore the wood of the sacrifice. . . . And he laughed mystically, prophesying that the Lord should fill us with joy, who have been redeemed from corruption by the blood of the Lord. Isaac did everything but suffer, as was right, yielding the precedence in suffering to the Word" (*Paidagogos* 1.5, cf. *Stromata* 1.5). This notion of Isaac's willing self-sacrifice does not altogether disappear from later Christian interpretation. Although Luther foregoes typological exegesis, he also asserts Isaac's confidence in God, based on solid doctrine rather than mystical foreknowledge: "There was a great light of faith in that young man. He believed in God the Creator, who calls into existence the things that do not exist [Rom 4:17], and commands the ashes that are not Isaac to be Isaac. For he who believes that God is the Creator, who makes all things out of nothing, must of necessity conclude that therefore God can raise the dead" (*Lectures on Genesis, ad Gen 22:11*).

29. The rabbinic texts set his age at 37, on the basis of Sarah's age as given in Gen 23:1.

30. *Gen. Rab.* 56.8.

31. *Mek. R. Ishmael*, VII, XI (1:57, 88 in the edition of Jacob Z. Lauterbach [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933]).

back with his father. And why not? Well, maybe he couldn't go back; maybe Isaac did not escape Abraham's knife unscathed. So the midrash shows us a picture very different from the biblical one: Abraham did not stop at the angel's command, the knife came down on Isaac's flesh, and his body was borne away by angels to paradise, where for three years they nursed him back to health.³² Some strands of the midrash develop the story even further, speaking not just of Isaac's blood, but of his ashes.³³ The implication is clear: the burnt offering on Moriah was indeed carried through to the end. The angels intervened, not to save Isaac from death, but to resurrect him.

It was in this most extreme version that the Jews of the Middle Ages made Isaac's story their own. Shalom Spiegel gives a remarkable account of how, "in the nightmare period of the Crusades,"³⁴ the ancient midrash of Isaac's death and resurrection reasserted itself. In the twelfth century, Isaac became a type for European Jewry in its martyrdom, his binding on Moriah completed in the sacrifice of thousands of other children of the promise, whose blood poured out in rivers for the sanctification of God's name. Desperation drove them to seek assurances of God's faithfulness beyond those given by the biblical text; according to their reading, God is faithful to Abraham's seed, even on the other side of death.

For the purposes of Jewish-Christian dialogue, perhaps the most important point about the midrash is this: it is *as a community* that Jews have found in Isaac a model for their faithfulness. And it is not only in times of persecution that this identification is asserted; at the beginning of each new year, according to Talmudic tradition, the sounding of the ram's horn recalls to God the event on Moriah, and all of Israel is credited with Isaac's merit.³⁵

It is, then, in connection with the experience of whole communities that Isaac is spotlighted, and here the contrast between the midrash and Kierkegaard's reading is absolute. For Kierkegaard, the focal point is Abraham's radical individuality; he is the solitary journeyer of faith, called into terrible isolation from every other human being. But what the midrash has seen in Isaac is the too common situation of the victim. Perhaps it is coincidental that in all of Scripture, Isaac hardly emerges as a distinct personality; he is the least individualized figure among the three paradigmatic generations of Israel's ancestors. Yet it is fitting that this almost faceless patriarch should stand for

32. *Yal. Reubeni* et al. See Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York: Behrman House, 1969) 6-7.

33. Spiegel traces this tradition of Isaac's death, which became prominent during the persecutions of the Middle Ages, back to the third century (*ibid.* 42-44).

34. *Ibid.* 17.

35. BT, *Rosh Hodesh* 16a.

those thousands—now, in this century, millions—of Jewish martyrs whose deaths horrify and shame us precisely because they were not isolated.

Obviously, with this midrashic account of Isaac's death and resurrection, we have moved far from what could reasonably be assumed to be the biblical narrator's intention. But it is the basic tenet of midrash that Scripture exists in dynamic relation with the experience of the people who call themselves Israel. Therefore, a full reading is achieved only when the present community draws on its own experience to activate the paradigms in the text. Recalling the three critical perspectives with which we began, the midrash can be understood in terms of the third of those, which sees the interpreter's own situation as crucial to the act of reading. Although the creators of midrash are a philosophical world away from the Deconstructionists,³⁶ no one shows us so clearly how to dance with the biblical text, how to bring our own experience dynamically, indeed passionately, into relation with Scripture.

The Question of Appropriation

For the Protestant Christian, it is this last reading that poses the most difficult problems of evaluation. The question is this: is this reading, which emerged from the Jewish community out of the crucible of persecution, available for appropriation by modern readers whose experience is different, who are not natural heirs to the Rabbis' hermeneutical tradition? At first the question may seem gratuitous, it not having been asked of another ancient tradition which would seem to have a prior claim on our attention: namely, the typological interpretation of the early Church. Yet there are elements in the current

36. A number of the modern practitioners or admirers of Deconstruction claim an affinity between this mode of criticism and rabbinic midrash. See Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982); the connection is also hinted at in some of the essays in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). While there is a stylistic similarity in their acknowledgement and even exploitation of the multiple meanings to which the text is liable, one must also note the great difference between the grounds on which the interpreters exercise their freedom. For the Rabbis, it is the conviction that every minute aspect of Scripture is fraught with meaning, and that the Written Law invites, indeed requires the Oral Law as its inspired complement. For the Deconstructionists, on the other hand, interpretation is a self-reflexive activity; interpretation is the sole source from which new interpretation is generated. There is no ontological center outside of the text, whose points of tension are probed precisely in order to show the absence of any transcendent meaning or presence.

theological climate which argue that this midrash is of particular importance for contemporary Christians.

First, feminist and liberation theologies have reminded us of what early interpreters, both Jewish and Christian, knew: that there is no single perspective for interpretation. They have shown us how our readings are distorted and dangerous when they focus only on those front-line strugglers who have the agony and the privilege of choice. Modern theology, then, affirms our need to attend to the more difficult reading and discover here the story of one who participates in history, not as the father of a nation, but simply as a child of the promise. The midrashic reading bespeaks the faith of that people who, though perhaps hearing no clear call from God, yet is called ineluctably by God's name and suffers accordingly, finding God faithful even beyond death.

Second, a realistic appraisal of our situation suggests that it is not affectation for even the most privileged of us to imagine that we may yet learn to practice the faith of the victim. Living on a planet overshadowed by the threat of nuclear or environmental destruction we are more than any previous generation vulnerable to the mistakes, the risks taken in faith, the bad faith of others; and that vulnerability is in no way limited by political, religious, or social identity.

But there are also factors which call into question the validity of a Christian or Protestant appropriation of this midrash. First, there is a crucial distinction between a liberation perspective and that of the Rabbis. Liberation theology demands that, in taking the side of the victim, we repudiate overt oppression, certainly, but also the kind of careless faith that jeopardizes the innocent or extracts from them an unwitting sacrifice. Yet it is striking that the Rabbis never made that move, for it would seem to have been an obvious one. If Isaac, the faithful victim, was a model for those who were suffering at the Crusaders' hands, would not historical analogy demand some denigration or at least qualification of the sort of blind faith that perpetrated his victimage? But the midrash, perceiving a truth that defies logic, holds up Abraham alongside Isaac as a model of faith.

A second factor relates specifically to the Protestant tradition of hermeneutics. The issue here is the extent to which participation in that tradition requires us to accede to the coercion of the text. Kierkegaard is appalled by Abraham's dreadful faith, and yet he feels bound by the same compulsion to sacrifice what he best loves. The drama of his broken engagement expresses in highly personal but not exaggerated terms a disposition that is fundamental to the Protestant understanding of Scripture. Its essence is the experience of God's Word as an alien and transformative power that overrides our rational explanations and objections, addressing us, not only in a narrative mode, as

a story that offers clues to our identity, but also in an imperative one, and confronts us with the demand for obedience.

The implication of these cautionary remarks is that conversation among those who stand in different hermeneutical traditions may deepen particularity, making each of us more aware of the immiscibility of our discrete perspectives. Yet this should not be construed as a negative result. If the integrity of every tradition limits its freedom of appropriation, nonetheless dialogue may, by arousing admiration, even envy of the riches of another tradition, make us more diligent in mining our own. I would suggest that it is indeed important for Protestant Christians to hear how the Rabbis read Genesis 22; for, in probing the silences of the text, they disclose a dimension of the story that Kierkegaard does not fully explore. If he is the great interpreter of Abraham's wordless passion, the midrash enables us to hear also the confident love of the son, love that shows its power in bondage, when the heroic heart ventures into territory over which no oppressor has sovereignty. The Rabbis thus alert us to an element of our own tradition that is too often overlooked. They teach us to read with the heart of the mystic, intoxicated with God, utterly bound and utterly free, whose suffering is transformed and obedience completed in love.³⁷

37. I am grateful to Prof. David Tracy, whose comments on an earlier version of this paper were helpful in formulation of the final section.