

Eschatology and Genesis 22

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The spark for this paper came from a graduate seminar with Dr. John Sailhamer, where he persuasively argued that the term “last days” in the Pentateuch is always eschatological and points forward to the coming of the Messiah. This important insight can and should be further elaborated. Genesis 22, though not specifically including the term “last days,” proves to be a key passage in illustrating the passion of Christ which inaugurates the “last days.” Through the avenue of narrative analysis, it will be seen that the details of Gen. 22 and surrounding chapters serve as intriguing pointers toward the Messiah’s mission.

Though interpretations vary, a long historical consensus exists in theological studies regarding the profound nature and significance of Genesis 22:1-19.¹ In the following study, this passage will be scanned for its “particulars.” Next, we will attempt to align these details to the larger context of the surrounding chapters in Genesis, and also the New Testament. A final section will suggest tentative theological implications for eschatology.

¹There are wide differences in *interpretation*, but not on the fact of its supreme importance in biblical narratives. This attention has not been limited exclusively to Christianity. All three monotheistic traditions that claim Abraham as their “father” (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) insist on the significance of this passage for their theology. For example, Islam’s sacred *Koran* includes this narrative. However, the intended victim of Abraham’s knife is *unnamed*. By the end of the third Islamic century, however, Ishmael has become the intended sacrifice. [R. Firestone, “Abraham’s Son as the Intended Sacrifice: Issues in Quranic Exegesis,” in *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 34 (1989): 117. References to the “Akedah” [the nomenclature given to the Gen 22 narrative in most Jewish writings; derived from the verb in v. 9, when Abraham “bound” Isaac] also appear in the earliest extra-biblical Jewish sources. Modern Jewish scholars continue probing Genesis 22 for discussions of their “martyrdom” in the Holocaust and other historical pogroms against their people. They frequently interpret the Gen 22 narrative to mean that in Isaac the Jewish people were thus “prophesied” and “destined” by God to be the “sacrifice” for the world. However, since Isaac, there has been no halting of the knife from heaven. For one example, see Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976), 97.

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One additional caveat: narrative analysis is a valuable tool. However, I submit that a weakness of this method, besides its leaning toward a non-historical interpretation of biblical narratives, is its proclivity to overlook the possibility of any overarching hermeneutical principle for interpreting the narratives. Undergirding this study is the hermeneutical principle Christ offers in Luke 24:

O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? And *beginning at Moses* and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.²

This strongly suggests that the OT narrative materials are not simply an eclectic collection of unrelated and random details.

A Reading of the Text

Genesis 22, verse 1: “Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham”:

The formula, “after these things” is found only four times in the Pentateuch—all four in Genesis (15:1; 22:1; 22:20; 48:1)³ Notably, two of the four are within the Abraham narratives.

This brings questions to mind, such as: after *what* “things”? And why is *this* pericope being singled out? With the many narratives in Genesis, what was the author’s intent in “tagging” so few narratives in this particular manner?

In Gen 22:1, “after these things” introduces God speaking again to Abraham. Perhaps this is to remind us of Abraham’s long, complex life, as recorded in the nine preceding chapters?⁴ Abraham now is well over 100 years old—an

² Also, v. 44 “Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.”

³ The first follows Abraham’s daring rescue of Lot and the subsequent worship of Yahweh by Abraham and Melchizedek (chapter 14). “After these things” also opens chapter 15, where Yahweh speaks again to Abraham and reaffirms His covenant, with its specific promise of numerous descendants. The third immediately follows Gen 22:1-19 so the reader will separate the next verses with the just completed event. The final appearance of “after these things” (chapter 48:1) introduces the reader to the blessings of Jacob upon Joseph’s two sons following the narrative of Jacob’s reunion in Egypt with his son Joseph.

⁴ This is Calvin’s understanding: “The expression, ‘after these things,’ is not to be restricted to his last vision; Moses rather intended to comprise in one word the various events by which Abraham had been tossed up and down; and again, the somewhat more quiet state of life which, in his old age, he had lately begun to obtain. He had passed an unsettled life in continued exile up to his eightieth year; having been harassed with many contumelies and injuries; he had endured with difficulty an . . . anxious existence, in continual trepidation; famine had driven him out of the land whither he had gone, by the command and under the auspices of God, into Egypt. Twice his wife had been torn from his bosom; he had been separated from his nephew; he had delivered this

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old man even for his generation. In his earlier years he had been strong to endure hardship and to brave danger, but now the ardor of his youth has passed. The son of Promise has grown to manhood by his side. Heaven seems to have crowned with blessing a life with hopes long-deferred.

But then comes the shock: “God tested Abraham.” The reader is abruptly informed at the outset that the following harrowing experience comes from *God*. The subsequent lethal commands are not a figment of Abraham’s imagination nor his misinterpretation of a dream. The test is not instigated by Satan.⁵ Neither is it a matter of Abraham losing his mind. The explicit description of *God’s* responsibility is underscored both by the reversal in the Hebrew of the usual verb-subject sequence, and also with the unusual use of the definite article with God’s name.⁶

The verb “tested” is not uncommon in the OT. It is found thirty-six times in the *piel*. These often point to other divinely-appointed “tests,” which generally include explanations of *why* the test is permitted. The reader is often informed of its reasonableness (Exod 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut 8:2, 6; 13:3, 4).⁷ However, in this instance, we are not told *why* God is testing Abraham—perhaps suggesting that even Abraham himself wasn’t told.

—“and He said to him, ‘Abraham.’” God has already spoken to Abraham on several occasions in the preceding narratives (12:13; 13:14-17, 15, 17; 18:21). However, only *this* time does God address Abraham by name *first*—perhaps singling out the solemnity of this moment.

—“and he said, ‘Here I am’ [*hineni*].” This response by Abraham to God occurs in Gen 22 (vs. 1, 11). Only two additional times in the entire Pentateuch will an address by God be coupled with this response. Abraham’s atypical re-

nephew, when captured in war, at the peril of his own life. He had lived childless with his wife, when yet all his hopes were suspended upon his having offspring. Having at length obtained a son, he was compelled to disinherit him, and to drive him far from home. Isaac alone remained . . . The meaning, therefore, of the passage is, that by this temptation, as if by the last act, the faith of Abraham was far more severely tried than before.” *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 560-561.

⁵By comparison, the readers of the Job narratives are carefully informed (Job 1) that Job’s severe trials come at Satan’s provocation.

⁶Phyllis Tribble correctly notes: “God, indeed God, tested Abraham.” Though such a procedure is implicit throughout the preceding [Abrahamic] stories, only here does the verb “test” (*nisah*) appear. The explicit use startles the reader. It portends a crisis beyond the usual tumult. How many times does Abraham have to be tested? . . . After delays and obstacles Isaac, the child of promise, has come. Let the story now end happily, providing readers and characters respite from struggle and suspense. But that is not to be. Vocabulary and syntax show otherwise. The divine generic *Elohim* occurs with the definite article *Ha* suggesting “the God, the very God.” Reversing the usual order of a Hebrew sentence, this subject precedes its verb. The narrator makes clear that an extraordinary divine act is taking place. “God, indeed God, tested Abraham.” (emphasis Tribble’s)

⁷I.e., “And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin.” Exod 20:20.

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sponse perhaps suggests that he himself was recognizing the portent of this occasion, and also his posture of obedience. He responds to God in this manner only in this narrative.⁸

Verse 2: “take now your son, your only/unique one, whom you love, Isaac”: This is the fourth time God’s commands to Abraham have involved his family ties.⁹ As painful as the earlier sundering of these bonds must have been, this surely is the ultimate devastation. Even the arrangement of the nouns in the Hebrew conveys a particularly strong sense of gravity. The three-fold description increases and intensifies Abraham’s attachment to his son Isaac: “Your son, your only/unique one, Isaac, whom you love.”¹⁰

Moreover, the triple designation plus name rules out any possible confusion. Abraham couldn’t evade the realization that God was clearly aware of what He was asking Abraham to do—and that He was specifically identifying the promised heir.¹¹ It could not be Eliezer, whom Abraham once suggested as his descendant (Gen 15:2). Nor could it be Ishmael, his son by Hagar, whom he begged God to let stand before Him (Gen 17:18).

The phrase “who you love” involves the initial use of the word “love” in the OT. With the oft-noted verbal reticence of this narrative, the tender regard Abraham had for Isaac is surely highlighted. God Himself is speaking. Thus the first time *He* uses this word in all His recorded dialogues in the OT is significant.

— “and go forth” occurs two times in the Abrahamic narratives. Both come at the outset of two signal commands to Abraham.¹²

⁸Only two additional times in the entire Pentateuch will such an address by God and this response be found—when God addresses Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:4), and when He addresses Jacob by name (as reported by Jacob, Gen 31:11). Later, the lad Samuel responds with “*hineni*” to who he thinks is Eli calling, suggesting the attitude of obedience that Abraham exhibits in this narrative.

⁹1) Gen 12:1, leaving kindred; 2) Gen 13:5-18, separation from Lot; 3) Gen 17:17-18, separation from Ishmael.

¹⁰God’s initial three-fold command to Abraham in Gen 12:1 also increases in intensity as it unfolds: “Get out of your country/from your kindred/from your father’s house . . .”

¹¹Trible is sensitive to significance of this identification God announces: “the object of the verb is not a simple word but heavy-laden language. It moves from the generic term of kinship, ‘your son,’ through the exclusivity of relationship, ‘your only one,’ through the intimacy of bonding, ‘whom you love,’ to climax in the name that fulfills promise, the name of laughter and joy, the name *Yishaq* (Isaac). Language accumulates attachments: ‘your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac.’ Thus far every divine word (imperative, particle, and objects) shows the magnitude of the test.” (Trible, 2.)

¹²Gen 12:1 “*Go forth* from your country and your kindred and your father’s house.” It is found only two more times in the OT (in Song of Songs 2:10, 13—feminine form), obviously a very rare usage (again underscoring the solemnity of the command). “The phrase ‘go forth’ serves as a bridge between the two narratives about Abraham. The first tells about the demand at the beginning of his history that he detach himself from his land, his home and his father’s house and go to the unknown country, at God’s command, ‘the land which I will show you.’ The second, at the end of this history, describes the most difficult demand of all, that he go to the land of Moriah and sac-

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— “to the land of Moriah”: no further identification of the divinely-ordained location is given except the assurance that God will signal Abraham at the appropriate time. Again, as in chapter 12, Abraham is commanded to go on a mission with its final destination a mystery. Verse 4 informs the reader that the designated place for sacrifice was a three-day’s journey away. Abraham would need to travel approximately seventy kilometers (forty-five miles) from Beer-sheva. However, traveling long distances was not new to Abraham.

— “and offer him as a burnt offering”: The first two imperatives in verse 2 would not have been alarming for Abraham. He is described in Genesis as regularly offering sacrifices to God. But with the third imperative, the true horror of the command is now made clear. Furthermore, the term “burnt offerings” is used not less than six times in this and the next few verses, the repetition keeping before the reader’s mind the extreme nature of the demand.¹³

What is Abraham’s response? “So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.”¹⁴

From preceding narratives the reader knows Abraham as a mighty warrior who readily speaks.¹⁵ However, now he only responds “*hineni*”, v. 2, and then becomes uncharacteristically silent. There is no more discourse, only actions, until Moriah.¹⁶

The reader “sees” Abraham “saddle the donkey” and “cut the wood”, and should recall that “it is rare to find routine tasks mentioned in biblical narrative.”¹⁷ Moreover, one wonders *why* Abraham at his advanced age, and with his great wealth, is doing these tedious chores. Surely these were tasks he didn’t normally have to do for himself—this “mighty prince of God” (Gen 23:6) who could arm “318 trained servants who were born in his own house.”

Why does Abraham saddle the donkey and cut the wood for the sacrifice himself? Is this giving a hint of Abraham’s anguish? In his turmoil he perhaps

rifice his only, beloved son on one of the mountains ‘which I will tell you.’” Shimon Bar-Efrat, *The Art of the Biblical Story* (New York: Almond, 1979), 213.

¹³Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1980), includes a whole chapter on biblical repetition. He makes the point that in sparse narratives (and Gen 22 certainly is one), *any* repetition becomes even more significant.

¹⁴One cannot help but compare Abraham’s ready obedience to an unwelcome task to that of the prophet Jonah.

¹⁵With his relatives to resolve difficulties (Lot, chapter 13), to royalty (kings of the Plains and Melchizedek, chapter 14 and king of Gerar, chapter 20), and most notably to God (chapters 15, 17, 18).

¹⁶For example: “So rose early Abraham in the morning”: This is an identical response to 21:14 when Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away at God’s directive. Even though both this command and that of chapter 21 were devastating for Abraham, one sees careful, prompt obedience. One cannot help but compare Abraham’s careful obedience to an unwanted task to that of the prophet Jonah.

¹⁷Bar-Efrat, 80.

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doesn't want to explain the journey (and thus God's command) to anyone. Maybe he knows someone would try to persuade him not to go, telling him he must be mistaken about what God said. Or, perchance, he *wants* to be alone as he wrestles with his thoughts. Thus, he attends to the preparations himself.

Notice also how Isaac is brought into the narrative *after* the two servants, perhaps indicating that Abraham woke him up last in his distress.

Suddenly the narrative alerts us to the fact that the journey to the unknown destination lasted three days. *Verse 4*: "On the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off." The distance traveled before arriving at Moriah surely prolongs the agony for Abraham. He must have reviewed the three-fold command from God over and over in his mind, hoping he had made some mistake. There was plenty of time in three days to think. Yet the narrator passes over any mention of the journey. We are not permitted to view those three torturing days.¹⁸

— "and Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place": possibly suggesting the height of the mountain that God revealed to Abraham. The more common OT description of "seeing" is "he looked . . . and saw." Thus, the author, by describing Abraham's "seeing" by "lift[ing] up his eyes" perhaps hints of Abraham's inner struggle, underscoring his deep mental anguish by implying his head was bowed down. Or, is the use of this particular expression possibly suggesting more than just physical sight?¹⁹

Verse 5: "and then Abraham said to his young men, 'stay here with the donkey. I and the lad will go yonder and worship and come again to you.'"

Abraham, from his extensive household, brought only two young servants with him. Now having arrived at the hour of sacrifice, he leaves them with the donkey. Perhaps even yet they might try to restrain Abraham. Or, possibly, he didn't want them to view what was going to happen. Father and son must go alone.

— "we will worship": the perceptive reader notices the first use of this word for "worship" in the Pentateuch. Abraham's faith apparently has not wavered throughout the three-day journey. Even with pain surely stabbing his heart, he can still affirm his intent to worship God.

— "We will return to you": this is an electrifying statement in light of what Abraham faces. The verbs are cohortative and thus reveal emphatic determination. The plural "we" should be shocking. Though the narrator does not directly disclose Abraham's agony, this profound statement of faith perhaps gives a glimpse of Abraham's mental wrestling during the long 3-day journey. The

¹⁸" . . . a three-day journey—which according to Kierkegaard lasted longer than the four thousand years separating us from the event . . ." Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends*. (New York: Random House, 1976), 72.

¹⁹Generally speaking commentators take this expression to indicate a literal upward movement of the eyes. A closer look at its actual usage, however, indicates that this might not necessarily be the case. See below for fuller discussion.

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author of the book of Hebrews (11:17-19) suggests this when he writes: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac . . . *accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead.*” The nature of Abraham’s faith on the mountain of sacrifice is astounding when one recalls that he had no precedent of any resurrection on which to base his faith. A 20th century person looking back through such miracles subsequent to Abraham can only marvel!

Verse 6: “and Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; so they went, two of them, together.”

The verb, “and Abraham took” completes the divine command to “take” in v. 2. God has commanded Abraham, and Abraham has conscientiously obeyed. Notice too, how in this verse, the sacrificial implements, “wood of the burnt offering” and “fire and knife”, surround “Isaac his son.”²⁰

Isaac now takes the place of the beast of burden. Why is the donkey left behind? The poignant picture is of the victim bearing the instrument of his death. Father and son go alone. The text states: “so they went, both of them, together.”

The wood has the heavier weight of those items that are needed for sacrifice and Abraham is elderly. Is this why Isaac carries the wood? Even so, notice how the father carries the knife and fire, as if to shield his son from their harm as long as possible.

Verses 7-8: “and Isaac said to Abraham his father and he said, My father, and he said, here am I, my son; and he said, behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, God will see/provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering my son; and they went, two of them, together.”

At Isaac’s question, Abraham again responds “hineni.” Note this identical response of Abraham to God earlier. Is this alerting the reader to the intensity of the moment?²¹

The poignant dialogue: “My father” . . . “my son” reminds the reader again and again of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac in this narrative—four times in just these two verses. In fact the word “son” occurs ten times between verses 2-16. This constant reminder is not just redundant reference to the blood relationship between Abraham and Isaac. Rather, this obvious repetition pointedly stresses the horror that a father goes through in sacrificing his son.²²

²⁰Trible, 5.

²¹Refer to comments on v. 1.

²²This is not a strained reading of this conspicuous repetition. It is an assumption of this paper that the Genesis book has one author. Thus this is just another example of this technique of repetition for accenting. It is also evident in the narrative of the first murder (Cain and Abel), where in just three verses (Gen 4:8-10) the word “brother” is mentioned five times. The reader already knows Cain and Abel are brothers. Thus, again, this type of repetition accentuates the horror of that scene even more. The most shocking aspect of the incident is not that only murder has taken place (as terrible as that is), but that fratricide has been committed (point well-taken by Bar-Efrat, 213). In this pericope, the author again repeats family ties in another critical event.

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— “God will see/provide himself”: One of many times this narrative emphasizes “seeing.” God’s involvement dominates Abraham’s guarded response to Isaac. Normal Hebrew syntax is again reversed and the subject precedes the verb. Note, also, how it includes a lingering ambiguity of apposition linking “burnt offering” and “my son.” Was this the only way Abraham could yet speak of what was just ahead?

— “and they went, two of them, together”: this phrase is repeated the second time in three verses. Was this when Isaac began to understand Abraham’s enigmatic response? If so, he did not try to escape, for we are again reminded that *even yet* father and son “went together.”

Verses 9-10: “and they came to the place of which God had told them. Abraham built there an altar and laid in order the wood and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar upon the wood and Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son.”

— “and they came to the place of which God [“God” again with definite article as in v.1] had told them”): once more we are reminded of the certainty of God’s instructions and how carefully Abraham had carried them out.²³

At this point the narrative slows down dramatically with the preparations on the mountain. Why are so many details included here? These preparations for a burnt offering would be unnecessary instruction to OT readers, well-familiar with sacrificial worship. Yet note the calculated accuracy depicted through this sequence of 6 verbs. Abraham alone is the subject of them all, with Isaac appearing as object after each group of three.²⁴ Milgrom comments, “These are particularly desperate moments because at each of these pivots Abraham could have turned back.”²⁵ Even the action of taking the knife is divided into two separate movements—putting forth his hand and then taking the knife—with the reader reminded yet again of Abraham’s intention “to slay his son.”²⁶

We are never informed *when* Abraham told his son of the divine command, or *what* he said to Isaac. Whenever it occurred, there apparently was no resistance. For when Isaac is again mentioned, we find that Abraham has bound him

²³Completing, thus, v. 2, that Abraham was to “. . . go to the land of Moriah . . . on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

²⁴Trible suggests a pattern which serves to heighten the tension:

Abraham built an altar
arranged wood
bound Isaac his son
laid him on the altar, on wood
put forth Abraham his hand,
took the knife to slay his son” (Trible, 7)

²⁵In *The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac* (Oakland, CA: BIBAL, 1988), 14.

²⁶It is one of these six verbs□, with its solitary appearance in the OT in this form, that subsequently becomes title for this narrative in Jewish writings—“The Akedah.” The narrative never reveals when Abraham told Isaac of God’s command. Thus, perhaps this verb of the six identifies the last moment when Isaac would have had to know.

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for sacrifice. As a young man, Isaac could have easily over-powered his aged father. But instead, the reader becomes aware of a second act of faith and obedience. For Abraham's beloved son, heir of the promise, lies ready to die by his own father's hand. The father has yielded his son. The son has yielded his life. All Christian and Jewish writers pause long over these two verses.²⁷

Verses 11-12: "but the angel of Yahweh called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham, and he said here am I. And he said do not lay your hand on the lad or do to him anything. For now I know that you fear God; you have not withheld your son, your unique one from me."

At this critical point one immediately notices the change of the name of God used up to this point. And this name will now be used until the end of the narrative.

The double vocative "Abraham, Abraham" reinforces the intervention from heaven,²⁸ as does the father's third "*hineni*" (as in vs. 1 and 7), all adding to the intensity of this moment.

Also punctuating God's urgent halt is the double negative to ensure the total safety of Isaac, "do not lay your hand on the lad/do not do anything to him."

— "now I know you fear God": The divine being declares the meaning of Abraham's act. This direct characterization of Abraham uttered from heaven thus has absolute authority. The reader is left with no doubt that true fear of God consists in complete subjection to His sovereign will.²⁹

— "Your son, your only/unique one": God repeating this designation of Isaac at this juncture (as in v. 2) accentuates that He recognizes full well the nature of His command to Abraham.

Verse 13: "and Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold a ram behind him caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son."

At this point, again "Abraham lifts up his eyes and sees." The narrator utilizes the same formula as in v. 4 to mark off another poignant moment for Abraham. The first time he "lifted his eyes" his heart must have stopped as he saw the mountain God indicated. He knew then for sure that he had not been mistaken about God's command. And *now*, at *this* moment he sees the substitute for his son.

²⁷I.e., "Few narratives in Genesis can equal this story in dramatic tension. The writer seems to prolong the tension of both Abraham and the reader in his depiction of the last moments before God interrupted the action and called the test to a halt." John H. Sailhamer in *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 178.

²⁸The double call is rare in the Pentateuch. Three other occasions of urgency employ it: Jacob (Gen 46:2); Moses (Exod 3:4); and Samuel (1 Sam 3:10). Very similar would be King David's mourning over his son (2 Sam 18:3). These several occasions are marked with high intensity.

²⁹Nahum Sarna is eloquent on this point, describing it as the "definition of relationship between man and God . . . [which finds the] fullest expression in the realm of action." (*Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 163.

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As alluded to above, the phrase “[he] looked ... and saw” is the most common way of depicting physical sight in the OT. It is used over 860 times; over 240 times in the Pentateuch; and almost 100 times in Genesis alone. Forms of “to see” also occur 7 times within 15 verses of Gen. 22. Thus it becomes tantalizing to notice the few times when the rare phrase “lifting up . . . eyes” is tagged to the already obvious word for “seeing.” Could this possibly imply something beyond mere physical sight?³⁰ The narrator could have written that Abraham “saw” the ram, in this case. He does this almost 250 times in the Pentateuch. However, at this dramatic point in Gen. 22 there is added “lifted up the eyes” to the word “seeing.” Is this possibly indicating something beyond natural vision?³¹

In the NT, Jesus Himself declared that “Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” (John 8:56). Could He have been alluding to this instance of “lifting up the eyes and seeing” of Gen 22:13? Was the Messiah’s future mission of salvation something that Abraham began to “see” there on Moriah’s mountain? The rare formula “lifting of the eyes”, used at two critical junctures in this narrative, could possibly signify something beyond mere natural sight. The narrator seems intentional that the reader “see” as Abraham did when he “went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering *instead of his son.*”

The drama of this substitution is also emphasized through the phrase “behold a ram”, answering earlier Isaac’s question: “behold . . . where is the lamb?” in v. 7. This is also the first time the word for this sacrificial animal is used in Genesis.

Verse 14: “and so Abraham called the name of that place Yahweh will see, as it is said to this day, on the mount of Yahweh, it shall be seen.”

³⁰Texts include: 1) Gen 13:10, Lot “lifting eyes” and seeing Sodom (hinting that he was seeing more than just the fertile valley, but was also considering what advantages there would be to living there). Also, he was in a position enabling him to look down into the valley and thus didn’t need to “lift” his eyes in a physical sense; 2) Gen 24:63-64, used *twice* in two verses, as Isaac and Rebekah first encounter each other (possibly denoting deep emotions both might have been experiencing at this “arranged” marriage); 3) 33:1, when Jacob “lifted his eyes” and saw Esau approaching, thereby suggesting the anxiety he was experiencing (remembering his elder brother’s fury at losing the birthright); 4) Gen 43:29, Joseph “lifted” his eyes and saw Benjamin as his brothers *bowed* before him (with complex emotions seeing his brother again plus remembering his past dreams and present fulfillment)—he certainly didn’t need to raise his eyes to view prostrate people; 5) Num 24:2, Balaam “lifts his eyes” to view the Israelite camp in the valley *beneath* him.

³¹The “lifting up the eyes” seems enigmatic and deserves attention. Gudmundur Olafsson, “The Use of NS¹ in the Pentateuch and its Significance for the Biblical Understanding of Forgiveness”, Ph.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 1988) 148-154, and C. S. Reif (“A Root to Look Up: A Study of the Hebrew *nasa ayin*” in *VTS* 36(1985): 230-244) both begin to turn in this direction.

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Abraham now names the mountain. The “name draws attention to God, not Abraham. It is not Abraham-has-performed, but God-will- provide.”³²

Verses 15-18: “and the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, by Myself I have sworn says Yahweh, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only/unique one. With blessings indeed I will bless you and I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the shore of the sea and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed because you have obeyed my voice.”)

After the sacrifice, the “angel of the Lord” called out of heaven the second time to Abraham. *Three* times in just nineteen verses God speaks to Abraham, two of them at this pivotal climax of the narrative.³³

Verse 16: “I swear by Myself”: This is the solitary instance of God swearing this way in all of the Patriarchal narratives, crowning these words with extreme importance.³⁴ God is obviously reaffirming His earlier Covenant with Abraham but in a dramatically expanded manner. “And He said”, used over and over in these nineteen verses, is now punctuated with “says Yahweh.”³⁵ Even the verbs are reinforced by the absolute infinitive—adding “most abundantly”! Noticeably, the blessing is now extended to Abraham’s seed, and victory over enemies is mentioned for the first time. These blessings are also uniquely presented as the result of Abraham’s actions, and not merely as God’s gracious initiative, as in previous chapters. God specifically praises Abraham’s obedience in this Covenant statement.

Messianic Echoes

The narrative of Gen 22 is profound.³⁶ Each of the “particulars” beckon attention and interpretation. It seems very apparent that the narrator has displayed, as Robert Alter cogently remarks, “his omniscience with a drastic selectivity.”³⁷ It is the position of this paper that the accumulative effect of the various particulars of Gen 22 and its surrounding context cannot be brushed aside as merely coincidental.

³²Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 109.

³³And this is the last time God speaks to Abraham.

³⁴This type of oath is extremely rare in all of Scripture. Three other examples: Isa 45:23; Jer 22:5; 49:13; (Heb 6:13, 14, the NT reference to this important oath). The Pentateuch subsequently has repeated references to this oath (24:7; 26:3; 50:24; Exod 8:5; 33:1).

³⁵“saith the Lord” is used constantly by the prophets, but is rare in the historical books (Num 14:28; 1 Sam 2:30; 2 Kgs 9:26; 19:33).

³⁶John Sailhamer is one of many who singles out the Gen 22: “Few narratives in Genesis can equal this story in dramatic tension.” *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 178.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 126.

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1. Isaac's birth, in just the previous chapter (21), is announced in a very singular manner.³⁸ Up to this birth, the author of Genesis has described the conception of a child as the result of the husband "knowing" his wife.³⁹ However, in this instance we are told that "the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken."

Sarah conceived, without the previously-used Genesis formula of her husband "knowing" her. This in no way suggests that Abraham was not involved! This is not a virgin birth. Sarah has, however, been pointedly depicted as well-beyond child-bearing years (chapter 18). Thus this birth of Isaac is miraculous in that fact alone, pointing the perceptive reader to the later miracle involved in the Messiah's unusual birth.

2. The text declares that Isaac's miraculous birth also came "at the *set time* of which God had spoken to him" alluding to a later fulfillment of God's word when at "the fullness of time" the Messiah would be born (Gal 4:4).

3. The birth announcement involves both names for God that are found in Gen 22, the shift in names occurring there at the decisive interruption on Moriah.

4. God explicitly informs Abraham what he is to call his son: "Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and *you shall call his name Isaac*", bringing to mind the later words of the angel to Joseph, "you shall call His name Jesus. (Matt 1:21) Matthew quotes the exact LXX phrase of Gen 17:19.

5. The word "love" is used for the first time in Genesis—in this narrative, specifying a father's love for his son. Surely fathers loved their sons before Abraham. However, this particular relationship is singled out.

6. Specific mention of Moriah: later readers would be reminded of when God halted the plague against Israel (2 Sam 24:15-25); where the Temple would stand (2 Ch 3:1), and thus, "in NT times, the vicinity of Calvary—where sin's great Plague would be halted."⁴⁰

7. Abraham's journey to Moriah is specifically pointed out as being a "three days" journey. "Three days" proves to be a significant marker in the Pentateuch, sensitizing the reader to the three days of Christ's death and resurrection.

8. The reader is given a double reminder linking a father and son—"they went, two of them, together."

³⁸"And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him." (21:1-2).

³⁹Gen 4:1, 25—Adam and Eve; 4:17—Cain. A fuller discussion will be given later in the paper.

⁴⁰Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), 143.

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9. The detail of Isaac carrying the wood to the place of sacrifice is explicitly noted.

10. The dramatic slow-down in the narrative in verses 9-10, sensitizing readers to the only time “in history by which it is surpassed: that where the Great Father gave His Isaac to a death from which there was no deliverance.”⁴¹

11. Curiously, Isaac is silent. He never speaks, except once—on Moriah’s mountain. Isaiah later writes of the Messiah: “Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter ...” (53:7)

12. The word for the “sacrificial ram” occurs first in this narrative.

It can be argued that the narrator develops a whole constellation of salvation images in Gen 22: a father giving his son; a son yielding to the father’s will; a sacrifice, wood, altar, ram, faith, and obedience. Taken in entirety, the poignant details of this narrative seem to point to the Great Sacrifice of Christ.

Eschatological Implications

Much current Narrative Analysis assumes the non-historical, mythical nature of OT events and personages with interest focused rather on probing the psychological nuances of the characters.⁴² Moreover, the various details included by biblical narrators are not generally allowed to carry theological import. However, this study has attempted to suggest a deliberate hermeneutic seemingly pervading the Abrahamic narratives. We are arguing that in the crafting of Genesis 22, the narrator was seeking to orient the reader to the “Last Days”, instituted with the Great Atonement of Christ.⁴³

New Testament materials also give evidence of linkage with Gen 22. It could be argued that it was some of the very particulars in Gen 22 that the NT writers pondered as they wrote of Christ and His death. The Apostle Paul seems to have lingered long over Gen 22 when he writes ““What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? *He who did not spare His own Son but delivered Him up for us all*, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32, emphasis supplied). Had John the Baptist

⁴¹James Montgomery Boice in *Genesis: An Expository Commentary, Volume 2, Genesis 12:1-36:43* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985) 218.

⁴²See Robert Alter, and David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewel, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) for but two examples.

⁴³Within the surrounding chapters, we note that Isaac’s name is given by a divine being before birth (Gen 17:19: as will happen with Christ, Mt 1:21); the miraculous conception (of both Isaac and Christ); the victim (both Isaac and Jesus) silent and yielding before death (Is 53:7); both Isaac and Christ bearing the wood to the place of sacrifice (Gen 22:6; John 19:17); resurrection on the “third day” (Isaac never dies; but he “miraculously” rises from the altar on the “third day.” Even Jewish Midrash ties the “third day” to resurrection with Hos 6:2. *Genesis Rabbah*, Vol. 1, 491. Also: “There are many three days mentioned in the Holy Scripture, of which one is the Resurrection of the Messiah.” (*Bereshith Rabba*); and “The Holy One doesn’t leave His just men in sorrow more than three days, as it is said, “After two days will He revive us; on the third day He will raise us up that we may live in His presence (Hos 6:2). (Parasha 56.1).

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been moved when studying Gen 22:7-8 and pondering “My father . . . where is the lamb?” coupled with Isa 53 when he announced, by the Jordan River, “Behold the Lamb of *God* which takes away the sin of the *world*.” (John 1:29, 36, emphasis supplied)

Is the word “love” describing a father’s heart initially used in Gen 22 so that when later God Himself calls from heaven twice, “This is *My* beloved Son”⁴⁴ later readers would better grasp what love was involved in *His* heart for *His* Son? The mention *three times* to Abraham by God in Gen 22 of Isaac as “your son, your only/unique one” also finds echo in Christ’s words to Nicodemus when He tells him that “*God* so *loved* the world that He gave *His* only/unique Son.”

The Apostle Paul also does careful exegesis of Genesis. He notes (Gal 3:18) that “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’” Of his several statements of the Abrahamic covenant, Paul was distinctly referring to the blessing in Gen 22 and the *final* covenantal declaration with *Abraham*. Two previous times God’s covenantal statement states that through Abraham all the earth would be blessed: in chapter 12, all the “families” of the earth; but in chapter 22, all the “nations” of the earth (which rendering Paul quotes). For in v. 18, God dramatically changes the destination of the blessing from “families” in Gen 12:3, to “nations” in Gen 22:18.

This important passage in Galatians also seems to validate the earlier suggestion above that the “lifting up of the eyes” includes more than just physical sight. For Paul states that the “gospel” was “preached to Abraham” and pinpoints this exact time with a direct quote from Gen 22:18. There is no direct mention of God “preaching” the “gospel” to Abraham in Genesis chapters 12-25. When does God “preach” the “gospel” to Abraham? If the enigmatic obscure formula “lifting up the eyes” can suggest something more than just natural eyesight, it could be hinting at Abraham’s perception opening when he “lifted his eyes” and “sees” the substitute lamb on Mt. Moriah.

Paul’s argument in later verses (Gal 3:15-16) must not go unnoticed in this context. He seems to continue his exegesis of Gen 22 when he points to the deliberate change to the singular “seed” in the Great Blessing of Gen 22. Paul is not careless. He has traced the “seed” through its several promises within the Abrahamic narratives and thus demonstrates a “close reading” of Gen 22:17, elaborating on a detail which many modern English versions do not translate precisely.

Paul apparently noticed that elsewhere in Genesis when the collective “seed” is used it appears with the pronoun “they” (i.e., Gen 15:13). In Gen 3:15—the first covenant promise—one finds the first mention of the “seed” (collective plural), but used with the 3rd person *plural*. In the Gen 16:10 use of “seed” (in

⁴⁴Matt 3:17—Christ’s baptism; 17:5—Christ’s transfiguration.

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God's blessing to Hagar), no pronoun is used. In 17:7, 9, "seed" is used with *plural* pronouns. Yet in 22:17 and 24:60, the text includes a deliberate use of the *singular* pronoun. This pronominal precision continues in the discussion of the "seed" beyond the Pentateuch. For example, in 2 Sam 7:12—"I will raise up your seed after you . . . I will establish *his* kingdom. Also 2 Kgs 17:20—"The Lord rejected all the seed of Israel—afflicted *them*, delivered *them*," etc. When a nation is implied, the pronominal suffix is plural.

Further testimony can be found "indirectly" from the LXX. Of the 103 times where the Hebrew masculine pronoun is used in Genesis, *never* does the LXX violate the agreement of the pronoun and antecedent except in Gen 22—evidence, perhaps, of an anti-Messianic bias.⁴⁵ The RSV appropriately translates the pronoun "he"—the Hebrew utilizes the third person *singular* pronominal suffix following the plural seed in Gen 22:18. This is an important textual nuance Paul noticed (and built his exegesis upon), but which is excluded by most modern English translations.

This is not an isolated incident. Pronominal suffixes in the Covenant blessings are not carelessly written. Subsequently in chapter 24, as Rebekah leaves her home to go and marry Isaac, she is blessed: "May you become the mother of ten thousands; and may your seed possess the gates of those who hate "*him*" (*again*, the third person singular pronominal suffix!).⁴⁶ This deliberate focusing on a single "*him*" seems again to imply a Messianic understanding of these promises by the author of the Pentateuch—a significant detail upon which Paul builds his own argument.⁴⁷

Moreover, many have seen Isaac as a type of Christ in this narrative. We also tentatively argue that in the carefully crafted Gen 22 narrative, the writer actually seeks to rivet the attention of the reader upon the *father*. There is almost exclusive focus on Abraham. He is the subject of almost all the verbs. Perhaps it was here in Genesis that the NT writers learned of the Heavenly Father's love for His Son, and how closely He was identified with Jesus in the Great Sacrifice.⁴⁸

⁴⁵See Johan Lust, "Messianism and Septuagint" in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, 36 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), 174-195.

⁴⁶Max Wilcox ("Upon the Tree"—Dt 21:22-23 In the New Testament" in JBL 96/1[1977], especially 94-99) notes this important point.

⁴⁷Jewish writers indirectly validate this interpretation. They blow the shofar horn, recalling the ram caught in the Moriah thicket, in anticipation of Yom Kippur, thus pointing forward to another divine event through Gen 22. Indeed, in addition to Gen 22, Christ's Atonement is prefigured all through the OT sacrificial system and the many types in the Israelite economy, and rightly so. The composition of the OT demonstrates one cannot focus too much on what Christ's Salvation Act involves.

⁴⁸The NT writers would have also noted (as we have) the constant repetition of "father" and "son" and the poignant repetition of "the two of them together"; and the first use of the word "love"—thus the pointed accent on a *father's* love. They also saw beneath the surface formula "he lifted up his eyes and saw"—realizing that on Mt. Moriah Abraham was "seeing" something more than just a mountain and a lamb. He was discerning not only the future Messiah but also now the

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OT sacrifices for sin were God-ordained. They were a prominent part of Hebrew worship. However, in Gen 22 one is instructed that God does not need the bloody sacrifice to bring His heart to love and forgive. It is because of the love already in His heart that He makes provision for the Atonement (Rom 5:8). And before any of the elaboration of the sacrificial ritual later in the Pentateuch, God first revealed to Abraham, the father of the true seed, what would be in *His* heart as He offered *His* only Son in sacrifice for sin.

The NT writers have not “advanced” theologically beyond the OT when insisting that “God is Love.” They are not introducing some new exalted concept. Rather, it is the position of this paper that NT writers lingered long over Gen 22 and saw, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who also inspired the Abrahamic narratives (2 Pet 1:20-21), that “*the Father Himself loves you* (John 16:27). The collective details in Gen 22 are not randomly included, but instead serve as intriguing pointers toward the Messiah’s sacrifice issuing from His Father’s heart, inaugurating the “last days.”

We moderns tend to pride ourselves on our access to the sophisticated tools of comparative linguistics, religion, psychology and archaeology in dealing with the biblical text. Yet we are humbled to recognize that the ancients saw all the angles, voiced all the questions and paradoxes, and emerged from the maze still one step ahead of us.⁴⁹

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Father’s part in giving His Son. Thus Abraham named Moriah’s mountain “The LORD sees . . . on the mountain of Yahweh, he will be seen” (with the insistent occurrences of variants of “to see” [vs. 2, 4, 12, 13], it makes sense to translate the verbs of v. 14 this way—enhancing what the writer is trying to portray in both a primary and secondary sense). The three-fold repetition by God of “your son, your only/unique one” was also not lost on the NT writers (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9, etc.)

⁴⁹Milgrom, *ibid.*, 62. Martin Buber says it equally well: “Scripture does not state its doctrine as doctrine but by telling a story and without exceeding the limits set by the nature of a story. It uses the method of story-telling to a degree, however, which world literature has not yet learned to use; and its cross-references and inter-connections, while noticeable, are so unobtrusive that a perfect attention is needed to grasp its intent—an attentiveness so perfect that it has not yet been fully achieved. Hence, it remains for us latecomers to point out the significance of what has hitherto been overlooked, neglected, insufficiently valued.” in “Abraham the Seer,” *Judaism* 5 (1956): 296.