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THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

Studies in the Development of a Literary Tradition

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by

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The Sacrifice of Isaac is one of the themes which enriched human thought and art. In this volume are collected eminent studies on the subject, which were printed in various and sometimes forgotten sources. The articles study the development of the theme from different points of view, from the Bible up to modern thought and literature.

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Abraham's Sacrifice of Faith

A Form-Critical Study of Genesis 22

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The obedience leitmotif complements the tension centered in the sacrifice and enables the good news of Isaac's salvation to stand as a reaffirmation of the patriarchal promise.

GENESIS 22 demonstrates an unusual skill in storytelling, a skill witnessed by artists from Rembrandt to Kierkegaard.¹ Yet, the story remains mysterious and haunting, jumping as Kierkegaard observe from the pathos of a father who faces ineffable tragedy to the heinous face of father turned devil as he raises his knife. And the strain duplicates itself in the image of a God who asks a father to sacrifice his most beloved son, the same God who fulfilled a special promise by giving the father the very same son.

Form criticism provides a particular method for unraveling the skill of such a narrative. It recognizes that storytelling depends on sensitive construction, that it does not happen automatically. If, for example, a storyteller captures his audience with a challenge, a situation that demands their attention, and then stretches their interest over a range of crises to a resolution of the crisis, he will not have done so accidentally. He will have followed some kind of plan. Moreover, if the storyteller employs competing lines in his narration, lines that develop different

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Das Opfer des Abraham* (München, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971) pp. 42-91.

points of denouement, different intentions, he increases the depth and color of his narration. Form criticism provides a means for understanding the balance and depth in such a complex plan.

Thus, Genesis 22 invites form-critical analysis. As a story that combines a powerful plot line with delicate characterization, it seemed appropriate as an example of narrative tradition for this symposium. I should note, in contrast to other form-critical studies of the same story,² that the point of departure in this essay is the received text, not a hypothetical reconstruction of earlier levels. The competing lines of narration in the story may derive from different levels in the history of the story's tradition. But the success or failure in integrating those lines in the final redaction carries the key to the story's impact on generations of artists and other exegetes.

Structure

- I. Exposition (1-2)
 - A. Headline (1a)
 - B. Dialogue (1b-2)
 - 1. Call to attention
 - a. Introduction, God to Abraham
 - b. Call
 - 2. Response
 - a. Introduction, Abraham to God
 - b. Response formula
 - 3. Instructions for sacrifice
 - a. Introduction, God to Abraham
 - b. Instructions
- II. Complication: Execution of instructions (3-10)
 - A. Transition Narration (3-4)
 - B. Interlude Speech (5)
 - 1. Introduction, Abraham to servants
 - 2. Instructions for duties
 - C. Transition Narration (6)
 - D. Crisis Dialogue (7-8a)

² Henning Graf Reventlow, *Opfere deinen Sohn; eine Auslegung von Genesis 22* (Biblische Studien 53; Neukirchen, Neukirchener Verlag, 1968) p. 32.

1. Call to attention (7a)
 - a. Introduction, Isaac to Abraham
 - b. Call
2. Response (7ab)
 - a. Introduction, Abraham to Isaac
 - b. Response formula
3. Question (7b)
 - a. Introduction, Isaac to Abraham
 - b. Request for information
4. Answer (8a)
 - a. Introduction, Abraham to Isaac
 - b. Explanation

E. Transition (8b)

F. Crisis narration (9-10)

III. Resolution (11-14)

A. Dialogue (11-12)

1. Call to attention
 - a. Introduction, angel of Yahweh to Abraham
 - b. Call
2. Response
 - a. Introduction, Abraham to angel
 - b. Response formula
3. Resolution of tension
 - a. Introduction, angel to Abraham
 - b. Instructions for substitution

B. Execution of instruction (13)

C. Actiology (14)

IV. Conclusion (15-18)

A. Introduction, angel of Yahweh to Abraham (15)

B. Speech

1. Reason for renewed promise (16)
2. Renewed Promise (17-18a)
 - a. Blessing
 - b. Descendants
 - c. Gate of enemy
 - d. Blessing to the nations
3. Reason (18b)

V. Itinerary (19)

A patriarchal itinerary scheme provides context for this story. Thus, Genesis 21:25-34 notes Abraham's contact with Beersheba over a long period of days, while Genesis 22:19 returns the scene of action for the patriarch to Beersheba. The story itself can be readily distinguished from its itinerary frame by the opening formula in 22:1: "After these things. . ." Unity with the context derives, however, not simply from structural context provided by an itinerary pattern, but of more importance, from unity in theological perspective with other Abrahamic tradition (cf. the discussion below).

This story projects a recurring motif as its principal key for unity: "Take *your son, your only son* whom you love, Isaac. . . . (*qah-nā' et-binkā' et-y'hīdkā' 'āser 'āhābtā' et-yiṣhāq*). With its emphasis on second person suffixes and verbs, on Abraham as the subject of the action, the motif appears in verses 2, 12, 16 with an opening headline, verse 1*a*, and a concluding generalization in verse 18*b*. Structure within this framework of unity comprises a plot built with three elements, exposition, complication, and resolution, plus a conclusion, an anticlimax advancing the narration well beyond the point of complication, and its resolution. Significantly, each of the first three elements employs dialogue as a central construction device, while the fourth element, the anticlimax, drops the stylized introductions to a dialogue and employs a speech addressed to Abraham without supporting complements. This shift in structure at least highlights the final element.

The exposition defines the purpose of the action presented in the plot line as a test (*nissāh*) of *Abraham* (not a sacrifice of Isaac). As verse 12 shows, the test noted in verse 1*a* determines whether the object of the test maintains fear of God (*y'rē' 'elōhim*). (For parallels cf. Exod. 20:20; Job 2:3.) The focus of such a test falls on obedience, integrity, loyalty. The exposition ties, therefore, quite directly into the unifying motif and sets the stage for a presentation of Abraham's obedience (cf. esp. v. 18). However, the exposition compromises the point of tension in verses 1*b*-2 by showing the story to be about Abraham's obedience, not Isaac's near sacrifice. It suggests that Isaac is not in any real danger.³ Verses 1*b*-2 make the exposition more specific, not only with the unifying motif in the instructions to Abraham, but also with the content

3. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis, a Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1961) p. 234.

of the instructions. The cutting point of tension in the plot at this juncture is thus two edged: (1) a call for obedience as a test for Abraham, with the patriarchal promise to Abraham at stake should he fail the test, and (2) a threat to the life of Abraham's first born, with the patriarchal promise at stake should Abraham carry through on the instructions to their bloody end.

Verses 3-10 compound the tension with painstaking details of Abraham's obedience. With a combination of narration and speech, the narrator paints a poignant picture, father and son moving slowly to a tragic destiny. The young men who accompany the central pair serve only to slow the pace of action, to heighten the tension. Abraham must stop in the midst of his tragic odyssey to give his servants instructions; then the journey continues. Significantly, Abraham's speech in verse 5 foreshadows the good news of the story's climax, for in a series of first person *plural* verbs, the coming act of sacrifice and its aftermath are announced: "I and the lad, we shall go there, we shall worship, and we shall return to you." And the tragic pair, unaware of the good news shared only by the storyteller and his audience, move off together. The transition narration in verse 6 captures the pathos of the scene: "So they went, *both of them together.*"

But just at this juncture of the plot a problem in the structure of the story appears. This foreshadowing device suggests that the scope of the story encompasses Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac and his return with Isaac safe (vs. 11-14). It provides a brief release of tension before the final denouement. But the tension it suggests is the threat against Isaac. And the denouement it foreshadows is a pardon from the sacrificial execution (cf. vs. 11f.). Obedience to the command is no longer at issue, for Abraham has already demonstrated that he would obey the command without a moment's hesitation. The arc of tension in the plot of the story thus does not open into the anticlimax in verses 15-18, with its focus on the patriarchal promise and Abraham's exemplary obedience. Yet, the foreshadowing does not exclude the anticlimax since it suggests that the son, who happens to be the heir of the promise, will not fall victim to the sacrifice. The plot construction thus complements the somewhat static character of the obedience theme.

The dialogue in verses 7-8 produces much the same image. In a poignant exchange of speeches catching an awful destiny, yet a destiny

that lies beyond the principals who share it, the son asks the father about a sacrificial animal. The wood and the fire are obvious. But what about a lamb? Abraham's answer is on the surface an effort to dodge the frontal pain of a straightforward reply. But again, the speech foreshadows the climax of the story, a climax involving the threat to Isaac without reference to the patriarchal promise and Abraham's obedience in verses 15-18. Abraham prophesies that God will provide his own lamb (N.B. the verb *rā' āh*). Yet again, the foreshadowing of God's provision for his servant Abraham also foreshadows a reaffirmation of the promise fulfilled in Isaac. The two points of tension stand in delicate balance and facilitate the depth of description for Abraham's obedience.

A transition narration connects the dialogue with the climax of the plot. The transition, identical to the one in verse 6, picks up the poignant motif of unity between the father and his son. Following this transition, however, no further delays in the pace of narration appear. With rapid pounding verses 9-10 report construction of the altar, preparation of the wood, and the final order for slaughter that would end the son's life in sacrifice. "Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son." The story can now move no further. The tension must break with either the death of the son or his miraculous preservation. But again structural delicacies appear. The peak of tension in the story's plot does not involve Abraham's obedience; that obedience is never in question. Rather, the breaking point centers on Isaac's life.

The dialogue in verses 11-12, particularly the angel's speech in verse 12, marks the resolution of tension for the story. Just in the nick of time (cf. the similar timing in Gen. 38), God stops the death blow. And a substitution lamb appears, caught in a thicket by his horns (N.B. the verb *rā' āh*). The crisis ends in a burst of good news—the first born, the only son whom Abraham loves, will not have to die. Verses 13-14 then narrate the conclusion of the story, a brief reduction of the tension along less emotionally packed lines. Abraham offers the lamb in the place of his son. And an aetiology plays on the verb "to see" (*rā' āh*).

But the story does not end with the obvious. The climax speech in verse 12 is picked up again in a second speech from the angel in verses 16-18. The changes obvious in a comparison between the two speeches

shift the point of climax from God's intervention, prohibiting destruction of the son, to Abraham's act of faith in not withholding the son. Thus, verse 16 emphasizes Abraham's act: "Because *you have done this thing*. . . ." The promise following from the foundation of Abraham's obedience renews the patriarchal covenant, guaranteeing posterity and blessing, as well as blessing for all the nations of the earth. Significantly, reference to possession of a land as a part of the promise is obscured behind an allusion to the "gates of the enemy" (cf. Gen. 12:1-3).

The overall story builds on a test for Abraham's obedience, concluding in verses 15-18 with a reaffirmation of the patriarchal promise. The reaffirmation I would understand as an integral part of the narration developing from the test. It seems to me to be difficult, then, to eliminate these verses from the unit as a secondary addition to the story.⁴ If the story in view is the story circumscribed by the arc of tension leading to a resolution in verses 11-14, then the reasons for eliminating verses 15-18 would be clear. They stand markedly as an anticlimax with no intrinsic role to play in the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac. But in that case the other allusions to Abraham's exemplary obedience would also drop away, particularly verse 14 with its compromise of the tension patterns.⁵ And that procedure would, I believe, destroy the depth of the story.⁶ To the contrary the obedience leitmotif complements the tension centered in the sacrifice and enables the good news of Isaac's salvation to stand as a reaffirmation of the patriarchal promise. To be sure, it shifts the character of the story from a story about the near sacrifice of Isaac

4. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964⁶) pp. 239f. Following Gunkel, commentaries have regularly labeled vs. 15-18 a secondary addition to the story. Cf. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 237; Reventlow, *Opfere deinen Sohn*, p. 73; and Rudolf Kilian, *Isaaks Opferung; Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte von Gen 22*, *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien* 44 (Stuttgart, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970), pp. 27-31.

5. Reventlow, *Opfere deinen Sohn*, p. 73, and Kilian, *Isaaks Opferung*, pp. 27-31, attribute the verses to a post-E redactor, thus secondary to the expansion of the story through the obedience motif. That the angel speaks for a second time is not in itself reason to eliminate the verses from consideration, particularly when one notes that the obvious structural distinction between the two angel speeches lies in the second speech, the absence of address and response formulas. Granted that the high point of the narrative's plot was attained in vs. 11f. and that the second speech breaks the speech pattern in a shift from instructions to promise, yet the second speech follows vs. 11f. as a confirmation of instructions executed. Moreover, the correspondence Kilian traces between vs. 15-18 and Gen. 26:1-5 establishes only a common perspective in both, not that both are secondary.

6. Cf. Reventlow, *op. cit.*, p. 52f. He observes: "ihre monotone Geschlossenheit bestätigt die Richtigkeit der beschränkten vorgenommenen Scheidungen." It seems to me that such extensive elimination of elements in a relatively well-constructed story is overly hypothetical and at least detracts from a serious consideration of the story in its final form.

to an account of Abraham's sacrifice of faith. But the shift is intrinsic to the shape of the story in its final layer.

The obedience leitmotif functions in the narrative as a means for reaffirming the validity of the patriarchal promise. It thus shares in the theological emphasis provided by the larger context of Abraham traditions constructed under the programmatic stamp of Genesis 12:1-3. There is no reason to assume that traditions presenting Abraham as a man of obedience could not be constructed along with traditions presenting the same patriarch as a man of little faith, traditions such as Genesis 12:10-20.⁷ Thus, the story of Abraham's sacrifice fills its position in a larger complex of stories about Abraham and his promise from God, a complex carried by J or JE. Behind this story lies an older story, developed around the tragic custom of child sacrifice, with its conclusion in a prohibition against this particular child's sacrifice and its corresponding aetiology.⁸ That story would have reached its climax in verse 14. At that level the story doubtlessly did not belong to one of the Pentateuchal sources. Rather, the storyteller has appropriated an ancient story of child sacrifice, altering it so that it becomes an example of Abraham's faith and an occasion for God's renewing the promise for great posterity, for blessing open to all the nations of the earth. Yet, precisely in the skillful combination of the two lies the genius of story-

7. Traditional source analysis has attributed this story to the Elohist. There is a tendency, nonetheless, to see Yahwistic elements in the story. Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 240, suggests that vs. 15-18 relate in some manner to J. Cf. James Muilenberg, "Abraham and the Nations," *Interp.*, 19:387-98 (1965), p. 394. It is instructive to note the source-critical arguments about the entire story by E. A. Speiser, *Genesis (The Anchor Bible 1)*; Garden City, Doubleday & Co., 1964, p. 166. He concludes: "On internal evidence, however, based on style and content, the personality behind the story should be J's." I do not intend to develop an argument here, however, that the story does not belong to E. The one point that seems to me to be crucial is that positive attitudes toward Abraham constitute no evidence for identifying the story as a part of the E source. The emphasis on obedience is characteristic of a particular genre (cf. the discussion below). And source analysis is on weak ground if it attributes an example of any particular genre to one source simply by definition of the source (such as the argument that E characteristically idealizes the patriarchal figures). Cf. Kilian, *op. cit.*, p. 51; Reventlow, *op. cit.*, pp. 67f. In the same manner cf. Hans Walter Wolff, "The Elohist Fragments in the Pentateuch," *Interp.* 26:158-73 (1972), pp. 163f. Wolff attributes the story to the collection of E fragments because of, among other things, the emphasis on the "fear of God" (*yere' 'elohim*). But cf. Von Rad, *Das Opfer*, p. 33. But would we not have to ask whether the fear of God motif in this context is characteristic of the E source, or whether it is characteristic of a story, of any story, or for that matter, any other genre developed around a test. Cf. Exod. 20:20; Deut. 13:3f; Job 2:3.

8. Gunkel, *op. cit.*, p. 240, argues for such an older story behind the final layer of this tradition. The most penetrating defense of this thesis in recent scholarship comes from Reventlow, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-52. Cf. also Kilian, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-123.

telling style so creatively displayed in this text.

Genre

At its latest stage the story appears as a legend. By definition legend functions as a narrative designed to edify subsequent generations by emphasis on virtues displayed by the central figure.⁹ As a consequence of its focus on characterization, attention for events falls into the background. Thus it seems to me that structural emphasis on Abraham's obedience at each major stage in the movement of the narration, compromising the arc of tension centered on the near sacrifice of Isaac, points to the generic identity of Genesis 22 as legend.

Moreover, a hermeneutical problem common to all legends arises in Genesis 22 at just this point. It would have been nice if the legend had displayed the inner tensions that Abraham must have felt in carrying out those grim, divine instructions. But there are no comments that would make Abraham more like me. Rather, he appears in superhuman, unemotional, somewhat unrealistic dress. He never objects to the unreasonable, slightly insane commandment to sacrifice his son, as the Abraham of Genesis 12 or Genesis 16 most certainly would have done. To the contrary, he seems to move about his grim task with silent resignation, as if he were an automaton. Or perhaps better, it would have been nice if the text had provided some more satisfying insight into God's character than the image provided by a God who would play a devious game with an obedient creature. But there is none. The text never raises questions about what kind of God would be asking such a horrifying confirmation of obedience and loyalty. In fact, God's character is not an issue. Isaac is relatively unimportant. Even Abraham's inner tensions carry no weight. The entire scope of the legend falls on Abraham's obedience.

A point of comparison would help. I Kings 13 has a similar story, although its central figure provides a negative example of obedience rather than a positive one.¹⁰ The man of God from Judah stands under

9. Ronald M. Hals, "Legend: A Case Study in OT Form-Critical Terminology," *CBQ* 34:166-76 (1972). Reventlow, *op. cit.*, p. 55, correctly defines the story at this stage as legend. But legend he defines too narrowly in terms of a model for religious piety. Hals points out the problem in such a definition (cf. p. 170). Cf. also George W. Coats, "The Joseph Story and Ancient Wisdom: A Reappraisal," *CBQ* 35 (1973).

10. André Jolles *Einfache Formen* (Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1968), pp. 51-55, describes such anti-heroes.

direction not to eat bread or drink water in the territory of Bethel. But another prophet intervenes and persuades the man of God to eat. His persuasion the text defines explicitly as seduction: "I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the LORD saying 'Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water.' But he lied to him." Yet, despite the seduction built on a lie, the man of God dies at the hands of God through an attacking lion. Was that punishment not unjust? Should the man of God not have objected strongly to the judgment (cf. v. 23). Yet the point of the story falls not on the justice of the punishment, not on the calm reaction of the man of God, or even the relatively inane character of the commandment, but on the question of virtue. God calls for obedience. But the anti-hero disobeys. It does not matter what the content of the command was. And exegesis goes astray if it stumbles over God's nature or the relatively unemotional reaction of the man. In Genesis 22 the storyteller is not primarily interested in playing out the tensions in full detail. At its latest stage at least, only Abraham's obedience is at stake and all else falls into the background.¹¹

The story behind the legend is a story of child sacrifice, with typical structure for the plot of a saga (cf. Gen. 21:8-21).¹² The tension of the plot is established by the command to sacrifice an only son, a first-born son. And the plot develops in an arc of tension from the initial complication to its resolution with God's provision for a substitute. Indeed, behind the present formulation of the saga may be a tradition about a theophany to confirm the change in requirement for first-born sacrifice. Moreover, the actiological elements, though not the substance of the saga, point to a cultic character, a concern not only for sacrificial

11. The automaton image remains problematic. Abraham moves as if to say: "My God, right or wrong. Yahweh, love him or leave him." But it seems to me to be crucial to remember that legend does not offer a pictorial transcript of Abraham's transactions with God and Isaac, but a stylized abstraction of particular virtues. Abraham represents the man who obeys. But his obedience arises out of his own decision, not out of coercion that denies his freedom to decide. His responsibility to decide applies, incidentally, to both the command to sacrifice his son and the command to stop the sacrifice. And by deciding to obey, Abraham demonstrates his willingness to accept creaturely limitations on his power. Obedience does not vitiate freedom or responsibility. It vitiates absolute power (for parallels, cf. Gen. 39-41, Num. 22-24, Job 1-2).

12. The category "saga" faces a thorough reevaluation. I use the word here simply in continuity with past scholarship. Cf. Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 238.

ritual, but also for a place. Its earliest stage thus may be identified as cultic aetiology, perhaps *hieros logos*.¹³

It is significant that at this stage in the development of the story, the question of God's character is at stake. The hero of the story understood God as a God who calls for child sacrifice. And so, according to the story, God changes his requirements. He still asks for the sacrifice of the son. But now a substitution can bear the actual point of the knife. The significant point, however, is that if the question about God's character is to be raised (and it should be), then the exegete should understand to which level in the history of the story the question properly belongs.

Setting

The legend seems to be the product of conscious adaptation from earlier tradition, designed to fit the story into the scope of theology about Abraham and his promise. I do not see evidence of a history of the legend prior to its incorporation into that literary construct. The prior story reflects a folk tradition, a style of storytelling that cannot easily be tied to one particular institution. It might as well have been told in the family as in the cult, for stories delight people in almost any kind of institutional setting.¹⁴ If the story had an even earlier form, it would have focused on sacrificial ritual, particularly the institution of a substitutionary sacrifice for the first-born son. As a ritual aetiology it would probably have been preserved within the cultic institutions of Israel's predecessors. If a *hieros logos* lies at the basis of the story, it would have its earliest tie to a specific locale, now not clearly named.

Intention

The legend provides an edifying example of obedience for all subsequent devotees of Yahweh. Indeed, it emphasizes the importance of obedience for Israel by making the primary saint of obedience the father of Israel, the recipient of Yahweh's promise for posterity. The legend

13. Cf. Gunkel, *Genesis*, pp. 240f. Reventlow, *Opfere deinen Sohn*, p. 36, notes the difficulties with this position.

14. Claus Westermann, "Arten der Erzählung in der Genesis." *Forschung am Alten Testament, Gesammelte Studien* (München, Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1964), p. 71. Westermann observes that the last layer in Gen. 22 is "erzählte Theologie."

functions, moreover, as an example of Abraham's faith in contrast to his lack of faith depicted in such stories as Genesis 12:10-20 or Genesis 16. And on the basis of this example the promise for posterity, a slightly obscured promise for land, and a designation for blessing stand reaffirmed. The outcome of the faith test demonstrates the necessity Abraham faces for recognizing Yahweh as lord of the promise. Abraham does not control the life of the promise; he does not even control its death.

Von Rad observes that Abraham's act of faith opens the door to a sense of Godforsakenness.¹⁵ The promise appears to be denied. And in this case Abraham's sacrifice of faith would sacrifice the faith for all generations. Yet the story does not really focus on the Godforsaken stage of Abraham's pilgrimage. It recounts a sacrifice, an act of obedience made possible by Abraham's faith, not Abraham sacrificing his faith, not even Abraham standing in lonely despair. Martin Luther picks up this point. In his commentary on Genesis¹⁶ he sets out his position through the eyes of Hebrews 11:17-19: "Abraham . . . did not give up hope in the divine promise but, believing in the resurrection of the dead, he was comforted by his faith that God's promises must stand." Von Rad cautions that Luther's exegesis moves well beyond an authentic exegesis of the story.¹⁷ And perhaps insofar as the explicit affirmation of the text is concerned, Von Rad is right. Yet, an affirmation common to both texts remains implicit. Abraham was willing to relinquish not only control over his life and the life of his son (and the promise) but also his control over his own death and the death of his son (and the promise). He accepts his limitations as an obedient creature by recognizing that he receives both death and life from his creator. In this obedience lies a reaffirmation of the promise, and indeed, a blessing for all mankind. Is that blessing so foreign to the Christian's hope in the resurrection?

The prior story maintains a plot line developed in the first order for suspense, thus for enjoyment. But its aetiological character, both in establishing substitutionary sacrifice for the first born and in its foundation for a holy place, cannot be mistaken.

15. Von Rad, *Das Opfer*, p. 32.

16. *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, trans. T. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, 1958) II, 9.

17. Von Rad, *Das Opfer*, p. 28-30.