

THE CENTER OF THE AQEDAH: A STUDY OF THE LITERARY STRUCTURE OF GENESIS 22:1-19¹

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The history of interpretation of the Aqedah (Gen 22:1-19)² reveals, as Claus Westermann puts it, "an antithesis, continuing right up to the present, which must be considered."³ There have been two main currents of thought concerning the accentuation and meaning of this OT passage.

The religious approach (exemplified in the Talmud and the medieval Rabbis,⁴ and in the Church Fathers, Protestant Reformers, and modern critics⁵) has traditionally stressed the end of the story. In this approach, the sacrifice of Isaac is important in witnessing to God's salvation, or, for those who read the story as an etiological saga, the importance is that it is supposed to explain the origin of

¹This is a revised version of a paper read at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Vienna (Austria), July 1990.

²The word "Aqedah" (binding) from the root *ʿqd* (to bind) is a late Jewish designation loaded with allusions to the Levitical sacrifices (in Gen 22:10 only the verb appears); it has become a technical expression to refer to the text of Gen 22:1-19 and to the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. On the use of this term, see S. Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. J. Goldin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), xix-xx; P. R. Davies and B. D. Chilton, "The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History," *CBQ* 40 (1978): 514. For a survey of the history of interpretation, see S. Kreuzer, "Das Opfer des Vaters—die Gefährdung des Sohnes—Genesis 22," *Amt und Gemeinde* 37 (July-August 1986): 62-70.

³Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1985), 353-354.

⁴See Y. Ta'anit, 2:4 (65d); cf. Aharon Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah* [New York: State University of New York, 1983], 60; *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, ad loc.

⁵Robert Martin-Achard, *Actualité d'Abraham* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1969), 80.

animal sacrifices or the location for the temple.⁶ In either case, the accent is put on the religious element of the story.

In contrast, the poetic or philosophical approach (as represented in classical poets and medieval mystics and in such philosophers as Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Pierre Emmanuel, and E. L. Fackenheim⁷) tends to stress the beginning of the story, doing so on the human level. In this approach the sacrifice of Isaac is important in witnessing the human condition with its anguished questions set up in a void. As R. Couffignal notes, what is emphasized here is "the tearing apart of the human heart rather than [an iteration of] God's design."⁸

This divergence of interpretations—a divergence that has varying degrees of incompatibility—calls for a new attempt at exegesis in order to seek in the text itself the location of its accent. If the meaning of the Aqedah ultimately depends on the place where the accent is put, it is important to analyze the literary structure of the text in order to determine the point of accentuation and the orientation that is thereby brought to light.

Some thirty years ago Y. T. Radday observed that Gen 22:1-19 is structured as a chiasm.⁹ The essentials of this chiasm can be set forth in an abbreviated outline, as follows:

⁶See, e.g., A. George, "Le sacrifice d'Abraham," *Etudes de critique et d'histoire religieuse* 2 (1948): 99-110, and H. Gunkel, *Genesis, Handkommentar zum Alten Testament* (Göttingen: Ruprecht, 1969), ad loc.

⁷See, e.g., Robert Couffignal, *L'épreuve d'Abraham; le récit de la Genèse et sa fortune littéraire* (Toulouse: Association des Publications de l'Université de Toulouse, 1976), 35-55; Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960), 175; Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, trans. with introduction and notes by Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941); Pierre Emmanuel, *Jacob*, 2d ed. (Paris: Le Seuil, 1970); and Emil L. Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: A Preface to Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). On modern Hebrew poetry, see Glenda Abramson, "The Reinterpretation of the Akedah in Modern Hebrew Poetry," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 41 (Spring 1990): 101-114, and Michael Brown, "Biblical Myth and Contemporary Experience: The Akedah in Modern Jewish Literature," *Judaism* 31 (Winter 1982): 99-111.

⁸Couffignal, 55.

⁹Yehuda T. Radday, "On the Chiasm in the Biblical Story" (in Hebrew), *Beth Mikra* 20-21 (1964): 66.

A, vv. 1-2. The word of Elohim ("here I am," "your only son," "bring him up for offering")

B, vv. 3-6. Actions ("and he took," "he split the wood," "the place which I will tell you," "and he laid," "the knife")

C, vv. 7-8. Dialogue

B₁, vv. 9-10. Actions ("and he took," "he placed the wood," "the place which he told him," "and he laid," "the knife")

A₁, vv. 11-19. The word of *YHWH* ("here I am," "your only son," "and he brought it up for offering")

Radday suggests that the apex of the chiasm is to be found in vv. 7-8, the section of text designated as **C**. The rest of the material has as parallel or corresponding sections **A** with **A₁**, and **B** with **B₁**. Radday's proposal appears to be fundamentally valid. His demonstration, however, remains somewhat deficient. The boundaries of and within the chiasm, which justify the shaping of the five sections, have not been fully established. In addition, Radday has justified the chiasm only on the basis of echoes of words and expressions, many of which in his table overlap other sections. For example, the words "mountain," "lads," "return," and the phrases "he arose and went," "he lifted his eyes and saw" are found in **B** as well as in **A₁**.

Along the general lines indicated by Radday, this study provides a more thoroughgoing analysis of the text. In doing so, it follows the narrative in its final form¹⁰ rather than exploring the history of sources and traditions lying behind it.¹¹ My intent is to determine the design and text boundaries represented in the chiasm by other evidences in addition to echoes of words and

¹⁰Cf. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953), 20.

¹¹On this subject, see Jean-L. Duhaime, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac (Gn 22, 1-19): l'héritage de Gunkel," *Science et Esprit* 2 (1981): 139-156; Sean E. McEvenue, "The Elohist at Work," *ZAW* 96 (1984): 315-332; and Hans-Christoph Schmitt, "Die Erzählung von der Versuchung Abrahams Gen 22, 1-19 und das Problem einer Theologie der elohistischen Pentateuchtexte," *Biblische Notizen* 34 (1986): 82-109.

expressions. In investigating potential parallels between the corresponding sections A/A₁, B/B₁ (and even within C [*a/a₁* and *b/b₁*]), I shall be attentive to the stylistic features of the text, such as the regularity of movement and repetition of thought. From this "synchronic" analysis, I shall suggest implications regarding not only the interpretation of the text¹² but also the "diachronic" mechanism of its deep structure.¹³

1. *The Dialogue between God and Abraham (A // A₁)*

The dialogue between God and Abraham in vv. 1-2 (A) and vv. 11-19 (A₁) uses four common themes in a parallel way and in language which makes them echo each other:

1. God's call
2. Abraham's response, *hinnēnî*
3. Order concerning the son
4. Order concerning Abraham

These four themes pattern in the following manner:

1. *God's call* is described in A and A₁ in the common terms *wayyō'mer 'ēlāyw: 'abrāhām*. However, whereas in A it is 'Elōhîm speaking, in A₁ it is the Angel of YHWH who addresses Abraham, doing so with a shout, *wayyiqrā'*, and a double call, *'abrāhām 'abrāhām*.

2. *Abraham's response* is the same in A as in A₁: *wayyō'mer hinnēnî*.

3. *The order concerning the son* is also described with similar language, but here it is language that brings out a contrast. In both A and A₁ the command relates to the sacrifice and contains two steps. In A the order given is to take and to sacrifice, and in A₁ it

¹²Cf. Phyllis Trible, "The Phenomenon of Repetition Is Important for Understanding the Structure, Content and Meaning of Hebrew Narratives," in *Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah*, Gross Memorial Lecture 1989 (Valparaiso, IN: Valparaiso University, 1990), 17.

¹³On the methodology of "synchronic" to "diachronic," see especially G erald Antoine, *Exegesis: Problems of Method and Exercises in Reading (Genesis 22 and Luke 15)*, eds. Fran ois Bovon and Gr egoire Rouiller, trans. Donald G. Miller (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978).

is to not lay the hand on the stipulated sacrifice (Isaac) and to do nothing. Thus, while in **A** the order is positive, in **A₁** the order is negative. Moreover, in both **A** and **A₁** the victim is designated as "your only son"; but while in **A** the victim is specifically called "Isaac whom you love," in **A₁** the victim is identified only as "the lad" (*hanna'ar*). And still further, in both **A** and **A₁** the place of the sacrifice is described as a mountain (*har*); but whereas in **A** the mountain has not yet come to view and is not even named (*ʔahad hehārīm ʔašer ʔōmar ʔēlēkā*, v. 2.), in **A₁** the mountain is seen (*wayyar ʔ*, v. 13), and is also named (*yē ʔmēr*, v. 14).

4. In the order concerning Abraham the contrast is also striking. In **A** the *lek lēkā* is tragic: Abraham receives the order to go, and this departure bears in itself a sacrificing of his hopes, anticipation, and prospects for the future, for it would lead (as far as he could see at that time) to the death of his sole heir, Isaac.¹⁴ In **A₁** on the other hand, the corresponding part of the *lek lēkā* has shifted into a blessing which is heard as a promise of a glorious future. Thus the *lek lēkā* in **A** is put in parallel with the second statement made by the Angel of **YHWH** and which concerns Abraham's blessing. The reason for this connection is not immediately obvious since it is indirect. It depends, in fact, on a common allusion to the blessing set forth in Gen 12:1-3, and deserves, therefore, a special treatment.

The expression *lek lēkā* in **A** points back to Gen 12:1, not just because this is the only other biblical text which uses the same expression,¹⁵ but also because in both passages the expression introduces a parallel three-step thematic sequence¹⁶: (1) the order to leave the place (the common word is *ʔeres*), followed by (2) the instruction to go to a place indicated by God (the common words are *ʔel . . . ʔašer*), and (3) the order to sacrifice the family heir ("your son" in Gen 22, "the house of your father" in Gen 12).

¹⁴See Hershel Shanks, "Illuminations: Abraham Cut Off from His Past and Future by the Awkward Divine Command 'Go You!'" *BREV 3* (1987): 8-9.

¹⁵Cf. R. Rendtorff, *Das Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*, BZAW 147 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), 59.

¹⁶For a discussion of links between these two passages, see Jonathan Magonet, "Abraham and God," *Judaism 33* (Spring 1984): 160-170; cf. Radday, 67, and Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, vol. 1, rev. ed., trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 239.

Likewise, the blessing of A_1 echoes the text of Gen 12:1-3 through the same association of three common motifs: (1) the promise to make of Abraham a great people (*rbh*, "great," in Gen 22; *gdł*, "great," in Gen 12; *zera'*, "seed," in Gen 22; *goy*, "people," in Gen 12; also in both places the same second-person pronominal suffix *kā* referring to Abraham), followed by (2) the blessing of Abraham (the common word is ^a*bārekkā*, I will bless you), and (3) the blessing of all the peoples in him (a common term is *brk* [*Niphal* in Gen 12 and *Hitpael* in Gen 22]; the same formula *kol + b + kā* refers to Abraham and there is also correspondence of the expressions *gôyê hā 'āres* [peoples of the earth] in Gen 22 and *mišp^ehôt hā 'āqāmāh* [families of the earth] in Gen 12).

2. Abraham's Walk (B // B₁)

In **B** (vv. 3-6) and **B₁** (vv. 9-10) of the chiasm in the Aqedah, Abraham's walk is described in similar terms and follows an identical four-step progression. Once again, however, we find a contrast between the two scenarios. The four sequential steps are as follows: (1) movement to the place indicated by God (in **B** there is departure, in **B₁** there is arrival), (2) connection between the wood and Isaac (in **B** the wood is placed on Isaac, in **B₁** Isaac is placed on the wood), (3) the knife held in the hand (in **B** there is fire, in **B₁** there is no fire), and (4) the refrain "And the two of them went together" (in **B** this occurs in the section's Conclusion, in **B₁** it appears in the section's Introduction).

3. The Dialogue between Abraham and Isaac (C)

The dialogue between Abraham and Isaac as contained in vv. 7-8 constitutes the central point of the chiasm—section C. This dialogue is inserted between the stylistic expressions *wayyēl^ekū š'enêhem yaḥdāw* (and they went the two of them together) and is articulated in connection with five occurrences of ^a*mr*. These occurrences, moreover, pattern in a structure of a chiasmic type which may be designated *a b c b₁ a₁*. This structure is outlined on page 23.

a. Said Isaac to Abraham, his father—

b. And he said: father?

c. And he said: here I am, my son!

b₁. And he said: here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for offering?

a₁. And said Abraham: God will see to himself the lamb for offering, my son!

The correspondences may be summarized as follows: Both *a* and *a*₁ carry a silence. In *a* the first ^ʾ*mr* of Isaac is, so to speak, aborted. The text says, *wayyōʾmer*—and nothing comes out. It is a pure silence. The last ^ʾ*mr* of Abraham can also be seen as a silence since it has this sort of effect in relationship to the specific question asked by Isaac, "Here (*hinnēh*) are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb?"¹⁷ One expects that in Abraham's response there would be an echo to Isaac's question by use of another *hinnēh* (here), which would introduce the victim to be sacrificed. Moreover, to all the questions which are directed to Abraham, whether they come from God (vv. 1, 11) or from Isaac (v. 7), Abraham always answers *hinnēh*, except in this instance. Here, instead of *hinnēh*, Abraham puts ^ʾ*Elōhîm* (v. 8).

The syntactical construction of this phrase further substantiates this observation. The subject ^ʾ*Elōhîm* comes before the verb *yirʾeh*, contrary to the general tendency which places the subject after the verb, especially if the verb is in the imperfect form.¹⁸ The reason for this irregularity is, of course, the intention to emphasize ^ʾ*Elōhîm*, but it evidences also a stylistic concern to relate Abraham's response in *a*₁ to Isaac's question in *b*₁:

—"He said" of Isaac (*b*₁) corresponds to "Abraham said" (*a*₁).

¹⁷Cf. Tribble, 6: "To say that God will see to the lamb evades the choice, at least for a time."

¹⁸See Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 129.

- "Here the fire and the wood" (b_1) corresponds to "ʿElōhîm" (a_1)
- "Where is the lamb for offering" (b_1) corresponds to "He will see to himself the lamb for offering" (a_1).

There is correspondence between b and b_1 in that both are questions asked by Isaac. The question in b is implicit in the word ʿābî (father). It is not only a call to the father and a reminder of the son-father relationship, it is also essentially a question that is not as yet spelled out nor can be comfortably articulated. The question in b_1 , on the other hand, is explicit: "Where is the lamb . . . ?"

Finally, c contains Abraham's only response that is really a response: *hinnennî*.

4. *The Literary Movement in the Chiasm*

Two aspects of literary movement in the chiasm of Gen 22:1-19 deserve mention here. These relate to the dialogue in the story and to a thrice-repeated refrain.

Literary Movement of the Dialogue

It is in the center section of this chiasm (section C, vv. 7-8) that the dialogue reaches its highest intensity. Out of the seventeen occurrences of the verb ʿmr which articulate the dialogues, five are found here. The rest are equally distributed, six times before vv. 7-8, and six times after vv. 7-8. This distribution of ʿmr is significant in that it reinforces the conclusion we have already drawn, on the other grounds, to the effect that the dialogues in section C do indeed represent the apex of the narrative. As such, these dialogues take on added significance as pinpointing the paramount emphasis and message of the Aqedah.

Literary Movement of the Refrain

It is significant, as well, that the boundaries of this central section are clearly defined through use of the specific stylistic expression *wayyēlekû šenêhem yahdāw* in Gen 22:6 and 22:8. The first of these occurrences forms the conclusion to section B, and the second is the introductory statement for section B₁. Thus the expression encloses section C in an envelope or *inclusio* structure.

The essential portion of the expression also occurs in v. 19, so that the three occurrences constitute a refrain exhibiting a well-marked rhythm. In v. 19 the expression *š^enêhem* (the two of them) is no longer used, but this omission is not, as has sometimes been suggested, an indication of Isaac's absence.¹⁹ Rather, it serves to indicate that Abraham had now joined the servants (there were more than two). This third departure of Abraham is the last one in the narrative and implies the presence of the servants once again.

This returning movement is also suggested through some further echoes. One set of these is *wayyāšob ʿel-n^eʿārāyw* of v. 19, echoing *w^enāšûbāh ʾalêkem* of v. 5 (the verb *šûh* is nowhere else mentioned in the text). Likewise the *wayyāqumû* of v. 19, which describes the servants' movements to rise in order to join Abraham (or Abraham and Isaac), is related to Abraham's order of v. 5 to remain *š^ebû-lākem pōh* (as he and Isaac were going to go on a bit further).

The expression in v. 19 *wayyel^ekû yahdāw* is, then, a replica of the two other comparable expressions in vv. 6c and 8. But while in v. 19 this refrain marks only the end of the section, in vv. 6c and 8 the expression marks the end of one section and the beginning of another, suggesting a progression in three steps.

There is another difference in the way this phrase is situated in the verse. While these first two occurrences of *wayyel^ekû š^enêhem yahdāw* are still contained in the verses which they conclude and are separated from what precedes by the *Atnakh*, the third *wayyel^ekû yahdāw*, in v. 19, is perceived in the MT cantilation right after the fall of the *Tebir* as a resumption of the beginning of v. 19, *wayyāšob ʾabrāhām*, that is, as the introduction of the last verse. In other words, the first two refrains mark the conclusion of the respective last verses while the third one marks the introduction of the final verse of the Aqedah. These differences of function and position can be explained by the fact that the last refrain marks not only the end of a section as do the other two, but also concludes the whole text. Abraham's walk next leads to Beersheba, the very

¹⁹See, e.g., Norman J. Cohen, "Heeding the Angel's Cry: A Modern Midrashic Reading of Abraham's Life," *Journal of Reform Judaism* 30 (Summer 1983): 1-15; James Crenshaw, "Journey into Oblivion: A Structural Analysis of Gen 22:1-19," *Soundings* 58 (Summer 1975): 243-256.

Synthetic Table of the Literary Structure

Gen 21:31 - 22:1, Prelude: Beersheba, theme of return (*šûb*),

"Now it came after these things" (*way^ehî ʾahar hadd^ebārîm hā ʾelleh*)

A, vv. 1-2. Dialogue: God (*Elôhîm*) and Abraham

- a. God's call
- b. Abraham's response, *hinnēnî*
- c. Order/Abraham
- d. Order/the son, mountain to be designated

6 ʾmr

B, vv. 3-6. Abraham's walk

- a. Departure
- b. Wood on Isaac
- c. Takes fire in his hand, and knife
- d. "The two of them went together"

wayyēl^ekû š^enēhem yahdāw

C, vv. 7-8. Dialogue: Abraham and Isaac

- a. Silence
- b. Question
- c. Response, *hinnennî*
- b¹. Question
- a¹. Silence

5 ʾmr

wayyēl^ekû š^enēhem yahdāw

B₁, vv. 9-10. Abraham's walk

- d. "The two of them went together"
- a. Arrival
- b. Isaac on wood
- c. Takes knife in his hand

A₁, vv. 11-19. Dialogue: God (Angel of *YHWH*) and Abraham

- a. God's call
- b. Abraham's response, *hinnēnî*
- d. Order/the son, mountain designated
- c. Blessing

6 ʾmr

wayyēl^ekû (š^enēhem) yahdāw

Gen 22:19-20, Postlude: Beersheba, theme of return (*šûb*),

"Now it came after these things" (*way^ehî ʾahar hadd^ebārîm hā ʾelleh*)

place from which he had commenced his trip to Moriah (see Gen 21:32-34, the verses just before our text begins).²⁰

We should also note again that this expression literally frames, in an *inclusio* manner, the dialogue of vv. 7-8.²¹ Thus it confirms once more that this passage is indeed the heart of our text.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The foregoing literary analysis of the text of the Aqedah leads to the conclusion that the apex of the text, section C, is located in vv. 7-8. That this is so is demonstrated by (1) the chiasmic structure A B C B₁ A₁ in which vv. 7-8 serves as the center of the narrative; (2) the concentration of *mr* in these verses; and (3) the framing of vv. 7-8 by the stylistic phrase *wayyēlekū šēnēhem yaḥdāw* in the form of an "envelope structure" or *inclusio*.

This structural analysis of the text of Gen 22:1-19 indicates indeed that the central idea of the story concerns the tragic dialogue between Abraham and Isaac. Now, if "the apogée of the chiasmus" is the major message, and contains, as Robert Alden puts it, a "capsule synopsis," it is possible that it has been composed from the center outward according to a concentric process.²² This motif would then be "the primary one" for which Roland de Vaux was looking—the one from which other motifs are derived.²³ The diachronic mechanism hereby suggested, as far as there may have been such a process here, indicates that the meaning is to be inferred *a posteriori*, from the raw event²⁴ (which has no meaning yet), and not the reverse, as it is taught in the traditional religious, philosophical, and critical interpretations.²⁵ Contrary to these

²⁰See Westermann, 364.

²¹See *ibid.*, 359; also Tribble, 5.

²²R. L. Alden, "Is the High Point of a Psalm's Chiasmus the Point of the Psalm?" A paper read at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL, November 1988.

²³Roland de Vaux, *Histoire ancienne d'Israël* (Paris: Gabalda, 1971), 270.

²⁴Concerning this emphasis on raw event and the action in Gen 22:1-19, see Auerbach, 19.

²⁵Another implication of this literary structure is that it shows striking parallels between the respective sections A B and A₁ B₁, thereby suggesting a strong literary unity of the text. Cf. Westermann, 355: "This is the reason why I do not think that it is possible to separate the text into two layers. . . ." Cf. also John Van

interpretations, which tend to put the accent on the level of the final answer, the structure of the text suggests that the accent here is primarily on the human questions and silences at the center.²⁶ More important than the response or solution would in this case be the question without response and the open silence of the human being experiencing the event.

Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975).

²⁶On the importance of silence in the Aqedah, see O. Rodenberg, "Der Opfergang. Gen.22,1-14," *Theologische Beiträge* 9 (1978): 138-143; cf. Tribble, 22, "Silence Speaks . . . Silence Shouts," 5-6; and Bovon, 423, "The evocation of Abraham and his son is realized on the foundations of barrenness, of solitude, and of silence." Cf. E. A. Speiser, who calls this passage in the center of the text "the most poignant and eloquent silence of all literature" (*Genesis*, AB [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978], 165).