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THE OFFERING OF ISAAC IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Image and Text

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One very important form of early Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible is not textual but visual. Study of the subjects, placement, composition, and representation of biblical stories by visual artists or their patrons provides important data concerning the application and understanding of the scriptures in the theology and worship of the early church. Unfortunately, early Christian iconography is a medium or data source often overlooked by students of biblical hermeneutics. This oversight is lamentable, not only because of the simple neglect of available information, but also because the mode of presentation presents the scholar with supplementary insights not available through written texts alone.

Since visual presentations of biblical stories are arguably more accessible to a wider audience, the literate and the non-literate, they may reflect a more popular level of understanding than extant exegetical documents. More significant, however, are the parallels between the symbolic mode of interpretation inherent in the images by the early church and the kinds of hermeneutical approaches often most favored by the church itself, the allegorical, figurative, and typological. In this respect the visual image is like the story itself—having a rich symbolic life that suggests meanings or significance beyond a literal or historical application. This symbolic mode of discourse was central to all early Christian exegesis and emerged from a desire to make the text alive and vibrant, responsive to new developments in the life of a faith community.

One of the most popular of early Christian images, and perhaps one of the most significant for a reflection on the symbolism of early Christian iconography, is the artistic representation of Abraham offering Isaac for sacrifice, as recounted in Gen. 22:1–19. Early Christian artists produced a great number of images of Abraham's offering of Isaac. At least two and possibly three late third- or early fourth-century images appear among known Roman catacomb fres-



Fig. 1. Abraham and Isaac, Rome: Catacomb of Callixtus, Chapel of Sacraments, A3, back wall. Source: J. Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Rome: 1903), pl. 41.2.

coes, and several representations among the sarcophagus reliefs date from the same period. From the Constantinian era until the end of the sixth century, studies list at least twenty more extant catacomb frescoes, approximately ninety sarcophagus reliefs, several important mosaics, and dozens of smaller objects including ivory pixides, glasses, lamps, and bowls. The number of incidences of this scene ranks it in popularity with images of Jonah, Noah, Moses, and Daniel, making it an essential theme of early Byzantine art.¹

¹ This enumeration is based on a brief survey of the materials in the Index of Christian Art at Princeton University as well as tables at the end of Isabel Speyert van Woerden's article, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham," *Vig. Chr.* 15 (1961), pp. 243–44. Some additions should be made to van Woerden's list, including the fresco from the Via Latina, and Tunisian redware and bronze bowls.



Fig. 2. Abraham and Isaac, Rome: Catacomb of Priscilla, cubiculum of the Velatio. Source: J. Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Rome: 1903).

All these portrayals show significant variances in composition. The earliest catacomb fresco, in the Catacomb of Callixtus (fig. 1; ca. 200–250), portrays Abraham and Isaac as simple orans figures. To the right appear the ram, an olive tree, and the wood for the sacrifice. The late third-century example in the Velatio chamber of the Priscilla Catacomb shows Abraham pointing to the altar upon which a fire has been kindled. Isaac stands to his left, bent under his bundle of firewood (fig. 2). Another late third-century image from the Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus (fig. 3) shows Abraham in tunic and pallium holding a knife in his upraised right hand. At his feet, next to a small, flaming altar, Isaac is naked, kneeling, and bound for the sacrifice. The ram appears on the far side of the altar. The image appears above a scene of the paralytic carrying his bed (John 5:2–9).

A third-century sarcophagus relief from Mas d'Aire shows a very different composition. Here, while Isaac kneels, Abraham grasps his hair from behind and raises his knife to strike. Abraham's eyes,

Other significant articles which analyze the Christian image of Abraham's sacrifice include Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem* (Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 51–52; Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 44–45.



Fig. 3. The offering of Isaac, Rome: Catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, chamber 62. Source: J. Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (Rome: 1903).

however, are not on the boy but on the substitute ram behind him. No altar is present in the composition (fig. 4).

Fourth-century representations of Isaac offer some variations. The carvings of this era sometimes portray Isaac bound upon the altar, and some continue the pattern of placing him next to the altar; at least one again omits an altar. Compare the compositions of various Vatican Museum sarcophagi, including the famous sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (figs. 5–9). A Tunisian redware bowl from the early fourth century shows a somewhat different composition. On

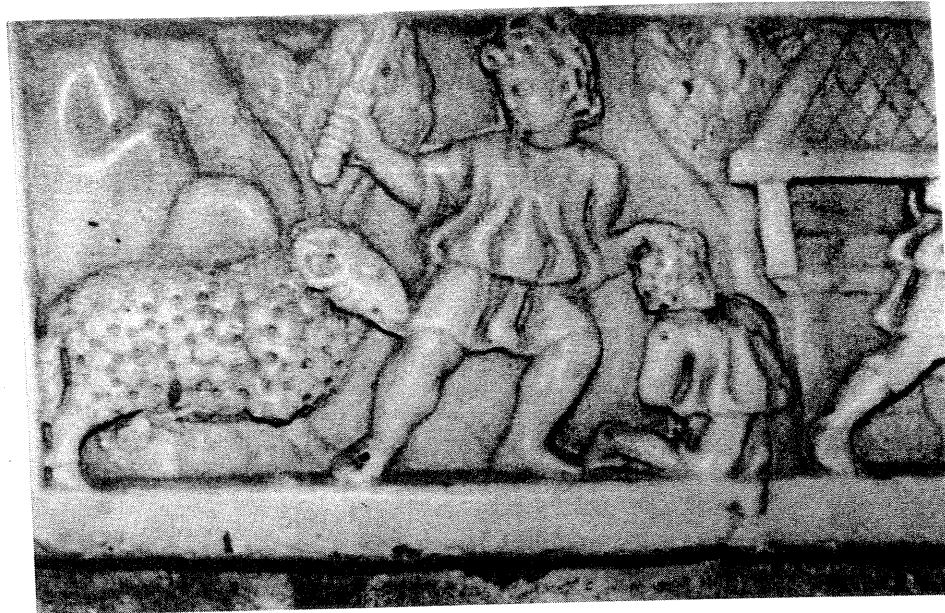


Fig. 4. The offering of Isaac, Mas d'Aire sarcophagus lid (left side). Source: Graydon Snyder, *Ante Pacem* (Mercer University: 1985), plate 24. Used with permission.

this bowl Isaac is shown as a full-grown man who places his hand obediently upon the altar. While Abraham lifts his knife to strike, he either averts his eyes or turns as he hears the angel call out to him.²

Two Byzantine mosaics from basilicas in mid-sixth-century Ravenna, one of them in the basilica of S. Apollinare in Classe and the other in S. Vitale, show markedly different compositions from catacomb frescoes or sarcophagus reliefs. Both mosaics associate the offering of Isaac with the offerings of Abel and Melchizedek, either with the frame of the image itself, or by proximity. The slightly earlier scene, in S. Vitale, appears on a lunette in the right wall of the sanctuary and portrays a kind of Abraham cycle (fig. 10). To the left Abraham and Sarah hear the announcement of Isaac's promised

² The bowl has been identified as Christian, but the possibility that it is of Jewish origin should not be excluded. See Kurt Weitzmann, ed., *The Age of Spirituality*, a catalogue of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), no. 379, cf. 384, 402, 435.



Fig. 5. Abraham offering Isaac, Vatican Museum Sarcophagus inv. no. 174 (left side). Source: Author's photograph.

birth. Abraham offers his three visitors a platter containing a small calf; the visitors are seated at a table on which are three loaves. To the right is the scene of Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Here Isaac is placed on the altar, Abraham's sword is aloft, but the hand of God has stayed it from striking. At Abraham's feet is the ram substitute. Directly across from this lunette is a complementary image of Abel and Melchizedek offering their sacrifices at an altar set with a chalice and two patens.

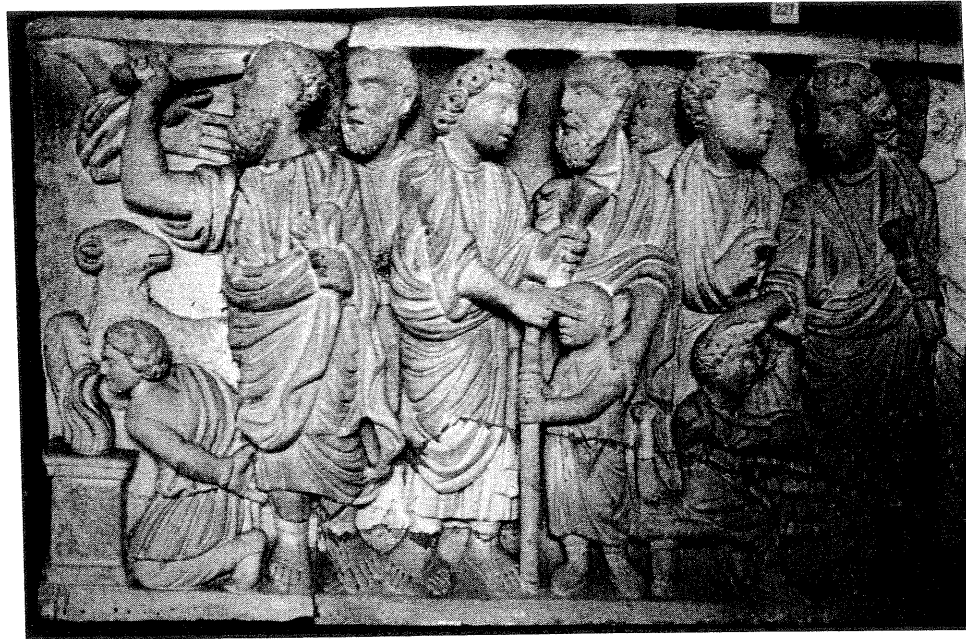


Fig. 6. Abraham offering Isaac, Vatican Museum Sarcophagus inv. no. 31578. Source: Author's photograph.

The mosaic in the apse area of S. Apollinare in Classe (fig. 11) combines all these images in one. On the left we see Abel, offering a lamb at the altar, Melchizedek presiding over the elements of the eucharist, and Abraham presenting Isaac on the right. Above, to the left, the hand of God appears out of the clouds in a gesture of blessing of these three sacrifices.

Jewish art of this period also produced several images of Isaac's binding, the *Akedah*. The two most significant include one that appears among the decorations of the Torah Shrine in the Dura-Europos Synagogue, and another portrayed on the sixth-century floor mosaic in the synagogue of Beth Alpha in the Beth Shean valley (figs. 12–13).³ The Dura synagogue image (fig. 12) is roughly contemporary with the image from the Catacomb of Callixtus but is

³ In addition to the two images mentioned here, an excellent example is shown in plate XL.4, in Carl Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, part I of the Excavations of Dura-Europos Final Report VIII (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).



Fig. 7. Abraham offering Isaac, Vatican Museum Sarcophagus inv. no. 31440 (right side). Source: Author's photograph.

quite unlike any of the Christian representations. Its situation, just above and to the right of the Torah shrine, suggests that it is an image of deep significance. The niche is decorated with the images of a menorah, a lulav, an ethrog, the Temple facade, and the offering of Isaac. Here Abraham stands off to the right, the ram beneath him. Isaac lies, clothed and apparently unbound, on top of the altar; the hand of God reaches out of heaven above him. In the upper right corner appears a tent-like shelter in which stands a figure who has

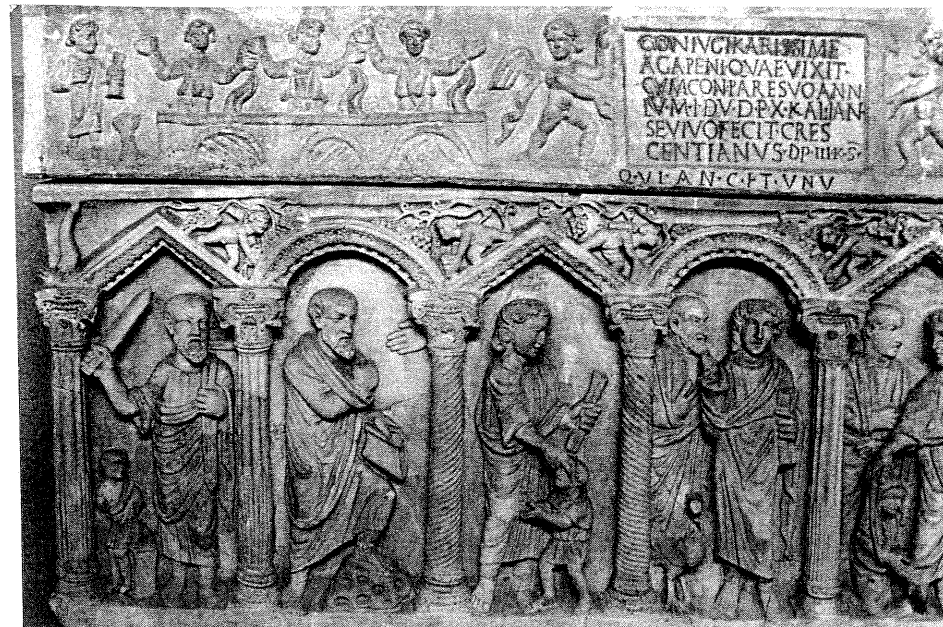


Fig. 8. The offering of Isaac, Vatican Museum Sarcophagus inv. no. 31489 (found in the Vatican Necropolis). Source: Author's photograph.

been variously identified as Abraham, Isaac, one of the two young men left behind with the donkey, or Sarah.⁴

In the mosaic from Beth Alpha, Abraham, whose name appears above him, lifts Isaac (also identified) with his left hand onto an altar already set with flame and raises his knife to complete the sacrifice. But here, as in the relief from the Mas d'Aire sarcophagus, Abraham has turned to look behind him and sees the ram and the hand of God which stop the descent of the knife. Above the hand, written in Hebrew are the words, אל השלח, "Lay not (your hand)." Next to the substitutional animal are the words, והנה אייל, "Behold a ram." On the far left are the two servants who were left behind with the donkey (fig. 13).

Interpreters of these varied iconographic representations have

⁴ See Kraeling, *The Synagogue*, p. 58, and n. 126; E.J. Bickermann, "Symbolism in the Dura Synagogue," *HTR* 58 (1965), p. 39, n. 138; Erwin Goudenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Graeco-Roman World*, vol. IV (New York: Pantheon, 1954), p. 189.



Fig. 9. Abraham offering Isaac. Junius Bassus sarcophagus, Vatican Treasury. Source: Author's photograph.

struggled with several important issues including the artistic sources of the compositions, the possible cross-fertilization of Jewish and Christian imagery, and the relationship between textual and material fields of data. Perhaps the most obvious problem is that iconographic interpretation is by nature inconclusive since images' meanings usually are not self-evident. Without direct testimony, we can never really know precisely what artists intended an image to convey, or why an image was copied and transferred to a different context. We cannot know how various viewers understood these

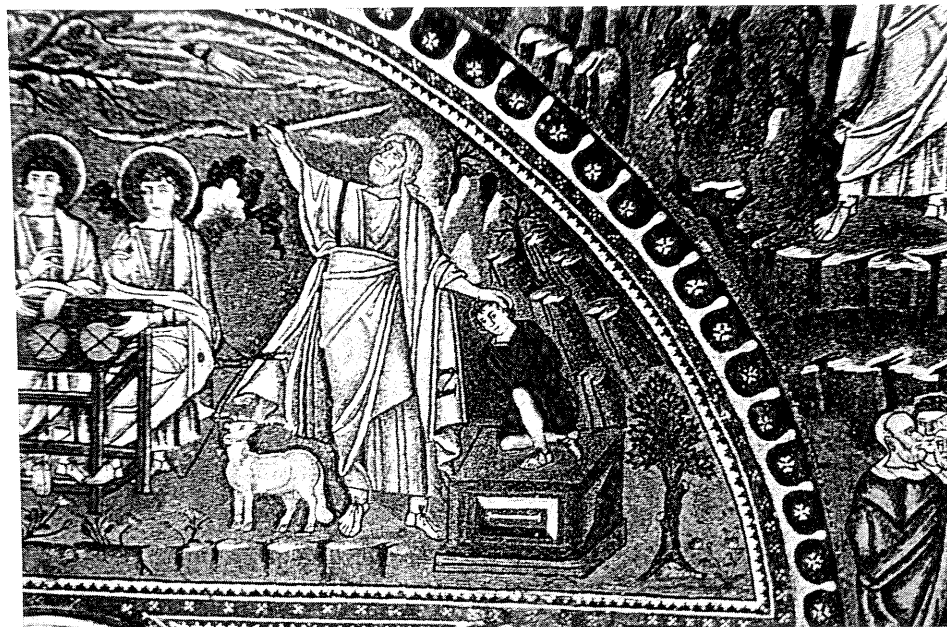


Fig. 10. Abraham offering Isaac, the Cathedral of San Vitale, Ravenna. Source: Author's photograph.

images, especially without written commentary from contemporary sources. Furthermore, the most significant images cannot be easily explained by a few lines of text or reduced to simple formulae.⁵

Different trends in interpretation characterize the last fifty years. Fifty years ago, art historians relied heavily on the documents of the early church for their cues to interpretation and, in the case of the representation of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, took it for granted that in a Christian context the image was *the* iconographical paradigm of Christ's crucifixion.

In the past two or so decades, some scholars have set about interpreting early Christian iconography by starting from its socio-cultural context and emphasizing its continuity with Roman and Hellenistic symbols and their interpretations as allegories of safety, piety, philanthropy and the like. These scholars doubt that the ear-

⁵ An interesting discussion of this problem may be found in M. Miles, *Image as Insight* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), ch. 2, "Hermeneutics and the History of Image Users."

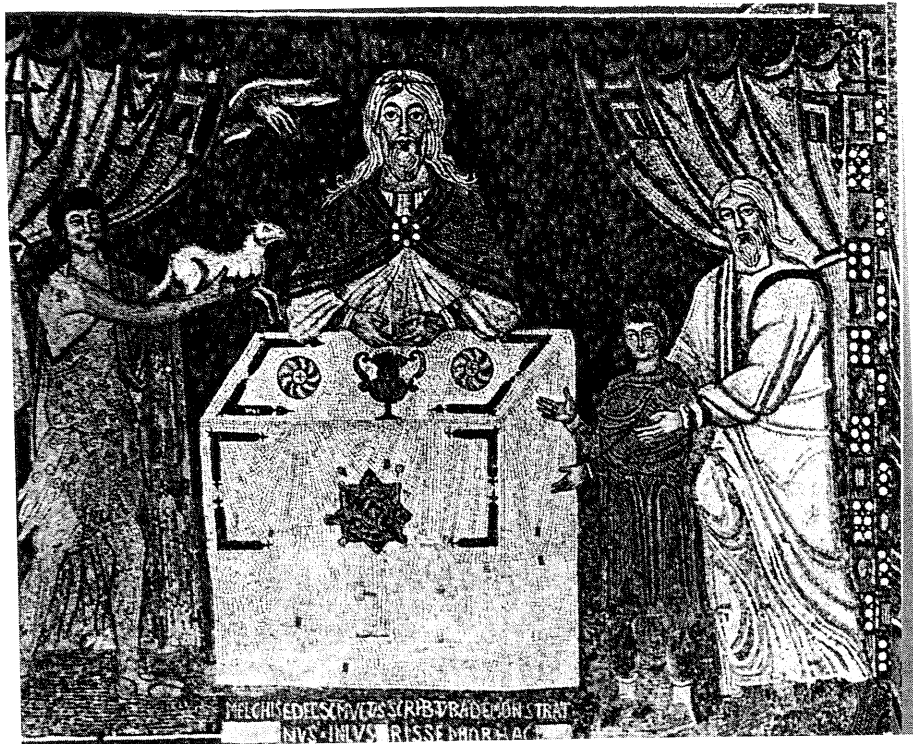


Fig. 11. The offerings of Abel, Melchizedek, and Abraham from the Basilica of S. Apollinare in Classe. Source: Author's photograph.

liest examples of Christian imagery, catacomb frescoes, sarcophagus reliefs, etc., could have specific Christian doctrinal significance and they reject the typological interpretation of most Christian images, especially before the Constantinian era.⁶ According to this approach, Abraham sacrificing Isaac was a symbol of deliverance from danger at its most profound level, and a simple Bible story illustration at its most mundane. This approach necessarily poses a difference between early written biblical interpretation, which was profoundly typological and allegorical, and the purpose or function of the visual image.

⁶ Graydon Snyder's book, *Ante Pacem*, is a model of this approach. See below for more discussion and other examples of this interpretation, with particular attention to the case of Abraham's offering of Isaac.

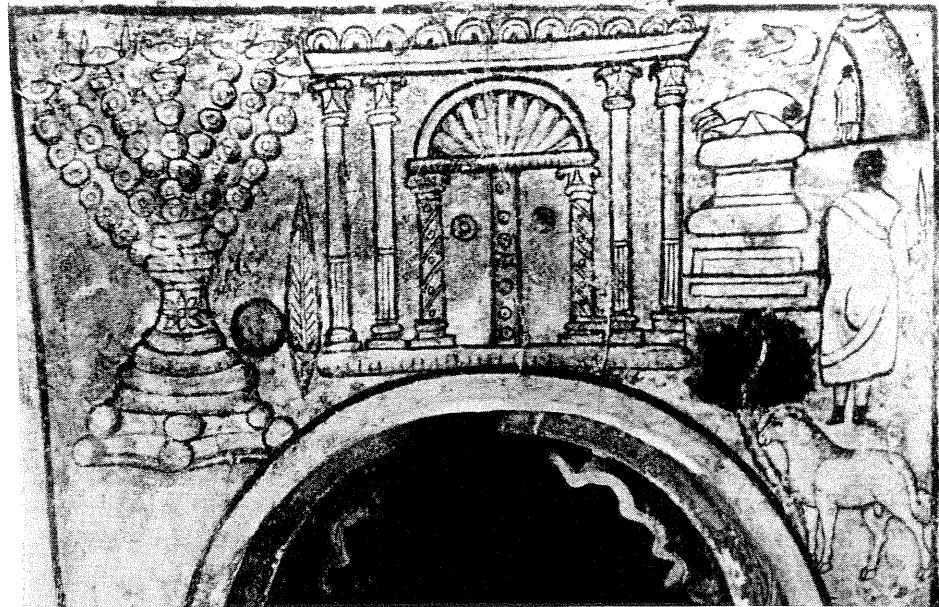


Fig. 12. The binding of Isaac, Torah niche in the Synagogue of Dura-Europos (upper right). Photographer: Fred Andereg, from *Judaism in Stone*, Hershel Shanks (Washington D.C.: 1979), p. 87.



Fig. 13. The binding of Isaac, Beth Alpha Synagogue mosaic pavement. Source: Zev Radovan, photographer. Used with permission.

Examination of the documentary evidence shows that early generations of Christians understood Isaac as a prefigurement of Christ, the only beloved son offered as the expiatory sacrifice for the people's sin, even though while Isaac was spared and returned to his father, Jesus's suffering resulted in his death. The textual parallels between the stories of Isaac's offering and Jesus's death were noted by early Christians. Isaac was miraculously conceived and, apart from Ishmael, was his father's only and beloved son. He carried the wood for his own sacrifice to the mountain which was reached on the third day.

Despite the parallels in the two stories, New Testament writings nowhere make any overt declaration that Christ's sacrifice is prefigured by Isaac's offering, although a parallel might be implied by choice of language and imagery. Paul may have intended his audience to make the connection when he described God in his epistle to the Romans (8:32) as "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us."⁷ Apart from the Pauline epistles, the two most often cited texts are Heb. 11:17–20, which emphasizes the offering of Isaac as proof of *Abraham's* faith (and adds that Abraham was aware that God could raise from the dead, perhaps a reference to a contemporary Jewish tradition that Isaac was resurrected), and the epistle of James 2:21–23, which cites *Abraham's* act as an example of justification by works.

In the post-New Testament Christian literature, however, the story of Abraham's offering of Isaac becomes an explicit "old covenant" counterpart of and paradigm for God's sacrifice of his own son on calvary. The type first appears in the epistle of Barnabas, usually dated to the early second century.⁸ Another early Church father, Melito of Sardis, noted the parallels between Isaac and Christ but stressed that, although Christ actually suffered and died, Isaac was released from his bonds:

Instead of Isaac, the righteous son, a ram appeared to be the victim, so that Isaac might be released from his bonds. Sacrificing the ram, Abraham released Isaac just as the Lord, becoming a victim released us. Being bound he released; and being sacrificed he redeemed. For the Lord was a lamb, just

⁷ See also Gal. 3:16; 4:28; Rom. 9:7; Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Jesus the Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 138–40; Robert Daly, "The Soteriological Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac," *CBQ* 39 (1977), pp. 67–68.

⁸ *Ep. Barn.* 7:3.

like the ram Abraham saw tethered in the bush of Sabek. Truly the bush represents the cross, that place in Jerusalem, and the lamb is the Lord, bound for sacrifice.⁹

Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, and Origen also cited the Isaac-Christ parallels. Tertullian saw the wood Isaac carried as a figure of the cross and emphasized Christ's self-sacrifice: "Isaac, being led by his father to be a victim, and carrying himself the firewood, at that moment was a figure of Christ's death, submitting himself to his father as a victim and lugging the [fire]wood of his own passion."¹⁰

This interpretive motif continued through the fourth and fifth centuries with such writers as Ambrose, Ephrem, John Chrysostom, Paulinus of Nola, Gregory of Nyssa, Theodoret, and Augustine.¹¹ But perhaps the most significant use of the Isaac-Christ typology was in the liturgy of the church. Documentary evidence indicates that the story of Isaac's offering was read during the Easter vigil service in Jerusalem and perhaps also in Milan by the last half of the fourth century at the latest.¹² Even more significant perhaps, Isaac's offering joined those of Abel and Melchizedek as eucharistic figures in the fourth-century Milanese Canon of the Mass, and the Christmas Preface from the *Sacramentarium Veronese*, possibly composed by Leo the Great.¹³

⁹ Melito, *Exerpt. lib. sex*, 1–2, PG 5, 1216.

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.* 10.6, CCL 2.2, 1376. See also *Adv. Jud.* 13.20–22 (CCL 2.2, 1388–9) in which Tertullian also refers to the bramble in which the ram was caught by the horns as a sign of the crown of thorns. See Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.10.1, Clement, *Paed.* 1.23; Origen, *In Gen. Hom.* 8. For other examples see E. Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung durch Taufe, Buße, and Märtyrerfürbitte in den Zeugnissen frühchristlicher Frömmigkeit und Kunst* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1973), pp. 185ff.

¹¹ See Abrose, *de Ab.* 1.8; Ephrem, *In Gen. I*, liber ad Jud. 10.77; Isodore of Seville, *Allegoriae*, Chrysostom, *Hom. in Gen.* 47.3; Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen* 27, 616–17; Theodoret, *Quaest. in Gen.*, 74; Augustine, *de Civ. Dei* 16.32.

¹² Egeria does not give details of the vigil readings when she was in Jerusalem, but liturgical scholars have argued that the twelve readings outlined in the Armenian lectionaries are essentially those used in late fourth-century Jerusalem. These readings include the Genesis stories of creation and the sacrifice of Isaac. See J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1981), pp. 253–254.; T. Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year* (New York: Pueblo, 1986), pp. 47–48. Talley argues that Egeria omitted mention of the Easter vigil readings in Jerusalem because they were also the ones she knew from her home in Aquitaine or Galicia and took them for granted. Talley, noting the parallels between "Poems of the Four Nights" in the *Targumim* and the vigil readings, sees therein a good illustration of the continuity between the Jewish and Christian celebrations of the Pascha.

¹³ See the edition by L.C. Mohlberg (Rome, 1956), nr. 1250. For a full discussion, see B. Botte, "Abraham dans la liturgie," *Cahiers Sion* 5 (1951), pp. 88–95.

Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land reinforced the parallels between Isaac's offering and Christ's crucifixion, and conflated the sites of both sacrifices (Moriah and calvary). Although Egeria's pilgrimage itinerary lacks any reference to Moriah or Isaac, the Bordeaux pilgrim situated Abraham's offering at the traditional Samaritan site, Mt. Gerizim. Jews in the south had already claimed that the Rock in the Jerusalem Temple was the site of Isaac's binding.¹⁴ Eventually, however, Christian tradition merged Moriah with calvary, and by the end of the sixth century the common identity had been accepted. The Piacenza Pilgrim placed the altar of Abraham right next to the rock of Golgotha, which he also understood to be the place where Melchizedek's sacrifice was offered.¹⁵ Eventually a chapel dedicated to Abraham was built there.

Whether Christian exegesis of the "binding of Isaac" is influenced by Jewish aggadic tradition is an extremely complex problem and must be left for a more detailed study of the topic.¹⁶ Briefly, during the first century, Jewish tradition concerning Isaac's binding (the *Akedah*) represented Isaac as an adult, a voluntary sacrifice—which was, in fact, actually completed. Philo, the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher and exegete, focussed on Abraham's piety and unfaltering faith, portraying him as a model Stoic hero.¹⁷ However, in other Jewish literature from just before the Christian era through the time of the Roman and Jewish wars, Isaac comes to the center stage as the prototype of the voluntary and joyful martyr, who went bravely to his death, while Abraham is the model for devoted parents who encourage their children to die rather than vio-

¹⁴ One source of this tradition is the naming of Moriah as the site of Solomon's temple in 2 Chron. 3:1. Also see Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels*, p. 154 and n. 8. Wilkinson points out that Josephus (*Ant.* 7.13.4) held that the site was the threshing-floor of Araunah and suggests a look at M. Avi-Yonah, *The Madaba Map* (Jerusalem, 1954), p. 33.

¹⁵ *Itinerarium* 19. See J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1977), p. 83. For other pilgrim accounts that place Abraham's altar on Calvary see the discussion by A. St. Clair, "The Iconography of the Great Berlin Pyxis," *Jb. Berliner Mus.* 20 (1978), pp. 23–24.

¹⁶ See, in particular, Hans Joachim Schoeps, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Paul's Theology," *JBL* 65 (1946), pp. 385–92; Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, IV, pp. 172–94; cf. IX, 71–77; XII, 68–71; Daly, "The Soteriological Significance," pp. 45–75; P.R. Davies and B.D. Chilton, "The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History," *CBQ* 40 (1978), pp. 514–46, which is a response to Daly's previous article. See also the recent discussion in Dahl, *Jesus the Christ*, chapter 7, pp. 137–47.

¹⁷ *de Ab.* 194–200.

late God's commandment. Josephus portrays Isaac as a twenty-five year old who rushes to the altar, knowing that he is to be the victim.¹⁸ According to this portrayal, in future times of distress, God will remember Isaac's binding, the *Akedah*, and heed the prayers of the Jewish people for deliverance from enemies.¹⁹

The fall of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE may have stimulated a profound new understanding of the *Akedah* in Jewish tradition. In early rabbinic aggadah, soon after that event, the binding of Isaac became the archetype of the no longer viable Tamid offering, which had been the daily act of expiation for the sins of Israel. The use of the Hebrew word, *Akedah*, specifically refers to the teaching that Isaac's offering and/or death was a vicarious atonement that was perfected and complete, and of which the Tamid was only a memorial.²⁰

In later collections of materials, probably dating from the Amoraic period, Isaac, an adult of 37 years, is fully aware of what is going to happen to him and not only accepts the role he will play, but begs Abraham to bind him more tightly, lest he struggle in fear and invalidate the sacrifice.²¹ The Jerusalem Talmud summarizes the tradition that Isaac's release is the equivalent of all Israel's release. Abraham received from God, as reward for his obedience, God's own future intercession for Isaac's descendants when they should fall into sin. Remembering the *Akedah*, God will suppress his wrath and have mercy upon the people.²²

¹⁸ See 4 Macc. 7:13–23; 13:12; 16:1–25; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.12.1. Also see the discussion and bibliography in Daly, "The Soteriological Significance," pp. 56–59; Davies and Chilton, "The Aqedah," pp. 521–29.

¹⁹ Making God recall the *Akedah* is the reason for blowing the shofar at Rosh Hashanah (the horn of the substitutional ram), for instance. See the discussion in Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), pp. 206–208, 213; E. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, IV, p. 173; Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. Judah Goldin (New York: Behrman House, 1967), pp. 471–547; Davies and Chilton, "The Aqedah," pp. 534–35. The Hebrew word *akedah* in this form is found nowhere else in the Bible and therefore only refers to the story of Abraham and Isaac.

²⁰ See Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*. Spiegel's book is a thorough analysis of the *Akedah* tradition, incorporating his ideas about haggadic materials in general. The essay originally appeared in *Alexander Marx Jubilee Volume* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950). Also see the discussion in Davies and Chilton, "The Aqedah," p. 534.

²¹ *Genesis Rabbah* 56:4–8. In general, the Midrash Rabbah (Parasha 56) on Genesis is the most complete collection of traditional materials scattered throughout the Talmud.

²² See *J. Taanith* IV, 5; also *Pesiqta Rabbati* 39.

Although the Genesis story says that Isaac's sacrifice was interrupted and the ram substituted, there are several ancient traditions concerning Isaac's ashes or blood and even accounts that speak of Isaac's death and revival.²³ In all these traditions, Isaac's ashes are the symbol of his merit, rather than of Abraham's, and the *Akedah* is the fulfilled expiatory sacrifice.

In order to minimize conflict between aggadah, which describes the reduction of Isaac to dust and ashes, and the Genesis text which says that Abraham was commanded not to lay a hand upon the child, later Jewish sages suggested that Isaac was laid upon the altar, before he was slain but after the wood was kindled, in accordance with priestly law (Lev. 1:7). Thus Isaac was burned to death and his ashes cast onto Moriah even though his father did not hurt him.²⁴

Given this highly suggestive textual tradition, both within Christian circles and coming from rabbinic exegesis, which may have influenced the earliest Christian interpretations, it is not surprising that art historians assumed the early Christian artistic imagery of Isaac's offering should be understood as a visual typology of the passion of Christ. Alison Moore Smith, author of a 1920s article on the iconography of the offering of Isaac, saw little need to justify linking the literary tradition and the images. She took the Christological interpretation for granted and assumed her readers would as well.²⁵ This assumption also has a recent history. In his analysis of the offering of Isaac niche on the Roman Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Erich Dinkler simply asserted that, "since Melito of Sardes [sic]" the *Akedah* has been "interpreted typologically as representing the Crucifixion of Christ."²⁶

In the last decades, however, more skeptical scholars have contended that an artistic representation of Isaac's sacrifice cannot be

²³ See the *b. Taanith* 16a; *J. Taanith* 2.1 (on the ashes); *Mekilta of R. Simeon b. Yo-hai*, on Ex. 16:2 (on the blood); Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913) I, pp. 281–82, and V, p. 251, which recounts the tradition that Isaac was also the name of the ram; Shoeps, "The Sacrifice of Isaac," p. 389; Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, IV, pp. 183–84. Spiegel (*The Last Trial*, pp. 28–40) cites a late midrash on the Shemoneh Esreh prayer which describes Isaac's revival and asserts that it draws upon earlier aggadah concerning the burning up and resurrection of Isaac.

²⁴ Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 35–37.

²⁵ Alison Moore Smith, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Early Christian Art," *AJA* ser. 2, 26.2 (1922), pp. 159–69.

²⁶ E. Dinkler, in *The Age of Spirituality*, p. 429.

convincingly argued as a type of Christ before 313, and that it did not become the consummate allegory or prototype of the crucifixion until the Middle Ages. They assert that before the peace of the church the image can only be understood as a sign of God's deliverance.

The most authoritative presentation of this position, probably its originator, is Isabel Speyart van Woerden, who in her summary says: "[D]uring the age of persecutions it has been a symbol of deliverance; from 313 onwards it appears transformed into a dramatic scene with allegorical bynotes; from the early Middle Ages onwards, it becomes the principal prototype of Christ's death on the Cross."²⁷ J. Stevenson asserts that the reason the scene of Isaac's offering was particularly appropriate in a funereal context was that it was a symbol of deliverance, leading to the Resurrection, and that this interpretation "surely prevails over a symbolic representation of the Passion."²⁸

In his study of Christian iconography before the time of Constantine, Graydon Snyder points out that Isaac is never shown actually bound upon the altar until the mid-fourth century. This, he argues, is an indication of the relative lateness of the sacrifice—crucifixion analogy. Moreover, he also points out that the earliest extant image, in the Catacomb of Callixtus, merely shows Abraham and Isaac as simple orans figures (fig. 1). In his prior discussion of the lamb symbol, Snyder ruled out the possibility of *any* early Christian motifs representing Christ's death or suffering. According to him "the earliest Christians stressed deliverance and victory rather than death and resurrection."²⁹ Adopting van Woerden's position that the image undergoes a post-Constantinian transformation, he argues that "the representation of the Sacrifice of Isaac shows the shift in the meaning of a pictorial representation as well as any early Christian scene."³⁰

Despite the fairly thorough treatment of the material by van

²⁷ I.S. van Woerden, "The Iconography of the Sacrifice of the Abraham," p. 242. For additional discussion of this article, see note 1 above.

²⁸ J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p. 68.

²⁹ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 14.

³⁰ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 51. This position is widely held. See, for instance, A. St. Clair, "The Iconography of the Great Berlin Pyxis," p. 20; Dassmann, *Sündenvergebung*, pp. 185ff; F. Saxl, "Pagan and Jewish Elements in Early Christian Sculpture," in *Lectures I* (London: Warburg Institute, 1957), p. 55.

Noerden, and the general consensus regarding its viability, several issues or problems seem to have been left aside and I would like to raise and examine them. First, as Snyder points out, the arguments that van Woerden makes concerning the transition in “type” after the time of Constantine are based on rather insubstantial data.³¹ Apart from the problem of certainty in the dating of any catacomb frescoes, there are simply too few pre-Constantinian images (especially discounting those which are partially obscured) to support any argument regarding a compositional pattern among them. Moreover, I am disturbed by the number of inaccuracies and omissions in van Woerden’s set of tables. As impressive as her exhaustive study is and however daunting an attempt at classification might be, the data need to be reassembled and checked for errors.

Inaccuracies in data aside, van Woerden’s analysis of the significance of the data is puzzling. She rightly argues that the sarcophagus images are more consistent with one another and that, from the mid-fourth century on, certain compositional elements regularly appear, including the placement of Isaac upon the altar and the hand of God in an upper corner. However, she concludes that these elements suggest a trend toward identification of the scene with the sacrifice of Christ, since it is these later images that she credits with reflecting that typology.

On the other hand, she also suggests that the placement of Isaac upon the altar and the addition of the hand of God might be due to Jewish influence and/or to a desire to represent the actual biblical narrative more closely. For example, she points to the fresco from the synagogue at Dura-Europos (fig. 12), at least a hundred years and a long distance away from late fourth-century artisans. Moreover, even if we acknowledge a *general* transformation of this compositional detail, both Snyder and van Woerden fail to explain why they think it necessarily signals a new crucifixion – sacrifice typology that was not valid before.³²

Consistent with his broad thesis that interpretive shifts in

Christian art are generally due to social and doctrinal developments, I suspect that Snyder would ascribe the change to the centrality of Christ’s crucifixion in orthodox theology and the increasing complexity of the eucharistic liturgy after the mid-fourth century. Snyder contends that the shift in Christian art generally is due to social and doctrinal developments in the fourth century when an “urban leadership attempted to replace the saints of the social matrix with the bishops of the city churches . . . [and] the ‘cemetery’ Christianity was eventually brought into the city, where the tradition of memory and recall was melded with the tradition of fellowship in the social matrix.”³³

Both van Woerden and Snyder may have missed a simple explanation for Isaac’s placement on the altar during the fourth century, an explanation which lies in the practice of sacrifice in the ancient world. An altar was not a place where the victim was killed but the place where the offering was laid. Both Romans and Jews bound and sacrificed their victims *next* to the altar, placing them on the fire to burn.

By the late fourth century, illustrators may have simply forgotten the earlier practices or sensed no need to make the scene look familiar or correct to their audience, opting rather to make the scene conform with the Genesis narrative in which Isaac is laid upon the altar before he is sacrificed. In nearly all the fresco images the altars are already flaming; it would make no sense to place Isaac upon them. Moreover, the theory must be modified to account for post-Constantinian images which continue to show Isaac next to the altar, including frescoes in the Via Latina catacomb, the Junius Bassus sarcophagus relief (fig. 9), and a number of medieval manuscript images included in van Woerden’s paper itself.³⁴

Second, there is the problem of correspondence between textual symbol and iconographic type. All the historians who reject a “sacrificial” interpretation of the earlier images nevertheless refer to pre-Constantinian literature which clearly describes such a sacrificial paradigm without any real attempt to explain what must

³¹ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 52.

³² Although the question of Jewish artistic influence upon Christian iconography is complex, a case can be made for the presence of rabbinical traditions in Christian images. In the particular case of the representation of Abraham sacrificing Isaac a general discussion may be found in E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, IV, pp. 172–94; and in A. St. Clair, “The Iconography of the Great Berlin Pyxis,” p. 20.

³³ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 165.

³⁴ There is a later rabbinic tradition that Isaac was burnt as a whole offering on the altar, although not actually sacrificed by Abraham, in part because of the injunctions for pre-kindling the altar in Lev. 1:7. See Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, pp. 35–37. For examples of medieval manuscript images, see van Woerden, “The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham,” figures between pp. 224 and 225.

be for them an apparent contradiction between text and art. Van Woerden actually prefaces her article with a quotation from Romans 8 (“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”) and then goes on to repudiate a typological reading of that text, at least in the iconography.³⁵ Snyder, who warns against reading later liturgical and theological positions into evidence that is too early for them—that is, discerning “post-Constantinian theological understandings” in “pre-Constantinian material” or harmonizing material data from one era with ecclesiastical traditions from another—seems to ignore texts that are chronologically and regionally concurrent with the iconography.³⁶

Third, the current scholarship shows a tendency to understand the earliest Christian iconography as a product of a popular and theologically unsophisticated faith. To an extent a conservative approach seems reasonable and I would argue against any assumption that either patrons or artists (most of whom probably were not even Christians) either were consistently symbolic or were *always* cognizant of all the profound allegorical meanings in their wall decorations. As van Woerden says, “How can we be sure about the actual intentions of the rich people who commanded the costly sarcophagi or of their ecclesiastical advisors? Profound symbols, when universally used, tend to become thoughtlessly chosen clichés.”³⁷

Still, since we assume that early Christians listened to sermons and catechetical lectures that centered on biblical exegesis, and heard the biblical stories in their lessons, prayers, and liturgies, we might imagine that early Christians were generally aware of the meaning of their favorite “clichés.” Artistic images were a form of mass communication, and catechesis was the way people were brought into the faith. I believe that homilies, liturgical settings, and catechesis are the most obvious sources from which early Christian imagery derives meaning for its audience. So long as the symbolism was constantly being explicated in church, common folk living in a world saturated with these symbols would certainly make the connection. Moreover, I see no particular reason to assume that artistic typologies were the invention of the post-Constantinian era.

Finally, I am concerned about a lack of attention to the overall programmatic context in the discernment of iconographical meaning. The discussion of the representation of Isaac’s offering has been carried on as if the image were isolated from the rest of the representations that surround it, either as a fresco in a tomb full of other paintings, or on a sarcophagus with other sculpted figures. Yet we know that context provides an important interpretive key in any study of iconography.³⁸

For instance, along with the representation of Abraham and Isaac as orans figures in the Catacomb of Callixtus (fig. 1), the other images include the baptism of Jesus, the healing of the paralytic, scenes from the Jonah cycle, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Examples in the Catacombs of the Jordani and under the Via Latina appear in conjunction with images of Moses at the burning bush, Moses striking the rock, Adam and Eve, Jonah, the Red Sea crossing, and Daniel.

The Mas d’Aire sarcophagus, whose lid shows the offering of Isaac (fig. 4), also is carved with scenes of the raising of Lazarus, Daniel in the lion’s den, the Good Shepherd, Adam and Eve, the baptism of Jesus, the healing of the paralytic, Jonah being swallowed by the sea monster, and Tobias and the fish. On at least two sarcophagi in the Vatican Collections the offering of Isaac is balanced by an image of Pilate washing his hands (figs. 5 and 7). On other sarcophagi the image is placed among scenes of healing, Moses striking the rock, and the arrest and trial of Jesus (figs. 6–8).³⁹

This is not the place to attempt an exhaustive analysis of context, especially on the basis of so few examples. However, if such a study were undertaken, I believe a pattern would emerge. First, a large percentage of these images can be understood as symbols referring to the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. The remaining images are mostly scenes from the trial and passion of Christ. The overall impression is that the imagery operates programmatically and symbolically, associating Isaac’s offering not only with Jesus’s crucifixion but also with the sacraments of baptism and eucharist.

³⁸ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon convincingly interprets a fourth-century example of Abraham sacrificing Isaac as a type of Jesus’s passion by citing its surrounding images. See *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, pp. 46–47.

³⁹ See the discussion by Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, pp. 45–47.

³⁵ Van Woerden, “The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham,” p. 214.

³⁶ Snyder, *Ante Pacem*, p. 6.

³⁷ Van Woerden, “The Iconography of the Sacrifice of Abraham,” p. 237.

A different contextual problem concerns an omission. Only very rarely do depictions of the crucifixion appear before the sixth century. Since it is generally agreed that by the fifth century at the latest, Isaac's offering was associated iconographically with the crucifixion, then it must have taken the place of any literal rendering of that scene. What this might indicate is that artists and/or patrons had long been aware of the meaning of the symbols they used and that they may have preferred allegory to literal representations of the sacraments or dogmas of faith.

In conclusion I would generally argue that the source for the early Christian imagery must be the experiences of and lessons learned in worship contexts. The symbolic references to the sacraments of the church, so prevalent in the catacombs and on the sarcophagi, are not surprising. Baptism is the key to salvation, and the eucharist is the extension of baptism in the ongoing life of the church. Baptism and later, more explicitly, the eucharist are both associated with Jesus's passion. Baptism in particular is a paschal rite.

The first generation of Christians who had converted from Hellenistic religions knew from their old cults that the essential rites of religion were initiation and the offering of sacrifice, both propitiatory and dedicatory.⁴⁰ God promised deliverance, but the deliverance would be conveyed in a cultic (not a purely moral) context. Jewish converts could have been already familiar with the rabbinic exegesis of the offering of Isaac and its soteriological implications. From earliest times Christians would have been sensitive to the typological references in the Pauline epistles, just as they were familiar with the prophetic references in the Gospels. There is no reason an artistic image of Isaac's offering could not have had many layers of meaning for them beyond the immediately comforting one of rescue in times of trial.

But the task of interpretation is not so simple. For complex and profound reasons, many modern Christians no longer value sacrifice as a theological category in the ways their ancient counterparts did. Isaac appears to be at best a voluntary martyr and at worst a victim of parental abuse. This perspective makes some exegetes

⁴⁰ There is a reasonable possibility that artists commissioned to portray Abraham's sacrifice were influenced by Hellenistic images of human sacrifice. See H.-J. Geisher, "Heidnische Parallelen zum frühchristlichen Bild des Isaak-Opfers," *JAC* 10 (1967), pp. 127–44.

and interpreters hope to find other valid readings in the image of Abraham's offering, others to reject it altogether.⁴¹

Moreover, modern exegetes and critics are not accustomed to nor very fond of allegorical and typological modes of interpretation—modes which were commonly used until the late Middle Ages. Contemporary biblical scholars suspect that Christians have too long appropriated Hebrew Bible stories as Christian typologies uncritically and insensitively.⁴² Some of these concerned scholars may wish to repress or at least revise an ancient Christian practice. Moreover, the historical-critical method of biblical scholarship focuses more on rediscovering the original meaning, context, and significance of a text than on how that text has been interpreted and employed by believers in different times, places, and circumstances.

Careful interpreters will not project modern concerns onto ancient symbols but rather ask what visual images might have meant to their original audiences. Since Jews as well as Christians reinterpreted the Hebrew Bible stories, both allegorically and figuratively, we can assume that painters or sculptors likewise reinterpreted the stories along the same lines. By juxtaposing different images, or by choosing a particular context for one image, an artist ceases merely to illustrate and begins to illuminate.

Our task as modern interpreters of ancient texts and images is to retrieve not only their "original" meanings but their ongoing life; i.e., the ways these images communicated within their culture and took on new meanings according to the circumstances and theological impulses of their own day, even if these theological impulses trouble us now. For these circumstances and impulses poured meaning into symbolic vessels (whether word or image) and those meanings, although sometimes elusive to modern interpreters, were clear and dramatic for the original viewers.

⁴¹ See, for instance, Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), pp. 53–96; Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*, ed. J. Carlson Brown and C.R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp. 1–30.

⁴² Here see, for example, R.P.C. Hanson, "Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* vol. 1., ed. P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 449–53.