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Typology of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, Gen. 12-22



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The Calling of Abraham

Salvation history entered a new phase when God called Abraham out of his father's house to go to a new land that God would show him:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."¹

The literal sense of this text is a dual prophecy and blessing involving the Chosen People and the Messiah, in whom all nations will be blessed. Abraham is called out of his father's house in Ur in Mesopotamia in order to become the father of a new people who will be uniquely blessed by God.² This blessing is not for this people alone, however, for all nations will be blessed in Abraham's seed. The importance of this prophecy can be seen in the fact that it is repeated in Genesis 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, and 28:14, referred to by Sirach 44:21,³ by St. Peter in Acts 3:25–26, and by St. Paul in Galatians and Romans, and Hebrews 11:8–13.

God wished to prepare for His entrance into human history in the Incarnation, and so He called Abraham two thousand years in advance to be the father of the people in whom He would become man and bless Israel and all nations in the Church. In Acts 3:25–26, St. Peter applies this text to all who enter the Church: Jew first and then Gentile:

"You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God gave to your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you in turning every one of you from your wickedness."

The calling of Abraham also has a moral typological sense, for Abraham is asked to walk by faith to a destina-

tion that he does not know, and to receive a blessing that seems utterly improbable and disproportionate. This calling is a type of the life of faith and of the Christian vocation, and thus of the vocation of every man who in fact is called to participate in the blessing promised to Abraham and his descendants. The typology of Abraham's faith is brought out in Hebrews 11:8–10:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land. . . . For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Abraham's journey to a land he did not know is emblematic of the Christian life, for our hope is in "things not seen" (Heb 11:1), and in a "city which has foundations" that we do not yet possess. For "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it ascended into the heart of man, what God has prepared for those who love him."⁴

Abraham and Isaac

The theme of Abraham's walking by faith continues to build throughout the story of Abraham. Not only did he have to walk to a place that he did not know, but he was given a promise of an offspring that was an ever greater trial of faith.

Abram was 75 when he received this promise, but he still had to wait 25 years for its fulfillment. In Genesis 15:2, Abram reminds God of the promise: "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" God then renews the promise: "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir. . . . Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. . . . So shall your descendants be." Genesis 15:6 then gives us Abram's response of faith: "And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."

However, the Lord still made Abram wait. After about ten years, Sarai decided to expedite matters by human means, giving Abram her maidservant, Hagar. This too can be considered a type of man preferring human agency to remaining in the darkness of faith. Not surprisingly, this use of human means does not obtain the desired outcome. Ismael, Abram's son by Hagar, is not the one in whom all nations will be blessed. Rather, he is foretold to be "a wild donkey of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him" (Gen 16:12).

1 Gen 12:1–3.

2 See Acts 7:2–5, in which St. Stephen summarizes the calling of Abraham: "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Depart from your land and from your kindred and go into the land which I will show you.' Then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living; yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him in possession and to his posterity after him, though he had no child."

3 Sir 44:21: "Therefore the Lord assured him by an oath that the nations would be blessed through his posterity; that he would multiply him like the dust of the earth, and exalt his posterity like the stars, and cause them to inherit from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth."

4 1 Cor 2:9.

Finally, when Abram was ninety-nine, God appeared to him again, renewing the promise: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.”⁵ At this point Abram and Sarai receive new names—Abraham and Sarah—to indicate their paternity over many nations. God says: “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

What is Abraham’s reaction? Not surprisingly, he “fell on his face and laughed,” saying: “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”⁶ The promise was renewed again in Genesis 18:10 when the Lord appeared to Abraham in the form of three angels to whom he offered hospitality, and who said to him: “I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.” This time it is Sarah who laughs, for she is barren and, on top of that, ninety years old! Isaac is named for laughter: “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me” (Gen 21:6).

Despite the laughter, Abraham and Sarah believed. St. Paul puts this forth as the model of faith in Romans 4:18–24:

In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations. . . . He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “reckoned to him as righteousness.” But the words, “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.”

St. Paul is saying that Abraham’s faith in God’s ability to bring forth Isaac from Sarah’s dead womb is a type of the faith of all Christians in God who raised up Christ from death and from the tomb.

Isaac’s Miraculous Birth

Isaac’s miraculous birth according to God’s promise from a woman both barren and greatly advanced in age is clearly a type of Christ’s birth from a Virgin. As Isaac is a type of Christ, so Sarah is a type of Mary and her virginal conception.

A not infrequent theme of the Old Testament is pairs of women, one infertile and the other fertile: Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, Hannah and Peninnah. In each case the promise is given to the infertile woman. In Hebrews 11:11-12, Sarah, despite an initial incredulous laugh, is mentioned as one of the heroes of faith: “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

Why did God choose Sarah to be the mother of the Chosen People, when she was both barren and also far too old to conceive? Why did He not choose a young and fertile woman? Clearly there is a great mystery hidden here. We can ask the same question about St. Elizabeth two thousand years later on the eve of the Incarnation. Why did God choose a barren old woman to give birth to the Precursor?

Sarah’s barrenness and old age manifest that the formation of Israel is not the work of human efforts; it is not something merely natural, but a supernatural intervention of God. God prefers to use the weak things of the world to show that the power is His. St. Paul expresses this beautifully in 1 Corinthians 1:27–29: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”

Sarah was chosen precisely because she was weak and despised in her barrenness and old age. For the same reason, two millennia later, God preferred to choose St. Elizabeth to be the mother of the Precursor. And for the same reason, but even more so, He chose a virgin bound by a vow of virginity to become the mother of the Messiah. Mary, through her voluntary virginity, put herself in the category of the barren and lowly of Israel. And indeed, the state of consecrated virginity in the Church that immediately followed on this example of Mary is the fulfillment of the figure of the barren woman who gives birth to a child through the power of God.

The second reason God chooses the barren to be supernaturally fruitful is so that the recipients of grace can exercise the virtue of faith in a heroic way. Precisely because there is no natural way for such a promise to be realized, the way is prepared for the merit of faith in believing that God can overcome any obstacle and accomplish what is naturally impossible. St. Elizabeth in the Visitation emphasized the great merit of Mary’s faith, saying: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Lk 1:45). And the angel Gabriel told Mary: “for with God nothing will be impossible” (Lk 1:37).

⁵ Genesis 17:1–2.

⁶ Genesis 17:17.

Sarah's supernatural maternity that brought forth Isaac is thus a beautiful figure of an even greater miracle, indeed, an immeasurably greater miracle: the virginal conception of the Son of God. Similarly, the faith of Sarah and Abraham is a figure of the still more heroic faith of Mary. Sarah and Abraham were asked to believe that a barren old woman could conceive a son. Mary was asked to believe two still greater miracles which had never occurred before and were never to occur again: that a virgin would conceive; and that the fruit of her conception would be a divine Person—the Son of God.

John Paul II brings out this comparison between the faith of Mary and of Abraham in his Marian encyclical, *Redemptoris mater* 14:

In the salvific economy of God's revelation, Abraham's faith constitutes the beginning of the Old Covenant; Mary's faith at the Annunciation inaugurates the New Covenant. Just as Abraham "in hope believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations" (cf. Rom. 4:18), so Mary, at the Annunciation, having professed her virginity . . . believed that through the power of the Most High, by the power of the Holy Spirit, she would become the Mother of God's Son in accordance with the angel's revelation.

Isaac's very name is connected to his being a type of Christ. "Isaac" means "laughter," for Sara laughed incredulously when the angel told her that she would conceive. Isaac is appropriately named for laughter, for he brought the supernatural joy of the fulfillment of God's promise against all appearances. The Fathers see Isaac's name as a type of the supernatural joy brought into the world by Christ and the Gospel, promised so many centuries before.⁷

Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22)

A glorious figure of the Passion of Christ is Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. This child of the miracle, Isaac, was said by God to be the child of the promise, rather than Ishmael, the firstborn of Abraham from his wife's handmaid. Thus all nations were to be blessed in the line of Isaac. Now it is precisely Isaac, the child of the promise, whom God commands to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah, which Tradition identifies with Mount Zion in Jerusalem. God was not only asking for the sacrifice of Abraham's only son from his legitimate wife, but of the very child of God's promise!

Obviously there is a great mystery here. Why did God command Abraham to sacrifice the son of the promise? The principal reason, according to the Bible, was to test Abraham's faith, and give him to us as a paradigm of faith, the father of the faithful. In this sense Abraham's faith in the sacrifice of Isaac was a type of the faith of the Blessed Virgin at the foot of the Cross. For like Abraham on Mt.

Moriah, so Mary on the hill of Calvary interiorly offered her Son for the redemption of the world. *Lumen gentium* 58 emphasizes Mary's loving consent to the immolation of her Son:

The Blessed Virgin advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and faithfully persevered in her union with her Son unto the cross, where she stood, in keeping with the divine plan, grieving exceedingly with her only begotten Son, uniting herself with a maternal heart with His sacrifice, and *lovingly consenting to the immolation of this Victim which she herself had brought forth.*

Pius XII also spoke of Mary's interior offering of her Son at the foot of the Cross: "It was she [Mary] who, always most intimately united with her Son, like a New Eve, *offered Him on Golgotha to the Eternal Father, together with the sacrifice of her maternal rights and love, on behalf of all the children of Adam, stained by the latter's shameful fall.*"⁸

However, there is more to the story than this. Isaac is clearly a figure of Christ, the beloved Only-begotten Son of God the Father, in whom all the promises to the human race are contained. The promises were contained in Isaac as forefather of the Messiah. As Abraham was ordered to sacrifice Isaac, so God the Father, in His eternal Providence, had determined the sacrifice of His Only-begotten Son for the redemption of the human race. As Isaac is a figure of Christ, the sacrificed Son, so Abraham, in this episode, corresponds to God the Father, a Father who sacrifices the object of His greatest love.

And as Abraham's readiness to perform the sacrifice showed his faith in the future resurrection of his son, that the promises might be fulfilled, so God the Father had His Son sacrificed in virtue of the divine decree for the Resurrection of Christ that would fulfill the promises of blessing to the human race. This parallel is discussed in Hebrews 11:17–19, which mentions that Abraham believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named.' He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence he did receive him back and this was a symbol." The word "symbol" in Hebrews 11:19 is equivalent to "type." Abraham's faith in God's power to raise Isaac from the dead was a type of faith in the Resurrection of Christ. Thus the fact that Isaac was not actually immolated, but was restored to Abraham, is seen by the Letter to the Hebrews as a type of the Resurrection by which Christ was restored after His real immolation.

Abraham is therefore a figure of all Christians who believe in the Resurrection of the Messiah. Through this

⁷ See Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogue* 1.5 (in ANF 2:296): "And he laughed mystically, prophesying that the Lord should fill us with joy, who have been redeemed from corruption by the blood of the Lord."

⁸ Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* 110, AAS 35, 1943, p. 247.

belief, Christians share the faith of Abraham, and are his descendants through faith. Thus both Jews and Gentile Christian believers are true descendants of Abraham, the former by blood, and both in the spirit through faith.

Other elements of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac are significant as well. Abraham has Isaac carry the wood for his own sacrifice. The Fathers⁹ and the liturgy¹⁰ see in this a figure of Christ carrying the Cross up to Calvary.

At the last moment the angel stayed the hand of Abraham and a ram appeared with his horns caught in a thicket of thorns. This ram, offered as a holocaust as a substitute for Isaac, was also—like Isaac—a figure of Christ. Christ also was crowned with thorns, offered as a holocaust in substitution not for one individual, but for all sinners. Christ is a vicarious victim for the sins of every man. Thus it is fitting that He be represented by a vicarious sacrifice in the Old Testament figure.

Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac merited a renewal of the promise of blessing to all nations, confirmed by the oath of God. God said: "By my own self have I sworn . . . because thou hast done this thing, and hast not spared thy only begotten son for my sake, I will bless thee, and I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand that is by the sea shore. . . . And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice" (Gen 22:16–18).

The figure, of course, magnificent as it is, falls far short of the reality of the Passion which is its fulfillment. Isaac was spared, whereas Christ was not. Isaac was not the promise itself, but only the forefather of the Promise that was Christ, in whom all nations are truly blessed. It seems that St. Paul makes reference to this difference between the sacrifice of Isaac and Christ in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

⁹ See, for example, the early third-century work of Tertullian, *Adversus Marcion* 3.18, ANF 3:336: "And no doubt it was proper that this mystery [the Passion] should be prophetically set forth by types, and indeed chiefly by that method: for in proportion to its incredibility would it be a stumbling-block, if it were set forth in bare prophecy; and in proportion too, to its grandeur, was the need of obscuring it in shadow, that the difficulty of understanding it might lead to prayer for the grace of God. First, then, Isaac, when he was given up by his father as an offering, himself carried the wood for his own death. By this act he even then was setting forth the death of Christ, who was destined by His Father as a sacrifice, and carried the cross whereon He suffered." See also St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.5.4.

¹⁰ See the great liturgical hymn *Lauda Sion* by St. Thomas Aquinas: "It [the Eucharist] was prefigured in type when Isaac was brought as an offering, when a lamb was appointed for the Passover, and when manna was given to the Jews of old." This figure is also mentioned in the Roman canon in the Mass (first Eucharistic prayer): "Look with favor on these offerings and accept them as once you accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchisedech."

Finally, a type of the sacrifice of Christ is present in Abraham's answer to Isaac's question about the sacrificial animal. Abraham replies: "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Gen 22:8). The significance of this phrase is reinforced in Genesis 22:14, as Abraham calls the name of that place "The Lord will provide." In the literal sense, the Lord provided the sacrifice in the ram found in the thicket. But typologically, the Father provides the sacrifice through the Incarnation of His Son. What no mere man could accomplish—a sacrifice to redeem the world—the Lord provided in His Incarnation and Passion.

Patristic Commentaries on the Sacrifice of Isaac

Many of the Fathers explain the typology of the Sacrifice of Isaac. The earliest commentary is from Melito of Sardis, a Father of the second century, who says of Jesus:

For as a ram he was bound (Gen 22:9) . . . and he carried the wood on his shoulders as he was led up to be slain like Isaac by his father (Gen 22:6). But Christ suffered, whereas Isaac did not suffer; for he was a type of Christ who was going to suffer. But while merely being the type of Christ, he caused astonishment and fear among men. For it was a strange mystery to behold, a son led by his father to a mountain for slaughter, whose feet he bound and whom he put on the wood of the offering, preparing with zeal the things for his slaughter. But Isaac was silent, bound like a ram, not opening his mouth nor uttering a sound. For not frightened by the sword nor alarmed at the fire nor sorrowful by the suffering, he carried with fortitude the figure of the Lord.¹¹

St. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150 – 215 AD) finds multiple meanings in this figure:

Isaac is a type of the infant Lord as son (and in fact Isaac was the son of Abraham as Christ is of God), victim as was the Lord. But he was not cut down like the Lord; no, he only carried the wood of the sacrifice, he, Isaac, as the Lord did His cross. He laughed mystically by way of prophesying that the Lord fills us with joy, we who have been redeemed by his blood. He did not suffer, but left to the Logos, as is fitting, the first fruits of suffering. What is more, because he was not immolated, he signifies also the divinity of the Lord. For after His burial, Jesus was raised up, thus leaving suffering behind, just as Isaac had escaped the sacrifice.¹²

St. Athanasius writes:

When Abraham offered his son, he was worshipping the Son of God; when he was prevented from immolating Isaac, it was Christ that he saw in that

¹¹ Melito of Sardis, *On the Pascha and Fragments: Texts and Translations*, ed. S. G. Hall (Oxford, 1979), 33.

¹² Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogos* 1.5.23.1-2 Translation in De Margerie, 1:87-88 .

ram offered as a substitute in immolation to God.¹³ . . . Abraham was really put to the test. However, the one who was sacrificed was not Isaac, but he who was foretold in Isaiah 53.¹⁴

Some Fathers, further developing the insight of Clement of Alexandria, see the sacrificed ram as a figure of Christ's humanity, and Isaac who was spared, as a figure of Christ's divine nature untouched by the Passion.¹⁵ Origen writes:

We said above, I think, that Isaac represented Christ. But this ram no less also seems to represent Christ. Now it is worthwhile to know how both are appropriate to Christ, both Isaac who is not slain and the ram which is slain. Christ is "the Word of God," but "the Word was made flesh." One aspect of Christ, therefore, is from above; the other is received from human nature and the womb of the virgin. Christ suffered, therefore, but in the flesh; and he endured death, but it was the flesh, of which this ram is a type. . . . But the Word continued "in incorruption," which is Christ according to the spirit, of which Isaac is the image. For this reason he himself is both victim and priest. For truly according to the spirit he offers the victim to the Father, but according to the flesh he himself is offered on the altar of the cross."¹⁶

St. Gregory of Nyssa develops the insight of Origen:

The whole mystery of faith can be seen in the story of Isaac. The lamb is fixed to the tree, suspended by its horns: the first-born carries upon him the wood for the sacrifice. He, then, who upholds the universe by the word of his power, is the same who bears the burden of our wood, and is hung up on the wood, upholding as God, and carried as the lamb, the Holy Spirit having in figure divided the mystery between the two, the only son and the lamb who appears at his side. In the lamb is revealed the mystery of death and in the only son the life which will never be cut short by death.¹⁷

In a homily on this text of Genesis, St. John Chrysostom stresses the depth of the typology:

All this, however, happened as a type of the Cross. Hence Christ too said to the Jews, "Your father Abraham rejoiced in anticipation of seeing my day; he saw

it and was delighted." How did he see it if he lived so long before? In type, in shadow: just as in our text the sheep was offered in place of Isaac, so here the rational lamb was offered for the world. You see, it was necessary that the truth be sketched out ahead of time in shadow. Notice, I ask you, dearly beloved, how everything was prefigured in shadow: an only-begotten son in that case, an only-begotten in this; dearly loved in that case, dearly loved in this. The former was offered as a burnt offering by his father; and the latter his Father surrendered [Rom 8:32].¹⁸

13 St. Athanasius, Festal Letter, quoted in De Margerie, *History of Exegesis*, 1:124.

14 St. Athanasius, Festal Letter 6, quoted in De Margerie, *History of Exegesis*, 1:125.

15 See also Cyril of Alexandria, *Hom. Pas.* 5, as cited in Edward Kessler, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians, and the Sacrifice of Isaac* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 142.

16 Origen, Homily on Genesis 8.9, in Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus, trans. Ronald E. Heine, series: The Fathers of the Church, vol. 87 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 145.

17 Gregory of Nyssa, *Hom. Res.* 1, in PG 46: 601C-D, trans. in Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality*, 129.

18 St. John Chrysostom, *Homily on Genesis 47.14*, in *Homilies on Genesis 46–67*, trans. Robert C. Hill, series: The Fathers of the Church, vol. 87 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 22.