

COMMENTARY ON GENESIS 22:1-19¹

The episode before us embodies what is perhaps the profoundest personal experience in all the recorded history of the patriarchs; and the telling of it soars to comparable literary heights. The very essence of the biblical process itself is laid bare here through the medium of a fearful test which Abraham had to face and surmount.

Isaac was to Abraham more than a child of his old age, so fervently hoped for yet so long denied. Isaac was also, and more particularly, the only link with the far-off goal to which Abraham's life was dedicated (see Genesis 21:12). To sacrifice Isaac, as God demanded, was to forego at the same time the long-range objective itself. The nightmare physical trial entrains thus a boundless spiritual ordeal.

The reader's anxiety, to be sure, is allayed at the very outset by the underscored notice (vs. 1) that this is to be only a test, however heroic the scale and the stakes. The suspense is thus shifted from viewers to actors, yet the transfer does little to relieve the tension. There is no way of assuring the father that he need have no fear about the final result; one can only suffer with him in helpless silence.

Each successive moment in that seemingly interminable interval of time is charged with drama that is all the more intense for not being spelled out: the saddling of the pack animal; the unarticulated orders to the servants; the splitting of the wood for the sacrificial fire; the long, wordless trip to the spot from which the chosen site can first be seen; the forced matter-of-factness of Abraham's parting instructions to the attendants. As father and son go off by themselves on the last stage of that melancholy pilgrimage — the boy burdened with the wood for his own sacrificial pyre, and the father fidgeting with the flint and the cleaver — the unwary victim asks but a single question. The father's answer is tender but evasive, and the boy must by now have sensed the truth. The short and simple sentence, "And the two of them walked on together" (8), covers what is perhaps the most poignant and eloquent silence in all literature.

At the appointed site, Abraham goes about his task with abnormal attention to each detail, with the speechless concentration of a sleepwalker, as if thus to hold off by every possible means the fate that he has no hope of averting. He constructs the offering stand, arranges the wood, straps the boy, lays him on the altar on top of the wood. The blade is in midair when his hand is stayed by a voice from heaven. A scapegoat is providentially at hand. The harrowing test is over.

What is the meaning of this shattering ordeal? In this infinitely sensitive account the author has left so much unsaid that there is now the danger of one's reading into it too much — or too little. Certainly, the object of the story had to be something other than a protest against human sacrifice in general, or child sacrifice in particular — an explanation that is often advanced. To be sure, the practice is traced to Israel's neighbors (II Kings 3:27; 17:31), and even to Judah (II Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; cf. Jeremiah 7:31; 19:5; Isaiah 57:5; Ezekiel 16:20-21; 33:37). It was not unknown in Mesopotamia, as is apparent from the so-called Royal Tombs at Ur, and attested by the murder of substitute kings (H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, 1948, p. 264). Yet here the subject comes up indirectly, as something not normally expected, and all the more terrifying because demanded by God himself. More important, the sacrifice is characterized at the outset as unreal, a gruesome mandate to be canceled at the proper time. If the author had intended to expose a barbaric custom, he would surely have gone about it in a different way.

Was it, then, the aim of the story to extol obedience to God as a general principle? Abraham had already proved himself on that count by heeding the call to leave Mesopotamia

¹ Ephraim Speiser, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Anchor Bible 1; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 164-66.

and make a fresh start in an unknown land (Genesis 12:1-3). The meaning of the present narrative, therefore, would have to be something more specific. And we can hardly go too far afield if we seek the significance of Abraham's supreme trial in the very quest on which he was embarked. The involvement of Isaac tends to bear this out, since the sole heir to the spiritual heritage concerned cannot but focus attention on the future. The process that Abraham set in motion was not to be accomplished in a single generation. It sprang from a vision that would have to be tested and validated over an incalculable span of time, a vision that could be pursued only with singlemindedness of purpose and absolute faith—an ideal that could not be perpetuated unless one was ready to die for it, or had the strength to see it snuffed out. The object of the ordeal, then, was to discover how firm was the patriarch's faith in the ultimate divine purpose. It was one thing to start out resolutely for the Promised Land, but it was a very different thing to maintain confidence in the promise when all appeared lost. The fact is that short of such unswerving faith, the biblical process could not have survived the many trials that lay ahead.