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# **THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC**

## **Studies in the Development of a Literary Tradition**

edited with prolegomenon  
and bibliography

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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# The Akedah

E. WELLSCH

## THE OEDIPUS CONFLICT IN THE AKEDAH

The previous chapters on the commentaries and legends dealing with the Akedah were mainly concerned with the presenting of facts about the subject. The following chapters will be devoted to the psychological interpretation of the findings. The first task in this investigation is the study of the Oedipus conflict which must be assumed to have existed between Abraham, Isaac and Sarah.

This does not mean that such a conflict is described in the

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Biblical story. All we can say is that the story is remarkable for containing features and details which psychological practice has shown to be symbolic of the unconscious Oedipus situation.

*Abraham.* At the time of the Akedah Abraham was a very old man.<sup>1</sup> He was at the height of his achievements and it is likely that he felt and feared that his powers as husband and leader of the tribe were now on the decline.

It is interesting to note that, although there is no record in Genesis of Abraham being jealous or afraid of Isaac, these traits of the Oedipus situation were instinctively added by Jewish and Islamic<sup>2</sup> legends.

It was told that the new born babe was so extraordinarily similar in appearance to the father that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. This story partly had the purpose of proving that Isaac was indeed the son of the centenarian Abraham. But it must also be understood in the light of Frazer's<sup>3</sup> observation which has already been mentioned on p. 20. Similarity of father and son was regarded in primitive society as an alarming sign that the father had died and was born or reincarnated in his son. This meant that the role of the father became endangered and one can assume that Abraham might have felt a similar anxiety as the Hindu fathers whom Frazer described. It is possible that the impulses of Laius were not strange to him nor the desire of King On of Upsala<sup>4</sup> to prolong his life by infanticide.

There are other stories which seem to confirm that Abraham harboured a secret in his heart about which he felt guilty and which he wanted to hide from Sarah. In

<sup>1</sup> According to Genesis, xxi, 5, and Ibn Esra (quoted from Beer, B., 1859) Abraham was probably about hundred and thirteen years old.

<sup>2</sup> Weill, 1846.

<sup>3</sup> Frazer, J. G., 1930.

<sup>4</sup> Snorro Sturleson, *The Heimskringla*, 1844.

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Genesis it is not mentioned if Abraham told Sarah of his departure with Isaac and the assumption is justified that he left secretly. In the Midrash,<sup>1</sup> however, a farewell is described in which Abraham deliberately hid the truth. He lied to Sarah and told her that he was taking Isaac to the religious School of Sem and Eber, the ancestors of their family. Although this behaviour can also be explained by Abraham's agonizing inner struggle, it points at the same time to an unresolved conflict in him.

As another story suggests, Abraham's Latus Complex towards Isaac was of a particularly tenacious nature. When in the last moment God commanded him not to lay his 'hand upon the lad'<sup>2</sup> he could not fully accept this immediately but wanted to shed at least a little of Isaac's blood.<sup>3</sup> Abraham, in this impulse, wanted to modify the infanticidal act by at least inflicting a vicarious injury to the son as was described by Frazer.<sup>4</sup> But God said further: 'Neither do thou any thing unto him.'<sup>5</sup> This changed Abraham's heart completely and extinguished the last trace of his Latus Complex.

*Isaac.* There is a legend<sup>6</sup> which indicates that rebellious emotions against his father were not unknown to Isaac. The legend related that Satan came to Isaac and told him that he was the son of a mother deserving pity. His old and demented father was going to slay him. Satan described Sarah in glorious words whilst he spoke about Abraham in a derogatory way. An important detail of the legend is the fact that Satan appeared to Isaac in the disguise of a youth like Isaac himself. This suggests that Satan, as often happens in dream images, was another aspect of Isaac's own personality. The

<sup>1</sup> Jalk. I, 98 nom. *Midrash. B. hajaschar*. Quoted from Beer, B., 1859.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, xxii, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Hershon, P. I., 1885.

<sup>4</sup> Frazer, J. G., 1930. See page 00.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis, xxii, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Tauch. and Jalk., *B. hajaschar. Ber. r.c.* 56. Quoted from Beer, B., 1859.

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legend closes with the victorious resistance of Isaac to Satan's accusations. But Beer<sup>1</sup> reports another legend which shows that Satan's visitation did not remain without impression on Isaac.

When the altar was ready for the sacrifice, Isaac implored Abraham to bind his hands and feet firmly because, so Isaac said, he was a strong youth and Abraham was an old man and he was terrified lest he would instinctively react against the sight of the open blade. According to another version<sup>2</sup> Isaac asked Abraham to bind him because he was afraid in the fear of death to make a reflex movement against the father and even to curse him, thus offending against the precept 'Honour thy father'.<sup>3</sup>

Isaac then went on to say that after his slaughter Abraham should burn him to ashes and place the ashes in Sarah's room. This should be done so that his mother, whenever she would enter her room, would burst into tears and cry: 'Oh this is my son who was slaughtered by his father.' Isaac's hostile impulses against his father and tender feelings for his mother were dramatically expressed in this legend.

*Sarah.* The legend is told that dreadful foreboding occurred to Sarah when Abraham informed her of the journey which he was to undertake with Isaac. She took Isaac in her tent and kept him there 'all the night and she kissed and embraced him . . . and (in the morning) she said to Abraham: Oh neglect him not.'<sup>4</sup>

The horrible suspicion which can be read in the above words of Sarah became terribly increased when soon afterwards Satan appeared to her. He came in the figure of an

<sup>1</sup> Beer, B., 1859.

<sup>2</sup> Pirké de Eliezer. Quoted from Friedlander, G., 1916.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus, xx, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Reprinted from *The Legends of the Jews*, by Louis Ginzberg, with the permission of the copyright owner, The Jewish Publication Society of America.

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old decrepit man who was an allusion to Abraham. Satan told Sarah of Isaac's agony on the altar of sacrifice and of how he pitifully asked his father for mercy. But Abraham mercilessly slaughtered the son. Sarah was petrified and died from grief.<sup>1</sup>

These stories show that Jewish folklore had the vision of an antagonism of Sarah and Abraham because of her love for Isaac.

The Akedah story describes *the resolution of the Oedipus conflict*. This is achieved to an extent which is never reached in any of the similar stories or legends. In the parallel<sup>2</sup> stories the wish and effort to overcome this conflict we described, but in the Akedah story its complete solution is shown. The resolution of the Oedipus conflict in the Akedah is unique in its completeness because it is brought about by unique religious and psychological phenomena which distinguish the Akedah experience from all other similar experiences. These will be called the *Akedah Motif*.

### THE AKEDAH MOTIF I

The *Akedah Motif* is an unconscious constellation of religious-psychological experiences which aim at a complete resolution of parent-child conflicts. It can be called the Biblical experience of the Oedipus Complex. It is characterized by the development of a succession of mental phenomena culminating in a specific kind of super-ego formation. The super-ego of the Akedah Motif is formed by an introjection, moral masochism and instinct transformation which involves the assumption of the existence of an external moral force.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Beer, B., 1859.

<sup>2</sup> Like the stories of the sacrifice of Iphigenia and Cunaçepha, which were mentioned on page 63.

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It is the purpose of this work to present the phenomena of the Akedah Motif as a new approach to psychiatry.

*The Development of the Akedah Motif.* The beginnings of the Akedah Motif are as old as the Oedipus Conflict. In the primitive infanticidal era they expressed themselves in the tendencies of the parents to mitigate and modify child murder. In the enlightened Greek and Antique era the Akedah Motif developed into the compromise solution of the Oedipus Complex. These stages can be called primitive and advanced *Akedah tendencies*.

The Akedah Motif was fully developed for the first time in Biblical history by the experiences of Abraham and Isaac. In Abraham it developed as the last and crowning experience which followed a series of extraordinary events of his earlier life. They consisted in the awareness of communications which Abraham felt to be reaching him from an outside power. They are known as *the call of Abraham*. Three times previously in his life he had heard the call of the great external power.<sup>1</sup>

The first time was in Ur when he was sixty years old and the God of Glory appeared unto our father Abraham . . . and said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.<sup>2</sup> The second time in Haran, at the age of seventy-five, after the death of his father Terah. This time the call had a promise attached to it. 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee; and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless the . . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.'<sup>3</sup> The third time, the call came to Abraham in Canaan when he was ninety-nine years old. This time God promised that 'Sarah, thy wife, shall bear thee a son . . . and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my coven-

<sup>1</sup> Deane, W. J., 1906.    <sup>2</sup> Acts, vii, 2, 3.    <sup>3</sup> Genesis, xii, 1, 2.

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ant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.<sup>1</sup>

About fourteen years after this last promise God asked Abraham to offer Isaac for a burnt offering. The acceptance of this new communication of God was the first of the *stages of the Akedah experience* proper. It was followed by a period of terrifying thoughts which led to the agony of the deed. It culminated in the transformation of Abraham's mental attitude. Corresponding experiences occurred in Isaac and Sarah. In the language of psychological interpretation these religious experiences can be regarded as experiences of introjection, moral masochism and instinct transformation.

*The Phenomenon of Introjection in the Akedah Motif.* In the super-ego formation of Abraham the introjection of the mental pictures and moral precepts of his parents and ancestors played a great role. The moral image which formulated Abraham's life most decisively, however, appeared to him as a divine call which came to him from outside.

Some, of course, may prefer to explain the call of Abraham as being due to a *projection* of his own mind, an idea which he produced in himself and believed that it reached him from outside. But even on this assumption the fact remains that the Akedah story expresses the emergence of a specific experience at a particular time and place of Biblical history amongst a particular family, which had unique moral consequences for mankind. The significance of this phenomenon cannot be disregarded even by those who do not share the Biblical attitude. By Biblical attitude is also meant a philosophy which refuses to separate the moral and religious phenomena within from the moral and religious power without.

From this point of view, Abraham not only introjected the mental images of his parents and ancestors but also the con-

<sup>1</sup> Genesis, xvii, 19.



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the communications of the external divine power. His ego was thus decisively formulated by the call of God he had received before the beginning of his full Akedah experience.

Abraham's Akedah experience commenced with a further vision of God which probably occurred to him during a dream in the night.<sup>1</sup> According to Genesis it began with the words of God: 'Take now thy son . . .'<sup>2</sup> It is of greatest importance to study the wording of this divine communication carefully because it contains two elements which, though expressed ambiguously, already contain a lead for the continuation of the trial.

God continued to say: 'and offer him . . . for a burnt offering . . .'<sup>3</sup> It was noticed by various commentators<sup>4</sup> that God did not say offer him *AS* a burnt offering but *FOR* a burnt offering. This means that God did not explicitly say that Isaac should be slaughtered but rather implied that he had commanded that Isaac should be brought up to the altar. What was to happen next was left undecided.

God also said: '. . . upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of'.<sup>5</sup> God did not tell yet on which mountain the trial was to happen and Skinner drew attention to the fact that this was never imparted in the story where the exact location of the mountain was later given to Abraham. God, by withholding the position of the place, 'put doubt and suspicion in Abraham'.<sup>6</sup>

This shows that God's command was not a straightforward order but was ambiguous from the beginning. It was not a direct order to carry out an act but vaguely implied an order

<sup>1</sup> See the story of Rabbi Eliezer, 1916; XXXVIth Sura of the Koran.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, xxii, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, xxii, 2.

<sup>4</sup> See Aha in *Midrash Rabba*; Hershon, P. I., 1885; Ibn Esra, *Genesis*.  
<sup>5</sup> See from Beer, B., 1859.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis, xxii, 2.

<sup>7</sup> See Huma on the authority of R. Eliezer, *Midrash Rabba*.

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to make a choice. Although Abraham 'rose up early in the morning'<sup>1</sup> and set out on his journey immediately, he did not obey the command to kill Isaac simply and blindly as some commentators describe.<sup>2</sup> He began his journey with an agonizing conflict. It was an inner struggle as agonizing and important as the struggle of Jesus when he set out on his way to Gethsemane.

*The Moral Masochism in the Akedah Motif.* The moral code developed in Abraham's super-ego by his call from God overcame the aggressive and incestuous tendencies of his ego. This state was suddenly altered by the command to sacrifice Isaac. This command emanated from the same source which formerly imposed the powerful repression of aggressive impulses but now it apparently coincided with them. It cruelly allowed Abraham to re-enact his primitive infanticidal wishes but at the same time it forbade him to indulge in them. Abraham is described as being in an acute agonizing state of *moral masochism*. The indications of this in Genesis were taken up and elaborated in legends and commentaries.

Abraham rode for three days to the place of sacrifice. He did not speak during this time, nor did he lift up his eyes.<sup>3</sup> This three days' silent journey stirred the imagination of Kierkegaard<sup>4</sup> who conceived it as a period of terror of thoughts in Abraham's mind.

St. Cyril of Alexandria<sup>5</sup> compared the agony of these three days with the agony of the three days during which Jesus went down to hell before his resurrection. With deep insight into the significance of the martyrdom of the three days Maimonides<sup>6</sup> commented that they were granted to Abraham

<sup>1</sup> Genesis, xxii, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Skinner, J., 1912; Spence, H. D. M., and J. S. Exell, 1897.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, xxii, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard, S., 1939.

<sup>5</sup> St. Cyril of Alexandria, 1881.

<sup>6</sup> Maimonides. Quoted from Beer, B., 1859.

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by God in order to give him time to make his choice. The third day in particular was regarded in Jewish tradition as being of such tremendous importance that it was thought to have happened on the first day of the month of Tischri, on Rosh-Hashana, the New Year's Day, when God will judge everything. According to another version the third day of Abraham's journey coincided with Yom-Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The ultimate outcome of Abraham's torturing struggle was *unconsciously foreshadowed* by some of his remarks which appear to have been uttered in a sort of trance-like state.

'On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.'<sup>1</sup> The meditation of the memorable three days had ended and his mind was set on action. He now knew the exact direction in which to proceed. But he did not yet know what he would find on the summit. He said to his servants: 'Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship . . .'<sup>2</sup> And then a higher power seemed to direct his further words, which must have shaken him with wonderment when they came forth from his mouth. He continued to say: ' . . . and come again to you.' This amazing annunciation was regarded by St. Augustin and Calvin<sup>3</sup> as a sign of Abraham's unconquering faith. Rashi<sup>4</sup> called it an unconscious prophecy. It was, in fact, a sign that after three days of inner struggle Abraham's ascent to a solution had begun.

Whilst ascending the mount, Isaac asked the terrible question: 'Where is the lamb . . . ?'<sup>5</sup> And again Abraham spoke with unconscious foreknowledge: 'God will provide himself a lamb . . .'<sup>6</sup> These were the last spoken words recorded in this chapter of Genesis. They were near the summit. The rest of the way they went up in silence.

<sup>1</sup> Genesis, xxxii, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Deane, W. J., 1906.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from Hershon, P. J., 1885.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis, xxxii, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis, xxxii, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis, xxxii, 7.

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During Abraham's agonizing state of moral masochism his super-ego behaved as if it would wish him to sacrifice Isaac. His present duty seemed to contradict the message and promise of his previous call. He could not understand this dilemma but felt that, in order to understand it later, he had to act now *As If*<sup>1</sup> he was to obey literally. There was no other way than to undergo this ordeal.

During the three days of his journey Abraham unconsciously felt that his ordeal to behave as if he were going to sacrifice Isaac was a fiction which only served to cover a misunderstanding which he was unable to solve. By thoughts he tried to narrow the gap of the misunderstanding to a minimum but he could not bridge it completely.

He could not find the solution as long as he was still in the plain of the desert and not on the mount. For the solution could not be found on the level of the plain but on the height of the mountain only. Because, there was no longer thought but deed.

The nearer Abraham came to fulfilling the sacrifice in deed the greater became the mental strain of his as-if experience. But the solution of his conflict could only be achieved by *bearing a maximal strain*. This was an experience which required an extraordinary mental organization. It could not be endured by persons who were made of a weaker mind than that of Abraham. It broke them like a brittle metal is broken—by overstrain.

The mental phenomenon occurring in the mind of Abraham can best be described with the help of a simile taken from the study of metals. There are brittle metals which cannot be overstrained without breaking them and there are ductile metals which can endure overstrain. The ductile metals can be worked to be useful. If the stress applied to

<sup>1</sup> The mental mechanism of the *As If* has been elaborated by M. Vaihinger, 1924.

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such a metal is very large and just less than the breaking stress, then, if the stress is removed, the ultimate strength of the metal, its hardness and elasticity, are tremendously increased. This is the so-called phenomenon of *overstrain*. Abraham, so to speak, was made of ductile metal. He endured the trial of the as-if experience to the utmost. When the stress was removed just at the last moment, Abrahams' strength, vision and love were enormously increased.

In another simile R. Jose C. R. Hanina compared Abraham with a piece of flax of good quality which is beaten by a flax worker. 'The more he beats it the more it improves and the more it glistens: but if it is of inferior quality it cannot give it one knock without splitting it.'<sup>1</sup>

All moral progress comes from personal trial and a superior mental organization of the persons tried. Therefore 'The Lord trieth the righteous: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth.'<sup>2</sup> Therefore God tried Job. It is significant that Abraham, in a legend describing the Akedah, was compared with Job. The legend begins with a Prologue in Heaven similar to that in the Book of Job.<sup>3</sup> Satan appears before God, accuses Abraham of wickedness and asks God to try him.<sup>4</sup>

### THE AKEDAH MOTIF II

*At the Height of the Passion.* The Akedah experience consists of a succession of stages of suffering and is in this respect comparable with the passion of Jesus. In fact, many pictorial representations of the Akedah render the story in a succession of scenes reminiscent of the stations of the cross.<sup>5</sup> They show

<sup>1</sup> *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis, Vayera.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm, xi, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Job, i, 6-12.

<sup>4</sup> Hershon, P. I., 1885.

<sup>5</sup> This aspect of the Akedah is movingly expressed in a painting by Bronzino which shows six scenes, and in a painting by Israhel van Meckenem which represents five scenes. Photographs of both pictures are in the Warburg Institute, University of London.

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Abraham's departure from home, his journey, the scene when he left the servants behind, the ascent of the mount and the altar scene at the height. The last stage of the passion of Abraham and Isaac requires special consideration. It is the deed.

Abraham proceeded from meditation to *deed*. The meditation of the three days was spiritual preparation but the real solution required physical action. Indian and Chinese saints found their apparent solution by meditation only. They did not need deeds because they despised life. Abraham was not content with contemplation only. He believed in the inseparable union of spirit and body. This was the essence of his monotheistic belief in One God only.

Abraham proceeded to the deed. He bound Isaac with his own hands and thrust the knife at Isaac's throat.

At this crucial moment the angel of God intervened.

The urgency of the situation has been dramatically conveyed to us by artists who painted the angel grasping the point of Abraham's weapon, pushing the blade of his sword away or arresting his arm.<sup>1</sup>

A tapestry of the Brussels weaver, W. Pannemaker, which hangs in Hampton Court Palace, shows four way-stations of the passion of the Akedah. (Pl. I.) The first station marks Abraham's and Isaac's fateful departure from the servants who remain, with the ass, at the foot of the mountain, resting, eating and drinking. The second stage is the ascent of Moriah by father and son, Isaac carrying the wood of his own sacrifice on his shoulders as Jesus did on his way to Golgotha, and Abraham carrying a censer as well as the knife. The third station is that of the Akedah. Isaac, bound, lies on the altar; Abraham, at the height of his agony is almost ready to carry out the sacrifice when at the last moment the angel of Jehovah intervenes. But the last and highest station is not that of the averted sacrifice. It is that of the sacrifice of the ram and of the common prayer of thanksgiving of father and son, which stands for the beginning of a new era.

<sup>1</sup> This is demonstrated in paintings by Giovanni Antonio Bazzi and Luca Giordano and in a Religious Icon to be found in the British Museum which is reproduced in Pl. III. Photographs of the paintings are in the collection of the Warburg Institute, London University.

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In the Iconography of the Akedah the saving angel is often painted as a female figure of beauty.<sup>1</sup> This is of psychological interest as the Bible only knows male angels.

A remarkable representation of the angel was made by Bonusamicus. In his relief on the pulpit at Volterra a woman with wings stands behind Abraham, forming with Isaac a family group (see Pl. II).<sup>2</sup>

According to psychological interpretation the female figure of the angel would have to be taken as a symbolic image of Sarah. And indeed, the thought is justified that Sarah's influence arrested the blade, brought the ram, and stood by Abraham's and Isaac's side in the moment of their greatest need.

This is also suggested by the Haggadic sources. There it is stated that Sarah had more prophetic vision than Abraham. She must have influenced him deeply throughout their lives. The last words which she said to Abraham before he went on the journey with Isaac must have especially affected him during the three days of meditation and must have reverberated in his mind during the agony of the last moment: 'Oh . . . I pray thee, take heed of thy son and place thine eyes over him.'<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore psychologically not incorrect to say that the angel spoke with the voice of Sarah. But Sarah was only the mediator and not the real power of the new command. Abraham did not accept the command of a mediator and

<sup>1</sup> This, for instance, is shown in the above-mentioned painting by Giovanni Antonio Bazzi. A significant version of the angel was painted by P. Testa. In his work a number of female angels are seen, one of them, carrying in great haste the ram in her arms, the vicarious sacrifice. This version is very rare in Western art but, as Schapiro, M. (1943) pointed out, common in Islamic art.

<sup>2</sup> The setting of a family is also given in an Alexandric-Coptic fresco at El Bagawat. It shows a woman without wings standing by the side of Abraham and Isaac.

<sup>3</sup> *The Legends of the Jews*, Louis Ginzberg (1908).

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insisted that God Himself should speak to him.<sup>1</sup> Therefore 'the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord . . .'<sup>2</sup> This means that God did comply with Abraham's invocation and spoke Himself to him. This oath of God was the only one recorded in the history of the patriarchs.<sup>3</sup> It is 'a point of unprecedented lustre in the Old Testament: for Jehovah here swears what he promises, as he does nowhere in his intercourse with the patriarchs.'<sup>4</sup>

Abraham did not lay his hands upon Isaac. The gap was filled. The solution was found. The tendencies of thousands of years had reached fulfillment. A fundamental change had taken place in Abraham, *a turning of mind* which divided the history of the world into two parts: one before and one after the Akedah.

The turning of Abraham's mind was symbolically expressed in artistic works by the turning of Abraham's body. In a Religious Icon from a French Bible (in the British Museum) Abraham's head was turned almost a hundred and eighty degrees towards the heavenly messenger (see Pl. III).<sup>5</sup>

When Abraham turned towards the calling angel he was so struck because he recognized the voice. He had heard it calling him three times before in his life. His turning was a returning to his calling.

*The Instinct Modifications in the Akedah Motif.* Through the experience of the turning Abraham's instincts underwent a decisive modification. During this process, phenomena occurred which were characteristic of the Akedah Motif and were not encountered in similar experiences of super-ego

<sup>1</sup> Hershon, P. I., 1885.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis, xxii, 15, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, B., 1934.

<sup>4</sup> Delitzsch, F., 1894.

<sup>5</sup> Mitellus (after a Titian painting in Santa Maria della Saluta, Venice) represented Abraham at the moment when the angel called from heaven. His whole body is struck as by lightning, twisted and turned vehemently away from the place of sacrifice and towards the calling angel.



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formation. They concerned the promotion and modification of the life instinct.

A fundamental effect of Abraham's change of outlook was the realization that God demanded life and not death. Abraham realized that the meaning of the commanded sacrifice was not to kill his son but to dedicate his son's life for lifelong service to God. He completely rejected the former dominance of his death instinct and entirely abandoned his aggressive tendencies against Isaac. His life instinct was tremendously promoted and with it a new love emerged in him for Isaac which became the crowning experience of his religion.

The idea of renewed life is represented symbolically by a surprising detail on the Alexandric-Coptic fresco referred to earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Intimately connected with the promotion of his life instinct was the promotion of a vital *need* in Abraham *to act*. By his resolute action he actually gained the victory of his life instinct over his death instinct. The desire to act and its counterpart, the need to meditate, are fundamental religious attitudes. It was a significant effect of the Akedah experience to strengthen the desire to act. It taught that meditation, or faith alone, is not sufficient but that action too is essential in Biblical religion. This is what was meant by James<sup>2</sup> when he said: 'Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar. . .? Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.'

The most important effect of the strengthening of Abraham's life instinct was the *increase of his object love*. This was a

<sup>1</sup> It shows Isaac holding a small box in his hands and Sarah with a similar box. A box, in the language of symbolism, is a container like a uterus. A uterus contains new life. It seems as if the artist's unconscious vision has seen one of the deepest meanings of the Akedah.

<sup>2</sup> James, ii, 21 and 24.

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process which can best be interpreted satisfactorily in the light of Biblical religion.

According to psycho-analytical theory, introjected parent and other images become ego-ideals and the aim of self-love or secondary narcissism. By this process, object-love which was formerly directed to the parents and other persons is withdrawn. A different aspect is gained if the Biblical view is accepted that Abraham's most formative image of his super-ego was the introjected call of God. According to this view he directed libidinous energy to the ego-ideal of his call, which had two consequences.

Abraham loved the call as something which was now in him, and thus part of himself. He loved the call with narcissistic or self-love. Whatever the call demanded was experienced in relation to his self-love. The command to sacrifice Isaac could be rationalized as being the opportunity to prove the greatness of his self-righteousness and could be justified because of reasons of self-preservation. By meditating about this his self-love increased and almost drove him to infanticide.

But Abraham's love for the ego-ideal of his call, which contained an altruistic aim, also had another and far more important consequence. It amplified his object-love by decreasing his self-love. This tendency clashed with the first-mentioned tendency contributing to the agony of Abraham's moral masochism, but, in the last moment, gained complete victory.

The amplification of Abraham's object-love was directed to Isaac in the first place but embraced all human beings and, because of the promise attached to the call, even future generations. It was a love which aimed at the happiness of all mankind in a purified and redeemed world. This mental attitude is *messianic love*. It became the most dynamic moral power of Judaism and Christianity with widespread cultural effects.

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The unique manner of the emergence and the unique qualities and effects of messianic love justify the assumption of the intervention of a moral power outside man which was introjected into man. This external moral power we are accustomed to call God.

*The Change of the Name of God.* The decisive change in Abraham's spiritual attitude is illustrated by the change of the Divine name in the Akedah story. God, at the beginning of the story, is called *Elohim* but at its end He is called *Jehovah*.<sup>1</sup>

The interpretation of the great significance of the change of the name of God in Genesis xxii follows Jacob.<sup>2</sup> He was of the opinion that Elohim, who tempted Abraham, was only a servant of God and not the real God Himself. Abraham also obeyed the servant of God, but he did so with a mental reservation. The open blade in the last moment of his ordeal brought about the change. He heard God's real voice and no longer obeyed the inferior Elohim but God Himself. He exchanged the Elohim for Him. And therefore 'Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh',<sup>3</sup> because he saw Him on the mount, the Holy Hill of the psalm.<sup>4</sup>

In the light of this interpretation Abraham's vision of the very nature of God underwent a change after the turning phase of the Akedah experience. According to his comprehension Elohim's command to sacrifice Isaac was not inconsistent with God's nature. Elohim, in this respect, represented

<sup>1</sup> As is generally known, the use of these different names of God in Genesis is held to be due to different sources. Such a theory need not be inconsistent with the Jewish tradition that Moses was the compiler of Genesis, and it may be noted that the more general name, Elohim, is used particularly when the patriarchs are in contact with the pagan peoples, while Jehovah belongs particularly to God as He reveals Himself and His character to Abraham and others. This difference can be felt in the rendering of the Authorized Version of the Bible, where Elohim is simply translated God, while Jehovah is THE LORD.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob, B., 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis, xxii, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm xxiv, 3 ff.

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the non-Biblical belief that destruction ultimately is as justified as creation. This belief is derived from the opinion that the world is governed by an eternal cycle of birth and death and that to obey God means to resign to the rule of this circular movement. Life itself has no intrinsic value because our goal is to submerge in the harmony of the eternal circular movement. Love to any particular person is therefore not specially valued in this belief. This provides a justification for infanticide. It is, in fact, a perfect rationalization for the death wish of the Laius-Oedipus Complex.

But this was only one aspect of the Elohim. In the ambiguous wording of his command he made mental reservations as to the moral value of infanticide which laid the foundation of Abraham's change of mind.<sup>1</sup> Elohim, if rightly understood, already spoke with the voice of Jehovah.

Jehovah commanded sanctification of life. This meant that the works done *here and now* are essential for the world to come.

Jehovah commanded personal love to definite persons as the highest expression of the intimidation of the Divine Love. Therefore infanticide must be abolished and also the compromise solution of satisfying one's hatred by vicarious acts. A new love must be kindled in the heart of man. This was Abraham's vision on Mount Moriah.

*The Aspects of the Akedah Motif.* The Akedah Motif concerns the moral development of family life. It consists of the aspects or motifs of the father, son, mother and daughter. The motifs of parents and children, reacting on each other, form the Akedah Motif of the family.

The outstanding phenomenon of the *Abraham Motif* is the initiative of the father in overcoming the family conflict. By his struggle, agony and practical example Abraham gave the

<sup>1</sup> See the remarks on p. oo.

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lead for the resolution not only of his Laius Complex but also of the Oedipus Complex of Isaac and the Jocasta Complex of Sarah.

His initiative made him the central figure of the Akedah drama. This point is impressively illustrated in many works of art. Abraham was often represented as a Lord and priest, wearing flowing white draperies and sometimes having a halo.<sup>1</sup> In order to show his power Abraham frequently holds a terrible sword of enormous proportions.<sup>2</sup> Abraham had the right and the power to use the sword but he did not use it. He did what his descendent Malachi later proclaimed to be the first requirement for the coming of the messianic age, he turned his heart to his child so that the heart of his child turned to him. Abraham was frequently called 'the father of faith' but he should also be called 'the father of love', because it was through love of his son that he ascended to the Akedah.

A moving aspect of Abraham's love of Isaac was shown by Rembrandt's paintings 'The Sacrifice of Abraham' and 'The Return of the Prodigal Son'.<sup>3</sup> They reveal that Abraham's love of his son was the love of a father for his prodigal son. All sons in their Oedipus aggression are prodigal sons and we can assume that Isaac, before the Akedah, was no exception to this. In the two paintings, the sons are naked as a child is when he is born, thus indicating that they were born again. In both pictures the sons' faces cannot be seen. They are

<sup>1</sup> An example is a tapestry at Halberstadt in Germany which was woven in the twelfth century. (Thomson, W. G., 1930.)

<sup>2</sup> This is, for instance, seen in a stained-glass window in Canterbury Cathedral which dates from *circa* 1230 and is situated behind St. Augustin's Chair. It is also seen in a painting by a follower of Toriti in the Chiesa Superiore di S. Francesco, Assisi.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' was painted in 1635. 'The Return of the Prodigal Son' was finished in 1663, shortly before Rembrandt's death. It is one of the most stirring and monumental works of this great painter. Both paintings are in 'The Hermitage' in Leningrad. (Bodkin, T., 1948.)

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blotted out; in the first case by the father's hand and in the second by his clothing. The fathers' faces in both pictures are shown with an expression as if shining in supernatural joy. Although the second picture was made twenty-eight years after the first one, the fathers appear to have a similar face.

The main developmental stages in the Abraham Motif were the experiences of the temptation and the turning. When the Elohim tempted Abraham he wished to prove to God his self-righteousness by obeying the terrible command and to give up his messianic tasks which he had obtained through previous calls. The stage of temptation is the phase of moral masochism. Ego and secondary narcissism are for infanticide. Super-ego and the awareness of the messianic call decide against it. The stage of the turning is characterized by the introjection of a further call of God and the father's ultimate choice to conquer his Laisus Complex completely.

When, as an Infant, Isaac reverently introjected the image of his father he also introjected the experience of his father's call of God. But as Abraham was tempted to interpret his calling as a justification to prove his self-righteousness by committing infanticide, so was Isaac tempted to use his introjected ideal as a justification for harbouring patricidal ideas against the 'father tyrant'.

During their three days' journey not only Abraham but also Isaac must have been tortured by intense moral masochism. Father and son fought the same battle. On the one hand Isaac behaved as if he were obediently following his father's command but on the other hand he considered if it were not better to kill his father before he was killed by him.

But at the height of his agony Isaac completely conquered

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his Oedipus hatred. When Abraham in the last moment looked into the eyes of Isaac<sup>1</sup> he was amazed and finally changed by what he saw. 'The eyes of Isaac looked towards the angels on high, and Isaac beheld them, but Abraham saw them not.' Isaac saw Heaven because he had overcome his Oedipus Complex completely. But Abraham saw it not for he still struggled with the last convulsions of his Laius Complex. Although Abraham had taken the initiative to resolve the Laius-Oedipus conflict completely it was Isaac who succeeded first in doing so. In this respect Isaac was greater than Abraham. By the surrender to the father's command *the son is greater than the father*.

Isaac, so the legend tells, died in the moment of his final surrender. But during the moment when Abraham looked into the eyes of Isaac he gained his last strength to resolve the last traces of his Laius Complex. The soul of Isaac returned into his body. Father and son had saved each other.

Elaborating the text of the Akedah chapter psychologically one might perhaps say that, although *Sarah* does not appear personally in the story, her influence in its course is so great that it decides the issue.

Sarah's central experience was her experience of Abraham's call of God. This destined her to overcome her Jocasta Complex completely. She unconsciously felt what the purpose of Abraham's journey was and was tempted to prevent Isaac from following his father. By letting Isaac go she conquered her Jocasta Complex.

But her undivided love for husband and son accompanied both in their final, bitter struggle, protected and saved them. The love of Sarah was with Abraham and Isaac during the three days of the journey. It influenced Abraham when he spoke to the servants and to Isaac during the ascent of the

<sup>1</sup> Targum of Palestine. Quoted from Ryle, H. E., 1921.

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mount. It stayed his arm in the last moment. Sarah was the angel.

Sarah was the moving force of the Akedah. Her love was greater than that of father and son. She was the mother.

The Akedah story, as the Oedipus story, does not contain a daughter figure. But the idea of the Akedah Motif, as that of the Oedipus Complex, includes a daughter experience. In the Oedipus Complex the daughter's hatred of her mother was called the Electra Complex. This term was derived from the Agamemnon-Clytemnestra myth. The daughter aspect of the Akedah Motif is characterized by the complete abandonment of the Electra Complex. An outstanding Biblical example of such an experience is given in the Book of Ruth.

*Ruth*, the Moabite, gained this experience by her love of her mother-in-law Naomi, through which she was converted to the belief of Abraham. So great was Ruth's contribution to the raising of the moral standard of family life that she was deemed worthy of becoming the ancestress even of King David, and through his line, of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Akedah story itself does not give a clear indication of what follows. One can, however, draw the conclusion that it marked the beginning of a new relationship between father and son which initiated a new era in the family relationships of man.

Its realization depends on a situation in which selfish aims are abandoned and real personal love and dedication to God's call are possible.

From the phenomenological point of view this new relationship can be described as *a covenant between parent and child* which inaugurated a new era of moral code. A pictorial representation of the foundation of the new covenant is seen in the tapestry at Hampton Court. (Plate I.) The last and



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highest stage in the passion of the Akedah, which this tapestry shows, is the prayer of thanksgiving of Abraham and Isaac. On the top of the summit they kneel in front of the altar in great emotion. They inaugurate the new covenant.

