

Assignment Title:

3000 words essay on the characteristics and reception of either Abraham, Isaac OR Jacob. As well as engaging with primary and secondary sources, you are also encouraged to evaluate and critique other material relating to the reception of the patriarchs in culture (this may include taking a gendered perspective, reviewing paintings, looking at poems, analysing films, etc).

Word Count: 3005

1. Introduction

The binding of Isaac and Jesus' crucifixion seem to have many narrative parallels. Isaac and Jesus are special sons with a special destiny. They are both to be given as innocent sacrifices. In a sense, both are ultimately spared death. Did the Akedah serve as inspiration for the retelling of Jesus' life and sacrifice in the gospels? It is impossible, at such a distance, to know what the gospel writers wanted to achieve. The evidence for direct allusion to the Akedah in the gospels is slim. This essay will be split in two parts. The first will, in some detail, evaluate the possible narrative parallels between the two accounts. The second part will discuss scholarly opinion on the link between the two texts but also on how the HB was read and used by the earliest Christians. We will conclude that it is best to understand the composition of the gospel accounts in the context of the gospel authors' knowledge and understanding of the HB sacrificial system as a whole.

2. Comparative textual analysis

2.1. Special sons

The following paragraphs will demonstrate that both Isaac and Jesus held a special status in the eyes of their fathers. Both the birth of Isaac and of Jesus were pre-announced. In Gen. 18, Sarah and Abraham are visited by mysterious and, possibly, theophanic guests (18:1).¹ One of the guests announces that Sarah will give birth to a son before their next visit within the next year (Gen. 18:10). In the case of Jesus, an angel appears to Mary and declares that she will give birth to a son (Lk. 1:30-31). This similarity may encourage readers to draw a parallel between Isaac and Jesus. However, it must be noted that this pre-announcement is only reported by Luke's gospel, and does not form part of a broader pattern within the gospels.

The prediction is met with derision by Sarah (Gen. 18:12) given the fact she too old to be pregnant (Gen. 18:11), so Isaac's birth is miraculous. The same can be said of the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth. Once again, only Luke's gospel may be read as potentially echoing Isaac's birth. Indeed, only Luke homes in on the miraculous nature of Jesus' birth by highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus' conception (Lk. 1:34-35).

¹ *Genesis*, ed. by Robert Alter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 77; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library, Rev. ed (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 204 <<https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/3239330/4>> [accessed 27 June 2023].

Both Isaac and Jesus are named by God himself. Even before the visit of the guests, God revealed to Sarah that she would give birth to a son and should call him Isaac (Gen. 17:19). In contrast, in the case of Jesus, an angel appears to his father, Joseph, and announces that the child that Mary is to bear should be named Jesus (Matt. 1:21). This point is only reported by Matthew's gospel. While this detail may weaken the case for a connection between Isaac and Jesus, it does not impact on the sacrificial dimension of the story, making it less relevant to any potential argument against their relation.

Both sons are only sons. Of course, in the case of Isaac, the picture is not quite that clear, Abraham having another son, Ishmael, with his wife's maid, Hagar (Gen. 16). By the time Abraham is called upon to sacrifice his son, Ishmael and Hagar had been sent away (Gen. 21). In this sense only, Isaac is an only son. The fact that Jesus is an only son is formulaic in John's gospel (1:14; 3:16, 18). For Lincoln, this formulation signifies status.² At the same time, other gospels draw attention to the fact that Jesus had biological siblings (Mk. 6:3; Matt. 13:55-56). In the case of Isaac, Alter argues for a biological reality.³ To summarise, the meaning of "only" in the case of both sons has potential for debate. However, in the context of a final-form reading of the text, readers may make a connection between both protagonists.

Both protagonists are defined by the profound love their fathers have for them. In Gen. 22:2, God gives us an insight into the love felt by Abraham for Isaac: "He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.'" Similarly, the synoptic gospels stage God as expressing his love for his son (Matt. 3:17; Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22). The Fourth Gospel makes this theme explicit by repeatedly stating the love felt by God for his Son (John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17). Isaac and Jesus have in common that they are loved by their fathers.

2.2. Special sons put to death

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) their special status, both Isaac and Jesus are to be put to death. Most strikingly, Isaac and Jesus are called upon to carry the means by which they are to be killed. Isaac carries the wood that will later form the fire that will kill him (Gen. 22:6). It is worth noting that this firewood is a repeated pattern in Gen. 22 (Gen. 22:3, 6, 7, and twice in

² Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries, 4 (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 105.

³ Alter, *Genesis*, p. 103.

9). The means of Isaac's death is a central feature of the account. Similarly, a wooden cross that will eventually be the instrument of Jesus' death looms large over the account of his life. In the Synoptic gospels, Jesus repeatedly exhorts his disciples to "take up their cross and follow me." (Matt. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23, 14:27). This image takes on a new significance when Jesus is condemned to crucifixion (Matt. 27:31; Mk. 15:20; John 19:1-16). None of the gospels depict Jesus picking up his cross, rather, they describe the handing over of the cross to a bystander (anonymous in John 19:17 but named as Simon from Cyrene in Matt. 16:24; Mk. 15:21, Lk. 23:26). The implication, however, seems obvious, Jesus, at least initially, carried his own cross. The carrying of the instrument of their death is a compelling parallel. The idea could be stretched further by stating that both Jesus and Isaac were then placed *on* the means of their death (Gen 22:9, and for Jesus, Matt. 27:35; Mk. 15:24; Lk. 23:33; John 19:18).

An argument could also be made for both protagonists being accepting of their fate. While this might be true, their characterisation offers a more nuanced portrayal. Fundamentally, Gen. 22 is not about Isaac and as a result the overall impression of Isaac is one of passivity. Isaac seems to go along with his father's plans. Though he does question his father and remarks upon the absence of a sacrificial lamb (Gen. 22:7), overall, Isaac seems to acquiesce to his father's demands. This is perhaps best illustrated by the apparent ease with which Abraham binds his son (Gen. 22:9). Jesus does share with Isaac questions addressed to his father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mk. 15:34) but on the basis of the gospel accounts Jesus's attitude to his impending death is far more proactive. We will see later that Jesus continually predicts his death (and resurrection). The gospels also present Jesus, even with his fears, as accepting his Father's will. This is seen clearly in the "cup" discourses (Matt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk 22:42; a similar idea is reflected in John 12:27). The gospel of John presents Jesus as not only completely aware of his fate but also as completely trusting in his father (John 10:11, 15, 17-18; 15:13, furthermore the Fourth Evangelist does not relay any questions from the cross.). In contrast to Isaac, Jesus is not apathetically enduring his Father's plans.

There is also a sense in which both Isaac and Jesus are undeserving of their punishment. Gen. 22 gives no reason as to why Abraham should sacrifice his son, other than it being a test of Abraham's faith and obedience (Gen. 22:1). Isaac is guilty of nothing and, in a sense, plays the central part in his father's story. Something similar can be said of Jesus: Jesus is innocent (this

observation is made by a criminal placed on a neighbouring cross in Lk. 23:41). Furthermore, John's gospel emphasises the fact that Jesus had to die for others (famously, John 3:16).

Abraham is told to head to the land of Moriah to carry out the sacrifice of his son (Gen. 22:2). Moriah is only referred to in one other place in HB: 2 Chron. 3:1. The Chronicler identifies Moriah with Jerusalem.⁴ A parallel may be drawn here as Jesus' death also takes place in Jerusalem. The crucial fact is that Jerusalem houses the Temple, where sacrifices were offered. In a sense, both sacrifices bookend the sacrificial system of the HB. The Akedah institutes (or provides an aetiology) for this system. Jesus' death on the cross ends its need (Heb. 10:1-18).

The time span of three days plays a crucial role in both sacrificial episodes. Gen. 22:4 recounts that it was "on the third day" that Abraham and his party reached the place appointed by God for the sacrifice. This time marker is a feature of the HB to mark significant events. The main example is found in Exodus 19:16 when "on the third day" God reveals himself to Moses. Of particular relevance is the fact that the HB also provides a precedent for third-day resurrections (Jon. 1:17; Hos. 6:1-2). This leads us neatly to Jesus' resurrection after three days. Throughout his ministry Jesus prophesied that he would die and be raised on the third day (Matt. 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; Lk. 9:22; 18:33; 24:7; 24:46). Though the phrase itself is not used, the tomb is found empty and Jesus appears again to his disciples on the third day (Matt. 28:1; Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1; John 20:1). There is striking parallel here. But it is hard to discern from this information alone whether this parallel is directly in response to Isaac's Akedah. The cause could very well be the more general influence of the HB. The fundamental difference, of course, is that Isaac does not reach the point of death.

A particularly significant parallel is the fact that, ultimately, both protagonists are spared death. In the case of Isaac, an angel intervenes *in extremis* to stop Abraham from carrying out the instruction God had given him. Jesus too is spared death as he is brought back to life on the third day (Matt. 28:6-7; Mk. 16:6; Lk. 24:5 and John 20:2). In the case of Gen. 22, the impression may be given that God provides a ram to take Isaac's place. In the New Testament, Jesus is known as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, this idea is not found in the synoptic gospels). This ovine taxonomy may link the two stories, but

⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, 'A Specimen Text: Genesis 22', in *Genesis and Exodus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 2001), p. 129.

the connection could very well be simply with sacrifice generally (and the HB theme of the Passover lamb, specifically).⁵

3. Discussion of scholarship

3.1. The Akedah and Jesus life and death

Childs offers a reading of the Akedah that places the account firmly in the context of the Christian canon.⁶ As a consequence, he is less interested in the development of the text and focusses on its present form. Childs contends that the text has been shaped throughout its history by a community of faith that regards the text as scripture.⁷ However, Childs states unequivocally that the NT as a whole contains “few explicit references to Isaac’s binding in connection with Jesus’ death.”⁸ For Childs, any connection between the Akedah and the narratives Jesus’ life are limited to “echoes and allusions”.⁹ This being said, Childs does draw a connection between Gen. 22 and the Johannine title of “lamb of God” (but via the Passover lamb of Exodus and the suffering servant of Is. 53).¹⁰ This example highlights the reality of the reception history of a text. As it travels through time it is shaped by the contexts in which it is read. Childs is not oblivious to this and recognises that that the Akedah, from a Christian standpoint, can only be read in reference to Christ’s death.¹¹ All this being said, Childs’ theological canonical approach cannot give us a sense of the gospel writers’ intentions.

Gadenz proposes to investigate whether the Lukan evangelist portrays Jesus as a type of Isaac.¹² His methodology is primarily linguistic and he detects “allusions” to the Isaac narrative throughout the Luke’s gospel, from Jesus’ baptism to his death.¹³ As relates to the crucifixion and the sacrifice of Isaac, Gadenz sees a direct quote of Gen. 22:9 LXX in Lk. 23:33: “they came to the place”.¹⁴ He notes that this phrasing is absent from Mark and Matthew. Gadenz recognises that this parallelism is composed of common words that could weaken his case, but

⁵ Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, p. 113.

⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of Old Test and New Test: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Augsburg: Fortress, 2011), p. 326.

⁷ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 326.

⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 329.

⁹ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 329.

¹⁰ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 329.

¹¹ Childs, *Biblical Theology*, p. 335.

¹² Pablo T Gadenz, ‘The Akedah and the Crucifixion: Isaac Typology in Luke’s Gospel?’, *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 31.4 (2021), 478–96 <<https://doi.org/10.5325/bullbiblrese.31.4.0478>>.

¹³ Gadenz, ‘The Akedah and the Crucifixion’, p. 478.

¹⁴ Gadenz, ‘The Akedah and the Crucifixion’, p. 491.

he relies on the thematic unity to allay any possible critique.¹⁵ Gadenz continues to present other examples of “verbal correspondence” between Gen. 22 LXX and Luke 23. To strengthen his verbal case, he continues to rely on the thematic unity shared by the texts. Unlike Childs, Gadenz is more convinced that the connection between Gen. 22 and Lk. 23 is intentional. He goes so far as to say that Luke is “winking at his readers, inviting them to read the two stories together.”¹⁶ Childs would not disagree that the two stories ought to be read together but he might question the intentionality that Gadenz sees in the Lukan author.

For Huizenga, not only did the Akedah provide a “resource” for early Christians to make sense of the life and work of Jesus Christ, but Matthew’s gospel also contains “traces” of an Isaac tradition that has been ignored by scholars.¹⁷ Huizenga concludes, much like Gadenz does for Luke’s gospel, that Matthew presents Jesus as a type of Isaac. Huizenga’s argument depends on a final form, narrative reading of the texts.¹⁸ As noted in the analysis above, Huizenga notes the analogy between pre-announcement of Isaac’s birth to Sarah, and Jesus’ birth to Joseph.¹⁹ Much of Huizenga’s argument, however, is based on the narrative elements that this essay has already covered in some detail such as the announcement already mentioned and Jesus’ baptism. Huizenga’s argument focusses primarily on why scholars have ignored studying the connection between Isaac and Jesus. He highlights scholars’ failure to take a literary approach to the text and to consider extrabiblical material and the LXX (as Gadenz does) to as the reason behind their failure to make the connection between both episodes. The apex of Huizenga’s argument is in what he refers to as “Matthean allusions”.²⁰ Huizenga invites to not only consider quotes but also allusions. This raises interesting questions, however, about intentionality. If Matthew was drawing on the Akedah narrative, why would he hide it? The response may lie in the fact that the Matthean evangelist, bathed in the Hebrew Scriptures, unintentionally draws the parallel. Reaching affirm conclusion on the basis of Huizenga’s work is difficult.

¹⁵ Gadenz, ‘The Akedah and the Crucifixion’, p. 491.

¹⁶ Gadenz, ‘The Akedah and the Crucifixion’, p. 494.

¹⁷ Leroy Huizenga A., ‘The Fate of the Figure of Isaac in The Gospel of Matthew’, *Novum Testamentum, Supplements*, 2010, cxxxi, 1–20 (p. 1) <<https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004175693.i-340.7>>.

¹⁸ Huizenga, ‘The Fate of the Figure of Isaac in The Gospel of Matthew’, cxxxi, p. 2.

¹⁹ Huizenga, ‘The Fate of the Figure of Isaac in The Gospel of Matthew’, cxxxi, p. 1.

²⁰ Huizenga, ‘The Fate of the Figure of Isaac in The Gospel of Matthew’, cxxxi, p. 18.

3.2. Reading the HB after Jesus

In his book *Scripture Re-envisioned: Christophanic Exegesis and the Making of a Christian Bible*, Bogdan Bucur explores the way in which early Christians read HB theophanies as pre-figuring Christ.²¹ The heart of Bucur's argument is centred on the earliest Christians' identification of the Lord Jesus with the LORD of the HB.²² One of the examples he cites has already been referred to in this essay. The three visitors of Gen. 18 provide an opportunity for a trinitarian reading (though, admittedly, this observation is slightly beyond the scope of Bucur's work). Other examples are Ex. 3, Ex. 33, Ps. 98 and 131, Is. 6, Hab. 3:2, Dan. 3 and Daniel 7). Bucur traces a history of what he refers to as "YHWH Christology" or "Christology of the Divine Identity".²³ In other words, Bucur seeks to explore how the earliest Christians read the HB in light of their developing understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. Bucur's argument is outside the scope of this essay as he focusses on theophanies. But it does draw our attention to the fact that early Christians did begin, quite rapidly, to read the HB through the lens of their knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ. With this mind, and given the subject material of Gen. 22, it is not difficult to imagine that the first disciples would have made a connection between Gen. 22 and the Jesus' Passion. The similarity of events allows a connection to be made and this connection may very well have influenced the writing of the gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion.

Allen, whose specific interest is the use of the Old Testament in the New, articulates quite clearly the problem that we are facing in relating the Akedah to Jesus' death. Even though his article does not address the Akedah, it does address the Apostle Paul's exposition of Jesus' death and resurrection in 1 Cor. 15:3-8. In this instance, Paul does reference "the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 13:3) but no indication as the exact scripture is given. In response to this, Allen raises two caveats. Either Paul had a specific text in mind but failed to name it (or didn't feel the need to name so obvious he considered it to be), or "he was alluding to a wider scriptural perspective..."²⁴ Allen concludes that it is this "silence" on sources that gives rise to the study

²¹ Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, 'Introduction', in *Scripture Re-Envisioned: Christophanic Exegesis and the Making of a Christian Bible* (Brill, 2018), pp. 1–5 <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004386112_002>.

²² Bucur, 'Introduction', p. 1.

²³ Bucur, 'Introduction', p. 2.

²⁴ David M. Allen, 'Introduction: The Study of the Use of the Old Testament in the New', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 38.1 (2015), 3–16 (p. 4) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X15595928>>.

of OT/NT.²⁵ This describes the situation in which we find ourselves with the Akedah and Jesus' Passion.

4. Conclusion

From a narrative, final-form perspective both sacrifice accounts have much in common. Isaac and Jesus share a special status in the eyes of their fathers. Both are innocent sacramental offerings. Both carry the instrument of their killing. Most importantly, both have a significant destiny. Isaac is the bearer of God's ongoing promises to Abraham (from Gen. 12 onward). Jesus is to play a crucial role in God's salvation plan (Matt. 1:21; John 1:29). There seems to be much to connect Isaac and Jesus. However, drawing a straight line from the Akedah to Jesus' Passion seems unlikely. For Gadenz and Huizenga the conclusion is clear: Isaac prefigures Jesus and inspired the Gospel authors to draw a parallel. However, their evidence seems to be too circumstantial and rather than pointing at the intentionality of the gospel authors, indicates that the gospel were written in a context that was bathed in the HB sacrificial system. This is where Bucur is helpful by giving an account of how early Christians sought to find Jesus in the HB. The Akedah certainly provides plenty of opportunity for this. And it continues to. It seems almost inevitable that Christians will seek to understand the Akedah through the lens of the Passion. Allen informs about how NT writers use HB scripture. It is difficult in this instance to be certain that the gospel writers were alluding to Gen. 22. To conclude, it is most likely that the gospel writers did not allude specifically to the Akedah in their Passion accounts, rather they were fully immersed in the HB's sacrificial system (from Isaac and onwards to its codification in Leviticus) and allowed this more general understanding to shape (knowingly or not) their account of Jesus's crucifixion.

²⁵ Allen, 'Introduction', p. 4.

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