Genesis 22, Hebrews, and a Hermeneutic of Faith*

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One of the key texts in the Old Testament, both in its own right and as viewed by Christian authors, is the account of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in Genesis 22,1-18.[1] The present essay will attempt: 1) to understand the meaning of Genesis 22,1-18 (Part I); 2) to study how the Epistle to the Hebrews interprets Genesis 22,1-18 (Part II); 3) to outline how Cardinal John Henry Newman's book, *A Grammar of Assent*, may justify a faith-centered hermeneutic with regard to the exegesis of the first two parts of this paper (Part III).[2]

Part I: Genesis 22,1-18

The sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham has proved a veritable storm centre in the later history of biblical criticism.[3] With the coming of the Enlightenment the sacrifice has often been viewed as an immoral action.[4] But such condemnations are normally based on a view of Abraham's decision to sacrifice Isaac which is divorced from

1. For a brief summary of the importance of Genesis 22 in scholarly biblical research and in the light of varying religious traditions cf. R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A study of Abraham and Jesus*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine; Cambridge: University Press, 2000, pp. 71-72. The present conference is dependent on this work to a considerable degree, both by way of agreement and disagreement.
2. Given the limitations of time within which this conference is presented, only an outline of the material in question can be given.
3. Cf. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith,* pp. 132-161, for a brief presentation. A more detailed discussion can be found in: D. Lerch, *Isaaks Opferung christlich gedeutet: Eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie, 12; J. C. B. Mohr: Tübingen, 1950; S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, Behrman, New York, 1979 [translation from the Hebrew edition of 1950].
4. Cf. the forceful condemnation of Abraham's action in agreeing to slay his son by the influential philosopher Immanüel Kant as presented in Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, pp. 128-129. Cf. also some remarks of contemporary scholars, p. 162.

its context. In the way in which Genesis 22,1-18 is customarily interpreted as part of the canonical text of the Old Testament alone or of the Old Testament and the New Testament together in various religious traditions, the verses present no insuperable difficulty in this regard.[5]

There are three broad headings which seem to commend themselves in a brief discussion of the implications of Genesis 22,1-18 within the canonical text of the Old Testament: 1) The Relevance of Covenant; 2) The Relevance of Sacrifice; 3) The Relevance of Faith. Taken together, these three headings provide a convenient way of entering into the text.

A. *The Relevance of Covenant*

For a proper understanding of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac it is crucial to keep in mind the covenant setting of the canonical text. V. 1 states that God is "testing" (*nsh* in Hebrew, *peirazein* in Greek) Abraham. That is to say, God is arranging a test to discover if his son is "faithful" (*n'jmn* in Hebrew, *pistos* in Greek).[6] The text of Genesis 22 is the climax of a progression involving call, promise, covenant and oath.[7] The call is found in Genesis 12,1-3, and consists of elements involving blessings: 1) a blessing which involves a land and nation (vv. 1-2a), 2) a blessing which involves a dynasty (v. 2b), and 3) a blessing which involves the entire world (v. 3 with v. 2).[8] These three elements seem to correspond to the three covenant episodes presented in Genesis 15, 17 and 22.[9] In Genesis 15, the episode with the

5. This point is well made by Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, pp. 129-130. On evidence from within the text that it was part of a canonical tradition cf. Moberly, 114.
6. Cf. B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son*, C.W.K. Gleerup, Lund 1966: "'Faith' is a vital element here; faith meaning to 'treat JHWH as reliable' (*n'mn*, *pisteuein*), to trust him, to believe that he will faithfully and lovingly keep his promises and honour his 'obligation'. What is required of the people in general is also required of each member individually" (pp. 26-27); "When the Old Testament speaks of YHWH testing his covenant son, 'tempting' him (*nsh*, *peirazein*), it means that God arranges a test to find out if his son is true to the covenant, is *n'jmn*, *pistos*. It is almost a formula that God tests 'that he might know' (*ld't*) whether his chosen one is true or not" (p. 27).
7. Cf. the discussion in the doctoral dissertation of S. Hahn, "Kinship by Covenant: A Biblical Theological Study of Covenant Types and Texts in the Old and New Testaments" (Department of Theology, Marquette University; Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI, 1995) 181-211.
8. Cf. Hahn, 183-184.
9. Most commentators agree that the covenant between God and Abraham is a "grant-type", i.e., it comprises six basic elements: 1) oath of suzerain (i.e., God); 2) blessing by suzerain of vassal and curse of enemies; 3) unconditional obligation on part of suzerain; 4) naming of progeny of vassal as beneficiaries by suzerain; 5) suzerain's praise of "name" of vassal; 6) frequent reference by suzerain to virtue of vassal. Cf. Hahn, 168-171.

divided animals represents a covenant in which Abraham's descendants will live as a nation in a particular land. In Genesis 17 the emphasis is on Abraham's great "name", i.e., there is question of a dynasty. And in Genesis 22,16-18, the climax, there is question of a blessing to all nations.[10] Thus Genesis 22,1-18 can be viewed as the culmination of Abraham's life as it is portrayed in the canonical text of Scripture. Afterwards he enters into the story only in relation to the death of Sarah (Genesis 23) and the marriage of Isaac (Genesis 24). His definitive life and destiny in terms of his relation with God are outlined in Genesis 22.[11] The oath sworn by God to Abraham can be considered the concluding high point in the series of covenant episodes.[12] It incorporates, so to speak, the successful outcome of Abraham's test into the blessing given to all nations, so that Abraham's faith is now a part of the destiny of his offspring.[13]

The context of the covenant in Genesis 22 is crucial for ascertaining the precise point of the passage. For Abraham is being tested with regard to his faith in God and His pledge to give him the blessings involved in the covenant despite the apparent contradiction of His command. Further, Abraham must have been aware that this was a test, that he was being faced with a cruel dilemma in which his filial affection was secondary. What was at stake was not only the meaning of his God-centered existence but the meaning of the God-centered existence of Isaac and of all who were to be descended from him.[14] The command from God to Abraham to sacrifice

10. Cf. Hahn, 185-186.
11. "Within the Genesis portrayal of Abraham's life and his relationship with God, Genesis 22 is the climactic moment. It is not the final story of Abraham, for there are still two more stories in which he features. Since, however, his purchase of a burial place for Sarah anticipates his own dying and burial (Gen, 23), and in the lengthy story of the acquisition of a wife for Isaac the focus shifts away from Abraham himself to Abraham's faithful servant (Gen, 24), these stories provide a kind of diminuendo and prepare for the storyline to move on from Abraham. Genesis 22 is the story of the last encounter and the last dialogue between Abraham and God, and its content focusses on the nature of the relationship between Abraham and God" (Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 72-73).
12. Cf. the discussion in Hahn, 198-202.
13. Cf. R. W. L. Moberly, "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah", *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988) 320-321.
14. Moberly, after a discerning discussion (*The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 102-106) of how God's omniscience can permit of the statement that "now I know" (cf. Genesis 22,12), has these summary remarks: "Issues about God with the Old Testament are never posed in separation from the relational dynamic through which Israel knows God. The most explicit raising of the issue of divine omniscience, Psalm 139, raises the issue entirely with the context of the psalmist's relationship with God. It would be a mistake to construe God's 'knowing' in relation to his 'testing' any

his son Isaac, in other words, was a deadly serious affair for Abraham and for God.[15]

That the command of God to Abraham was a serious affair for God as well as for Abraham has perhaps not been sufficiently noted. For in ordering the test God is implicitly endangering the whole enterprise of His covenant with Abraham. In terms of the story, God is waiting to see the result of Abraham's free reaction to the test: a refusal by Abraham to sacrifice Isaac would show that Abraham had not passed the test of his faith.[16] Hence the covenant enterprise and everything associated with it would, presumably, collapse, and salvation history would have to take a radically new turn.

B. *The Relevance of Sacrifice*

A second major perspective according to which Genesis 22 should be interpreted is that of sacrifice. Sacrifice here is tied in with the place in which the action of Genesis 22 occurs. There is ample reason to take the place ("Moriah" [*mryh*] in v. 2) as Jerusalem.[17] If this is so, then Genesis 22 becomes the basic Old Testament text for the understanding of animal sacrifice as practiced in the temple of Jerusalem.

differently. The concern of the texts is for a deepening of the encounter between God and people. Although the primary emphasis falls upon the appropriate human response, this response is relational at the same time as being moral, and this relationship is not conceived as one-sided but rather God is engaged within the encounter in such a way that the outcome is a genuine divine concern. When Abraham is depicted as 'one who fears God', the divine pronouncement 'now I know', rather than 'now people will know', indicates that the deepened relationship is in some way an intrinsic concern of God even as it also constitutes the nature of mature humanity" (pp. 106-107). Moberly takes the "fear of God" which is the object of God's know as a result of the test as equivalent in Christian parlance with the "faith" of Abraham which is being tested (p. 79). But this equivalence seems a bit too facile, and betrays a lack of recognition of the covenant dimension of faith. "Fear of God" in Genesis 22 seems to be the virtue of Abraham which is based on his faith and is evidenced by his heroic obedience.

15. Cf. the discussion in Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 97-98.
16. "It is [the] dimension of human choice that is primarily signified by *nissah*, which characteristically, as in Deuteronomy 8:2, poses Israel's response in terms of a fundamental choice—'testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandment[s], or not'. What marks out Abraham as 'one who fears God' is that he *chose* to obey God. What Deuteronomy holds out as a human possibility, all too often unrealized, is realized in Abraham. Human growth through choosing to obey God is the issue . . . " (Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 105).
17. Cf. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 108-116. Moberly notes that the emphasis given in v. 14 to the place of the testing as "YHWH sees" indicates that "the general truth about God is tied to a particular place where that truth is realized" (p. 109).

This, in turn, would solve the puzzle as to why so little is said in the Pentateuch about the meaning of such sacrifice.[18] The principal type of sacrifice indicated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy is the whole burnt offering (*'lh*, *holokautōma*, *holokauston*).[19] This is precisely the type of sacrifice which Abraham is called on to make of Isaac and actually does make of the ram at Genesis 22,2.13.[20]

The relevance of sacrifice in the interpretation of Genesis 22 has not always been given the importance it should. This lack of attention to the dimension of sacrifice distorts the interpretation of Genesis 22 which must have guided generations of faithful readers in Israel. Further, this lack of attention distorts the possible relevance which Genesis 22 should have for the modern reader of the canonical text. By showing exactly how sacrifice can have a purchase on human existence as personified in Abraham, Genesis 22 is of crucial importance in the understanding of God's revelation as contained in the Bible.

C. *The Relevance of Faith*

The perspectives involving covenant and sacrifice indicate the centrality of faith in Abraham's response to God. Covenant and sacrifice are focused on God as He manifested Himself to Abraham (covenant) and as Abraham replies to God's command

18. Cf. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 117-118: ". . . Genesis 22 becomes the primary account with the Old Testament of the meaning of animal sacrifice (as practised in the Jerusalem temple). It has long been a puzzle that the extensive pentateuchal prescriptions for sacrificial worship say so little about the meaning of what is prescribed. One explanation, at least in terms of the Pentateuch as a canonical collection, is that the meaning of sacrifice has been so clearly depicted in Genesis 22 that further explanation becomes superfluous".
19. Leviticus 1; Deuteronomy 12,6.11.13.14.27. Cf. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 118.
20. "Within Genesis 22 Abraham's sacrifice of the ram stands in place of his sacrifice of Isaac. Once Abraham sees the ram, he does not need to be told what to do, but directly grasps its significance and so he sacrifices the ram instead of Isaac. The meaning of this substitution of animal for child is provided by the preceding narrative of God's testing, Abraham's fearing, and God's providing. That is, the whole burnt offering is symbolic of Abraham's self-sacrifice as a person who unreservedly fears God. Sacrifice could, and no doubt did, mean other things within Israelite history (not to mention other contexts). But the canonical and received meaning is that of Genesis 22, where visible religious action and inward spiritual significance are knit together as one" (Moberly, 118).

(sacrifice). It is faith that motivates Abraham.[21] To have faith is to treat God as reliable, to trust him, to believe that he will faithfully and lovingly keep his promises and honor his obligations.[22] Because Abraham's faith was based on his covenant with God, he was aware of what was at stake, and was cognizant not only of what was expected of him (obedience) but what was expected of God (fulfillment of the promises): his faith was a type of knowledge. And it was this knowledge which enabled him to withstand the test God had prepared for him: Abraham *knew* that God would somehow provide a solution to what, outside the realm of faith, was an insoluble problem. In other words, Genesis 22,8 ("God will Himself provide a lamb for a burnt offering") is to be taken not simply as the anxious words of a distraught father to a questioning son, but as an expression of certainty based on faith.

In seeking the relevance of Genesis 22 for the reader of today, faith is thus the crucial element. It is this element which provides the basis for the religious significance of the original text for any application of that significance to a world contemporary with a reader of any age.[23] Hence any attempt to read Genesis 22, if it is to come to grips with the core relevance of the text for the contemporary world, has to be based on Abraham's faith.

But there are two basic ways in which Abraham's faith can be approached by the contemporary reader. The reader may so stand with regard to the text that he or she is inside the loop of Abraham's faith, or outside it. That is to say, the reader may share Abraham's faith insofar as possible as Abraham lives the events portrayed in Genesis 22, or the reader may be simply an onlooker of the events portrayed. Right here is the crucial hermeneutical challenge of Genesis 22.

There is nothing within the text which will force the reader to opt for a reading in which he incorporates Abraham's faith into his own life. The stance here has to be dictated by the reader's own free choice. God's freedom in calling Abraham and

21. The result of Abraham's faith as presented in Genesis 22 is that he is shown to "fear God" (*yr' 'lhym, phobeisthai ton theon*). This phrase seems to situate Abraham in a broader context than the covenant, making his conduct a model for all those who react in obedience to God. Cf. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 94-97.
22. Cf. above, n. 6.
23. On the question of the religious meaning of a biblical text as a key element for the application of that text to the situation of a later age see the remarks of A. Vanhoye, former secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in P. Williamson, "Catholicism and the Bible", *First Things*, #74 (June-July, 1997), p. 36: ". . . the Bible is a collection of religious writings. If one does not explain the religious meaning of a biblical writing, one has not explained the text adequately".

in putting him to the test and Abraham's freedom in responding to this call and test are mirrored in the freedom which every reader enjoys before the text as it stands. But this is not something peculiar to Genesis 22; it is a choice which faces every reader of the Bible. It is the peculiar merit of Genesis 22, though, which sets forth the choice in all its starkness.[24]

Part II: The Epistle to the Hebrews and Genesis 22

The Epistle to the Hebrews pays particular attention to Genesis 22. This attention can serve as a guide in understanding how the early Christians interpreted this key text in their search for understanding the reality of Jesus Christ.

A. *Hebrews and the Faith of Abraham*

Hebrews singles out Abraham's faith in its understanding of Genesis 22:

> By faith Abraham, in the act of being tested, stands as offering Isaac, that is, he attempted to offer up his only son in sacrifice, he who had received the promises, he to whom it had been said that 'In Isaac will your seed be named', having concluded that God was able to raise from the dead, and as a result he received Isaac back as a symbol (Hebrews 11,17-19).[25]

The text is theologically rich. "Faith" (*pistis*) is highlighted. In Chapter 11 of Hebrews faith is attributed to a variety of Old Testament heroes, and is described in 11,2-3.6.[26] The word "offer [in sacrifice]" is used twice in v. 17. The first use is in the perfect tense (*prosenēochen*, "stands as offering"), i.e., Abraham's sacrificial stance is the chief point of Genesis 22 which the author of Hebrews wishes to choose as the basis for his understanding of the whole text. The second verb is in the imperfect tense (*prosepheren*), "attempted to offer"). This conative imperfect describes how Abraham was "in the act of being tested" (*peirazomenos*). The terms

24. Cf. the remarks of E. D. Hirsch, Jr.: "Since it is very easy for a reader of any text to construe meanings that are different from the author's, there is nothing in the nature of the text itself which requires the reader to set up the author's meaning as his normative ideal. Any normative concept in interpretation implies a choice that is required not by the nature of written texts but rather by the goal that the interpreter sets himself," E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, Yale University Press, New Haven–London: 1967, 24).

25. Translation from the Greek by the present author. The text used is that of Nestle–Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 27, 1994, 581. There are no significant textual variants.

of the testing are made clear: he was offering up his "only son" (*monogenē'*) as "one who had received the promises" (*ho tas epaggelias anadexamenos*). The promise in question is specified: "he to whom it had been said, 'In Isaac will your seed be name'" (*pros hon elalēthē hoti en Isaach klēthēsetai soi sperma*). These remarks indicate that the author of Hebrews has read the text of Genesis 22 with care, and has set out the parameters of the test with precision. What follows is a remarkable interpretation of the reasoning behind Abraham's faith in God: "having concluded that God was able to raise from the dead" (*logisamenos hoti kai ek nekrōn egeirein dunatos ho theos*).

The apparently matter-of-fact way in which the author of Hebrews attributes belief in the resurrection from the dead to Abraham should not distract one from realizing the implications of what is being affirmed. First of all, Abraham's inference would seem to be plausible, given his previous belief in the birth of Isaac from his own "dead" body and Sarah's "dead" womb.[27] In view of Abraham's heroic faith, there is nothing forced or artificial about the exegesis. If God's promise of offspring through Isaac (v. 18) had to be believed without qualification, and the command to sacrifice Isaac was, for Abraham, required by God, then belief in the resurrection would seem to a possible, indeed, perhaps even the only possible inference. Secondly, the attribution of belief in resurrection from the dead to Abraham is remarkable. He stands at the very fountainhead of Old Testament belief and practice, and this belief and practice is traditionally understood as being agnostic with regard to resurrection from the dead.[28] Here, a Christian writer who had clearly reflected long and deeply on the Old Testament antecedents to his Christian faith clearly states that Abraham believed in resurrection from the dead.[29] Thirdly, if Abraham's interior attitude in sacrificing Isaac is to be understood as being paradigmatic for

26. Any detailed study of the use of Genesis 22 in Hebrews would have to take into account these descriptions. But such a study is beyond the possibility of the present paper.
27. Cf. Hebrews 11,10-11, and Romans 4,19.
28. The following texts are sometimes cited in support of belief in resurrection from the dead in the Old Testament: Isaiah 26,19; Ezekiel 37,4-14; Daniel 12,2. The first two texts are not conclusive. The third is much more probable as an indication of belief in individual resurrection from the dead, but it is quite late.
29. One modern commentator on Hebrews remarks dryly: "This phrase and the belief thus attributed to Abraham go well beyond the scriptural data;" H. W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia; Fortress Press, Philadelphia: 1989, 335. The explicit scriptural data, certainly. But what is implicit in the scriptural data, perhaps not. Another modern commentator on Hebrews notes: "What the present verse says about resurrection is clearly derived not from OT or other pre-Christian sources, but from primitive Christian tradition," P. Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International

the interior attitude of all subsequent Old Testament worshippers, this is a startling statement about what the author of Hebrews regards as implicitly standing behind all Old Testament sacrifice.

What seems to be happening in Hebrews 11,19 is that the author of Hebrews, guided by his faith in the resurrection of Christ (cf. Hebrews 13,20), is extrapolating this belief into the faith-world of Abraham. But the extrapolation is perfectly in keeping with the words of the Old Testament text, i.e., it does no violence to the parameters of the text as it stands. Further, in the context of Abraham's presumed heroic faith in God there is nothing out of character for such a belief on Abraham's part. The second part of Hebrews 11,19 confirms the view that the author of Hebrews was thinking of the restoration of Isaac with relation to the resurrection of Jesus, for he states that the restoration is a 'type' of the resurrection of Jesus.[30]

B. *Hebrews and the Oath Sworn to Abraham*

Hebrews alludes to the sacrifice of Isaac at 6,14 with a citation from the text of Genesis 22,17. The context of Hebrews is revealing:

[13]For God, having made a promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater to swear by, swore by Himself, [14]with the words: *With blessing shall I bless you, and with increase shall I increase* you. [15]And thus, having endured, did Abraham receive the promise. [16]Now men swear by that which is greater; and at the end of every controversy among them comes the oath as a confirmation. [17]Thus God, wishing to show more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable nature of His design, intervened with an oath. [18]The purpose of the oath was that, through two unchangeable things in which it is impossible that God lie, we have a strong source of comfort, we who have fled, so as to lay hold of the hope before us.[31]

Greek Testament Commentary; William B. Eerdmans – Carlisle: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1993, 602). Agreed. But the inference attributed to Abraham seems legitimate given the circumstances and given the presumption of Abraham's faith in what naturally seems to be impossible.

30. Ellingworth (*Hebrews*, 604) suggests that the reference is more to the resurrection of believers more than to the resurrection of Jesus, since the author of Hebrews is more interested in the former than in the latter. The present writer wishes to contest this view, for the resurrection of Jesus is, for the author of Hebrews, that which brings to "perfection" the priesthood of Jesus. Cf. J. Swetnam: "The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6", *Melita Theologica* 43 (1992) 58-62, in particular, n. 28; "Christology and the Eucharist in the Epistle to the Hebrews", *Biblica* 70 (1989) 78-79 and n. 17.
31. Translation by the present writer from N-A 27.

These six verses, Hebrews 6,13-18, are cited to support the exhortation of the author of Hebrews that the addressees show the necessary diligence and concern to imitate the heirs of the promises and receive the promises through faith and endurance. Hence the presence of the introductory "for" in v. 16.

That Genesis 22 is in the mind of the author of Hebrews is seen, not only from the citation of v. 17 of that chapter at Hebrews 6,14, but also from the allusion to the oath of Genesis 22,16 in Hebrews 6,13. This suggests that for the author of Hebrews the oath has a close relation to the blessing and multiplication of Abraham's offspring. The precise content of the "two unchangeable things" mentioned in Hebrews 6,18 is much canvassed.[32] The text at Hebrews 6,13-14 would seem to furnish the first step towards an answer: the "two unchangeable things" are the oath of Genesis 22,16 and the promise of Genesis 22,17. They are juxtaposed in Hebrews just as they are juxtaposed in Genesis. The words of the promise speak for themselves with regard to the content: they have to do with the multiplication of Abraham's progeny.[33] The oath serves to reinforce this promise, so that when Abraham receives the promise at the conclusion of his heroic show of patience at the call to sacrifice Isaac (6,15) the promise has been reinforced by an oath. Abraham is thus portrayed as having received the promise. But it is clear from the way the author of Hebrews uses the verbs *epitugchanō* (6,15—cfr. 11,33) and *komizō* that even if Abraham had received *epitugchanō* (6,15—cfr. 11,33) the promise reinforced by an oath, he had not received (*komizō*) the thing promised—progeny (cf. 11,13.39 along with 10,36). The mind of the author of Hebrews is revealed by the fourth and final use of *komizō*: at 11,19 the author says that Abraham received (*komizō*) Isaac after the attempted sacrifice "as a symbol" (*en parabolēi*). In other words, the thing promised to Abraham at the sacrifice of Isaac—progeny—is received only with the coming of Christ: Christ Himself is that progeny.

If the content of the promise to Abraham is Christ, then the oath sworn to Abraham by God is an oath which issues only in a symbolic action foreshadowing the granting of the thing promised. That is why the author of Hebrews emphasizes the oath sworn by God to Jesus at the moment of His resurrection (cf. 7,20-21).

32. Cf. the discussion of opinions in W. L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary, 47; Word Books, Dallas 1991, 152.
33. It is this promise which is referred to in the singular at Hebrews 6,17, "to the heirs of the promise" (*tois klēronomois tēs epaggelias*·

This is the oath which was foreshadowed by the oath of God at the sacrifice of Isaac and which results in the actual granting of that which was promised in connection with this oath: definitive progeny. Christ is the definitive progeny promised by Abraham, and the oath at Christ's resurrection is the oath of which the oath to Abraham was a symbolic foreshadowing.[34]

By identifying the oath of Psalm 110,4 with the fulfillment of the oath of Genesis 22,16, and by placing the oath in the explicit context of the multiplication of Abraham's seed, the author of Hebrews has brought about a profound transformation in the nature of this seed. For the true and definitive offspring of Abraham is effected not through his physical child Isaac, but through His spiritual offspring Jesus Christ of whom Isaac was a "type" precisely with regard to Jesus' resurrection (and, in the context of Hebrews, the accompanying oath of Psalm 110,4). The author of Hebrews thinks that this offspring can be best described by evoking the Old Testament figure of Melchizedek in the context of whom Jesus Christ emerges as the definitive high priest. As the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek Jesus Christ replaces the Levitical high priesthood which had heretofore given identity to Abraham's descendants (cf. Hebrews 7,11). This new high priest is the Son of God Himself (Hebrews 7,3).[35] He is the source of the definitively better hope which is the cause of the addressees' encouragement. The One through whom God made the ages (Hebrews 1,2) is the One through whom God definitively blesses and multiplies Abraham's offspring. Through Christ's risen priesthood a new people has come into being (cf. Hebrews 7,12), one coextensive with the entire human race. Through a Son who transcends time, Abraham's offspring is extended to all men who have ever lived and who will ever live—to those who existed before Abraham as well as those who existed after him. This is the way the author of Hebrews understands the meaning of Genesis 22,17, with its promise that God will bless and multiply Abraham's offspring. He has seen in the oath of Genesis 22,16 a vindication of Abraham's faith that God would provide an offspring and a challenge to his own, for which the Christian abrogation of Jewish expectations of offspring through physical descent must have offered problems.

34. Cf. H. Köster, "Die Auslegung der Abraham-Verheissung in Hebräer 6", in R. Rendtorff – K. Koch (ed.), *Studien zur Theologie der alttestamentlichen Überlieferungen*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen: 1961, 95-109.

35. Cf. J. Swetnam, "Hebrews 1,4-14", *Melita Theologica* 51 (2000) 51-68.

C. *Hebrews and the Relevance of Faith*

Just as the reader is faced with the choice of a hermeneutic when confronted with Genesis 22, so the reader is faced with the choice of a hermeneutic when confronted with the interpretation of Genesis 22 in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The reader may opt to share in the obvious faith the author of Hebrews had in the Christian relevance of Genesis 22, or he may not. That is to say, the reader may opt to be a participant or spectator in Christ's role in Genesis 22 as seen by the author of Hebrews. Right here is the crucial hermeneutical challenge of Genesis 22 as presented in Hebrews.

There is nothing within the text of Hebrews which will dictate to the reader whether he or she should opt for a reading in which a faith shared with the author of Hebrews is an essential element. The stance here has to be dictated by the reader's own free choice. The freedom which underlies the belief of the author of Hebrews in the relevance of Genesis 22 for the Christian's life is mirrored in the freedom which every reader enjoys before the text as it stands. But this is not something peculiar to a reader of Hebrews; it is a choice which faces the reader of every book of the Bible. But it is the peculiar merit of Genesis 22 as presented in Hebrews, though, which sets forth the choice in all its starkness. For Genesis 22 is about a test of faith—Abraham's faith—and that faith is highlighted by the author of Hebrews with obvious sympathy. He regards Abraham's faith as an invitation to the reader to place his faith in Christ in the context of Genesis 22.

Every reader of Hebrews comes to the text with a certain set of presuppositions, just as every reader comes to Genesis with a certain set of presuppositions. And such presuppositions determine in large measure the reader's choice of a hermeneutic. A Christian who lets his Christian faith enter into every facet of his life will identify automatically with the Christian author of Hebrews. For such a believer identification with the faith of Abraham as presented in Genesis 22 will be subsumed into the faith of the author of Hebrews in the Christ who gives to the story of Genesis 22 a new dimension. For the author of Hebrews the faith of Abraham becomes focused explicitly on God's power to raise from dead, and the oath sworn to Abraham by God is seen to be fulfilled at the moment of resurrection by Christ the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Resurrection from the dead is the way in which this new high priest entered into His eternal priesthood. Once confirmed in His priesthood by God's oath, the God-Man Jesus Christ, who transcends time by reason of being Son of God and who is a product of time by reason of his saving death, automatically confers on

Abraham's fatherhood a completeness which takes in all men who ever lived or ever will live. This fatherhood is of a redeemed humanity, and it is as cause of this redeemed humanity that Jesus Christ enters the history of salvation as the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

One final, crucial truth about the faith of Abraham as seen by the author of Hebrews should be noted: the obedience of Abraham is rewarded by God with the gift of Isaac as symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. Thus the faith-trust of Abraham enters into the Providence of God in achieving the role of Christ as high priest for all of humanity. That is to say, Abraham, as a result of his belief that God could raise from the dead and his acting on that belief in obedience to God (Hebrews 11,17-19), received Isaac back "as a symbol" (*en parabolēi*) Isaac is a symbol of Christ insofar as Isaac's reprieve was an imperfect foreshadowing of the fulfillment of resurrection in Christ.[36] Abraham offered Isaac "having believed that God was able to raise from the dead" (Hebrews 11,19a), as was explained above. But then the text goes on to say, "whence (*hothen*) he received him back as a symbol" (Hebrews 11,19b). In other words, Abraham's trust (Hebrews 11,17), which leads him to posit belief in God's ability to raise from the dead (Hebrews 11,19a), is rewarded with Isaac's symbolic bestowal. Since Hebrews 11,17-19 is found in a section in which faith is presented as resulting in God's becoming a "rewarder" (*misthapodotēs*) (Hebrews 11,6),[37] the inference is to be made that in the supreme gift of the resurrection of Jesus and all that follows from it is in a sense a "reward" for the faithfulness of Abraham. Thus the oath of God as the final act of Genesis 22 contains something new for the author of Hebrews: the role of Abraham's faith enters into the gift of the risen Jesus and hence into all that the risen Jesus implies for humanity, as outlined above.[38] God has taken cognizance of Abraham's covenant

36. Some authors maintain that the resurrection of Jesus is not as important for the author of the epistle as the resurrection of Christians (for example, Attridge, *Hebrews*, 335, n. 34). But this is to ignore much patristic evidence to the contrary on the relation between Isaac and Jesus, as Attridge himself admits. This view of Attridge also depends very much on his interpretation of chapter 2 of the epistle with regard to the expression "Son of Man" (in which Attridge follows common views for the most part). For a different view cf. J. Swetnam, "The Structure of Hebrews 1,1 – 3,6", *Melita Theologica* 43 (1992) 58-62, in particular, p. 64, n. 28.

37. Cf. the discussion of Hebrews 11,6 in Attridge, *Hebrews*, 318-319.

38. This inference of the author of Hebrews follows the sense of the Old Testament of Genesis 22, where the oath following on Abraham's successful completion of the test contains something new with respect to the original promise of descendants made by God to Abraham: the plans of God for Abraham's descendants are henceforth based on the will of God and the obedience of Abraham (which two elements, obviously, do not enjoy equal billing). Cf. above, Part I, A (p. 160) and n. 13.

faith and has responded in the language of His own covenant loyalty. And He has done so in a way which was completely unexpected.

There is one final step needed to sketch a satisfying hermeneutic of Genesis 22 and Hebrews: the presuppositions which prompt the Christian believer to believe in a Christian interpretation of Abraham's faith must be explored.

Part III: The Presuppositions of Christian Belief and Cardinal Newman's *Grammar of Assent*

No one approaches any written text without presuppositions. And if this is true of any written text in general, all the more so is it true of a religious text such as the Bible. And in particular it is true of Genesis 22 and the Christian interpretation of Genesis 22 in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It was argued above that the only proper way to approach the interpretation of Genesis 22 is on the basis of its place in the larger context of Scripture, whether one adopts a stance of faith or not. For the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham was intended by the author of Genesis 22 to be understood in a much broader context than the text itself.[39] And this broader context takes in such fundamental questions of religious cult and morality that Genesis 22 frequently serves as a focus of discussion on man's relations with God.[40] Given the fundamental nature of the questions involved in Genesis 22, it is impossible that the reader not approach the text with certain presuppositions. These presuppositions may be of a believer or of a non-believer. But whatever their nature, they are present, and their presence, since it inevitably involves subsequent interpretation of the biblical text, should be taken explicitly into account.

It was argued above, in dependence on the basis of a contemporary hermeneutics, that hermeneutical stance is a matter of choice: one chooses one's approach to a text.[41] But this choice is not made in a vacuum of values: one's presuppositions are inevitably the basis for one's choice of hermeneutical stance. Hence the choice of one's hermeneutical stance must be investigated in the light of one's presuppositions.

39. For example, the use of the word "test" (*nsh*) implies the context of covenant, as was mentioned above (cf. n. 6); the mention of "Moriah" (*mryh*) suggests the context of Jerusalem, as was mentioned above (cf. above, n. 17); the mention of "holocaust" (*'lh*) suggests the context of sacrifice, as was mentioned above (cf. n. 20)
40. Cf. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, 71-72.
41. Cf. above, n. 24.

It is in this context that it seems appropriate to introduce John Henry Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*.[42] The book was finished in January of 1870.[43] The core insight which enabled Newman to bring the book to a conclusion is the core insight of the book itself—that the act of assent of the human person is not the result of a reflex act which is called certitude, but the act of assent which is the result of a variety of contributing causes working together in what he calls the "illative sense".[44] The illative sense, for Newman, is the personal use of reason about some concrete matter.[45] He insists on the personal nature of any such use of reason.[46] As authorities for this view he cites Aristotle and Scripture.[47] Given the personal nature of any such use of reason with regard to some concrete reality, the role of conscience in religion is for Newman unavoidable:

42. The edition used in this paper is John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. With an Introduction by Nicholas Lash, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1979 [Sixth Printing, 2001].
43. Cf. the informative introduction by Lash, pp. 7-12, in Newman, *Grammar of Assent*.
44. Cf. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 271: "I have already said that the sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense, a use of the word 'sense' parallel to our use of it in 'good sense,' 'common sense,' a 'sense of beauty,' &c.; —and I own I do not see any way to go farther than this in answer to the question."
45. Newman draws a contrast between a judgment about something "scientific" and a judgment about something "practical". It is necessary to study the chapter "The Illative Sense" (pp. 270-299) in the *Grammar* to understand his approach. A detailed discussion is impossible here. As with any other imaginative suggestion, this suggestion of Newman's must be corrected, refined and deepened.
46. ". . . in any inquiry about things in the concrete, men differ from each other, not so much in the soundness of their reasoning as in the principles which govern its exercise, that those principles are of a personal character, that where there is no common measure of minds, there is no common measure of arguments, and that the validity of proof is determined, not by any scientific test, but by the illative sense" (Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 321).
47. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 321-322. He gives no explicit references, but does give citations. For example, "Young men come to be mathematicians and the like, but they cannot possess practical judgment, for the talent is employed upon individual facts, and these are learned only by experience; and a youth has not experience, for experience is only gained by a course of years. And so, again, it would appear that a boy may be a mathematician, but not a philosopher, or learned in physics, and for this reason,—because the one study deals with abstractions, while the other studies gain their principles from experience, and in the latter subjects youths do not give assent, but make assertions, but in the former they know what it is they are handling" (p. 322). Newman is referring to a passage in Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book Six, Chapter 8 (cf. J. A. K. Thomson, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics Translated*, Penguin Books, 1971, Harmondsworth p. 182). Among the Scripture texts alluded to by Newman is John 7,17: "If anyone wishes to do His will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own" (translation by the present author). Cf. also Epistle VII of Plato [#344A-D] (Plato, with an English Translation: *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, by R. G. Bury [Loeb IX; London: William Heinemann / New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1929), p. 538]).

Our great internal teacher of religion is . . . our Conscience. Conscience is a personal guide, and I use it because I must use myself; I am as little able to think by any mind but my own as to breathe with another's lungs. Conscience is nearer to me than any other means of knowledge.[48]

The use of the word "knowledge" in the last sentence should be noted: conscience, in matters of religion, is a means of knowledge. From this it follows that Scripture is not merely a collection of abstract truths, but an authoritative teaching.

And the whole tenor of Scripture from beginning to end is to this effect: the matter of revelation is not a mere collection of truths, not a philosophical view, not a religious sentiment or spirit, not a special morality . . . but an authoritative teaching, which bears witness to itself and keeps itself together as one, in contrast to the assemblage of opinions on all sides of it, and speaks to all men, as being ever and everywhere one and the same, and claiming to be received intelligently, by all whom it addresses, as one doctrine, discipline, and devotion directly given from above.[49]

This view, of course, is the result of Newman's own exercise of conscience as a means of knowledge. He comes to the judgment above about the whole tenor of Scripture as a result, in part, of the personal guidance of his conscience, and to this judgment he gives real assent.[50] And he concludes his book by showing his own

48. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 304. Cf. the remarks of one contemporary commentator on Newman: "His [i.e., Newman's] concern is not with finding *more* knowledge of the divine, but rather with showing that religious experience can help us *realize* the more abstract knowledge of God we already have. The question he poses to himself in the *Grammar* is this: 'Can I attain to any more vivid assent to the Being of a God, than that which is given merely to notions of the intellect? Can I enter with a personal knowledge into the circle of truths which make up that great thought? Can I rise to what I have called an imaginative apprehension of it? Can I believe as if I saw?' The religious experience in conscience enables him to answer these questions in the affirmative, because God is there perceived and encountered, not as an abstract essence, but as a concrete reality. The difference that such an experience makes in our conception of God, and in our relation with him, is analogous to the difference between actually meeting a person and just hearing about him," J. van Schaljik, "Newman and Otto on Religious Experience", *Communio: International Catholic Review* 28 (2001), 734.
49. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 302.
50. "Real assent . . . as the experience which it presupposes, is proper to the individual, and, as such, thwarts rather than promotes the intercourse of man with man. . . . I call the characteristics of an individual accidents, in spite of the universal reign of law, because they are severally the co-incidents of many laws, and there are no laws as yet discovered of such coincidence," Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 82-83.

reasons for believing in the Catholic Church as God's providential gift to be accepted by faith,[51] a faith, however, which is associated with an accumulation of probabilities which yield the certitude which results from the legitimate use of the illative sense.[52]

Conclusion

The present study began in Part I with a presentation of Genesis 22 with all its attendant challenges to interpretation. Because of its explicit connections to covenant and cult, an exegesis was advanced based on the acceptance of that covenant and cult as part of the religious dispensation whose written record is the Old Testament. The proper response to Genesis 22, it was argued, is one of faith mirroring the faith of Abraham. This interpretation of the propriety of faith was occasioned by the content of Genesis 22, not mandated. It was argued that the acceptance of Genesis 22 in a spirit of faith was the result of a hermeneutics of free choice.

In Part II an interpretation given to Genesis 22 by the Epistle to the Hebrews was suggested. This interpretation revolved around the faith of Abraham and the oath of God sworn to Abraham following the successful outcome of his test. The faith-inspired interpretation given by the author of Hebrews was seen as a function of faith in Jesus Christ. And the propriety of a reading of the text accompanied by faith was proposed. Again, this faith was seen as the result of a hermeneutics of free choice. The Old Testament faith of the believing Jew was subsumed into the New Testament faith of the Christian.

Finally, in Part III, an attempt was made to ground this hermeneutics of exegetical choice on a hermeneutics of exegetical presuppositions. John Henry Newman's *A Grammar of Assent* was invoked to show that the "illative sense" proposed by the author was a key factor in understanding the presuppositions of a Christian believer (in the case of Newman, of the Catholic believer). Because of the importance of conscience in the formation of the suppositions which underlie the Christian's act of faith, the role of moral choice is evident here as well.

Thus, when all is said and done, it is the person who is responsible for the exegetical stance adopted for the interpretation of a given text of Scripture, first

51. ". . . instead of saying that the truths of Revelation depend on those of Natural Religion, it is more pertinent to say that belief in revealed truths depends on belief in natural," Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 321.

52. Cf. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 319-320 and p. 299.

with regard to the presuppositions which govern his choice of an exegetical approach to a given text, and then with regard to the choice itself. It is clear that Genesis 22 portrays Abraham as a man of faith; it is clear that the Epistle to the Hebrews portrays Abraham in Genesis 22 as a man of faith and presents Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of that faith. But whether the exegete will put himself into tune with this faith is a matter of his own choosing, a choosing both remote and proximate.

In attributing hermeneutical stance to personal choice one should not neglect the bias built into the biblical text itself: the text itself is an invitation to believe as its authors believe. It is clear from the way Genesis 22 is framed, and from the way that the Epistle to the Hebrews enters into a development of Genesis 22 in terms of Jesus Christ, that the authors of these texts are believers and have written the text for other believers, actual or potential. The author of Hebrews speaks frequently of "we", i.e., "we believers" (cf. 1,2; 2,3; 3,6; etc.). He believes, and writes to others who believe. At the most profound level, these texts call for participation in the faith of those portrayed, not simply a contemplation of that faith. As Kierkegaard remarks about the biblical passage involving the widow's mite (Mark 12,41-44), acceptance of the story on its own terms, i.e., presupposing the faith of the widow, transforms the gift "into much". This faith-challenge is the challenge of Genesis 22 in its Old and New Testament guises as well.

> . . . that sympathetic person who accepts the book and gives to it a good place, that sympathetic person who, by accepting it, does for it through himself and through his acceptance, what the treasury did for the widow's mites: hallows the gift, gives it significance, and transforms it into much.[53]

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00187, Rome.

53. Translated by T. Jacobsen from the preface to *Fire opbyggelig Taler*, Søren Kierkegaards samlede Verker udgivne of A. B. Drachmann, J. L. Heiberg, og H. O. Lange, 2nd ed. IV (Copenhagen, 1923), p. 7. Used by Jacobsen in his article "The Myth of Inanna and Bilulu", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 12 (1953), pp. 160-187, and reprinted in Thorkild Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*. Edited by W. L. Moran, : Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970, 61. Jacobsen uses the quotation to invite the reader to invest credibility in an ancient Sumerian myth written in an "old book of clay". As it is used in the conference above, it is used to invite faith in the Bible. A "literary faith" of the type advocated by Jacobsen has, of course, it's own value, but a "religious faith" that saves presents a dimension completely different. A faith that saves, obviously, is dependent ultimately on a gift of God. The present conference has sought to address the problem of belief from the standpoint of faith's psychological components.