

CHAPTER 3: ISAAC, EXEGETED – GENESIS 22* AS MAJOR ISAAC TEXT

The philosophical, historical and methodological aspects of this study having been discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses on the exegetical work on the Isaac texts, with as primary text, Genesis 22. Many of the points made below will however refer back to what has been discussed thus far; these two sections – call them for the sake of brevity “theory of exegesis” and “practice of exegesis” – remain intrinsically intertwined.

3.1 Genesis 22* – the major interpretative text on Isaac

As mentioned in the opening chapter to this study, the figure of Isaac is best remembered, both in church circles and in broader society, because of his almost-sacrifice at the hand of his “father”, Abraham, in Genesis 22. To Christian sensibilities, drenched in the theology of a loving God, this remains a disturbing part of, precisely, the Word of God. Thematically, the highlight in the Christian tradition of God’s self-sacrifice, namely in Jesus Christ, finds a disturbing almost-exact opposite in the Genesis 22 account, when God instructs Abraham to sacrifice his only begotten son (that is, excluding the special case of Ishmael).

Not surprisingly, this is also the section among the Isaac texts in the Old Testament which has received the most exegetical scrutiny. Unforeseen, it has in addition

turned out to be the most determinative text for the new insights which are concluded to in this study.

The manner in which the Genesis 22 text is brought to discussion here is as follows: first, stock is taken of the historical issues related to this text. Then, linking up most directly with the section in Chapter 2 on exegetical methodology, a narrative reading of this text is undertaken in order to demonstrate the limited value it has as an explanatory aid to the questions it sets even itself to answer, and to indicate the good value it could hold for the historical interpretative enterprise in Genesis 22*. This is followed by an analysis in historical mode of Genesis 22*, from which then the interpretative implications for the rest of the Isaac texts are indicated.

3.2 What are the historical issues related to Genesis 22*?

In this section, stock is taken, briefly, of the historical questions encountered in the Genesis 22* text. This is meant as a primer of sorts, a preparation, namely in order to highlight the historical issues as they are encountered below through references and allusions, in the two sections immediately subsequent to this one. Only once these issues have been pointed out, the full scope of the direct references and indirect allusions in these two following sections to the historical issues can be realised. The purpose here is thus not to discuss extensively the details of each historical point indicated, nor to trace the interpretative and research histories. The problems are merely pointed out, with the scholarly literature in the subsequent two sections which form the backdrop to this introduction.

- As an opening point, the question must be asked what the opening phrase אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים would refer to. Is it an editorial addition, to link herewith temporally this narrative with the preceding? The link between this Genesis chapter and the previous is rather tenuous, as is the link between the Genesis 22:1-19 pericope and the verses immediately following it, Genesis 22:20-24, with the latter pericope receiving the exact same introduction. Or are these indeed indications of not literary, but historical sequentiality?
- The setting of a test to Abraham in verse 1, which is followed up in verses 15–18, is a matter of grave moral and theological ambiguity. Moreover, it seems stylistically different from the main narrative (Genesis 22:2-14), in which, besides, the theme of a test being set is wholly absent. Are these indications of editorial activity?
- Can the highly stylised dialogue, in verses 1-2 and 11-12, between God and Abraham, and in verses 7-8, between Abraham and Isaac, be historically accurate, or are such discourses given here according to norms of literary (that is, story-telling) convention?
- The further difficulties in verse 2, namely the reference to Isaac as only son, and the reference to Moria, should not escape attention. The exclusion of Ishmael, Isaac's first-born, and the absence of information on precisely which mountain is indicated, are vexing questions. The silence in the next verse on Isaac's mother, Sarah, when all other parties and needs are listed, is none the less intriguing too.
- Can the discussion between Abraham and Isaac in verses 7-8 be regarded as a further breakdown of strictly moral behaviour, because Abraham clearly deceives his son by withholding vital information?

- The changes in the reference to God throughout this narrative draw attention to these reference. The references to respectively אֱלֹהִים , יְהוָה , and the מְלֶאךָ יְהוָה (as a reference to God), beg explanation.
- The magical appearance of a sacrificial ram in verse 13 will always be caught between a super-natural and a literary explanation. The latter-day literary genre of magical realism in novels (with Salman Rushdie as its most famous exponent) finds here a strange precursor: can it be characterised from a historical point of view as a mythological “lamb of God”, or is it, in true ancient (albeit Greek) dramatic convention, a case of *deus ex machina*? (Or should the latter perhaps be, with reference to particularly Genesis 22*: *deus ex agnus*?)
- The connections between the different sub-sections of this pericope remain challenging. The relationship in Genesis 22 between verses 1, 2-13, 14, and 15-19, respectively, are oft debated, with characterisations falling somewhere between “inherently united” to “editorially developed”.
- The question, so disturbing to readers of this account through the centuries, apart from the fact that God would command a murder, is the possibility that child sacrifice may have been a part of ancient Israel’s cultic practices. Or could a merely aetiological need (verse 14) explain the whole narrative? Could other possibilities be suggested...?

These are the main issues which will find reference in the two sections below.

3.3 Problems of narratological analyses of Genesis 22

First, before a historical reading of the Genesis 22* text is given below, an own narratological analysis of Genesis 22 is presented³⁶, as indicated in the introduction to this chapter, above.

3.3.1 False promises

In some respects, at least, narrative exegesis seems very appealing when one first encounters it, as had been argued in Chapter 2. Practically, though, on later reflection, this method is found to be interesting, but not of as much value as had initially seemed the case. As will become clear below, narrative exegesis has little of true substance to offer. Also, although this method seems democratic, namely in that many more “ordinary readings” now become acceptable, the question which goes to the heart of this presupposition dare for the sake of academic integrity not be avoided: can my utterly lay interpretation of, say, Shakespeare or Goethe, ever be said to be of the same quality, and have the same validity, as those of the scholars of such literary works? The valid and urgent interests of popularising theology and of understanding popular hermeneutics cannot be addressed simply by the assumption of an appropriate exegetical method. Narrative exegesis, though it no doubt has its

³⁶ References to Genesis 22 without the asterisk is meant in this section as an acknowledgement that whereas historical-critical studies all agree that the text shows layers of development, narratological analyses tend to take the text as is a comprehensive unit and thus do not take into account editorial layers and developments.

attractions, however more often than not leads to disillusionment in interpreting the biblical text.

The move over recent decades³⁷ towards narrative and other modes of textual interpretation was, as alluded to in Chapter 2, conditioned by at least two factors (Ukpong 2004:23): a “push factor”, namely – in the by now formulaic phrase – disenchantment with the results of historical-critical methodologies (see e.g. Lombaard 2007a:63-66 / 2006c:19-21), and a “pull factor”, namely the cultural effects of post-modernism, with its emphasis on language, rather than history, as the all-encompassing framework of understanding.

To some extent at least³⁸, narrative interpretations of the biblical texts had sought to return to pre-historical-critical, perhaps even pre-critical readings of the text. Within this ideological frame of reference, history would no longer be confronted in the biblical text; rather, the text-as-is and the narrative-as-is are identified with one another. Despite the fact that, classically at least within this framework (e.g. Powell 1990:19-21), the existence of historical settings for author, text and reader would be

³⁷ The call for reading a text as literature goes back further, though, at least to Jowett 1860:330-433, who sought in this approach a solution for his day to the multitude of interpretations to biblical texts (cf. Moberly 1992:12) – a motive that sounds all too familiar.

³⁸ Gunn & Fewell 1993:7-12, for instance, represent a more moderate position: they criticise the historical-critical methodology for its adherence to modernistic ideals (somewhat unfairly, since much historical scholarship has been published which has loosened itself from this navel string, and then offer the narrative approach as a more democratic interpretative strategy. However, in their case, they clearly retain appreciation for the historical work, and they do not claim to find with their reading strategy *the* answer; rather, healthily, they offer *an* interpretation.

acknowledged, these aspects have no interpretative currency within narratological analyses. With narrative exegesis, implied author, narrative, and implied reader draw all the attention.

Interestingly, this is not far removed from a way of treating the biblical texts which is historical, but not critical. This is namely a view of text which may be termed “naively historical”: the text is viewed as conveying history directly; that is, the complexity of the relationship between a text and what it (purportedly) recounts, has not been accounted for. The text simply tells it as it was, in a “plain sense” (Tanner 1987:59-78). Such readings come close to narrative analyses of the text, which may not be interested in history, but is similarly concerned with telling us only what the text tells us. Apart from this difference as to the esteem in which history is held (cf. Schmid 1999:3), the alternatives of a naively historical approach to the text and a narratological engagement with the text thus lie not in the way the text is fundamentally dealt with, but rather in the grade of methodological awareness. Narratology is usually clear about its analytical tools (see below), whereas the naively historical approach tends to offer hardly anything in the form of methodological awareness.

In both these cases, taken together now, the main difference with the historical-critical readings of a text³⁹, is what has been called “democratic” above, but could

³⁹ For some of the differences between narrative and historical readings, see e.g. Powell 1990:6-10, 85-91 and Levenson 1987:19-59. Of course, as Moberly (1992:10-11) and others have pointed out, the two approaches of historical criticism and narrative analysis are not mutually exclusive; the results from one may feed into the other. This, however, this does not occur in the manner which is often assumed, namely as some almost romanticised cooperation or even agreement. As argued in

more accurately be termed populist. Whereas historical-critical readings seek out every possible problem and lay them bare, leaving all but the hardest-working exegetes at a loss on how to decide with some confidence among the possible interpretations, the narrative and naively historical approaches simply trust the text. What is valuable lies in the words before us. These words must (be brought to) speak to “the people”. With the latter sentiment, I certainly have no qualms (cf. Lombaard 2009a, 2009b, 2008e:119-138, 2008f:291-293, 2007b:358-359, 2005c:139-150, 2005d:295-305, 1999a:26-41, 1999b:22-46, Lombaard & Froneman 2006:141-150, Lombaard & Rabe 2005:412-431), while realising very well the difficulties of any religious discourse (cf. Lombaard 2008b:94-107); however, to execute this sensitivity in an a-historical way, serves thinking believers poorly, in Western(ised)⁴⁰ contexts at least. Such critically thinking believers’ questions remain unanswered by the results of this method; their faith, unfed; their trust, hence, weakened. These are not instances of having worked *through* the historical issues (as e.g. Craghan 1983 does; cf. Lombaard 2008a:140-141, 147, 149-150), of Brueggemann’s “postcritical reading” (Brueggemann 2002:7, cf. 3), or, again, of Ricoeur’s “second naiveté” (cf. Schneiders 1985:19); behind this urgency about narrative exegesis is, often, a search for something more-or-less: more faith-full, or less challenging; more soothing, or less troublesome. People who live daily in our informationed age, however, soon experience this as smoke and mirrors. One of the fundamental objects of narrative exegesis – getting the biblical message(s) across –

Chapter 2, the views-of-text are just too different for that: the one will always usurp the other – as again below...

⁴⁰ Cf. however Colenso 1862, which shows that historical-critical questions occur quite naturally in a traditional African context too.

is thus self-defeating. People are not drawn to a greater trust of the biblical text, but are ultimately pushed away, with their questions unanswered, despite (or: precisely because of) initial promises to the contrary.

What is more, should a text that has incessantly captivated human (religious) interest for, perhaps, 24 centuries, and had done so on its own accord, now be “smoothed down” by narratological-interpretative means?

However, a text such as Genesis 22*, our case in point here, contains a range of historical difficulties, as indicated above; almost every publication on the Aqedah explicitly points this out too. This already renders it attractive to many of the “pull factors” which accompany narrative methodology. What is more, though, Genesis 22 is a genuinely compact, gripping account, and as such lends itself quite naturally to interpretation as a narrative.

Let us then, as an experiment, submit just a little to this temptation, and see where narrative leads us...

3.3.2 To read a narrative

Drawing on texts such as Bar-Efrat 2006/1989; Schmid 2004:271-300 & 1991; the 14 contributions collected in Noort & Tigchelaar 2002; Steins 2001:509-519; Tolmie 1999; Wénin 1999; Neef 1998:45-62; Seebass 1997; Berman 1997; Bekker & Nortjé 1995:454-464; Gunn & Fewell 1993:46-89, 101-128, 147-173; Janzen 1993; Gunn & Fewell 1993; Moberly 1992:39-56; Sailhamer 1992; Kruger 1991:187-200; White

1991 & 1979:1-30; Powell 1990; Cooper 1987:67-73; Crenshaw 1986; Deist 1986a:69-102/1986b:72-107; Alter 1985; Sternberg 1985; Blum 1984; Coats 1983:157-163 (drawing on Coats 1973:389-400); Brueggemann 1982; Westermann 1981; von Rad 1976:189-193; Gunkel 1917, though on none in particular explicitly, a narrative analysis of the Genesis 22-text would look at aspects such as these, with which to analyse the account:

- **Story**

- Realist
- Imaginary
- Combination (magical realism)
- Function: educational, subversive, legitimating, expository

- **The narrator**

- First or third person, or oscillating
- Point of view: evaluative / intrusive (e.g. gives moral “lessons”) or reclusive / descriptive (the drive is more subtle, in the story line)
- Power: imperfect or all-knowing
- Active (tells) or passive (shows)

- **Characterisation**

- Main and minor characters
- Round and flat characters (with the former multi-faceted, and often showing character development)
- Empathetic or repulsive

- **Events-in-plot (line-of-conflict)**
 - Line of tension
 - Turning point
 - Denouement / finale
 - Asides (purposeful digression)
 - Loose ends (with no purpose)

- **Mise-en-scène**
 - Time
 - Place
 - Changes in time and place
 - The manner in which such changes take place

- **Dialogue**
 - Pointed or detracting (quality of the narrative art)
 - Sparse or plentiful
 - Revealing or concealing (as set up by the author)

- **Stylistics**
 - Language
 - Metaphors
 - Themes
 - Structures

To employ all these aspects in a brief narrative analysis is of course not possible. Therefore just one aspect is chosen here, taking a cue from one of the most

influential works on narrative analysis, the 1959 Auerbach-volume titled *Mimesis*⁴¹. Central to this book is the idea that everything about narratives are meant to “draw the reader in”, as it were, so that the past is renewed in the present, that is, that the narrative is re-lived in practical ways by the readers (Auerbach 1959:9-14). Noted seldom, and never acted upon, is the important point made by Auerbach (1959:14) that in Genesis 22, everything about the narrative is driven by what remains *hidden*. Let us briefly trace⁴², therefore, this mimetic aspect of hiddenness – that is: silence, non-action, non-disclosure, secrecy, and related concepts – as a thread running

⁴¹ The sources listed in the opening paragraph to this analysis above are presupposed here in the narratological retelling offered. However, deliberately, in this retelling these sources are not continually acknowledged: it would break the narrative flow aimed at here – and narrative flow has, appropriately, become an inherent part of this exegetical method. This choice was thus made in keeping with the traditions of narrative exegesis, in order in this way too to demonstrate competence in this methodology.

⁴² Even with this single theme I have had to exercise restraint, in order to keep the analysis brief. A qualifying methodological note (the need for which has been indicated by a seminar question by Prof. Hans van Deventer, Old Testament scholar at the North-West University, Vaal Triangle campus: it would have been possible to summarise here an extant narrative interpretation of Genesis 22, to avoid the possible accusation of setting up a straw doll. Three considerations led me to opt for creating an own narratological-exegetical account here: first, try as one may by qualifying one’s motives and by being as fair as possible, the *ad hominem*-accusation will always be made when one recounts a specific scholar’s work and then dismisses the method – a distasteful misunderstanding, best avoided; second, by this means it is shown that I am thoroughly at home within this exegetical approach, and that I understand its dynamics – that is, its joys *and* its problems – from the “inside”; third, it is an altogether more satisfying exercise to create something new, than to recount another’s recounting of the Aqedah narrative. The latter two considerations, and the way in which the narratological analysis has been done here, should, I hope, provide enough evidence to the contrary in countering concerns about setting up a straw doll.

throughout the Genesis 22-narrative. To highlight these aspects, the relevant concepts below are placed in italics.

3.3.3 A methodological illustration: Genesis 22 narratologically read

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה¹

אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִנִּי:

In the opening four words already we encounter a narrative technique common to many stories: the date remains *hidden*. Immediately, the *vagueness* lures the reader; the *mystique* is engaging. Although some scholars debate whether these four words bind this chapter to the previous, or in fact indicate the exact opposite, namely a firm break, this is unimportant to us. This *non-descript* “once upon a time” has our ears pricked. This is an engaging narrative technique. We are ready to hear more...

The time and place are *not mentioned* either. The speculation and refutation by one or two debating commentators that the revelation must have taken place at night, is again an irrelevant detail. The fact that God speaks to, no, deliberately tests Abraham, *without reasons given*, has given rise to many other stories – that is the important part. These resultant stories have themes such as: a debate in heaven (à la the book of Job) that causes the test; or that it was not God after all who set such a monstrous challenge; or that God obviously knew that Abraham would pass the test; or that Isaac willingly submitted to being sacrificed; or that Sarah, strangely

absent from the Genesis 22 account (perhaps patronisingly, the matron is *silenced?*), was horrified by her husband’s *secretive* actions. *Stillnesses* in stories give rise to a multitude of further accounts.

וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְךָ אֶת-יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָתָּ אֶת-יִצְחָק
וְלֶךְ-לְךָ אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אֶתֶר
הַהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים:

In this verse, the *absence* of precise time and place indication in verse 1 are given a strange twist. Namely, the place remains *vague*; the time not. The place seems certain at first – Mount Moria –, but it is not. This is not the certainty of 2 Chronicles 3:1, where the city and mountain are unambiguously indicated:

בִּירוּשָׁלַם בְּהַר הַמֹּרִיָּה. Here the location is imprecise – a generalised direction: merely the *הַמֹּרִיָּה*.

God is sending Abraham to a *strange* place – in more ways than one!

Completely the opposite is true, however, of when this should happen: the implication is clearly “now”; also, to what purpose: for Abraham to kill his son (who is identified thrice over, as the *secret* is progressively revealed: *אֶת-יִצְחָק* – *אֶת-בְּנֶךְךָ* – *אֲשֶׁר-אַהֲבָתָּ* – until being fully exposed: *אֶת-יִצְחָק*!); an *unravelling* tension line stressed with three verbs: *וְהַעֲלֵהוּ* – *וְלֶךְ* – *קַח*. Here, no uncertainty. Paradoxically, this goes to heighten the supreme irony, namely on the *continued silence* as to why God would do this. The very same God who gave Isaac as concrete expression of

continued presence, *takes away* that “sacrament”: the concrete expression of care. Why the God of life – of everything – would condemn this sign of divine grace to death – *nothingness* – remains cloaked in a *tremendous mystery*.

³ וַיִּשְׁכַּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֶּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת־חַמְרוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־שָׁנִי
וַעֲרִיּוֹ אִתּוֹ וְאֵת יִצְחָק בְּנֵוֹ וַיִּבְקַע עֲצֵי עֵלֶּה וַיִּקֶּם וַיִּלְדֹּךְ
אֶל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר־אָמַר־לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים:

Was there discussion? Why is no response recorded of Abraham to God’s “inhuman” command? This *silence on unsilence* breaks the expectation harshly by the simple opening words of this verse: Abraham just did. The one verb after the other. God tests: *why*, is *not said*; Abraham obeys: *why*, is *not said* either. These *suppressions of information* entice the reader, namely into Abraham’s shoes: vicariously, we live his obedience. He remains *unaware* that he is being tested; we the reader share with the narrator, and with God, that *secret*. Precisely this implicit shared *conspiracy* against Abraham, forced on us by the narrative, draws us into his life, *silently*.

⁴ .. בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיֵּשֶׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת־הַמָּקוֹם מֵרְחֹק:

Why are we given this detail about time? As a historical indication? Or simply as a narrative technique? If the latter, is this detail given because we are wanted by the author to be reminded of another instance, in the Psalter, in which eyes are lifted to a mountain and the question asked, where will my help come from? Then, in Psalm

121, as now, is the mountain a place of evil, against which divine protection is required, or is that the place where God dwells, on high? Alternatively, is this detail given because, as with many good stories, the really important events occur on the third day? The *silence* of this verse on these issues is deafening; hence, precisely, its narrative effect. We now, soon, expect the story climax.

⁵ וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל־נַעֲרָיו שְׁבוּ־לָכֶם פֹּה עִם־הַחֲמוֹר וְאֲנִי
וְהַנֶּעֱר נֵלְכָה עַד־כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנִשְׁוֹבָה אֵלֵיכֶם:

The *silence* is broken! Dialogue starts! For this first time during the whole journey, words are exchanged. But what do the words reveal? The purpose of the journey? Only *subterfuge*, it turns out. Contrary to the purpose of words – to reveal –, Abraham’s utterances here just push the real tension *below* the level of consciousness. What really will happen up ahead is *not revealed*. This is not fully a lie; it is not exactly wholly disclosive communication either. The first person plural form of וְנִשְׁוֹבָה has a sting: its meaning is singular (usually translated cleverly without numerical form as, simply, “and [then] come again”).

By what remains hidden behind the words, we the readers are drawn into *another conspiracy* here, this time with Abraham, against Isaac, and to the exclusion of the accompanying slaves. In reality, that is the exact power of these words. It is what is left *unsaid*, or is at best vaguely hinted at, that is the true power of this sentence. Here, *the conspiratorial silences are the meaning*.



וַיִּקַּח אֲבִרְהָם אֶת-עֵצֵי הָעֵלֶה וַיִּשֶׂם עַל-יִצְחָק בְּנֹו וַיִּקַּח

בְּיָדֹו אֶת-הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת-הַמִּאֲכָלֶת וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל-אֲבִרְהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּנִי

בְּנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיִה הַשֶּׁה לְעֵלֶה:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבִרְהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לֹו הַשֶּׁה לְעֵלֶה בְּנִי וַיִּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו:

As an eerie precursor to the famous Anthony Hopkins movie, Isaac here breaks the *silence* on the lamb. That is, the sacramental meal himself – we know – breaks the quietude on the one *missing* element of the sacramental offering up ahead: that which will experience the cut-throat action most directly, most existentially. Ironically, he that will be killed – brought to *nothing* – asks the question about that which will be killed. Isaac remains *ignorant* that his question is self-referential, not in a Derridaian way of endlessly referring signs, ad infinitum, but the exact opposite: it is self-annihilating referentiality. Unknowingly, Isaac speaks a death sentence. The ultimate finality this holds for him, however, remains *concealed*.

Abraham's response to the question on / by the lamb-to-the-slaughter is *devastating* to all faith. He does not lie, directly, but uses piety to *quash* a question; namely, for Isaac, *unwittingly*, the question of life. In such an answer, though no lie, lies no honesty. Here we find no integrity in human-human communication; nor in the intimate, trusting familial communication – least of all because it exploits the most existentially meaningful relationship, namely with God, to *hide reality*. Here, faith *sublimates* truth. Isaac is *kept in the dark*, ironically, *destructively*, by Abraham's

pious utterance. Thus, Isaac is taken for a ride, further along on the journey which for him will be a road to *nowhere*...

⁹ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לּוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם

אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת-הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת-יִצְחָק

בְּנוֹ וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לְעֵצִים:

¹⁰ וַיִּשְׁלַח אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמֶּאֱכָלֶת לְשֹׁחַט אֶת-בְּנוֹ:

Suddenly, time, place and action *collapse* here, into an *almost-zero*: what took a whole period of time, and involved a substantial change in location, and should have taken much effort, is *concentrated* into a few words only. During precisely this *contracted* mise-en-scène, Isaac is brought almost to *non-existence*. Like a black hole in outer space, which *compacts* everything in its environs into *near extinction*, these two verses summarise the rush of events – for Isaac, up to the very point of his death. In sharpest focus, this is the cutting edge of narrative technique.

¹¹ וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹוֹ מִלֶּאֶךְ יְהוָה מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבָרָהָם אֲבָרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הַגִּנִּי:

¹² וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-תְּשַׁלַּח יָדְךָ אֶל-הַנֶּעֱר וְאֶל-תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה

כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי-יִרְא אֱלֹהִים אֹתָהּ וְלֹא חָשַׁכְתָּ אֶת-בְּנֶךָ אֶת-יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי:

¹³ וַיִּשָּׂא אֲבָרָהָם אֶת-עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא וְהִנֵּה-אֵיל אַחֵר נֹאֲחָזוּ

בְּסַבָּךְ בְּקִרְבֵּי וַיִּלָּךְ אֲבָרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הָאֵיל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֵלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ:

Like the *deus ex machina* option in ancient Grecian theatre, when there is no longer for the leading characters any way to extricate themselves from a *hopeless* situation, suddenly, we have God's action, *out of the blue*: the miracle of Isaac's life being spared. Only now, and directly from the mouth of (the angel of) God, Isaac gets to hear the purpose of the *mystery* in the midst of which he finds himself; at the same time, Abraham is spared the most terrible act which he was about to commit. At this point, all that was hanging in the air, is cleared up.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שְׁמֵהַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר יְהוָה יִרְאֶה:¹⁴

All...? No, here, one last *lacuna* is cleared up. Where does the name of this place come from? This place is related to an ancient memory, in a very clever way: “Yahweh-jireh” is a finely-stringed word play between “*seeing*”, “*to be let seen*” (the active and passive), and to “*foresee*”. The word play between *nothingness* and being shown something fits the story of Isaac's *near-death* experience perfectly. This last question is thus settled.⁴³

וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל-נְעָרָיו וַיִּקְמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל-בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבְאֵר שֶׁבַע:¹⁹

But where is Isaac? He who was kept in the *dark*, has *disappeared* from the narrative. A new question! – the *mystery* of the *missing* son, and along with it, the *missing* future... Saved by God, Isaac *is* in this narrative *no more*. Yet, it is to

⁴³ With very few exceptions, verses 15-18 are regarded by exegetes as a later interpretation. This interpolation should, of course, be analysed too; however, for this brief experiment, this is (for reasons of brevity, and because the points I am trying to make can already be amply demonstrated) not done.

Beersheba that Abraham goes to from here: the “home” of the Isaac traditions. The *strange plot* thickens...

This *open-endedness* calls forth a rereading; and yet another: have we *missed* something?

And here we are, having read it yet again...

3.3.4 (Self-)evaluation

In this example of a narrative analysis, done in but a circumscribed way here, we can see that the approach of narratological exegesis allows one to describe the story, or rather, to re-describe it, for the sake of elucidating its inner workings. The strong point of this kind of analysis, as with all text-immanent approaches, is that it *takes* the reader to the text; its weak point is, though, that it *keeps* the reader with the text. That is: the reader never gets past the text; the text becomes the reader’s universe. This non-referential aspect as the text-as-narrative, a central aspect within narratological theories in general (cf. Thiselton 1992:471-514), means that such exegesis still does not tell the reader *what the text means, outside of its own universe*. That is precisely, though, what readers refer to when they ask about the meaning of a text, either when they are interested in its currency in the ancient world or when they seek in some way to relate a text to their own lives (alternatively: as they seek in some way to relate their own lives to a text). By means of narratological analysis we do manage to understand the text itself better, of course, or rather: some aspects of it, in some senses. What it had meant to initial hearers / readers, and to

the generations following them, including us, has however not been made clear by such an analysis.

Much engagement with the text has thus been offered by this method, and – usually – in a most enjoyable way. Still, the questions everybody keeps on asking of this text have not been answered. The narrative approach cannot answer them; the nature of this method is not to *respond* to issues, but to *recast* the story.

People who ask the difficult questions about the text, however, will not long submit to such subterfuge. Meaning for them is not the same thing as hearing the story in other words. Meaning is for them, as far as Genesis 22 is concerned, coming to terms with the terrifying morality implied here (cf. e.g. Westermann 1981:433 on Immanuel Kant), among other issues. Exegesis which does not address this may suit certain kinds of pieties; the critical mind, not.

3.3.5 End of story

Many stories such as this one above have been told about Genesis 22. Often aspects of the Aqedah account have, in the memorable terminology of Miscal (1983:140-141), remained “decidedly undecidable”. Narrative analyses, the re-storyings of the story, do not deliver on its self-expectation to simplify matters; they circumvent well, but answer little. When von Rad (1962:134) famously wrote that “(d)ie legitimste Form theologischen Redens vom Alten Testament ist ... immer noch die Nacherzählung“, he was working within a thoroughly historically-inclined paradigm. Von Rad’s exegesis, known for its narrative qualities, perhaps more so

than any other exegete over the past century, was indeed a retelling of the biblical texts, but then: *historically*.

The art of reading the Bible as narrative has yet to reach this point. Like much of earlier historical criticism, narrative analyses do not go far enough⁴⁴. The story may be retold, beautifully even, but what is offered us, in the end, is primarily a phenomenology of that particular narrative. Such a study, even when indicating (all too) briefly a date (see e.g. the collection of Old Testament stories retold by McCarthy & Riley 1986), is not full narrative criticism yet. Telling us how the narrative works, is only step one (as I have also indicated in Lombaard 2007a:69-70 / 2006c:23-24, drawing on Barr 1995:5-8). Full narrative analyses of the Bible would now take a next step, and discern trends in writing, comparing the art of the narrative in different historical phases and socio-cultural contexts, which is among the standard procedures of the scholarly critique of literature in general⁴⁵. This step, which would be so helpful, is never undertaken in narrative analyses of the biblical literature⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ I allude here to my recent chapter on Biblical Spirituality (Lombaard 2008a:150): "The point is not, as is often stated..., that historical criticism goes too far. Rather, the case is that historical criticism has tended not to have gone far enough! ... historical exegesis has often stopped at the point of coming to understanding of a given text in its ancient contexts.... The hazardous process of crossing the centuries to speak theologically and faithfully to the people and issues of our time is part of the core tasks of this discipline".

⁴⁵ My thanks for this insight to the recently deceased Prof. Elize Botha, the doyenne of the analysis of Afrikaans literature.

⁴⁶ Von Rad 1976:189 thinks in this direction with regard to the Elohist sources (albeit in a manner which would no longer be acceptable).

3.3.6 From retelling story to rewriting history

The purposes of the above narratological analysis of the Genesis 22 account includes demonstrating practically what has been theorised about this method in Chapter 2. Narrative analysis, as entertaining, even, as it is, does not contribute in its usual guise to our understanding of the historical questions related to this text – questions which simply will not go away.

Much more productive, it will be shown below, are historical analyses of this text, despite what has become a kind of automatic reaction on such methods, based on the assumption that such analyses cannot further a fruitful relationship of a reader with whichever text is in question.

It is to such a historical interpretation that we turn next. However, a different twist is included in the analysis below, namely by drawing on, precisely, narrative analysis, but then in a more historical way than is undertaken by its proponents, as had just been pleaded for.

3.4 Isaac multiplex – Genesis 22* in a new historical representation

After the narrative reading of Genesis 22, which showed that method to be less than satisfactory, a historically-oriented reading of Genesis 22* is now presented (cf.

Lombaard 2008d:907-919), which holds the possibility of placing this text in a new frame of reference for the modern reader.

3.4.1 Isaac multiplex

As complex as the interpretation history of the Aqedah text, Genesis 22:1-19*, over the past two millennia plus has been the scholarly analyses of this pericope over the past two centuries plus (see Popović 2002:211-223 for recent bibliographic references). The main *redaktionsgeschichtliche* and *rezeptionsgeschichtliche / wirkungsgeschichtliche* lines identified during this period may briefly be categorised in six different groups:

- Interpretation within the Aqedah text, with as prime example the *Fortschreibung* already in the text as we have it (cf. Moberly 1988:302-323), namely the almost universally-accepted (van Seters 1975:229; Coats 1983:152; and Seebass 1997:200-201; 213-214 are among the few who differ from the majority on this point) editorial addition of Genesis 22:15-18;
- The early religious reinterpretations of this narrative within Judaism, Christianity and Islam (cf. e.g. Steiger & Heinen 2006; Garcia Martínez 2002:44-57; van Bekkum 2002:86-95; Leemhuis 2002:125-139; Bekker & Nortjé 1995:457-462; Berman 1997; Kruger 1991:190-191);
- Representations within art history (cf. e.g. van den Brink 2002:140-151; de Jong 2002:152-165; Berman 1997:137-149);
- Within scholarly traditions, the historically-oriented interpretations, about which more below;

- Within scholarly circles still, the narrative approaches to this text, which for our purposes here may be classified with structuralist and semiotic readings as a-historical approaches, all of which are interesting, but – as indicated again in the preceding pages – rarely offer us something “new”, despite claims to the contrary (often also in the title of such publications);
- Lastly, philosophical-ethically inclined interpretations, the most famous of which are those by Kierkegaard (1843), Buber (1953) and Derrida (1992), though these discussions certainly go wider, with the best treatment of this interpretational genre the recent paper by Sekine (2007).

In what follows, then, I remain firmly within the ambit of the fourth of these interpretational strands, namely the historically-inclined interpretations of Genesis 22:1-14, 19⁴⁷. Within this historically-inclined interpretational strand on Genesis 22:1-14 & 19, though, the situation is not simple either.

3.4.2 Genesis 22* in historical interpretations, related

The historically-oriented interpretations of the meaning of the Genesis 22* account may be divided, broadly, into two main streams⁴⁸:

⁴⁷ It is clear that the majority opinion is correct in this instance, that verses 15-18 are textual additions. This does not mean that these verses are to be disregarded: to the contrary, their effect on recasting the rest of the Aqedah narrative and the resultant effect on the interpretation history of this text are very important, for this study too, as will shown below.

⁴⁸ Two minor streams offer alternative historical interpretations: that the Genesis 22* account reflects an earlier aetiology of the name of the mountain in 22:14 (יְהוָה יִרְאֶה), and that Genesis 22* reflects an

- those that seek to understand the text within the cultic history of ancient Israel; and
- those that seek to understand the text within the theodicy discussion among Old Testament texts.

The former option, with Genesis 22* placed within the cultic history of Israel, sees behind the text the ancient practice of child sacrifice, with this text seeking to put to an end such practices, by indicating God's strong preference for an animal. The fact that this prohibition is placed by the Genesis 22* narrative at the very beginnings of Israel's faith history, namely as part of the experiences of God of the arch-patriarch Abraham, is a calculated strategy, namely to show to the intended audience of this text that from the father of their Yahweh-belief onwards (as they understood its historical construction in the post-exilic time), child sacrifice had been anathema.

The dating attached to the Genesis 22*-narrative by proponents of this solution varies quite widely, from after 722/721 (so, recently, Noort 2002:19), to the time of king Manasseh (because of the reference to child sacrifice in 2Kings 21:6, and then usually as part of the Elohist's 7th century narrative; cf. e.g. Steins 2001:514-515), to shortly after the exile (the most popular suggestion at present), to – in the case of Stavrakopoulou 2004 – much later in Israel's history, since child sacrifice would have, according to Stavrakopoulou, continued as a part of Israel's practice of faith.

initiation rite (only White 1991:187, 203, drawing on his earlier work, White 1979:1-30). Though some vague nods have been made in the direction of the former proposal, always with the qualification that even if it were true, that aspect now lies so far behind the text as to be essentially untraceable, the White-suggestion has found no audience.

With Genesis 22* understood as a text within the clearly post-exilic theodicy controversy, this account finds itself understood among texts such as Job (a popular linkage made in scholarly literature; see e.g. van Ruiten 2002:58-85) and Qohelet, reacting against, for instance, some Proverbs-texts which, with the most observable connection to Deuteronomistic theology (cf. Lombaard 2002b:1-82 & 2002d:1-82; on problems with the concept of a Deuteronomistic movement, see e.g. Lohfink 1995:313-382), advocate a firm retributive ethical order. Against the latter, Genesis 22* points to the mystery of God's ways. In the exilic / post-exilic period, while coming to terms with 587/6, Genesis 22* would then be another representative of post-dogmatic piety within Israel. Genesis 22* would argue in this debate that suffering, leading almost to death, and from which there is, after all, escape, are all part of the inscrutability of God's ways with Judah.

In the first of these two major historically-oriented interpretations, a pre- or early-Yahwistic element (though probably not a non-Yahwistic element) of Israel's faith, namely child sacrifice, is countered by Genesis 22*; in the second such interpretation, a post-exilic ethical dogmatism is opposed. Both these interpretations have found common expression within the historically-inclined exegeses of the Genesis 22*-text.

However, the most popular synchronic interpretation remains aligned to that which is provided in the text-as-is, namely that this narrative is a call to blind obedience to God. Either dehistoricised or read naively as a historically accurate account, Genesis 22 thus becomes an exhortation to faith in all circumstances; that is,

encouragement to trust that God will provide an escape from difficult situations, even though these cannot always be foreseen by human agents. Genesis 22 is thus, in this line of thinking, a pious, moral tale. However, the morality of a God that in fact created the almost-slaughter of Isaac in this narrative is left unconsidered by such readings (and usually by those within the historical line of exegesis, when this interpretation is offered, too), rendering such explanations wholly unfit to provide the model of trust they seek to impart. This is precisely the kind of weaknesses missionary anti-religious writings, such as that recently again by Dawkins (2006:242-243), have focussed on. Such narrow moralistic interpretations of Genesis 22 will not change, and certainly not answer, the questions popularly asked about this text. Neither can the philosophically-oriented discussions, which tend to offer conjectures on concepts and themes in this account (cf. Sekine 2007) – interesting enough, but not resolving much.

It remains for historical exegesis to open avenues of accounting for the existence of this text and its inclusion in the canon.

It is along these lines that another historical context for this account is now proposed.

3.4.3 Genesis 22* and the relationship between the patriarchs

This proposed alternate historical understanding of Genesis 22* was induced directly by the text-as-anecdotal-history view indicated in Chapter 2. In this reading, Genesis 22* retains the familiar themes: threat, saving grace, and subjugation; now, however, not related to either religious practice or to theological debate, as had been the case

with the respective major historical explanations summarised above, but related to inner-Israelite identity politics. Genesis 22* can namely be read as a text reflecting the power play within ancient Israel (more specifically: Judah), in which the carriers of the Abraham traditions with this narrative either reflect on past events, or threaten imminent events, in their conflict with the carriers of the Isaac traditions.

It has for a long time been clear to historical scholarship from parallel texts such as the *אֲשֶׁתוֹ אַחֲתִי* passages – Genesis 26:1-11 (*יִצְחָק*), 12:10-20 (*אַבְרָם*), 20:1-18 (*אַבְרָהָם*) – that there was a competition of sorts between the respective tradents of the Isaac and Abraham traditions in ancient Israel. By the sheer weight of Abraham-texts included in the Pentateuch when compared to the few Isaac texts, it is clear who the winner in this power struggle was. The *אֲשֶׁתוֹ אַחֲתִי* passages show us something of the process of this rivalry. The one whose stories dominate, dominate history – and *vice versa*.

Following this line of interpretation, in Genesis 22* we find Isaac, and thus per implication the Isaac tradents, at the mercy of both Abraham and God, and so per implication at the mercy of the Abraham tradents⁴⁹. Isaac is cast in the role of family idiot: he has no inkling of what is about to happen. Isaac (and so the Isaacites) is in the power of Abraham (that is: the Abrahamites) and God: the latter two form a

⁴⁹ Unintentionally, von Rad 1976:194 comes very close to this view, when he writes: “Das spätere Israel ... konnte wohl nichts anders als sich in Isaac verkörpert zu sehen, d.h. also auf den Altar Jahwes gelegt, ihm zurückgegeben und dann allein von ihm das Leben zurückempfangend, ... allein aus dem Willen dessen, der Isaac aus der Freiheit seines Geschichtswillen leben ließ.“

powerful union⁵⁰ in which Isaac (the Isaacites) is both clueless and powerless. The warning is clear: Isaac (the Isaacites) will from now on play a subservient role in the religious identity of the composite “tribe” of Israel in Judah. The אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹרָהָם has come to dominate the פְּתָר יִצְחָק (cf. Genesis 31:42 & 53)⁵¹; the union of Israel, post-exilic, is being forged with power, that is, with both the threat of demise and with divine justification / compliance. Such power rhetoric is typical of ruthless “political scheming” (this terminology from Kruger 1991:193): that the threat of violence is combined with theological support. This is a claim which is always easy for a dominant group to make, and always almost impossible for the dominated to refute. The Isaacites in Israel have been overpowered by the Abrahamites. Isaac now fully plays the role of an insignificant middle child. To recontextualise the words of White (1991:190): “His role and identity thus are defined altogether with respect to the powerful bonds which tie him to Abraham”, and, I would add, to the alliance with God which Abraham claims.

Hence, Genesis 22* here plays a role which can be said in some ways to parallel that which had been ascribed to Joshua 24 in the earlier widely-accepted amphictyony theory of Noth (1954:83-104), namely that we see in this text different groups being combined, if not unified; in this case, though ultimately peacefully, not without the threat of imminent, divine-sanctioned violence. It is but by the grace of

⁵⁰ Davies 2000:21-40 refers with his typical humour to this alliance as “male bonding” between God and Abraham, which he interprets as two macho figures engaged in constant one-upmanship.

⁵¹ Clearly, Alt’s 1929 *Gott der Väter*-hypothesis echoes here...

God that Isaac lives; had it been in the hands of Abraham, Isaac would be no more – this is clearly the implication the Isaacites should grasp⁵².

3.4.4 Genesis 22:19

The two problems of Genesis 22:19, that Abraham returns from the mountain *alone*, and that he then goes to *Beersheba*, may now be resolved differently from the usual suggestions with this interpretation. The Abraham-alone reference is not a simple *pars pro toto* expression here, referring to only Abraham but implying that Isaac went along; nor is this the point where Isaac finds his own way, his own identity apart from Abraham. Rather, the opposite is the case here: Isaac counts no more; the Isaacites have been subjugated. It is therefore not without good reason that it is for, precisely, Beersheba, the home base of the Isaac traditions, that Abraham then departs. The geographical reference is not meant as a narrative link of this account to the out-of-place episode of the treatise between Abraham and Abimelech which immediately precedes Genesis 22 (i.e. Genesis 21:25-33, + 34; at best, the shared geographic reference may explain why these two texts were put next to one another by later

⁵² Miyamoto's interpretation, reading *וַיִּשָׂא אֶת־הַהָרִים שָׁם לְעֹלָה* in Genesis 22:2 as "lift up [Isaac] on the mountain in order to offer a burnt offering" (cf. Sekine 2007:11 on Miyamoto 2006:81–162) may be creative, and his resultant conclusion that Genesis 22 leads to "a tribe-conquering narrative identity" (Sekine 2007:11) appears attractive to my proposed interpretation here. However, Miyamoto apparently indicates a personal, existential element with this phrase (based on his cultural-philosophical background?), whereas the interpretation possibility offered here is that of an adversarial relationship between two different tradent *groups*, which is "resolved" by the one now finally and thoroughly coming to dominate the other, "with God on our side" (in the words of folk singer Bob Dylan, 1964).

editors). Beersheba too is now Abraham's domain. The Isaacites have been vanquished; the winner takes all.

3.4.5 Genesis 22:15-18 & 1

Soon after, however, a sugar-coating was needed. When power play has succeeded, it can be hidden, so that the powerful may be experienced (again) as "good people". This not only portrays the winner who took all in a more positive light; it also stabilises the power relation that has now been established. The act of subjugation is thus sublimated and reinforced, all at once. Thus, with theological flair, Genesis 22:15-18 does both: it gives new credence to the acts of Abraham (and thus the Abrahamites) by casting him now as "ein religiöses Ideal" (Gunkel 1917:240)⁵³, rewarded in these verses by God's blessing; this is done in such a way that Isaac (the Isaacites) suffer(s) the inconsequence of instrumentalist reference only: for him / them, no reward⁵⁴, except perhaps to count among those who are blessed in the arch-patriarch (Genesis 22:18)⁵⁵.

⁵³ Boehm 2002:1-12 & 2004:155-156 thinks in some ways along parallel lines to my reasoning on this point, but sees the heavenly intervention here as a later apology for Abraham who, in an older version of the events, sacrificed a sheep in stead of obeying the command of verse 1. He accepts, thus, concord between Abraham and Isaac – one of many such apologetic turns in both the academic and religious literature on the Aqedah. An interpretation which notices the inner-religious contest, however, requires no such interpretative turns.

⁵⁴ The harmonious interpretation of this narrative as that Abraham and Isaac are here given to one another, because of their shared obedience to God, as Kaiser (2003:224) would have it, does not take into account the minute, instrumentalist-only role Isaac is afforded here. In addition, one has to make sense of the given that Isaac is absent from verse 19, and Abraham moves alone to Beersheba, the

This earliest reinterpretation of the account by Genesis 22:15-18 is further cemented by employing the term נִסָּה (tempting / testing / trying) in Genesis 22:1 (cf. Gunkel 1917:238). Thus, the whole account is now recast, from the beginning, giving it from that moment a much stronger theological than political slant. From this instant onwards (in both the narrative *and* its reception history), the story is all about God and Abraham (reinterpreting here Westermann 1981:434, 436); the overpowering of Isaac has effectively been overlaid with a theological motif. Of course, as often happens with political interference in matters religious⁵⁶, the results could not be foreseen: 24 centuries – and counting – of speculation on what could have been going on in the mind of the God of Genesis 22...

3.4.6 24 centuries...?

The dating of this text, as with so many others, is in the by now stock phrase, notoriously difficult. Despite misgivings expressed earlier on the possibilities

home of the Isaac traditions, as stated above: symbolically with this narrative to take over both the locality and to some extent the Isaac traditions. The latter we see most clearly with the “my wife - my sister” passages.

⁵⁵ Moberly’s interpretation (1988:319-323) of the addition of verses 15-18, namely that Abraham would from now on (i.e. for Moberly, the 7th or 6th century) play an intercessory role in Israel’s faith, would have supported my argument here: Isaac is rendered powerless by God-and-Abraham-in-alliance. However, I do not find this Abraham-as-intercessory view of the Aqedah postscript by Moberly convincing.

⁵⁶ Remember: it is a white South African, born into the Dutch Reformed Church, writing here – cf. Lombaard 2009d, 2009c & 2001b:69-87.

narratology offers with the interpretation of the *meaning* of this text, higher hopes emerge on the promise it holds for *dating* Genesis 22* – if, as indicated earlier, it is done historically.

I have namely argued above that:

...narrative analyses do not go far enough. The story may be retold, beautifully even, but what is offered us, in the end, is primarily a phenomenology of that particular narrative. Such a study ... is not full narrative criticism yet. Telling us how the narrative works, is only step one... Full narrative analyses of the Bible would now take a next step, and discern trends in writing, comparing the art of the narrative in different historical phases and socio-cultural contexts, which is among the standard procedures of the scholarly critique of literature in general. This step, which would be so helpful, is never undertaken in narrative analyses of the biblical literature.

The narratological-historical question to ask of Genesis 22*, thus, is: when is the time of the short story in ancient Israel?

In classical Pentateuchal *Literarkritik*, the time of "the great narratives" (to appropriate Lyotard 1989:315) began with a Solomonic J, perhaps around 950. Now, much less impressive ages for a J are commonly accepted (on the J dispute, see Gertz, Schmid & Witte 2002 and Dozeman & Schmid 2006); yet, the point remains that *Literarkritik / Literargeschichte* and *Literaturkritik / Literaturgeschichte* ought not be that far removed from one another. On the less expansive than J,

though perhaps more coherent shorter narratives, such as first, Daniel and then, Joseph, the commonly accorded age has dropped equally dramatically, as the “carbon dating” of critical scholarship has continually been applied to these narratives. For the most part, “short stories” such as the books of Esther, Jonah and Ruth have long found a comfortable consensual home in post-exilic to late-post-exilic times. For a narrative such as Genesis 22 – a “short short story” – to be placed within the fourth century, or even the third, BCE is therefore a possibility not to be reckoned without, given that the literary genre of the short story finds an easy home in this period.

This would not mean that this late date would be the first time any hint of this story’s constitutive elements had existed. The possibilities of an aetiology (Genesis 22:14), an intra-religious polemic about child sacrifice, and a theodicy debate, all of which may have in some ways given impetus to what became “our” story, are not to be summarily discarded. All stories draw significantly, though not necessarily deliberately, on themes and ideas available within their birth culture – cultural “reverberations”, in the language of Boehm (2004:147).

It is for precisely this reason, namely that the theme of child sacrifice becomes more acceptable at some distance from the exile and the strong contemporaneous influence of Deuteronomistic theology, that a later dating for Genesis 22* is more likely than an earlier dating. It seems highly unlikely that child sacrifice would have survived as actual practice in the Judean cult past the exile, or even past the prophets such as Hosea and Amos, simply because of the ethical impulses towards social justice from these prophets onwards (cf. Lombaard 2002c:83-140 & 2002e:83-

138). (That is, if actual child sacrifice, rather than just a cultural awareness, had been a significant part of Yahwism, or of the surrounding religions, about which doubts have been expressed.) The point is, however, that after the initially insular stances post-exilically, which we find particularly in Ezra-Nehemiah, the later, reactive, outward-looking stances in Judea tend to be more positive towards contact with outside cultures. Thus, in the developing literature of the time, Ruth goes to Moab, probably in the 5th century; Jonah to Nineveh, in the late 4th / early 3rd century; and Esther to Persia, during the 3rd century; the wisdom book Qohelet goes so far as to quote, both with approval and in dispute, Hellenistic philosophy, in the 3rd century (cf. Lohfink 2003). A growing trend towards openness can thus be detected in this cultural phase in Judaism towards employing “external” elements in order to make an “internal” point. The use of a theme from the religious environs of Yahwism, such as child sacrifice, would thus fit well with a later dating of the Genesis 22*-narrative.

Based on these two considerations – literature type (the growing prominence of the ever shorter short story in Israel) and thematic orientation (the easier acceptance of “foreign” material) – the Aqedah could thus be dated with some certainty to no earlier than the fourth century, though precisely how long after 400 remains unclear. The earliest reinterpretation of the story, by means of the new frame of verses provided by Genesis 22:15-18 & 1, as indicated above, could have occurred within a very short period of time; precision, though, eludes everybody on this point. The latest possible dating for the text as a whole would be around 280 – 250 BCE (cf. e.g. Dines 2004:41-45), with the translation of the Hebrew Bible texts into Greek, that is, into the Septuagint, at which point the Genesis 22* account as we have it had been fully established.

3.4.7 The remains of the day

With this theory proposed, what remains to investigate is how the subjugation of Isaac in Genesis 22 is effected in the rest of the Isaac narratives; that is, how this “new Abraham” and “new Isaac” colour anew the other Old Testament references. Genesis 22 could thus indeed become a “centre” of sorts of the Pentateuch (as Steins 2001:516 would have it, but understood differently here). Such following investigations would not only provide further critical reflection on the possibilities, or none, this suggested interpretation offers, but could also aid in the relative dating of the Isaac texts.

These endeavours are undertaken in what follows.

3.5 Genesis 22* as interpretative key to the Isaac texts

To summarise the theory that has been proposed above: the Genesis 22* account is a text incorporating earlier narrative elements and theo-ethical themes, which during the fourth or early third century BCE had been a key text in the inner-Judean identity politics. With this account, the tradents of the Abraham traditions subjugated firmly the tradents of the Isaac traditions, making the case resolutely that the Isaacites are to be found within Second Temple Judaic society but by the grace of God. The Abrahamites are their definite superiors in their contemporary society. By then recasting this account in religious, even pious terms, namely that the whole episode

had been a test of Abraham's faith, a test he had passed with flying colours, Abraham is thus no longer cast as a mere power player in the socio-political sphere, but he is now also the ultimate faith hero, to the extent that he becomes a kind of mediator of God's blessings to all. The case for Abrahamite superiority is thus made even more strongly, with this religious play. Socially, that is: theo-politically, the Isaacites have thus been effectively marginalised.

By casting the events Genesis 22* recounts into early history, much authority is added to this power-play, for all – the victor and the vanquished – have now to accept that this is the way it had always been. The implication is clear: Abraham will always be the father; Isaac, always the son. However, this is a genealogical relationship of a special type, because, thoroughly unusually, Abraham had brought Isaac to the very brink of death. This had been done in express cooperation with the will of God. The suppression of Isaac is thus complete. For the Isaacites, there can be no deliverance, socially or theologically, from this lesser position. Father Abraham and his God keep Isaac in his place; the Genesis 22* account demonstrates dramatically that the Isaacites have no hope of rising above their accorded status.

The question is, now, how much of this struggle, of these identity politics, can be detected in the other, less prominent Isaac texts of the Old Testament. Because the evidence is scant, the conjectures offered below cannot be related as firm conclusions. At best, vague hints which have to be teased out from the few Isaac texts that we have in the Old Testament, may be indicated.

CHAPTER 4: INTERPRETATIVE IMPLICATIONS OF GENESIS 22* AS READ ANEW ON THE OTHER ISAAC PASSAGES IN GENESIS

Two dangers must be guarded against in this chapter:

- First, that the usually independent, anecdotal nature of the different accounts, as indicated in Chapter 2 of this study, is forgotten. It remains with each of these texts discussed below the case that they recount often unrelated stories, “in episodic form” (Fretheim 1996:80).
- Second, that the interpretations offered here are understood as having been the meaning of these accounts throughout their existence. That is patently not the case. Each of these narratives indeed had had its own history (which may have been an extended history) of development in oral and/or textual phases, the meaning of which, true to the nature of most literature, changed in time, either through altered socio-historical contexts or by means of deliberate editorial processes. The latter constitutes either redactional work *within* the texts themselves, or redactional work *around* the texts, namely by altered framing. A new frame can speak a thousand words too...

What is offered below, in summary, is precisely that: the new shade of meaning cast by Genesis 22*, as interpreted above, over the body of Isaac references. These accounts would (or more modestly: could) now have been understood (anew) by readers / hearers whose frame of reference has been fundamentally (re)formed by this interpretative key of Genesis 22*. What is offered here should thus not be understood as an argument for the late dating of all of these texts, but (closer to the Alt – Gunkel – Noth – von Rad line of thinking indicated in Chapter 2) as an

exploration of additional meaning that may well have accrued to these often older accounts, in the light of the influence of the Genesis 22* account.

In each instance below, then, extensive exegeses of the different texts are not presented. Rather, the implications of the hermeneutical effect of Genesis 22*, as understood above, are simply described in brief.

4.1 Isaac's birth narratives – Genesis 17:19-21 & 21:1-8

The promise of Isaac's birth is embedded within the twin covenantal chapters of Genesis 15 and 17. The differences between these two chapters are both profound and well known, with the ensuing debate on comparative dating and theology. Drawing on the theory of the multiplexity of the patriarchal figures, along with the concurrent competition between the tradents of the different patriarchs, a different perspective emerges, related here specifically to the implication this has for the Isaac reference in Genesis 17:19-21.

In the Genesis 15 account (cf. e.g Ruppert 2002:235-293; Westermann 1981:247-275), a more traditional arrangement of a covenant is related, with animal sacrifice giving figurative expression to the agreement. The patriarch involved is Abram, and though no names are mentioned, the promise of an heir is a prominent part of the covenant arrangement; however, with as central importance here the giving of hereditary land. In Genesis 17, the scene is different (cf. e.g Ruppert 2002:331-362; Westermann 1981:301-328): the covenant entails a radically new symbolic act, namely the ritual of circumcision, which forms part of a covenant with Abram, who in

the process is renamed Abraham. Here, in Genesis 17, one may very well postulate a merging of two different patriarchal traditions, one associated with an Abram-figure, the other with an Abraham-figure (see also the accompanying Sarai-Sarah nomenclature), with the two identities being merged into one at this juncture, as part of an emerging collective identity of the respective traditions during the time of narration and later.

In a text which clearly has a complex literary history, the Isaac-references in Genesis 17 seem awkward. The sign of the covenant is, prominently, performed on Ishmael; however, it is clear from the text that a parting of the ways between the Ishmaelites and Isaacites is reflected here. The same is the case with Genesis 21 (cf. e.g. Scharbert 1986:160-164): although the text begins with the circumcision of Isaac, the remainder of the chapter deals with two other explicitly anti-Isaacite accounts. First, Abraham's love and God's care for Ishmael are amply demonstrated; second, Abraham's connection with Beersheba is related. From both these clues, and the apparent slant away from Isaac in Genesis 17 (cf. Boase 2001:314-315), it is clear that the Isaacite birth narratives as we have them in the present form do not swing any scales dramatically in Isaac's favour. Not even is land promised to Isaac, as one would expect (de Pury 1998:13). At best, the Isaacites remain within the ambit of the Abrahamic line. This is however, contrary to what is usually assumed by this scenario, not an altogether positive run of events for Isaac: compared to the love, care and freedom afforded the Ishmaelites (as with Abraham's sons from his concubines – Genesis 25:6), the negative undertones of the Isaacites being inescapably locked into a hereditary line with the Abrahamites show through too. In the same way as is the case in the closing verses to the Aqedah account in Genesis

22*, Isaac is not only trapped in a hierarchical arrangement with Abraham-and-God, but is also deprived of a primary, ancient link to Beersheba. The vanquished loses all.

This argument would thus provide further support for the later dating of the Genesis 17 account vis-à-vis Genesis 15 (cf. e.g. Ruppert 2002:289); this however does not necessary imply a dating for Genesis 15 as early as, say, the pre-exilic period. Probably, both accounts spring from post-exilic times. Genesis 17, though, would reflect a later dating of the two, with the subjugation of Isaac within the Abrahamic covenant made more explicit – a subjugation which would have been made easier by a putative merging of the Abram and Abraham groups. Together, these two groups keep the Isaacites in line, within the covenant with God, and take over their ancestral location.

4.2 A family for Isaac – Genesis 24, 25, & 27

One of the peculiarities about the account of how Rebekah becomes Isaac's wife, is how little of Isaac is mentioned. He hardly features in the account. Moreover, though his wife is to come from Abraham's family, Isaac himself is not to visit the Abrahamic ancestral territory – both these aspects are expressly stressed. Seen from the perspective of the conflict in post-exilic times between the Abrahamites and Isaacites, both these aspects gain an additional hue. This is namely that Isaac is bound in still another way to the dominant Abrahamite clan, yet is denied any access to the ancestral area of Bethel. Taken together, these are rather strong strategies with which to convey the message of the Isaac group's subordination to the Abraham

group (cf. Boase 2001:333). The fact of the direct divine guidance in leading Abraham's emissary to the chosen wife, gives this further tying of Isaac to the Abrahamite clan an unmistakable air of theological legitimacy being added.

In the account of the birth of Isaac's children – Genesis 25:11, 19-34 – the same trend as with the finding of Rebekah is encountered (cf. e.g. Soggin 1997:333): Isaac himself plays but a minor role. The greater part of the account deals with the struggle between Jacob and Esau. Again, viewed from the post-exilic struggle for dominance between the tradents of the different patriarchal traditions, it becomes apparent that in the struggle of (the much more dominant) Jacob with Esau, Isaac is regarded as unimportant enough not to feature heavily at all. Even though Jacob and Esau are cast as the next generation after Isaac, it is in this case not the elder who is given the greater emphasis. The Isaacites are diminutive enough in stature in post-exilic Juda that Isaac is afforded the bare minimum of attention. To be sure, he is there. However, his role is far on the background, as the next generation struggles for prominence.

Isaac's being sidelined here may have much to do with the fact that he is perceived as aligning himself with the wrong party in the struggle for prominence between Esau and Jacob, as shown not only in the birth narrative of the twin brothers, but most explicitly in Genesis 27 (cf. e.g. Scharbert 1986:190-195). The alliance between the Jacob and Abraham, with here the Abrahamites represented strongly by their embedded agent Rebekah (cf. Genesis 25:28), manage to deceive Isaac (hapless again here, as in the Genesis 22* account) into passing on the baton of leadership to Jacob. In the subsequent events, Isaac is ever more marginalised: Jacob is, as was

the case with Isaac, to take a wife from the Abrahamite clan associated with Bethuel (Genesis 28). The link between Jacob (the Jacobites) and the Abrahamites thus serves to lock Isaac in on all sides: his father, wife and most prominent son are all allied. Isaac retains only a very strictly circumscribed area of identity; the Isaacites have no area of independent influence.

4.3 Isaac's prosperity found, prosperity lost – Genesis 26:12-33 and the “my wife - my sister” passages

The Genesis 26:12-33 account is the only remaining Old Testament text which shows still something of Isaac's initial power. The text shows Isaac accumulating wealth independently, to the point that it even leads to conflict because of limited resources, and then shows the patriarch being associated with Beersheba as patriarchal territory, namely by Isaac naming the area.

However, even here, rather ill fitting references to Abraham show an attempt already within this text to play down Isaac's independent success. In two ways, mention is made by editorial means that Abraham had been in this southern area before, and that he thus had been the true pioneer – in Genesis 26:15 & 18, Abraham's antecedent actions are indicated, unnecessarily, and in verse 24 it is explicitly stated that all of Isaac's success had been through the grace of God, but then: because of Isaac's link with Abraham. The impression the text creates from the perspective of the post-exilic reader is that Isaac by himself is able to do no good; he is no pioneer; any blessing he receives is not by direct grace of God. In each instance, Abraham is

the mediator. The message hints delicately, but unambiguously: the Isaacites have a place only inasmuch as they are under the patronage of the Abrahamites.

This message is conveyed in another manner too, no longer by editorial means within the text, yet in this instance too with a view further to refute any claim Isaac may have on Beersheba. In Genesis 21:22-34 (cf. e.g. Ruppert 2002:487-503) we find a different version of the events recounted in Genesis 26:26-31. The former is not a harmless duplication of an account, with the patriarch innocently transposed from Isaac to Abraham, either during an oral phase or in the process of enscripturation. Here – refer to the remarks above on the closing verses of the Genesis 22* account – is a deliberate commandeering of an Isaacite account by Abrahamites, in order to rewrite history in their favour: not with Isaac, but with Abraham Abimelech contracted on the ownership of the land of Beersheba. This is thus a deliberate case of the redistribution of the land, not here to the benefit of the poor, but rather following the dictum that ὅς γὰρ ἔχει, δοθήσεται αὐτῷ· καὶ ὅς οὐκ ἔχει, καὶ ὃ ἔχει ἀρθήσεται ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ (Mark 4:25).

These different ways of communicating this message is repeated, in a similar way, in the famous “my wife - my sister” passages – Genesis 26:1-11, with parallels Genesis 12:10-20 and 20:1-18. Mostly, doublets (or in this case, triplets) are explained in historical research as either literary motifs finding repeated application in different accounts, or that the same account comes to be associated with different figures (cf. Zenger 2006:78-79; Krauss & Küchler 2004:244; Gooder 2000:52, 56-57 summarises the main explanations that have been offered for the “my wife - my sister” trilogy). The process is thus viewed as non-deliberate, having something to

do with a natural growth in a culture's body of literature. However, taken from the threefold perspective of the multiplexity of the patriarchal figures, the competition for prominence between the patriarchal traditions, and the interpretative light of Genesis 22* as understood above cast across all Isaac references, new emphases emerge here.

The Isaac version, in the opening verses of Genesis 26, serves mostly to recount how this patriarch's sojourn in the South had come about. There is an air of legitimacy to this account, not so much because of the pathos of the content, but most directly because of the traditional association of Isaac with the southernmost part of Juda. Not so the two Abrahamite accounts, in Genesis 12 and 20, which show respectively the as yet unmerged Abram and Abraham figures both independently competing with Isaac for the story – that is: for the geographical area, and by implication, for social prominence. From this my wife - my sister trilogy the strong possibility, within the theoretical lines as drawn above, emerges that the Abram-group and the Abraham-group had found, before their joining, already a common opponent in the figure and thus group of Isaac. Apart from the affinity that may well already have existed between groups respectively linked to iconic figures with such similar names, the old adage that one's enemy's enemy is one's friend could not have hurt their emerging unity.

Though from this perspective alone not much can be said about the relative dating of the Genesis 12 and 20 versions of these events, it is plain that the antecedent account is the Isaacite version of Genesis 26 (true to the interpretative tradition following Noth 1948:116). Rather than, *vice versa*, it being a case with these three

deception accounts that “Abraham passes the idea on to his son Isaac” (Davies 2000:27), the opposite is true: this account *itself* passes on from Isaac to Abraham. A literary deception of the readers is effected by the account being twice usurped by Abrahamites. Thus, the historical social geography of Juda is rewritten, for the sake of favouring the Abrahamite coalition in post-exilic Juda.

4.4 Summary

From these Isaac accounts three strategies emerge by which the Abrahamite supporters appropriate identity-forming narratives to their own benefit:

- By editorial processes within an existing account, namely by adding references to Abraham with which to accentuate his primacy over Isaac;
- By character definition; that is, by placing Isaac only on the background in most accounts, he plays just a supportive role, which means that readers are not led to deduce that he is of any major import;
- By duplication of accounts, with such duplication deliberately being set up in order for the patriarch without power, Isaac, to lose ever more of what he had had: significance, land and – in the eyes of the text beholders – social influence.

These accounts reflect different phases through which this process of social exclusion by absorption had been effected. In the my wife - my sister passages, the as yet un-united Abrahamites each independently vie for the Isaacite southern influence. The existence of both an Abram and an Abraham duplicate account gives evidence to this three-way competition. By the time of the induction of the new

ceremony, attested to in Genesis 17, however, the merger of the Abrahamites is well under way. The circumcision is thus as much a symbol of a new divine covenant and a celebration of a newly created unity among the Abrahamites as it is, by implication, an indication of a firm movement towards the emasculation of the Isaacites. The Isaacite family accounts show this process being executed ever more fully, as Isaac finds himself encircled from all sides by representatives of the Abrahamic line. Of the once mighty Isaac encountered in the second half of Genesis 26, precious little has remained. Most of that chapter has been copied, by means of which the Abraham claims are made to supersede any Isaacite priority. In the other Genesis accounts, we also see Isaac sidelined by means of different strategies.

The way in which these perspectives can further be applied to come to an understanding of Isaac's history in the Pentateuch, is indicated in the closing chapter to this study. Next, though, our attention is drawn to three Isaac texts which together exhibit a unique characteristic related to this patriarch, which may add further light to the theories being pursued in this study.