Theology and Ministry 6 (2020): 4-19
ISSN 2049-4513

Offering What Is Precious:
Genesis 22 as a Basis for Christian Giving

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Abstract

This article argues that a careful interpretation of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 can offer a good basis for Christian giving, something which is often lacking in debate around the concept of tithing. Core hermeneutical and textual issues relating to the passage are examined and a Christian interpretation of the passage is proposed. This interpretation is then applied to the issue of Christian giving to suggest that what lies at the heart of the imperative to give is the call upon the one who would worship God to offer that which is truly precious. In doing so the Christian participates in a sacrificial act which externally demonstrates a right response to God ('the fear of the Lord') which reflects an internal right attitude and motivation. Such a right response costs the worshipper something but it is required with the long-term good of the worshipper in view. Sacrificial giving can then be an act of participation in the work of God which is done in response to that which is received from God as pure gift.

Keywords: Aqedah; Genesis 22; giving; tithing; offering; fear of the Lord

Introduction

Tithing, normally considered the act of giving away at least ten percent of one's income, is a disputed concept across churches and denominations.[1] Much of the

debate lies around whether or not tithing applies to Christians today.[2] This article does not aim to enter this debate but will rather argue that Genesis 22 offers a better fundamental basis for a Christian understanding of giving than the passages in the Old Testament which speak of tithing.[3] Before examining how the binding of Isaac (known in the Jewish tradition as the Aqedah) can form such a basis for Christian giving, a number of questions need to be asked as to its genre, context, and content to determine what may be a good interpretation of the passage.

History or *Sage*?

Two giants of twentieth century biblical scholarship, Hermann Gunkel and Gerhard von Rad, were keen to argue that the genre of Genesis should not be perceived as history (or historiography) but rather as *Sage*, which has been translated into English as both 'legend' and 'saga'.[4]

Gunkel stresses that *Sage* and falsehood are not to be confused with one another, for *Sage* describes not truth or falsehood but rather a specific genre with a specific purpose: 'Legend – the word is employed here in none other than the generally acknowledged sense – is a popular, long transmitted, poetic account dealing with past persons or events.'[5] Seeing the narrative thus helps the interpreter avoid the trap made by many of interpreting poetry as prose, and in doing so missing the real value in the narrative.

> Historiography, which wants to instruct concerning actual events, is by nature prose. Legend, however, is by nature poetry. […] Whoever has the

[1] For an overview of the debate which offers our different perspectives, see David A. Croteau (ed.), *Perspectives of Tithing: Four Views* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011).
[2] For example, Stuart Murray makes a case against tithing being required of Christians by examining both the biblical and historical basis in *Beyond Tithing* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011). A similar case is made by David A. Croteau in *Tithing after the Cross* (Gonzalez: Energion Publications, 2013). Both books make a case against tithing and then seek to offer principles which undergird Christian giving, such as generosity, cheerfulness and sacrifice. However, by deconstructing a system of tithing and then working to principles, both writers miss what I will argue is the central basis for Christian giving, which can be found in a careful reading of Genesis 22.
[3] The passages which broadly relate to tithing in the OT are Gen. 14.20; 28.22; Lev. 27.30–32; Num. 18.21–28; Deut. 14.22–24; 2 Chron. 31.5–6; Neh. 10.38; 12.44; 13.5, 12; and Mal. 3.8–10.
[4] Timothy D. Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Heidelberg: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. 5.
[5] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark Biddle (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), pp. vii–viii.

> heart and the sensitivity must observe, for example, that the narrative of Isaac's sacrifice is not concerned with establishing certain historical facts. […] Whoever has recognised the unique poetical charm of these old legends becomes angry at the barbarian – there are also pious barbarians – who thinks that he can only value these accounts if he treats them as prose and history.[6]

Von Rad also argues that *Sage* is the correct term for the Genesis narratives. This does not mean that they did not once have their beginning in actual historical events, but that they have moved beyond history as they have been theologically shaped by the shared experience of the community of Israel.

> At the beginning, the saga in most cases certainly contained an 'historical' fact as its actual crystallizing point. But in addition it reflects a historical experience on the relevant community which extends into the present time of the narrator.[7]

This requisition of stories by the community of Israel in later generations as they collate and edit known *Sagen* does not equate to a simple distortion of historical truth. The truth inherent in the story of Abraham is not one of historical fact, but of a community's ongoing reflection on their experience as a people living under YHWH. As Walter Moberly explains:

> It should be clear that the question of the truth of the story is not primarily a question about the historicity of what it relates, but rather a question about the beliefs and values incorporated in the story by those who have related it. Presumably these beliefs and values arise out of Israel's life as a people under YHWH and have been found through practical experience of life under God to be true.[8]

Before looking at key issues for interpretation within the text, one last point should be made on genre. In his famous work *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach argues that part of the power of the narrative in Genesis 22 lies in what remains unsaid. There is plenty of silence, thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, and the whole story remains

[6] Ibid., p. xi.
[7] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 34.
[8] R.W.L. Moberly, *Genesis 12–50* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), p. 54.

'fraught with background'.[9] One of his observations (or accusations) which comes about as a result of this is: 'Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his efforts to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon.'[10]

While Moberly and others argue that Auerbach somewhat overstates the case, Moberly does raise a valid point about the nature of the text.[11] A good interpretation therefore will be wary of reading into the silence and constantly finding something new to feed on. Psychological accounts of what is going on in the narrative may be interesting but they easily miss the primary concern of the passage. To attempt to understand what this primary concern may be, the location of the Aqedah needs to be investigated — a subject which may at first appear to be of only secondary interest for interpretation.

What's in a Name?

So far it has been noted that the genre of the narrative is that of the *Sage*.[12] To understand more precisely what may have been the original purpose of the story, the location of the Aqedah should be discussed. In verse 2 Abraham is instructed to go to the land of Moriah. The only other mention of Moriah in the Bible comes in Chronicles 3.1 where it is listed as the location on which the temple is to be built: that is, Jerusalem.

However, many scholars have rejected Jerusalem as the original location. Hermann Gunkel, who laid a foundation upon which many other scholars would

[9] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 11–12.
[10] Ibid., p.15.
[11] Moberly, *Genesis 12–50*, p. 40.
[12] It is worth observing that some more conservative commentators make a similar point, even if they are not willing to disregard the accuracy of the historical events entirely. They prefer to use the language of 'tradition', in part because it does not carry the connotations of falsehood that legend or myth may popularly imply. For example, A.R. Millard states: 'Let all who read remember that the patriarchal narratives are our only source for knowledge of the earliest traditions of Israel, that traditions can be correct reflections of ancient events, and that they do not pretend to be textbooks of ancient Near-Eastern history or archaeology.' See 'Methods for Studying the Patriarchal Narratives as Ancient Texts' in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. A.R. Millard and D. Wiseman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), p. 51.

build, argues that Moriah was not original to the story but was in fact a later addition by a Jerusalemite wanting to stake a claim for the historic significance of the temple mount.[13] Instead, he proposes a different location based on the Hebrew in verse 14, where Abraham names the place 'the Lord will provide'. Examining the wordplay contained there he concludes that the location of the sacrifice was not Jerusalem but Jeruel, 'which lay between Engedi and Jerusalem in the vicinity of Tekoa'.[14] Jeruel is only otherwise mentioned in 2 Chronicles 20.16, 20 but for a variety of practical and semantic reasons Gunkel is confident in his conclusion.[15] He summarises:

> Gen. 22 was originally the legend of child sacrifice at Jeruel. It narrates how at this site the deity actually wanted the firstborn son as a sacrifice, but how the deity accepted a goat as a substitute for the boy — this feature may also be understood as etiological. The current cultic status presumed by the legend is probably that one offered a goat at Jeruel. But the legend still knows that it should actually be a child. We may conclude that originally it was a child.[16]

Gunkel's influence runs deep. Others have made the case for a different location, notably Royden Yerkes, who argued the case for El-roi being the location shortly after Gunkel's commentary was published.[17] However, Jeruel was at one point so widely accepted as the location of the Aqedah that when Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* in the 1950s he accepted Gunkel's conclusion without even explaining where he drew it from.[18]

Von Rad was also influenced by Gunkel's work, and while he differed in his conclusions he nevertheless agrees, having already ruled out Jerusalem as the location, that the narrative originally had such an etiological basis.[19] He writes:

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[13] Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark Biddle (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), p. 234.
[14] Ibid., p. 238.
[15] For further discussion about how Hebrew wordplays can be used to establish a location for the binding, see Isaac Kalimi, 'The Land of Moriah, Mount Moriah, and The Site of Solomon's Temple in Biblical Historiography', *Harvard Theological Review* 83.4 (1990) pp. 345–62.
[16] Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 239.
[17] Royden Keith Yerkes, 'The Location and Etymology of יהוה ידאה, Gn. 22: 14', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 31 (1912) pp. 136–39.
[18] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 10.
[19] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 241.

> The naming of the place, which Abraham now does, was an important matter for the ancients; for a place where God had appeared in so special a fashion was consecrated for all future generations. Here God will receive the sacrifices and prayers of coming generations, i.e. the place becomes a cultic centre. It is strange, to be sure, that the narrator is unable to supply the name of a better-known cultic centre. He gives no place name at all, but only a pun which at one time undoubtedly explained a place name.[20]

The fact that the original location became lost appears to von Rad to be something of an oddity. However, he concludes that this is all part of the way the use of the narrative shifted between its original purpose and its eventual inclusion in the Torah.

> It may have become clear that the supposedly oldest version of the narrative was a cult saga of a sanctuary and as such legitimized the redemption of child sacrifice, actually demanded by God, with the sacrifice of an animal. This idea is quite foreign to the present narrative. One sees it most clearly in the loss of the name of the cultic centre. When the narrative lost its connection with its ancient cultic point of contact, any particular interest in its name also disappeared. What was once the most important point has now become an accessory to the narrative in the form of a pun.[21]

In other words, the narrative as we have it has a fundamentally different purpose from that of its origin as a cult *Sage*. The theological emphasis shifts and the story becomes instead about Abraham's act of faith in God. However, if the cult site is not Jeruel, El-roi or another site now lost to us but is rather Moriah, the location of the temple, then a different theological interpretation could be made.

The Jewish scholar Jon Levenson makes a strong argument that this is indeed the case. He agrees that the story may well have been about a cult site but he points out that the Aqedah serving 'as the foundation legend for the great Temple of YHWH in Jerusalem is the traditional Jewish answer to our question about the identity of the cult-site at issue in Gen. 22.1–19.'[22] He suggests that the tendency of

[20] Ibid., p. 242.
[21] Ibid., p. 243.

modern scholars to reject this conclusion outright has less to do with the text and more to do with 'the pervasive modern perception, found even among the devout on occasion, that the category of the sacred is a mystification of social and political arrangements.'[23]

Levenson goes on to demonstrate that the word play emphasised by Gunkel, Yerkes, and others to justify Jeruel or El-roi as the location of the binding could just as easily be used to suggest the Hebrew name for Jerusalem.[24] The reference to 'the mount of the Lord' in verse 14b, if not seen as a late gloss but as a description of Abraham's experience which long outlasted the name he gave to the mount, would also point to Jerusalem.[25] He goes on to build an effective cumulative case that the traditional Jewish answer may indeed be correct. Finally, he notes that the absence of an obvious name could be explained, not simply by a lost name which left behind a pun (which as von Rad noted was something of an oddity), but by an intentional aversion to use the name explicitly:

> Given the centrality of Jerusalem to the history of Israel from the tenth century BCE on, it is striking that the name of the city appears in the Pentateuch not once. […] Whatever its explanation, the reticence about naming Jerusalem may account both for 'Salem' in chapter 14 and for 'Adonai-yireh' in chapter 22. In each instance, the text may be deliberately employing a term that only suggests Jerusalem and does not name it.[26]

What is particularly striking about the strong and detailed case made by Levenson is that he draws no theological application from his conclusion about the location of the Aqedah being the temple mount. Walter Moberly comes to the same conclusion as Levenson, yet he suggests:

> If Genesis 22 is an etiology for the Jerusalem temple, its interpretation should be related to temple worship. Abraham's offering of the ram pictures Israel's

[22] Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 115.
[23] Ibid., p. 118.
[24] Ibid., p. 119.
[25] Ibid., p. 122.
[26] Ibid., p. 123.

> offering of sacrifice, each alike a response of obedience to God. The fact that the ram substitutes for Isaac says something about the meaning of animal sacrifice – that it should represent that which is of real value to the worshipper, so much so (given Isaac's significance for Abraham) that in a sense it symbolizes the worshipper's own self-sacrifice and self-dispossession before God.[27]

If the events of Genesis 22 are, as Levenson and Moberly believe, the etiology for animal sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple, then this tells us something fundamental about what lay behind its use in worship. The purpose of sacrifice was to represent something of real value to the worshipper.

This has all sorts of implications for other parts of scripture, but I will here mention just one by way of illustration. Such a view of the sacrificial system of temple worship gives a depth of meaning to the cries of the prophets that God despises Israel's worship when it is not also accompanied by justice in the land.[28] The actions of the worshippers demonstrated that they were no longer offering what was of value, the purpose of the sacrificial system, but instead perceived the system as nothing more than a tick box exercise. The injustice was not the problem in and of itself but was a symptom that something deeper had gone wrong in the way Israel related to YHWH.

Testing and Fear

There are two Hebrew words which, because of their significance in structuring the text, need to be engaged with for a good interpretation: נסה (*nsh* – test) and יראּ (*yr'* – fear). The concept of God testing Abraham raises all sorts of questions, as Phyllis Trible notes: 'What kind of God tests human beings? The kind who remains faithful even when Abraham fails? […] Why, then, have the test at all?'[29] Walter Moberly

[27] R.W.L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 189.
[28] For example, Amos. 5.21–25 and Isa. 1.21–24.

notes that the verb נסה is used in Deuteronomy 8 in conjunction with 'humbling' to denote a process that, while painful for Israel, nevertheless had their long-term good in view. The implication of this is that for Abraham 'what follows will be searing, yet positive in purpose.'[30]

To understand more of the nature of this testing, ירא needs to be examined in the context of verse 12, where the angel speaks to Abraham and says, 'for now I know that you fear God.' Trible argues that to 'fear God is to worship God. The term "fearer of God" embodies awe, terror, and devotion in the presence of a *mysterium tremendum*.'[31] For Trible:

> The test, then, is an opportunity for understanding and healing. To relinquish attachment is to discover freedom. […] Fear of God severs the link between detachment and attachment to save both Abraham and Isaac.[32]

However, this interpretation of the fear of God does not reflect the normal use of the phrase. In the Old Testament, fearing God is not an emotional reaction, and it is nowhere else obviously interpreted as being about relinquishing attachment to discover freedom. As von Rad puts it:

> It must not be considered as a special emotional reaction to the reality of God which is experienced *mysterium tremendum*. That the Old Testament is familiar with such a thing cannot be disputed, but where the phrases 'fear of God' and 'fearing God' occur in the Old Testament, they refer not to a particular form of strong emotions but rather to their consequence, i.e., to obedience.[33]

Fear of God implies not awe, nor an emotional experience, but rather a right attitude and obedience.[34] It is the lens through which we are to view the nature of the test. Walter Moberly, taking a canonical approach to interpretation, notes with interest that these two verbs also appear in conjunction with one another in Exodus 20.20, as

[29] Phyllis Trible, 'Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah' in *'Not in Heaven': Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, ed. J. P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 171.
[30] Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, p. 186.
[31] Trible, 'Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah', p. 178.
[32] Ibid., p. 179.
[33] Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 241.
[34] Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, p. 187.

Moses interprets God's giving of the ten commandments. God gives Israel these commandments to 'searchingly draw them into a purer and more faithful way of living.'[35] Moberly proposes that there is an intentional imaginative link between this and Genesis 22:

> Abraham's response to God models what Israel's response should be. It is not that Abraham becomes an observer of torah, but that the language of torah has been used to make sense of Abraham's response to God and that which is expected from Israel.[36]

The testing of Abraham, and his great act of fearing God by being absolutely obedient to his command, is the archetypal example that Israel is meant to follow. Nothing gets in the way of Abraham seeking to obey God's direct command. Not the sacrifice of his only beloved son. Not the apparent end to the promise that God has made to him. Jon Levenson states it strongly:

> Abraham's willingness to heed the frightful command may or may not demonstrate faith in the promise that is invested in Isaac, but it surely and abundantly demonstrates his putting obedience to God ahead of every possible competitor. And if this is so, then if Abraham had failed to heed, he would have exhibited not so much a lack of faith in the promise as a love of Isaac that surpassed even his fear of God. He would, in other words, have elected Isaac his own son over Isaac the beloved son in the larger providential drama, the son whose very existence, from the moment of the angelic annunciation of his impending birth, has run counter to the naturalness of familial life. The Aqedah, in short, tests whether Abraham is prepared to surrender his son to the God who gave him.[37]

Genesis 22 and the New Testament

We have already seen how there is a symbiosis between Exodus 20.20 and Genesis 22. For Christians this can be taken a step further, and the question can be asked as

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Levenson, p. 126.

to how our reading of the New Testament impacts upon our interpretation of Genesis 22. Von Rad boldly claims in his commentary on Genesis: 'We receive the Old Testament from the hands of Jesus Christ, and therefore all exegesis of the Old Testament depends on whom one thinks Jesus Christ to be.'[38] Brevard Childs touches on something of the complexity of the implications of this for biblical interpretation when he writes: 'For the Christian church the continuing paradox of faith lies in its encounter through the Jewish Scriptures with the selfsame divine presence which it confesses to have found in the face of Jesus Christ.'[39]

So, what does this mean in practice? One approach that is commonly used, especially by preachers, is to read into the account of Abraham and Isaac the crucifixion narrative, where Isaac becomes a forerunner to Jesus (so the wood he carries becomes symbolism for Jesus bearing the cross, etc.). The problem with this approach is that it involves seeing things in the text which either are not there at all, or at the very least are a good distance removed from the emphasis of the narrative.[40] Another possible approach would be to begin with New Testament passages which reference Genesis 22 (Heb. 11.17–19, Jas. 2.18–24, and debatably Rom. 8.32) and to use them as the lens through which we see and interpret the passage in its entirety. Once again, however, if overemphasised this method risks completely removing the narrative from its original context — and, I would argue, its canonical purpose.

Walter Moberly models a third possible approach in his *The Bible, Theology, and Faith*.[41] He argues that the Christian interpreter has a task which the non-believing, or indeed the Jewish interpreter, does not.

> The task is to consider the significance of the Christian canon as a whole (a task not possible for any of the writers within the canon), which in this study

[38] von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 43.
[39] Brevard Childs, 'Does the Old Testament Witness to Jesus Christ?' in *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche: Festschrift für Peter Stuhlmacher*, ed. J. Adna et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), p. 64.
[40] A good example of this can be found in a popular commentary on Genesis: 'The tie between the command for Abraham to offer up Isaac and God's offering his own Son on the cross provides insight into why God tested Abraham in this manner. It informs us that God was just in making this request of Abraham, for God asked him to do what God would do in offering up his own Son at Calvary.' John Hartley, *Genesis: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 213.
[41] R.W.L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

means an engagement with the substantive issues raised by Genesis 22 as these are raised also in the New Testament, specifically in Matthew's Gospel and Philippians 2.1–13.

Specifically it is our thesis that Jesus' divine sonship in relation to Abraham's fear of God is a good example of the principle which, according to Matthew, Jesus himself enunciates near the outset of the Sermon of the Mount: 'Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets; I have not come to destroy but to fulfil' (5:17). Jesus continues and extends the understanding of God and humanity already present within Israel's scripture.[42]

An Interpretation of Genesis 22

The Aqedah raises plenty of interpretative issues which have not here been examined: the ethical implications of the story from a modern perspective the patriarchal emphasis of the account, the significance of the genealogy in verses 20–24, and the complexities of what a canonical reading of the passage should or should not involve, to name but a few.[43] With this caveat, a brief interpretation of the passage will now be offered.

Genesis 22 is a *Sage* which explains the real meaning behind the Israelite sacrificial system which, like the Aqedah, centred around Jerusalem. It emphasises the significance of sacrificial worship as symbolising that which is truly of value to the worshipper. Abraham is tested by God. This test involves Abraham being asked to give up his son, not just as his only son, whom he loves, but as the means through which God's divine promise to Abraham is to come about, for Isaac is the child of

[42]Ibid., p. 226.

[43] 1. See Moberly's discussion in *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, pp. 189–99; 2. See Trible, 'Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah', pp. 170–91; 3. See 'What the narrator is doing is preparing the way for the fulfilment of the renewed promise of descendants to Abraham through Isaac (vv. 16–18) by quietly introducing, in a normal way, the human character whose life will soon be taken up into the fulfilment of the divine promise.' Moberly, *Genesis*, p. 49; 4. For a critique of Walter Moberly's use of the canonical approach on Genesis 22, see Brevard Childs, 'Critique of Recent Intertextual Canonical Interpretation', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 115.2 (2003) 178–84. For Childs' application of the canonical approach to the passage see his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992), pp. 325–36.

promise. In being willing to sacrifice this child of promise, Abraham demonstrates through his absolute obedience that he fears God, and in so doing becomes the model for how Israel is to relate to Yahweh, living under him in obedience to torah. Both Abraham's test and Israel's torah are given by God with their long-term good in view.

This obedience to God is seen most clearly in the New Testament in the life of Jesus. His life is offered as a sacrifice of something of supreme value. He was obedient to the point of death, even in humiliation upon the cross (Phil. 2.8). All Christians who seek to follow the God of Abraham, who is ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ, are now also called into that same obedience as they work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12). And yet paradoxically this salvation is received as pure gift.

This paradox can also be seen in Genesis 22 as Abraham receives the divine promise from God as pure gift and yet because he is obedient when the test comes, fearing God more than he loves anything else, a 'promise which previously was grounded solely in the will and purpose of Yahweh is transformed so that it is now grounded *both* in the will of Yahweh *and* in the obedience of Abraham.'[44] Abraham's obedience has been incorporated into the divine promise which was given as pure gift.[45] Abraham then becomes a model not just for Israel's obedience to the torah but also for Christians, who are saved by faith in the person of Jesus through his death and resurrection and yet have to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, seeking to live in obedience to Christ's claim on their lives (Rom. 6.1–11).

A Basis for Christian Giving

Five principles that lie behind the nature of Christian giving can be drawn from the Aqedah as interpreted above.

[44] R.W.L. Moberly, 'The earliest commentary on the Akedah', *Vetus Testamentum*, 38.3 (1988) pp. 302–23 (p. 320).
[45] Ibid., pp. 320–21.

Firstly, the respective and differing requirements in the Old Testament and New Testament for those who would follow YHWH to give from what they possess are a call on the worshipper to offer what is held dearly in terms of their material resources. Such giving symbolises, or stands in for, the giving of what is truly precious and cannot be physically offered or sacrificed. For Christians that which is truly precious is ultimately offered on their behalf, in full, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross — yet the call on Christians to imitate Christ (note the third point below) necessitates their participation in the offering of what is of material value. What is held dear in a society reliant on agriculture and livestock will be different from that of a culture dependent on cash (or indeed one dependent on digital currency), but the principle remains the same.

Secondly, it has been observed that the phrase 'fear of God' or 'fearing God' relates primarily not to a *mysterium tremendum*, nor to a strong emotional response, but rather to someone having a *right attitude* towards YHWH resulting in *obedience*. The phrase therefore plays a similar role in the Old Testament to that of the concept of faith in the New Testament. The very fact that 'fearing God' and 'faith' are consistently held up as qualities of great worth in the biblical narrative, as typified by the Aqedah in the Old Testament and the example of Christ in the NT, demonstrates that right attitude and obedience are to be central to the follower of YHWH. Such an attitude is to be substantiated at least in part by how an individual, a family or a community uses the resources available to them to reflect their professed commitment to YHWH. Motive and action both matter and appear irrevocably interconnected in much the same way as faith and works are in the letter of James (Jas. 2.14-26).

Thirdly, this use of resources required by the 'fear of God' involves an element of giving that costs the worshipper something. The Aqedah provides the archetypal example for Jews of what 'fearing God' looks like in a way that is comparable with how Jesus' death on the cross exemplifies it for Christians. In both cases what was offered (the life of Isaac, the child of promise, and the perfect life of Jesus Christ, the Son of God) was of supreme value. Both examples demonstrate the outworking of obedience to God above every competitor, and they are intended to

be imitated: the former through the sacrificial system outlined in the Torah (especially in Lev. 1–10), the latter through Jesus' command for his followers to deny themselves and take up their cross (Matt. 16.24–26) and the subsequent emphasis early Christians placed on following Christ's example (most obviously in Eph. 5.1–2 and Phil. 2.5–13). Whilst the act of imitation found in the sacrificial system is relatively clear, the implications of imitating Christ's example are admittedly less concrete. However, both archetypes imply that there must be a sacrificial cost attached to the act of giving for those who would obey YHWH, for what is truly precious cannot be offered (even in symbolic form) without a cost being borne by the giver. If this is taken seriously it makes it impossible to offer a set formula or percentage of what costly giving may look like for an individual, family or community.[46] It has rather to be worked out in fear and trembling.

Fourthly, just as both Abraham's test and Israel's torah are given by God with their long term good in view, this implied call on Christians to give sacrificially is ultimately for their own benefit.[47] This is not because the giver can expect any material return, but rather because such giving may be a means whereby they can be searchingly drawn into what Walter Moberly refers to as 'a purer and more faithful way of living.'[48]

Finally, it was suggested that Abraham's obedience has been incorporated into the divine promise, which was given as pure gift, and that he thus becomes a model both for Israel's obedience to the torah and for Christians' obedience to Christ. Giving then becomes one of the means by which Christians can participate in God's promise through an external action of right response which demonstrates an

[46] Some may find the idea of a base percentage helpful to guide their generosity, but a better approach to sacrificial giving may rather hold in tension the principles that it should be done willingly/cheerfully (2 Cor. 9.7), that it should be done in acknowledgement that all things come from God (1 Chron. 29.14), and that the giver should examine what is being kept over and above that which is being given (Mark 12.41–44, Luke 21.1–4).

[47] A paradigmatic example of this broader principle can be observed in the description of the essence of the law in Deut. 10.12–22. Here Israel is commanded to fear God and to walk in all his ways. They are then informed that they are to do so for their own good or well-being. A NT parallel can be seen in John 10.1–18 which records Jesus using the language of sheep and shepherds to call people to follow him and to walk in his ways. Verse ten emphasises once again that this call to follow is for the benefit of the sheep themselves, that they may have abundance of life (ζωὴν ἔχωσιν καὶ περισσὸν ἔχωσιν). It is my contention that the concept of giving sacrificially as part of a right response to God fits this same pattern.

[48] Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis*, p. 187.

intrinsic obedience based on faith (or the 'fear of God') as they continue to work out their salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12). Giving that which is truly precious then has the potential to become an act of participation in a divine promise which has been received by the worshipper as pure gift.

Offering What Is Precious

The kind of giving that Abraham models in Genesis 22 is motivated by obedience in response to a test from God. He offers that which is truly precious and does so due to his 'fear of God' (defined as having the right attitude to YHWH, which leads to obedience). This act of giving is costly but God requires it of Abraham with his long-term good in view. One consequence of the Aqedah is that Abraham is allowed to actively participate in the divine promise which has previously been received as pure gift. This offering of what was truly precious offers Christians an archetypal basis for the theological significance which lies behind the imperative for Christians to give sacrificially and generously of their resources.