The binding of Isaac

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The binding of Isaac, or ʻaqedah

Abram, the Aramaean who has settled somewhere between Schechem and the Negev, presumably under the oaks of Mamre, has become wealthy (see 12.16, at the end of the episode in Egypt). He builds altars. In Gen 13, the tension between Lot's and Abram's herders has been solved amicably. Lot chooses the Jordan valley, which supposedly was well-watered in this tale, contrary to its true nature, unless one thinks of Jericho, which is a beautiful and well-watered oasis. He goes East, which we have seen could be a wrong choice, before the valley gets destroyed by a flood of fire. He seems interested in acquiring wealth and doesn't show the patient demeanor we see in Abraham who is willing to wage everything, even against his own interests. Now, a problem: who is going to inherit Abram's promise, and his claim on the land of Canaan, which is not called Israel yet? Eliezer of Damascus (see Gen 15.2)? "A slave born in my house." God answers: "your own son." Abram "believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness." (15.6), but he seeks a covenant, through the sacrifice of three-year old victims (heifer; she-goat; ram; plus turtledove and pigeon). Ishmael, the son of a slave woman, moreover Egyptian, cannot be this heir either. Thirteen years later, the covenant is repeated, and its sign is the circumcision (ch. 17). And there is the promise of another son who will be born to Sarah who by then is 90. Abraham laughs, as Sarah will laugh too, which is a way to explain the name of Isaac. The name presumably comes from a theophoric, such as "God X will smile" (on this new person). Who can believe such things? In chapter 18, the Lord appears to Abraham, as one of three mysterious visitors…. In 18.1–8, we see Abraham offering an example of extreme hospitality, without any inquiry as to the identity of his visitors and their capacity to return the enormous favors he does them. Abraham's generosity and display of grace is especially striking when one compares it to that of Lot in 19.1ff.

In Genesis 22, Abraham is silent and obedient, a development prepared by his previous dialogues with his wife, kings, neighbors, or the divinity itself. Is this God's voice he hears? Kant thought not: But isn't Abraham's life Isaac's life? See Kierkegaard *Fear and trembling* on this issue, and in Auerbach, ch. 1 from *Mimesis*. Is the story about Abraham abandoning control over his own life, which he has been preserving or hoping to multiply all along, like the stars, as repeatedly

promised? Frst-born were to be redeemed (pedion ha ben) After this episode, the promise is repeated for the seventh time, in its most generous form so far.

Ishmael and Isaac

In Gen 21.1-21, Ishmael is a sort of sacrifice (to Isaac). He is cast out by Sarah, which is "displeasing to Abraham." The elements that can be set in parallel are: Abraham rose early; food on the shoulder (not wood, however); cast the child under one of the bushes (thicket); the angel of the Lord called from heavens; lift up the lad (versus lay hand on the lad); God opened her eyes (cf. ram).

Human and animal sacrifices

They had existed, of two main sorts: offering of older male child, especially as a foundation ritual (note homophony in Hebrew of "build" and "son"); and offerings in special occasions, usually at times of war or grave threats against the kin group. For the last type, see 2 Kgs 17.17 and 3.27 for instance, concerning the king of Moab, in the time of king Mesha, the herder: These sacrifices were thought to show the extraordinary determination of people (kings) and Gods would be expected to protect fathers taking such measures, as well as their social systems.

In Greek history or mythology rather, one thinks of the parallel story of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter, demanded by Artemis as the price for sending a favorable wind to the Greek fleet awaiting at Aulis to sail for Troy. Or perhaps the goddess was offended by the killing of a deer or goat in a sacred grove. In most versions, Iphigenia is saved by Artemis and is replaced by a hind or a boar. Athamas: Beotian or Thessalian figure. He is the father of Helle and Phrixus. Ino is after them (why her anger?) and wants them sacrificed for land fertility (again, no surprise here), but they are safely borne away by the magic ram (with golden fleece). Other parallels can be found in the story of Laius and Oedipus: Laius has been warned that he must die childless (in Aeschylus). But lust leads to his begetting Oedipus, who is then exposed, a bit like Ishmael. Oedipus kills his father and commits incest with Iocasta. He becomes blind. He will also curse his sons and they are to fight each other (a theme not pursued in Ishmael / Isaac but developed in the story of Esau and Jacob).

Regarding the tracking of evil in non-biblical myth: In Greek tragedies, the chorus may speak, e.g. of the role that even the most superficial-seeming gesture such as cutting a tree in the forest to make the planks for the Argo will have in subsequent history (*Medea*): the causes for murder and violence are thought to extend back, through biological lines (the Atrids), the mechanisms of society, even the skewed structure of the cosmos, itself the product of violent theurgic activity. In the Bible, what is proposed is that brutal acts of Cain, evil before the flood, etc., are sui generis.

Setting or Sitz im Leben

Westermann distinguishes three stages in the development of this patriarchal story.[1] The primary control text is the prophetic literature, which can be dated with some precision (early collections framed in Amos, first Isaiah, Hosea, Micah), especially Ezekiel, an exilic and post-exilic author. The early prophetic texts curiously speak very little of the Patriarchs.

1. The first stage could be a number of stories similar to that of the Ugaritic Aqhat, i.e. a late bronze age story whose author-scribe is the high-priest Ilimilku. In it, a certain great man, king Dani'ilu, is without a son or descendance. The divinity, through ten female messengers, promises (the right word?) a son, from his wife. But eventually he loses him, following a plot by the goddess 'Anatu, Ba'lu's wife.[2]

2. The second stage was the stories kept in memory and writing about the ancestors of Israel and Judah, and which developed under the monarchy. It was important to maintain and develop cohesion between the tribal groups. Perhaps personal piety developed too, in response to burdensome royal prerogatives, and took Abraham and other ancestors as its examples. This cohesion perhaps extended to a notion of the different groups making up Israel and Judah as being "brothers."

3. The third stage is a post-exilic setting, quite visible in the case of Gen 22. Several questions concern the writer. The status of the land is on the minds and contracts of the Israelites and Judaeans of that exilic period. We know of land acquired and owned by self-described autochthonous descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: see the harsh criticisms by Ezekiel 11.14–21, 33, and Isaiah 51.1–2 and 63.16. What is proposed here, in contradistinction, is a land promised to descendants placing themselves as spiritual heirs of an Abraham of faith and justice:[3] mostly the exiles, who feel the political and social loss more strongly than anyone else. They read their return from "Chaldee" (Ur of the Chaldees, a late Iron Age expression) as a divinely-enjoined command. The insistent "Go, go" or "Betake thyself" (לך לך) of Gen 12.1 and 22.2 is a command given especially to them, which they interpret as a duty to return to Judaea and Jerusalem. That land, one should add, is not conditional on acceptance of other commands and laws in this view, as

[1] See esp. Westermann (1985); and Albertz (1994), 402ff.

[2] See *AQHAT I (KTU 1.17).* In the translation by Moor (1987): *And then Dani'ilu, the Saviour's man,*
then the hero, the Harnamite man,
gave the gods consecrated oblations to eat,
gave the sons of Qudshu consecrated oblations to drink.
In his sackcloth he went up and lay down,
in his loincloth — and so he spent the night.

[3] One should add: tested, and already obeying the Torah, though this is only discreetly indicated, as the redactors were all too aware of the needed balance between Abraham's example and that of Moses "to come". See Ska (2009).

it is in the Deuteronomistic document (Dt, Jos, Jud, Sam, Kgs). It seems to stem from a more hopeful vision of history.

Abraham and especially Isaac are seen as embodying Israel. In this view, Isaac is portrayed as taking on the burden of a cruel history. (note: the poetic language of vision and darkness is a conquest of this history?) It is a story of hope, namely that the people will survive the "trials" of the times. This is particularly true of the exiled groups that survived amidst great difficulties in Babylonia and saw the change to a Persian-led empire with some trepidation. This vision is perfectly embodied in Isaiah 51 that, in its entirety, is a call to hope: "Look up to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave you birth. He was alone when I called him, and I blessed him and multiplied him. Yes, Yahweh consoles Zion, he consoles all its ruins." Or Jeremiah 33.26: "I'll change their fate (viz. Israel's and Judah's) and I'll have compassion for them."

Other themes of Genesis 22, aside from a hope for better times, are the fundamental notion of fear of God; a further development of familial piety; and a continuation of the theme of a radical difference between polytheism and monotheism. Abraham is understood as separating himself from Teraḥ and even Lot later on in the story, because of their "polytheism." This radical departure is marked by two cultural aspects, circumcision and the sabbath. Circumcision could not be seen before the exile as a distinguishing mark but became so within Babylonia and Persia. The custom of early circumcision, a family-centered ritual, critical to cultural identity, may have developed then, rather than from its main use as a pre-marital ritual. The sabbath custom probably developed at the same time and for similar reasons (the date of this custom is disputed).

See Ska (2001), 102–3, a literary analysis of Gen 22 according to various points of view (reader, divinity, Abraham, Isaac, servants). But note the singularity of Abraham and Isaac at the top of the mountain (*'alah*). The expected people congregating around the sacrifice have become the temple-less readers (or readers aware of the fragility of the divine home). The writer imagines the holy ground that will serve as foundation for the Jerusalem (or Garizim) temple: Mor(i)ah.

Commentary

"God tested Abraham." What sort of test? of his faith. We have seen him believing yet laughing too, and not believing, leaving his country, obeying divine visitors, but also arguing with God (ch. 18).

22.1 וַיְהִי אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם *and it happened after these things that the divinity tested Abraham.* This is an unusual comment on the narrator's part, an explanation (or early exegesis?) of the import of the story. Does this mean that the story is older and is set here in a new context? What are the *things* mentioned? Among the events that just happened to Abraham, there is the fact that Ishmael, the closest thing that Abraham once had to something like immortality, has been expelled and is lost to him. Second, why does the word for the divinity, *elohim*, have a definite article, *ha-elohim* = האלהים ? Where else is this articulation used in the Abrahamic saga? When Abraham answers Isaac's

question in the story, he uses אלהים. The meaning of *ha-elohim* is presumably "the true God."

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי *and he said to him, "Abraham," and he said, "Here I am."* The divinity uses the name of Abraham as an endearment? The use of a personal name is not common in the Bible. We don't see it with "Adam," Noah, or others (check). The repetition of the name "Abraham" is done in the Greek text but not in the Hebrew MT. *hinneni*, that is "Here I am," an expression of utter willingness, appears 3 times in the story. Further reflection on the use of the name: the immediate proximity created by the use of a personal name is strangely at odds with the distance that the topic of the story produces for the reader between the three main characters. The trials of a history that forces everyone into a same straight jacket makes them more absent to each other, yet freer to elect each other.

22.2 וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בִּנְךָ אֶת יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר אָהַבְתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ לְךָ אֶל אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה *And he said, "Take, please, your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah."* The divine request, not a command, comes three-fold, rhymed by the particle et (את), and introduced in polite, even intimate fashion: *Please take... your son, your only one whom you love, Isaac...* Why the insistence? This repetition is taken by ancient Jewish exegetical tradition to be a progression and mean that Abraham wasn't quiet but argued with God. Indeed, we see Abraham arguing with God just before in Gen 19.

lekh-lekha, "go immediately, proceed;" a reminder of the use of the same expression in 12.1, where A. leaves kin, country, culture (language), and (false) gods. This story is prefaced in the same way as in ch. 12 to mean that we have here another kind of leaving: give leave of one's loved ones, of one's sanity? Another sort of test and trial regarding human existence: to be human is not to have control over land and name. *to the land of Moriah.* The land is named here, but was nameless in 12.1. The textual tradition hesitates. Was there another name here before "Moriah?" This name alludes to the root for "seeing" + "Yah". It was understood early as connected to the Jerusalem temple cult (see Targum Onkelos), and where temples, churches, and mosques will or still stand. "*Mor*" also means "bitter," another homophony picked up by the tradition.

וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אַחַד הֶהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ *and offer him up there as burnt offering, on one of the mountains that I will tell you. 'al 'ehad* why the masculine? *Offer him up as burnt offering ('olah)*: this is standard vocabulary for a sacrifice in which the whole victim was burnt, without any part being reserved for the priesthood or for a communion meal. There is an interesting and curious contrast between the technical sacrificial word being used here and the untechnical, mundane words used about the knife, and the killing later on in the story.

22.3 וַיַּשְׁכֵּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ אֶת חֲמֹרוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת שְׁנֵי נְעָרָיו אִתּוֹ וְאֵת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ *and Abraham got up at dawn, he harnessed his donkey, he took his two servants with him, and Isaac his son.* Why take his two servants with him (who are they, tradition asks: Eliezer and Ishmael?? But since Ishmael has just been expelled, this wouldn't work very well). In any case, the sense of being separated and isolated from everyone will be made greater when these two "lads" are left behind and only Abraham and Isaac are left to climb the mountain.

וַיְבַקַּע עֲצֵי עֹלָה וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים *and he split the wood for the burnt-offering, and he rose and went to the place that God had told him.* the order of the actions seems strange: split the wood after the donkey is loaded? *hammaqom*: the "place," a euphemism for the central cultic place, Jerusalem, in late historical development. This expression also is used 3 times. The present text is taken by tradition to found the sacrificial cult of Jerusalem (setting it in hoary antiquity), as Greek stories are also wont to do.

22.4 וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי *And Abraham lifted his eyes and he saw the place from afar, on the third day.* The lifting of the eyes (first one in this story) might indicate weariness, prayer, or simply the seeking of a sign that would bring an end to the proceedings. *He saw.* Why the insistence on seeing, especially here in this story but actually throughout the Abraham saga?

22.5 וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל נְעָרָיו שְׁבוּ לָכֶם פֹּה עִם הַחֲמוֹר וַאֲנִי וְהַנַּעַר נֵלְכָה עַד כֹּה וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה אֲלֵיכֶם *And Abraham said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey and I and the youth we will go until there and pray and we will return to you.*

22.6 וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֲצֵי הָעֹלָה וַיָּשֶׂם עַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיִּקַּח בְּיָדוֹ אֶת הָאֵשׁ וְאֶת הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו The word for knife uses a metaphor of "eating" (*maakhelet*). To complicate things, there happens to be a metathesis with the word used for angels, in this case the angel (*mal'akh* = מלאך) who interferes later and prevents the killing. Can anything further be said about this little literary device? That the angel and the knife are related by sound, i.e., the knife is a mystic knife, not to be taken literally? Messages and messengers can easily be confused, and depend a great deal on the quality of the listening.

22.7 וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֶּנִּי בְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיֵּה הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה The intimacy of the scene, with Isaac's call to his father, the extraordinary willingness and preparedness of Abraham ("Here I am, my child," the rare Hebrew הנני, used for the second of three times in this compact story), the brevity of Isaac's question (no verb) and Abraham's answer in the following verse.

22.8 וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה לּוֹ הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו *God will provide the lamb for the burnt-offering, my son.* An old tradition places the accents differently, and cuts after "lamb:" "for the sacrifice my son…" After this intimate dialogue, the repeating of the "walking together" can be interpreted to be a self-immolation. The religious reader contemplates in the story the limits of her own life.

22.9 וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לוֹ הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּבֶן שָׁם אַבְרָהָם אֶת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת הָעֵצִים וַיַּעֲקֹד אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ וַיָּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ מִמַּעַל לָעֵצִים *wayya'aqad*: hapax legomenon. The verbal root: to bind. Binding is what one does with laws, statutes, religious customs, that is, bind oneself (as religious Jews still do today)

22.10 וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת לִשְׁחֹט אֶת בְּנוֹ *And Abraham stretched his arm* (sent his arm); "to butcher." The vocabulary here is mundane, not technical vocabulary for the ritual.

22.11 וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּנִי The messenger or angel of the Lord appears now (earlier, we have "the true God," האלהים. The name Abraham is repeated, to signify affection and urgency. For the third and last time, he says *hinneni*, "Here I am," that is, Abraham shows his readiness to answer the divine call, either when it comes from the ether (from consciousness) or from his son.

22.12 וַיֹּאמֶר אַל תִּשְׁלַח יָדְךָ אֶל הַנַּעַר וְאַל תַּעַשׂ לוֹ מְאוּמָה כִּי עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי יְרֵא אֱלֹהִים אַתָּה וְלֹא חָשַׂכְתָּ אֶת בִּנְךָ אֶת יְחִידְךָ מִמֶּנִּי

22.13 וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא וְהִנֵּה אַיִל אַחַר נֶאֱחַז בַּסְּבַךְ בְּקַרְנָיו וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָהָם וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאַיִל וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ לְעֹלָה תַּחַת בְּנוֹ Second "lifting of the eyes" by Abraham.

22.14 וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר יֵאָמֵר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה *So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'* (Ska 2001, 107) translates: "This is why today they say: It is on this mountain that Yahweh appears." The "why" is more interesting than the "to this day," which clearly refers to the Persian period. What does the why attempt to reach? Is it simply a justification of the cult? See 2 Chron 3.1.

22.15 וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה אֶל אַבְרָהָם שֵׁנִית מִן הַשָּׁמָיִם This part of the story, Gen 22.15–18, appears to be an addition, introduced by a "second" calling by the angel: a little clumsy?

22.16 וַיֹּאמֶר בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי נְאֻם יְהוָה כִּי יַעַן אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְלֹא חָשַׂכְתָּ אֶת בִּנְךָ אֶת יְחִידֶךָ

22.17 כִּי בָרֵךְ אֲבָרֶכְךָ וְהַרְבָּה אַרְבֶּה אֶת זַרְעֲךָ כְּכוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְכַחוֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל שְׂפַת הַיָּם וְיִרַשׁ זַרְעֲךָ אֵת שַׁעַר אֹיְבָיו The covenant is repeated for the seventh gime, and includes an unusual promise of military success.

22.18 וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְזַרְעֲךָ כֹּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ עֵקֶב אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקֹלִי

22.19 וַיָּשָׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶל נְעָרָיו וַיָּקֻמוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ יַחְדָּו אֶל בְּאֵר שָׁבַע וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם בִּבְאֵר שָׁבַע Note that the verb to see recurs several times.

Use in Jewish and Christian traditions

The story of Abraham and Isaac became fundamental to ancient Judaism. For instance, we have the stories of a son sacrificed for his father's glory: Ben Shetaḥ; Rabbi Yose. The binding of Isaac becomes emblematic of Judaism on the fifth to sixth century CE Galilee synagogal floors, for instance at Sepphoris and Beth Alpha.

The scene has long been the topic of many paintings, musical compositions, and works of literature. Modern poets have gone back time and again to this story to frame tragic events. The first instance comes from Wilfred Owen, who was killed at the end of World War I, after serving for a long time in some of the worse sectors of the front.

> *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*
>
> So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
> And took the fire with him, and a knife.
> And as they sojourned both of them together,
> Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
> Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
> But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
> Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
> And builded parapets and trenches there,
> And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.
> When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
> Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
> Neither do anything to him. Behold,

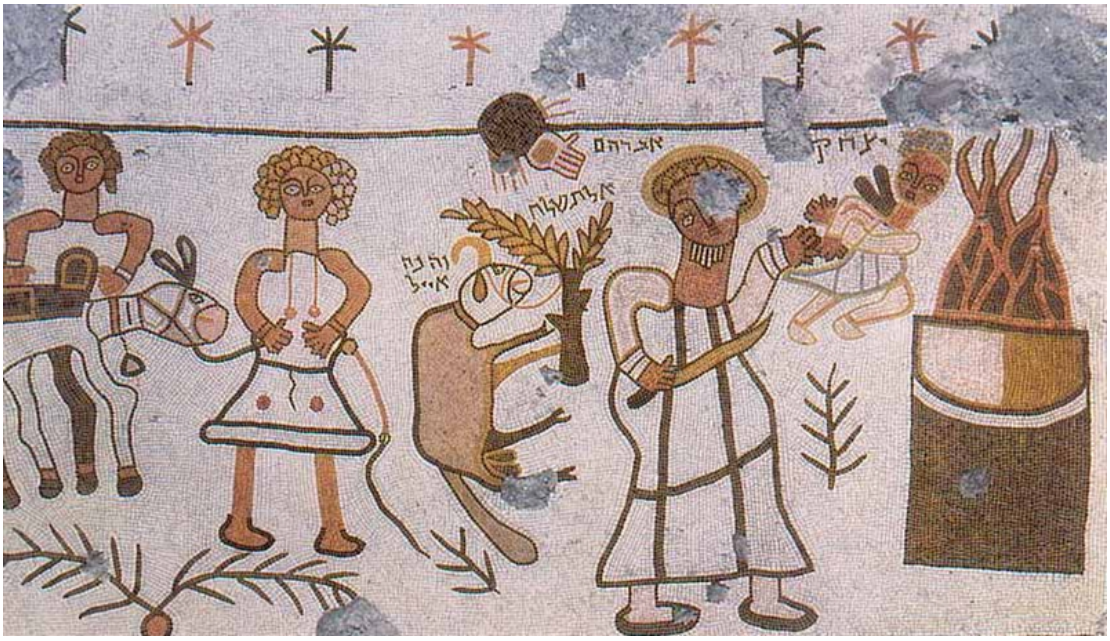

Figure 0.1: Beit Alfa synagogue: sacrifice of Isaac

A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

The second and last example comes from Yehuda Amichai. It points to the inexorable machinery or clicking of wheels of history as to a sacrificial machinery in which many innocent people get caught, yet manage to sing it away and hope there is a substitute in the "bush."

An Arab Shepherd is Searching for His Goat on Mount Zion

An Arab shepherd is searching for his goat on Mount Zion
And on the opposite hill I am searching for my little boy.
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
Both in their temporary failure.
Our two voices met above
The Sultan's Pool in the valley between us.
Neither of us wants the boy or the goat
To get caught in the wheels
Of the "Had Gadya" machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes,
And our voices came back inside us
Laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or for a child has always been
The beginning of a new religion in these mountains.[4]

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[4]Y. Amichai, *Poems of Jerusalem and love poems* (Bilingual edition. Riverdale-on-Hudson, NY: The Sheep Meadow Press, 1992), 106–107.