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## FOREWORD

Although the phrase “crisis of authority” has developed almost the status of cliché, the phenomenon to which it refers is nonetheless very real. We are clearly living in a time when the foundational values of Western civilization have eroded to a dangerous degree. This development, auguring the descent of a new Dark Age, presents the church with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that Christians no longer may merely assume that the momentum of Western Christendom will continue to provide an environment favorable to Christian faith and life. The church is challenged to re-examine and perhaps totally to rebuild a foundation capable of supporting free and faithful lives.

Yet, the erosion of traditional values also offers the church an opportunity to commend Christian faith to those who, in Isaiah’s words, “grope for the wall like the blind.” In unparalleled fashion, the present situation calls for the church to demonstrate the relevance of Christian faith. These essays are presented toward the end of encouraging Christian reflection regarding the many issues associated with the loss of authority in the wider society and in the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

THE AKEDAH: A ROOT EXPERIENCE AS AUTHORITY  
FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

By Allan McNicol

At the outset, I would like to bring to your attention an observation made by Eric Auerbach in his monumental study of narrative Mimesis.<sup>1</sup> Auerbach discusses the episode in Genesis that scholars designate the Akedah or what is called in other circles “The Testing of Abraham” (Gen. 22:1-19). According to Auerbach, in this narrative there is a marvelous suggestive capacity that “serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed” in the actual literal account of the story.<sup>2</sup>

To my way of thinking, Auerbach’s observation is a clue which when followed can lead us anew to the sense of awe and appreciation for these stories that has been apparent among the people of God.

This leads me to my basic proposal. That is, through following the clue of an observance of “a deep sense of the unexpressed” and other similar literary features, we come to see that biblical narrative has a configuration that develops its own distinctive attitude toward reality. The more we study the individual figures in the biblical story, the more we realize that these accounts which involve individual figures only make sense

when we see that they are part of a Gestalt or unity which envelops the individual figure and the particular story. This configuration will often serve to transcend and transfer the particular story into the framework of a total Story which gives focus to the basic description of reality implicit in the narrative, and provides ultimately a glimpse into the world of the eternal. I realize this is a powerful claim. In the following comment, I will attempt to substantiate the argument. To do this, we must go back to Genesis 22.

### The Model for Understanding Biblical Narrative

At the outset, reading along in Genesis 22:1, we come to a very simple direct account, “after these things, God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’” In this economy of statement, as Auerbach points out, from the beginning, through the reading of the narrative we are led suggestively beyond the mere contemplation of the literary development of the figures mentioned in the story. By means of an awareness of a deep sense of the unexpressed in the story we move into new territory. We are forced to ask, “What is the locale for this confrontation between Abraham and God?” The text is silent. We are in the realm of the unexpressed. “What is God doing talking to Abraham?” Again, there is no answer in the text, “Why did God test Abraham?” He may have had his reasons, but the reader is never told. We are simply left to wonder.

Furthermore, if we look specifically at the information about Abraham, it is equally sparse. We are told he must go to the land of Moriah. However, nothing is said about the

circumstances of the divine visit to him. “Did God come in a dream?” Perhaps it was at night. We are not sure. “Did Abraham immediately recognize the call or was it a dawning realization?” Again the text is silent. In just two short verses, God appears to Abraham, tells him to take his only son to the land of Moriah and offer him as a human sacrifice on one of the holy mountains. There must be more to the narrative than that. Who is this God that comes and tells people to offer their first-born son of promise as a human sacrifice?

The subsequent narration of the story follows in similar vein. The unexpressed elements, if anything, become more dominant as the story continues. The economical framework of the narrative is a constant feature of the story. Abraham travels for three days, but we know nothing about any incidents that happened on the way, and certainly there is no discussion of Abraham’s inner thoughts, as Auerbach says:

The journey is like a silent progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath, a process which has no present, which is inserted, like a blank duration, between what has passed and what lies ahead.<sup>3</sup>

When they get to their destination only enough details are given to highlight the deep suspense of Abraham’s test. Abraham gives Isaac the wood to carry to his slaughter. Dialogue between the two is sparse; only enough to produce an almost unbearable sense of suspense. Isaac makes the pitiful observation, “Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

Yet even granted this high sense of drama in the story, the reader still is led beyond

the description of the occasion to the conviction that what is not expressed is potentially more important than what is expressed. Abraham and Isaac are themselves but then again they are more than themselves. For, unexpressed in this particular story, but known to the person who understands ‘the biblical Story,’ is the fact that Abraham not only faces the prospect of the death of his son, but also the obliteration of the people of promise. Here we have a man called upon to make a decision that truly has eternal consequences. Abraham is more than an ancient nomad. He is a man who is called upon to make an ultimate decision to obey; in his case, either to fail to keep the command of God or obliterate the people of promise.

And yet Abraham held fast to the integrity of his commitment. Is it any wonder that the later Jewish interpreters saw in the strength of Abraham’s faith not just another example of stubborn persistence to get the job done on the part of a fellow human, but an example of courage, trust, and tenacity that was of eternal worth? Since Abraham’s faith was not made of the stuff of this finite existence, it warranted a similar response in kind from the Eternal One. So the act of Abraham in binding Isaac to the wood (Akedah) was deemed to have eternal consequences. R. Benai, a Second Century A.D. rabbi, in awe at the strength of this faith of Abraham, said “At the Exodus the waters were cleft because Abraham cleaved the wood.”<sup>4</sup> In later Hebrew liturgies Abraham’s faith was regarded as having such importance that the following prayer was said in times of distress:

I have done thy word with joy and have effected thy decree and now, when Isaac’s children come into a time of distress,



remember the binding (Akedah) of Isaac their father, and listen to their prayer, and answer them and deliver them from all distress.<sup>5</sup>

Abraham's faith has eternal worth. It was always available to be invoked on behalf of the oppressed. This leads us back to note the conclusion of the story about Abraham's test. In the story, the ram is found and Isaac is spared. The intensity of the narrative drama is broken. In keeping with the majestic quality of Abraham's faith, God responds with a similar intense commitment. Not only is the ram provided in place of Isaac, but we also learn from Genesis 22:16-17 that there was an additional response from God in making the promise stronger.

By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your only son, I will indeed bless you.

This promise, in turn, serves as a basis for the later Israelite claim, that in fact, God shows the same quality of faithful unremitting love for his people as demonstrated by the ancient patriarch in Gen. 22. Abraham was never more human when he carried out his fateful decision to go to Moriah. But at the same time, his commitment and faith intersect to such a degree with the trustworthiness and purpose of the Divine One, that we come to understand in this act the world of the eternal. Through Abraham's faith we, the people of God at a later time, come to know what it means for the Divine One to be faithful toward us.

As we have seen, this narrative account of Abraham's test left a lasting impression on the people of God. In reading the great narratives of the Hebrew tradition, we see that

accounts like the Akedah, and other experiences such as the Deliverance at the Sea constitute a series of “root experiences” in the history of the people of God that lay claim on all our subsequent experiences. Abraham’s test is far more than a yarn that stimulates our interest intensely for a little while, and then afterward we put it down, and thirty minutes later we have forgotten all about it while we await to be stimulated by another similar experience. There is an intrinsic authority or power within this narrative account that unveils a reality beyond itself. Accounts like these have always been understood by the people of God as the true representation of reality. This story of an historical figure which mediates the claims of the Absolute One is, in my view, the essential genius of biblical narrative.

As one example of this root experience being able to lay a claim upon later generations, we need to go no farther than to look at Paul’s reflection upon the Akedah. Here was a man steeped in reading Hebrew Scripture through the insight of Messianic faith. Is it any wonder that in Romans 8:32 he utters the following words:

He (God) who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all.

That is to say, in the spirit of the same faith with which Abraham acted, God has given his own Son Jesus. Abraham’s faith had lasting benefits for his children and Isaac’s children. But God’s love in Christ, in the context of Romans, has positive benefits for the whole human race.

That is what we mean when we intend to say the Akedah is not just an idiosyncratic story stuck away in an obscure part of the Old Testament. Rather it has an integral relationship with the biblical narrative manner of representing the Divine Order; it contributes to the configuration of the total Christian Story. We are thrilled when we encounter in the life of Abraham the story of a man who in the course of his everyday existence shows such a strong spirit of faithfulness. We stand in awe when reading further in the Bible that in fact Abraham's faith was ultimately a figure of the Divine faithful love for us. In this insight, by no means is there any intention to demean the Abrahamic account. On the contrary, his life is not annulled but confirmed by this newer and deeper meaning given to it. For indeed, it is the essential claim to authority on the part of these biblical narratives that in the course of the totally free actions and responses of Abraham, Moses, David, and ultimately Jesus, the Divine purpose is accomplished. This stakes out and invests a unique importance in the narrative stories of the Bible. They point to something that always was and will be and we ignore their authoritative claim over us, the people of God, only to our ultimate peril.

### Biblical Narrative and the Question of Authority Today

Notwithstanding the continual power of the Akedah to lay claims upon our lives, it would only be fair to say that for many, even among those who wear the name Christian, such narrative accounts frequently register little response and are no longer replete with

power. Instead of invoking awe, a biblical story like the Akedah raises for many people questions about the historicity or morality of the incident. Did Abraham actually offer his first-born as a sacrifice? How could a loving God ask a man to sacrifice his son? What has happened to our perception of this story? Does it truly have a vital role to play in Christian faith and experience today?

Of course we are not the first generation to be bothered by this state of affairs. In fact, if we look back over Western religious history of the past couple of centuries, we will notice that a lot of ink has been spilt on this subject. In fact, the erosion of the ability of the Bible to serve as the authoritative guide for the destiny of human life has come about because biblical narrative, by and large, no longer persuades men in Western society intuitively that it represents the true picture of reality.

A little bit of history is in order here. Hans Frei has written a very interesting book published in 1974.<sup>6</sup> Unlike most books published by academicians, its basic thesis should be made known to a wider audience. Frei has argued that since the period of the dominance of Christianity in the early Middle Ages down until the Age of Enlightenment (1660-1770), people in Western Europe and colonial America operated within a society with a single vision of reality. This vision had its basis in the biblical Story. This Story figured a world of one temporal sequence, and this world could be discovered through the reading of biblical narratives literally; that is to say, whenever you have a historical reference in a biblical narrative story, it happened, and the literal depiction of that

happening in some way coincided with the meaning of the narrative account.<sup>7</sup>

The content of this world depicted in the biblical Story is so well known that it needs to be rehearsed here only in the broadest details. God created the world in seven literal days. Creation was good, but distortion (sin) came into the world through Adam. Rebellion increased, until finally God selected a covenant people to follow him and to carry out his purposes in history to redeem it. Starting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel), and highlighted by the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt, the giving of the law of Moses, the establishment of the state under David, the purposes of God were finally brought to complete fruition in the coming of Jesus Christ (God-man) who embodied God's way most truly. Ultimately, in the future, God's purposes will become triumphant in human history in the return of Jesus and the final judgment with its separation of the righteous from the wicked and the new creation of the heavens and the earth.

This Story starts in Genesis 1 and spans the whole Bible to Revelation 21-22. It involves dozens of biblical books and hundreds of narrative accounts. But it was one Story. In pre-Enlightenment times, for the European this Story was factual history. "It told it as it is!" It was the only history. The histories of other ancient tribes and cultures, apart from the biblical narrative, were irrelevant. All the believer needed to do was to place himself in the appropriate place in the scheme of the Story (between the first and second coming of Christ) and he had the satisfaction that his life had total meaning in

reference to the past historical order and a definite hope for life everlasting at the second coming of Christ.

As Frei points out in his major finding, all of this came apart with the Enlightenment, especially belief in the biblical narrative stories as literal historical facts. As one may well surmise, the causes for this dramatic change in the consciousness of European man were diverse and it is not necessary here to retrace this complex history so adequately handled by Frei. Yet, one basic development that took place during this period, I think, is worthy of our consideration at this time. One of the contributions of the Enlightenment was the development and growth in concern and understanding for other cultures. Certainly the Enlightenment philosopher was interested in all peoples.<sup>8</sup> To think that the history of only one people (Israel) was relevant for study, according to Enlightenment historians, was myopic, irrational, and downright anti-human. All histories and cultures should be studied as part of the general humanistic analysis of the human cultural condition. But when this was done, for many, Israel's history looked like the history of just another Near Eastern tribe of people and so things started to come apart. Why should one accept the explanation of Israel that the world had its beginning through the agency of its peculiar deity Yahweh? Were not the various accounts of the more ancient Babylonians equally worthy of a hearing? And why should we accept the biblical account of Adam and Eve being the first humans as having more authority over and against analogous accounts in the Babylonian, Egyptian, or Chinese cultures?

Furthermore, if we give up insisting on the uniqueness of Adam and Eve, how does one talk about sin and an ultimate need to redeem the human race? And if the fall is questionable, do any of the later biblical narrative texts read as a history of redemption have any meaning? Under these and similar assaults, the whole pre-Enlightenment structure of biblical “Story” as a description of ultimate reality collapsed in much of Western society.<sup>9</sup> The history of theological studies in the West since the end of the Enlightenment may be viewed, according to Frei, as a search to recover this lost pre-Enlightenment power and authority of the biblical Story.<sup>10</sup>

Aside from those who act as though the Enlightenment never happened, it appears to me that biblical scholarship and theological studies have attempted to retrieve the pre-Enlightenment power of the biblical story by focusing on either the historicity<sup>11</sup> of the Story or by focusing on the meaning<sup>12</sup> of the story apart from its historicity. In my view, this enterprise results in steering the theological ship into Scylla or Charybdis rather than between them.

As we have already learned in our study of the Akedah, we understand Abraham as a human historical figure. The Abraham and Isaac incident is historical. It is the same way as Martin Hengel has said of Jesus’ portrayal by the Gospel writers; “for all their religious concern, they set out to depict the activity and the suffering of a real man and not a phantom figure.”<sup>13</sup> And yet we do not understand the actions of the historical figures in the Bible correctly unless we see them in the total configuration of meaning generated

both in their own unique stories, the total Christian Story, and our own particular story as members of the people of God who are founded upon, defined by, and live within the parameters of the biblical Story.

By holding history and its meaning together in the context of the acceptance of the Christian Story which authoritatively defines the present ‘remembering’ community today, we are able to appropriate anew the power and authority of biblical narrative and steer the safe course between the Scylla of equating the meaning of a biblical narrative with its mere historicity and the Charybdis of reading a biblical story for its meaning devoid of its historicity. In proper focus, the characters in biblical narrative are never so historical and so real as when they are seen as figures of the world of the eternal.

#### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Eric Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953). Akedah is the Hebrew word for binding. As a technical term, it refers in biblical literature to the binding of Isaac by Abraham in Gen. 22:9 and as a metaphor for the whole story of Gen. 22:1-19.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 11.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 10.
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted from the rabbinic literature Mekilta be-Shallah 4 by Nils Dahl, The Crucified Messiah and other Essays (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1974), p. 152.



- <sup>5</sup> Targum Neofiti, Gen. 22:14 noted by Dahl, Crucified Messiah, p. 151.
- <sup>6</sup> Hans Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 1, 2.
- <sup>8</sup> Peter Gay, The Enlightenment: An Interpretation--The Rise of Modern Paganism (New York: Random House, 1969), note especially pp. 279-308.
- <sup>9</sup> Frei, op. cit., p. 16.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 11.
- <sup>11</sup> Since the Enlightenment there has been an approach to biblical narrative by some scholars who accept a biblical narrative as true only when the account can be proved to have happened. The meaning of a narrative text is equated with its historicity. The question that precedes any discussion on biblical narrative, for these scholars is, did it happen? This approach has found itself in difficulties. From the rationalist apologetes of the eighteenth century down to the present "God Who Acts" school, it is obvious that historians have a problem. Their methodologies have never been sufficiently precise for them to agree on "what happened."
- <sup>12</sup> Those who follow this path are in a similar position to those who base their theological position on "what happened." In the nineteenth and twentieth century, meaning in narrative was made dependent, almost always, on some cultural or anthropological model. Yet these models change continually with the passing of the years.
- <sup>13</sup> Martin Hengel, Acts and History of Early Christianity, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 19.

## CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS VOLUME

The contributors to this issue of the Faculty Bulletin are all members of the faculty at the Institute for Christian Studies,

Ash, Anthony Lee, B.S., Florida State University; M.A., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D., University of Southern California. Old Testament, Church History.

McNicol, Allan, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Intertestamental Literature.

Thompson, James W., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph. D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Hellenistic Literature.

Watson, Paul, B.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., M.A., M.Ph., Ph.D., Yale University. Old Testament.

Weed, Michael R., B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University. Ethics, Theology.