

religious *practices* (circumcision, sacrifice, food laws etc.), and yet retain most of its religious *principles*. As long as there is a shared assumption that human life has value and dignity, that life is to be lived responsibly in trust and obedience under God, and that prayer is an essential medium of communication between God and humanity, then the religious principles that give rise to one set of religious practices in one context may still inform a distinct yet related set of religious practices in another context. It is likely that this kind of understanding accounts not only for Christian retention and use of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, but also for Yahwistic retention and use of the patriarchal traditions in Genesis 12–50 as Hebrew Scripture. The primary interest of Israel in the patriarchs was therefore in them as people who could in one way or other exemplify the dynamics of life under God and so would inform and instruct successive generations of Israelites. This was in no sense a moralistic kind of exemplification, as we have seen that the portrayal of Jacob most obviously (though the same applies to a lesser extent to Abraham) is anything but moralistic—but is still usable to exemplify how life under God should (and should not) be lived.

If this understanding of Genesis 12–50 is at all valid, it should also be related to the well-known debate about the origins of Scripture as a significant concept within Israelite faith. It is customarily maintained that early Israel had little sense of texts as normative for faith, and that only with the advent of Deuteronomy in the late seventh century did there begin a movement in this direction. Certainly there is much in this notion, and one can easily see in Deuteronomy a concern for normativity that is lacking in other law codes (e.g. Deut. 1.5; 4.1–8; 12.32 [Heb. 13.1]; 31.9–13), and no doubt this did give considerable impetus towards Judaism’s becoming increasingly centred upon a book rather than upon sacrifice in the temple. Nonetheless, if my proposed understanding of Genesis 12–50 is at all on the right lines, it suggests a concern for a narrative text such as Genesis 12–50 as also authoritative for Israel’s faith. To be sure, it functions as authoritative in a way quite different from Deuteronomy, for Genesis 12–50 is a nondirective text, which much more obviously needs interpretation if it is to function as religiously authoritative than is the case with the legal precepts of Torah. Moreover, we do not know the date when Genesis 12–50 was recognized as authoritative for Israel, and whether this was earlier or later than Deuteronomy. Nonetheless, the point remains that any discussion about the origins and development of scriptural authority in Israel’s faith needs to do justice not only to the laws of Deuteronomy but also to the narratives of Genesis 12–50.

Chapter Three

A SPECIMEN TEXT: GENESIS 22

I propose in this chapter further to introduce the patriarchal stories in general by focusing on one story in particular, Genesis 22 (the interpretation offered here is developed more fully in my *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*, ch. 3). The hope is that the kinds of issues that are seen to be relevant to understanding this chapter will then be able to be applied elsewhere without too much difficulty. There is of course the danger that Genesis 22 may not be wholly typical of the patriarchal narratives. Indeed, it is in many ways distinctive in the range and depth of its content and in its mode of telling, and it is probable that the story has received more attention than others already in the time of the biblical writers, as well as subsequently. Nonetheless it is in my judgment sufficiently typical that it may serve to illustrate more clearly than most the kind of material that is found in a number of the patriarchal stories; it also shows the kinds of processes that we should suppose, to greater or lesser extent, to have been involved in the patriarchal narratives in general.

An Interpretation of Genesis 22

1. The first task is to read and interpret the story as it now stands. The best way to do this is to follow the lead of the story-teller. This, however, may be easier said than done, because, according to a famous analysis of the story by E. Auerbach in his *Mimesis*, Genesis 22 is a model of restraint on the part of the storyteller. The story is told in a taut, suspense-filled way, in which much is left unspecified by the narrator: ‘time and place are undefined...thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole...remains mysterious and “fraught with background”’ (*Mimesis*, pp. 11–12). There is much of value in Auerbach’s analysis; however, he has somewhat overstated his case, for the writer does in fact provide strong clues about the way in which the story should be understood.

Generally speaking, Old Testament storytellers do not stand outside a story and comment upon it, but rather so tell it that it conveys its own meaning (there are important similarities between the conventions of Old Testament narrative and those of contemporary novels and films). The points at which the storyteller usually places what he considers most important are usually the speeches made by the main characters at the dramatically crucial moments, though sometimes repetitions and wordplays also serve this function. In this, Genesis 22 is no exception.

Genesis 22 is, however, exceptional in that the narrator does comment on the story and provides an explicit interpretative key right at the outset, presumably because the story is not only of prime importance but also because it may be liable to misinterpretation. Thus the story begins, 'After these things God tested (*nissâ*) Abraham.' The precise sense of 'test' will be crucial to understanding the story, but it should not be taken on its own, for there is one other word that should be taken in conjunction with it. The speech of the angel of Yhwh at the critical moment of sacrifice refers to the result of the test, a result which presumably constituted its purpose in the first place, and so is essential to understanding it. Verse 12 reads, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy, and do not do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God (lit. you are a fearer of God, *yārē* 'lôhîm 'attâ), since you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.' Here the crucial thing is that Abraham fears God. Thus the two words which together provide the primary key to understanding the story are 'test' (*nissâ*) and 'fear' (*yārē*).

The meaning of these words is best discovered by examining their usage elsewhere. First, it should be noted that 'fear' in Gen. 22.12 has its predominant Old Testament usage in a religious context; that is, it does not indicate fright, or even religious awe, but rather moral obedience. 'Fear' of God concerns doing rather than feeling (see e.g. Deut. 5.29, where fearing God is connected with keeping his commandments, or Job 28.28, where the fear of the Lord is parallel to departing from evil).

Secondly, the words *nissâ* and *yārē* occur together in one other passage in the Old Testament, that is Exod. 20.20, a key passage because in it Moses explains the purpose of God giving the Ten Commandments, the heart of Torah (the Hebrew word traditionally, but often misleadingly, rendered as 'Law'), to Israel. Here Moses says to Israel, 'Do not fear (i.e. be frightened), for God has come to test (*nassôt*, the infinitive of *nissâ*) you, and so that the fear of him (i.e. obedience; *yir'âtô*, the noun from *yārē*) may be before you to keep you from sin.'

The purpose of Torah is thus in some way to challenge and draw out Israel into a fuller obedience to God. It should be noted, moreover, that although the specific words 'test' and 'fear' are not found in conjunction elsewhere, the concept that they represent is. For it is a recurrent notion, especially in the major theological treatment of Israel's position as the people of God – Deuteronomy, and literature related to Deuteronomy – that Yhwh tests Israel so as to enhance their obedience to him; thus Exod. 16.4 interprets the giving of the manna in the wilderness as a matter of testing (*nissâ*) Israel, whether they will be obedient to Torah or not; Deut. 8.2 interprets the whole forty years in the wilderness as a time of God's testing (*nissâ*) whether Israel would be obedient to God's commandments; Deut. 13.3 [Heb. 4] interprets a wonder-working prophet who preaches apostasy as Yhwh's testing (*nissâ*) Israel to prove whether they love him wholly and solely (cf. Deut. 33.8-9; Judg. 2.22; 3.4).

How then is the connection between Genesis 22 and these other passages to be understood? The linkage between the passages is routinely noted by most Genesis commentators, but most make little of it. Even Westermann (*Genesis* 12-36, p. 356), who has an excursus on *nissâ*, merely makes some observations about the history of the concept and points out that the usage of 'test' with regard to Israel as a people appears to be older than with regard to an individual person (such as Abraham). Yet the interpretation of Genesis 22 can be taken further than this.

Initially, it should be noted that the notion of God testing is primarily a part of a theology of Israel and Torah, for this is where the language overwhelmingly occurs, particularly in the key passage Exod. 20.20. It follows from this that the use of this language with regard to Abraham is an extension or reapplication. Why should this be? This is another instance where a basic perspective on the patriarchal stories as non-Israelite material told from Israel's context is illuminating. This may perhaps best be appreciated if we stand back initially and consider a well-known Christian analogy.

The Old Testament, as Christian Scripture, poses a well-known hermeneutical problem. If Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation of God, how is the Christian to understand and appropriate material from a pre-Christ context? One characteristic Christian assumption is that the Old Testament contains patterns and analogies to the revelation of God in Christ, a hermeneutical approach known as typology. Thus the basic Christian stance with regard to the Old Testament is Christological, that is, it starts with Christ and reads the Old Testament looking for patterns and analogies to him.

Less well known is the fact that the Old Testament itself contains a closely similar hermeneutical problem. For Israel, the supreme revelation of God is Torah, given by God through Moses to Israel at Sinai. Yet Israel used as part of its Scripture these stories of Israel's ancestors, the patriarchs, who lived in a pre-Torah context. How, then, was Israel to understand and appropriate these stories (Green, *Devotion and Commandment*, helpfully characterizes traditional Jewish awareness of, and responses to, this problem)? The natural assumption is that they would want to show patterns and analogies to Torah, and to do so particularly with Abraham as the supreme exemplar of the life of faith under God. It is therefore not surprising when there is one explicit statement to this effect within the text (Gen. 26.5), and another of similar import (18.19), and when post-biblical Jewish tradition, from the Book of Jubilees in the second century BCE onwards, extensively develops the notion that the patriarchs obeyed Torah even before it had been given at Sinai. Yet in fact it is not Gen. 26.5 that provides the best textual foundation for this notion, but rather Gen. 22.1, 12, where Israel's language of testing with a view to Torah obedience is applied to Abraham. For this makes Abraham an exemplary type of Israel, one who demonstrates as a representative individual the kind of Torah obedience to God that should characterize Israel as a whole.

2. The second main interpretative issue to consider, which is the one with which people tend to begin, is the fact that God is asking Abraham to take the life of a child. In any modern context this would be considered morally repugnant, and anyone who claimed to have been told by God to kill a child would find no credence for such claims from any responsible person, believer or non-believer. There is a modern tendency, encouraged (in different ways) by people of the stature of Kant and Kierkegaard to suppose that this modern moral judgment must also apply to the story in its ancient context. Yet such an approach is a classic example of anachronism and demonstrates the importance of having an informed historical perspective when reading the Old Testament. Our first point, about the nature of testing, indicates that the story is to be seen as a positive moral example, and this is confirmed by further considerations.

The general attitude to children in the ancient world was almost the exact opposite of that generally found in the modern West. Where the modern world has a high estimate of the value of children, which easily lapses into sentimentality, the ancient world had a low estimate, which easily lapsed into cruelty (most obviously in the widespread practice of the exposure, i.e., abandonment in the open to

death, of unwanted children). The adult, in particular the father, was considered the norm of life, and children, until they themselves reached adulthood, were considered as significant to the extent that they enhanced the worth of the father. Although the Old Testament generally encourages a humane attitude towards children (and towards orphans and widows, being those most vulnerable in society because left without domestic male protection), it does not generally question their subordinate importance in relation to the father, and this is particularly evident in some of the older strata. For example, on two occasions in Genesis (other than ch. 22), the story takes for granted that a father can make life and death decisions about his child (38.24, Judah with regard to his daughter-in-law, Tamar; 42.37, Reuben with regard to his two sons). The law of Deut. 21.18-21 envisages a father's making a life and death decision with regard to a rebellious son, and Exod. 21.7 envisages a man's selling his daughter as a slave. Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in fulfilment of a vow (Judg. 11.34-40). The assumption common to all these passages is that the role and worth of the child is relative to, and dependent upon, the father. The material is, in one important sense of the term, patriarchal in outlook.

In the light of these passages, it is clear that Genesis 22 is making a similar assumption—Abraham naturally has the right of life and death over Isaac. Indeed, throughout the story of Abraham, Isaac is always seen as significant in terms of Abraham, for the birth of Isaac means that Abraham will no longer be without an heir by Sarah, and that the promise to Abraham made by God will be fulfilled. At the beginning of Genesis 22 something is said about Isaac, not about Isaac in himself but about his significance for Abraham ('your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love', v. 2), and at the end of the story it is Abraham who is commended and promised further blessing because he has not withheld his only son from God (22.16-18). The significance of Isaac in Genesis 22, therefore, is not that of a unique human being whom it would be immoral to kill. Rather, as Abraham's son, he is Abraham's hope for the future. Isaac is Abraham's most precious possession, a possession all the more significant because promised by God and waited for over so many years. What Abraham's test of obedience consists in, therefore, is a willingness to surrender to God that which is most precious to him, that in which he could most legitimately have confidence and hope, precisely because it was promised and given by God in the first place.

One other possibly relevant factor in this context is the widespread belief in the ancient Near East, shared also by Israel, that the first of all

new life belonged to God (an illuminating discussion is Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*). The underlying assumption was that as God was the giver of life, so he had the right to receive back the first and best of what he had given. In this, Yhwh expected no less than any other deity, for in the context of the passover (itself a story about Yhwh's life-and-death authority over the firstborn) we read, 'Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine' (Exod. 13.2). Moreover, in Exod. 22.29-30 (Heb. 28-29) there are some old laws about such offerings: first, agricultural produce ('You shall not delay to offer from the fulness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses'); secondly, children ('The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me' [the normal verb 'to give', *nātan*, is used]); thirdly, livestock ('You shall do likewise with your oxen and with your sheep'); fourthly, there is a note that seems to apply to both sons and livestock ('Seven days he/it shall be with his/its mother; on the eighth day you shall give him/it to me'). It is often suggested that ancient Israel at one stage countenanced the sacrifice of children to God, and that Genesis 22 is a protest against such practice. But whatever the underlying historical developments may have been, the natural way of reading the Genesis text as it now stands is rather different.

First, the premise on which the story rests is certainly that God has the right to ask for Abraham's son (his firstborn by Sarah), but less on the ground that this is God's right to the firstborn than on the more general ground that God has a right to ask for whatever he has given to Abraham. It is worth noting that there are many similarities between Genesis 22 and Job 1-2, both stories where God tests a godly person, and where the test consists of relinquishment of that which is most precious. The attitude towards God contained in the famous words of Job is not without relevance for Genesis 22: 'Yhwh gave, and Yhwh has taken away; blessed be the name of Yhwh' (Job 1.21). The point in Genesis 22, however, is that God is prepared not to exact his right to take away, but will accept obedience and the symbolic sacrifice of a ram instead.

Secondly, despite some resonance with the issue of God's right to the firstborn, it may be correct to see that particular issue as already dealt with, as the text now stands. The ancient law of Exod. 22.29-30, cited above, does not specify the form that 'giving' the firstborn to God should take, and only requires that it be done after eight days. There is one obvious resonance with this requirement that a child be given to God after eight days, and that is the practice of circumcision on the eighth day (Gen. 17.12). Although Genesis 17 applies the

requirement to every male child and not just the firstborn, it remains natural to see the law of male circumcision as a generalization of the principle of Exod. 22.29-30. This means that the practice of circumcision is, among other things, to be understood as the giving of a child to God. In the case of Isaac, this has already been carried out prior to Genesis 22 (Gen. 21.4).

In short, therefore, whatever moral scruples the story of Genesis 22 may initially arouse in a modern context, in its own context any notion of immorality is out of place. It is a story about God's demand of Abraham to relinquish to God that which is most precious to him, as the essence of what true faith ('fearing God') involves. God is able to demand this not only because of his intrinsic right to that which is best, but also because Isaac's life was God's gift in the first place. It is only as Abraham is willing to obey this hard command that he discovers that he will not in fact lose by it, but instead will gain great blessing (22.16-18).

3. A third major issue concerns the location of the story, something to which the story itself draws attention, both by naming the territory as Moriah (v. 2), and by recounting a special name given by Abraham in token of what had happened there (v. 14), a name given special significance by a wordplay (vv. 8, 14; see below). Where is this place?

The name Moriah occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament only in 2 Chron. 3.1: 'Then Solomon began to build the house of Yhwh in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where Yhwh had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.' Although, surprisingly, reference is made only to the story of David (2 Sam. 24 // 1 Chron. 21) and not to the story of Abraham, there can be little doubt that the Chronicler's Moriah is the same as that of Genesis 22, and that a comparison of the passages means that the Temple is built on the site of Abraham's offering of Isaac. It is generally thought, however, that the identification of Jerusalem as the site of Genesis 22 is a later interpretation of the text which is not intended in the story's own Genesis context. Von Rad, for example, comments that 2 Chron. 3.1

refers without doubt to the mountain on which the Temple stood. But our narrator means a land of Moriah about which we know nothing at all... He [the narrator] gives no place name at all [in Gen. 22.14], but only a pun which at one time undoubtedly explained a place name. But the name of the place has disappeared from the narrative... Perhaps the ancient name was lost because of the later combination of the narrative with the 'land of Moriah' (*Genesis*, pp. 240, 242, 243).

There are, however, good reasons for supposing that a reference to Jerusalem is indeed intended as an integral part of the Genesis story as it now stands, and is the point of the pun in v. 14.

There is an emphasis in the story upon 'seeing' (*rā'â*, 22.8, 13, 14; usually rendered 'provide' for reasons of sense in context), which is related as a general principle to one place where God supremely sees (22.14a) and is seen (22.14b). This is probably to be connected with the name of the territory where the story happens, Moriah (22.2), understood as a noun from the verb *rā'â* with the sense 'Place of Seeing'. Within the Old Testament generally, there are two places in particular where God is seen: first, Sinai (esp. Exod. 24.9-11; cf. 1 Kgs 19.9-18), and secondly Jerusalem (e.g. 2 Sam. 24.15-17; Isa. 6.1; Ps. 84, esp. vv. 5, 8 [Heb. 6, 9]). Since the story envisages a location within the central territory of Israel, three days' journey from Beersheba, it is naturally Jerusalem rather than Sinai that is indicated.

Furthermore, the site of the story is linked with 'the mountain of Yhwh' (*har Yhwh*, 22.14b). Elsewhere in the Old Testament the phrase 'the mountain of Yhwh' is only ever used of Jerusalem (Ps. 24.3; Isa. 2.3; Zech. 8.3), with the sole exception of Num. 10.33 where it is used of Sinai.

Finally, with regard to location, one may note that the story has to do with sacrifice, which for Israel, according to the prescriptions of the Old Testament, should supremely take place within the Temple in Jerusalem. Abraham offers his sacrifice to God at a place which God selects for him (22.2, 3), which is similar to God's requirement for Israel's worship 'at the place which Yhwh will choose to put his name there' (Deut. 12.5 etc.), a place which is to be understood as Jerusalem (1 Kgs 14.21).

4. A fourth major element in the story, which has not yet been considered, is the extended address by the angel of Yhwh when he calls a second time from heaven (22.15-18). This is notable for at least two reasons. First, it renews God's promise of blessing and does so in uniquely emphatic terms, stronger than anywhere else in the Abraham story. Secondly, it links this promise of blessing to Abraham's obedience ('because you have done this...because you obeyed my voice', vv. 16, 18).

It is this second point that is theologically most interesting, because elsewhere God's promises to Abraham are unconditional statements given with no grounding, thus implicitly being grounded in the character and purposes of Yhwh himself. I have studied this in detail elsewhere and have come to the following conclusion:

Abraham by his obedience has not qualified to be the recipient of blessing, because the promise of blessing had been given to him already. Rather, the existing promise is reaffirmed but its terms of reference are altered. A promise which previously was grounded solely in the will and purpose of Yahweh is transformed so that it is now grounded *both* in the will of Yahweh *and* in the obedience of Abraham. It is not that the divine promise has become contingent upon Abraham's obedience, but that Abraham's obedience has been incorporated into the divine promise. Henceforth Israel owes its existence not just to Yahweh but also to Abraham.

Theologically this constitutes a profound understanding of the value of human obedience—it can be taken up by God and become a motivating factor in his purposes towards man. Within the wider context of Hebrew theology I suggest that this is analogous to the assumptions underlying intercessory prayer... ('Earliest Commentary', pp. 320-21).

5. Although the main interest of Genesis 22 is in vv. 1-19, it would be wrong to overlook vv. 20-24. At first sight the verses are unpromising, just another of those Genesis genealogies which seem to offer little to the modern reader. Yet it is not accidental that the genealogy of the twelve sons of Nahor, Abraham's brother, has been placed directly after the preceding narrative, for in addition to the twelve sons, there is the intrusive mention of one woman, the granddaughter Rebekah (v. 23). The full significance of this woman within the Genesis story will not become clear until Abraham's servant goes in search of a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24), although the reader who, like the writer, stands within the context of Israel may already smile knowingly. What the narrator is doing is preparing the way for the fulfilment of the renewed promise of descendants to Abraham through Isaac (vv. 16-18) by quietly introducing, in a normal way, the human character whose life will soon be taken up into the fulfilment of the divine promise.

6. One final point may be made about the way in which the story is told. The restraint of the storyteller, which Auerbach interpreted in terms of suspense, may also be part of an imaginative desire to be faithful to the context of the patriarchs themselves which he is portraying. That is, although the writer is showing the linkage of Abraham with Torah and Jerusalem, he does not explicitly mention either, but rather leaves them implicit, to be inferred by the thoughtful reader from the clues provided in the text. Perhaps part of the reason for this is the recognition that in Abraham's own context neither Torah nor Jerusalem had the significance which they had for Israel. The writer's subtle, inferential reference to both makes it

possible on the one hand to show Abraham's connections with what was central for Israel and on the other hand to respect his difference from Israel.

To sum up, what we have in Genesis 22 is a remarkable story of Abraham as a model of Israel's Torah-shaped obedience to God. He is willing to offer to God that which is dearest to him and he also offers sacrifice on the site of Israel's worship on the mountain of the Temple in Jerusalem, thereby showing that the symbolic meaning of sacrifice is unreserved self-offering to God. This obedience is understood to be of such value that it is incorporated by God into the heart of his purposes towards Israel.

From the point of view of a reader within the context of Israel, it is also a story about how Israel's very existence hung, apparently, by a thread, for, had the sacrifice been carried out, there would have been no Israel. Yet the very fact that the story can be told presupposes that there is an Israel, and so from the outset the outcome is presupposed. Thus, together with the sense that God may himself imperil Israel's very existence, there is a sense that Israel will not fail, primarily because of the ultimate good purposes of the God who imperils, but also, and notably, because of the quality of human obedience that Israel's paradigmatic ancestor displayed. If the story is rightly understood, it is not only in God but also in an obedient human being that Israel's confidence for its existence is based.

A Critical Analysis

I have offered an interpretation of Genesis 22, and something of its riches and depths has been seen. Perhaps the best way to proceed further is by asking 'Is it true?' This question is the more important because of another feature of the way the story is told, as noted by Auerbach, and developed by M. Sternberg. As Auerbach puts it,

Without believing in Abraham's sacrifice, it is impossible to put the narrative of it to the use for which it was written... The Bible's claim to truth...is tyrannical—it excludes all other claims... The Biblical narrative...seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world... (*Mimesis*, pp. 14, 15).

Similarly, Sternberg refers to the

Bible's determination to sanctify and compel literal belief in the past. It claims not just the status of history but, as Erich Auerbach rightly maintains, of *the* history—the one and only truth that, like God himself,

brooks no rival... The Bible shows a supreme confidence in its facts. Any rival version, it implies, would be absurd, if at all conceivable (*Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 32, 126).

It is not important here to analyze the basis for such claims, for in one way or other some such understanding would be widely granted. The present concern is to explore precisely how credence might be given to some such claim about the truth of the text. This is not a question that can be answered without some careful exploration of precisely what is meant by truth in this context.

There is a recurrent tendency in much modern biblical study to approach the question of truth in a narrative via the question of its historical accuracy. For the great narratives of the Old Testament are certainly in some way historical narratives, telling the story of Israel from beginnings to exile. Moreover, from a theological point of view it has often been felt important to maintain at least a basic historicity of content in Israel's stories, lest the denial of such content would evacuate their value for the Jewish or Christian believer who is committed to a belief in God's genuine engagement with life in this world. If, then, we approach Genesis 22 with the question of its historical accuracy in mind, what do we find? The short answer is—a problem.

The basic reason for this is the point I have emphasized as essential for understanding the patriarchal narratives, that they are pre-Israelite material told from an Israelite perspective. That is to say, by the very nature of the situation, the stories are told from a perspective that was not their own originally, and so far as this Israelite perspective has been incorporated into the text, so far has the original historical nature of the material faded into the background. If, for example, I am correct in the contention (see Chapter 4) that the Old Testament is consistent that the name Yhwh was first revealed to Moses, and that all the uses in Genesis represent a Yahwistic retelling of the stories based on the conviction that Yhwh the God of Israel is none other than the God of the patriarchs, then however much one may justify the procedure as theologically legitimate and in keeping with storytelling practice, the point remains that from a strictly historical perspective anachronism is involved—the patriarchs themselves in their historical context did not know God as Yhwh.

To say all this does not mean that there may not be anything genuinely pre-Israelite still present in the patriarchal stories. As we will see in Chapter 5, there is considerable evidence that the Yahwistic tellers of the patriarchal stories were not only aware of the distinctively pre-Yahwistic, pre-Israelite nature of the stories, but also

preserved this distinctiveness in many ways when one might have expected them to obliterate it. Nonetheless, the point remains that the writers did feel free to retell the patriarchal stories in their own terms and categories, and this makes the modern historical quest for the original form of the stories, not to mention their possible historicity, particularly elusive.

With regard to Genesis 22, this basic problem is obviously acute. The story as it now stands presupposes that Jerusalem is a holy site for Israel, and Jerusalem only first became Israelite under David in the early tenth century BCE (2 Sam. 5.6-10; cf. Judg. 19.10-12). More specifically, it presupposes that the reader knows that the Temple stands in Jerusalem, which means that the story must be not earlier than the time of Solomon who built the Temple (1 Kgs 5-8). We do not know the date at which Israel developed its theology of testing and Torah, but it is most prominent in Deuteronomy and in Judges 2-3 which is written in the light of Deuteronomy, and these texts are conventionally dated to the seventh and sixth centuries; although Gen. 22.1, 12 and Exod. 20.20 may be earlier than these, it is obviously difficult to establish the point with much confidence. Finally, I have myself argued that the second address by the angel in Gen. 22.15-18 is an addition to a story that was already otherwise complete, an addition possibly made in the time of the exile in the mid-sixth century when the Abraham stories were probably being reappropriated as a foundation for Israel's future life after the exile (cf. Isa. 51.1-3).

For the content and composition of Genesis 22 as it now stands, we thus have to look to one or more periods within the general range of the tenth to sixth centuries BCE. Yet on the timescale of the story itself, it is set sometime in the early second millennium BCE—perhaps some 800 years before Solomon, and some 1200 years before the exile. If this timescale is to be taken at even approximately face value, then, for the historian, whose access to past events depends in the first instance on establishing the nature of the sources and establishing their likely degree of proximity to the events they relate, this means that strictly limited weight can be put on Genesis 22 as a historical source. For Genesis 22 simply stands at too great a remove from its narrated events.

The virtual impossibility of using Genesis 22 in its present form as a historical source may be illustrated by a consideration of one attempt to utilize it as such. For example, W. Harold Mare discusses the archaeology of Jerusalem in the Middle Bronze period (early second millennium). He notes Kathleen Kenyon's dating of a wall (above the

Gihon spring on Mt Ophel) to c. 1800 BCE, with its implications for population in the area at the time, and then comments: 'That Abraham did not encounter any opposition when he came to Mount Moriah to offer Isaac (Genesis 22) suggests that the inhabitants of the area were not strong enough or belligerent enough to organize resistance against him' (*Archaeology of the Jerusalem Area*, p. 24). The difficulty with such an inference from the text of Genesis 22 is that it seems to assume that had the local inhabitants been a significant problem, then they would have been mentioned (presumably as in Gen. 21.25-34; 26.17-22). Yet as Genesis 22 stands, such an issue is surely an irrelevance—the story is simply impervious to the question of what the inhabitants of the district might have been doing or thinking when Abraham was there. As far as the story goes, the only significant figures are Abraham, Isaac and God, and other people, outsiders, might as well not exist for all the difference they make. The assumption that Genesis 22 is just a simplified, selective account of historical events can, it is true, hardly be definitively refuted. But it is thoroughly implausible, partly because it does not take seriously the question of dating the source, partly because it does not take seriously the Yahwistic context from which originally non-Yahwistic material is now told, and partly because it does not sufficiently consider what type of material the story might be.

There are two main ways of trying to make progress in this apparent impasse. The first concerns the historian's desire to penetrate behind the present form of the narrative to try to recover something of its original pre-Yahwistic form. The classic modern work in this regard was Gunkel's analysis of the story in his *Genesis* commentary, which has been widely adopted in subsequent works. Gunkel assumed that the story told of the founding of a sanctuary (it being common practice in ancient and mediaeval times for holy places to have official stories of how they came to be), but that this must originally have been somewhere other than Jerusalem. By assuming that the uses of Yhwh in v. 14 replace an original 'God' in the form 'ēl or 'lōhīm, and that the wordplay on 'see' (*yir'eh*, from *rā'ā*) is original to the story, he suggests that the original place name given by Abraham in v. 14 was Jeruel, a place near Tekoa mentioned in 2 Chron. 20.16, 20. Further, he assumes that the sacrificial element was original to the story, and that originally it told of actual child sacrifice to God at Jeruel, though in time a ram came to be substituted for the child.

Such proposals are ingenious, but the obvious difficulty with them is their speculative and untestable nature. Although one may affirm the legitimacy in principle of seeking an earlier form of the story, it

seems arbitrary to retain the wordplay and yet discount the links with the name Moriah and with Jerusalem as the place of seeing, and also to retain the element of sacrifice and yet discount the testing element altogether. The main strength of Gunkel's suggestions lies in comparative religio-historical study where stories about the founding of holy places are not only common but are also liable to retelling in the light of the concerns of those who happen to be dominant at the holy place at any given time. But even this really only reinforces the original insight, that the story has been retold from a perspective different from that which it originally had, and does not give any clue as to what the likely original form may have been.

The alternative to penetrating behind the story is to focus on the story as it stands, and in particular to ask what kind of material the story is. The obvious category that comes to mind is that of legend. This is a term that is often used so loosely and diversely that it needs definition if its use is in any way to clarify matters (see Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 19-21; Hals, 'Legend'; von Rad, *Genesis*, pp. 31-43).

Broadly speaking, the main sense of legend is that of a story, usually attached to and originating from some outstanding and remarkable person or event, which is constantly told and retold and which in the retelling takes on a life of its own. This is a phenomenon attested in all cultures, and almost invariably the earliest history of a culture is cast in the form of legends (for example, the Homeric stories for the Greeks, the Arthurian stories for the British). Insofar as people have a sense of identity that is related to these stories, their retelling tends to embody the values and beliefs that are important to those who do the retelling. When the legend is of a religious nature, it often has a strongly moral element, aimed at encouraging imitation. This means that in due course the legend will usually come to say more about the beliefs and values of those who tell it and cherish it than it does about the person or event which originally gave rise to it—though obviously the relationship varies greatly from legend to legend.

It is in some such sense of the term 'legend' that Genesis 22 is probably to be understood. For it is clear first that it is a story important to Israel's self-understanding and identity; secondly, that it is a story embodying a high degree of moral content of an exemplary nature; thirdly, that it was told and retold over a long period of time; fourthly, that in its present form it dates from a time when its content tells us primarily about the beliefs and values of those who told it.

There are at least two consequences that follow from this. First, we

can only be agnostic about the bearing the story may have on 'the historical Abraham', for we simply do not have the necessary evidence either to affirm or to deny suggestions about the likely original date and content of the story.

Secondly, and more importantly, it should be clear that the question of the truth of the story is not primarily a question about the historicity of what it relates, but rather a question about the beliefs and values incorporated in the story by those who have related it. Presumably these beliefs and values arise out of Israel's life as a people under Yhwh and have been incorporated in the story precisely because they have been found through practical experience of life under God to be true. Because the great figure of Abraham was the outstanding exemplar of the potential of the life of faith under God, it was felt to be appropriate to express Israel's understanding of basic truths about such life in the context of retelling Abraham's story where such truths were already at least implicitly present. In the legendary story of Abraham there is a merging of past and present (von Rad's account of this in the final section of the introduction to his Genesis commentary is particularly interesting).

This means that the question about the truth, or otherwise, of the story cannot be answered except by engaging with the beliefs and values that the story portrays. Is it true to the character of God, and is it true to the nature of human life? These are not questions that can be answered without reference to one's basic stance as a person. In general terms, those who stand in some kind of continuity with the ancient community of faith which cherished and wrote the story and who themselves cherish it as part of scripture will be inclined to affirm that the story is true. Those without that commitment may answer differently.