6.27.99 in Craigville Tabernacle worship I read the Akedah (Gn.22.1-24) & Richard Floyd (who's completing a book on the atonement) preached on it. The sermon will be a chapter in the book, & he asked me to write a brief introductory essay on the Hebrew text & Jewish usage. This is it.

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FIRST "BINDING,"* THEN LOOSING (FREEDOM)

* Hebrew, "akedah"

1 As "The Transfiguration" signals something that happened to Jesus (Mt.17, parallels in M. & L.), "The Akedah" is Jewish shorthand for something that happened to Issac (Gn.22.9: Abraham "*bound* his son Isaac" [the noun is not used]). In the former case, Christian interpreters, in naming the passage, direct attention to the essence or core of the story. So in the latter case: the Jewish name tells us to look at the rope, the symbolic (meaning-pregnant) object in the action.

2 The problem with listening prayer (word-silent in mind as well as mouth) is that God may say something you don't want to hear. You are bored when somebody in the group talks all the time: God is bored when you/we do it. But God is patient & persistent &, when necessary, will come in when we're not praying....But "Abraham" is, for Jews & Christians, the primordial personal symbol of the listener in the presence of God, the obedient listener, the hearer who hearkens (i.e., acts on what's heard). He's the Father of "the Promise" (another shorthand: God's revelation of what's to be done & the benefits of the obedience) (Gn.12.1-3 onward).

3 Most of what God wants us to do we can dope out from our own smarts, out of what makes sense in the situation. What brings us up short is becoming aware of God's will not ours ("not my will but yours be done" (L.22.42)--which happens when God asks us to do something that just doesn't make sense, something we just can't make sense of, supremely when the strange sense seems to compromise our understanding of the character of God. (In the Talkback after the worship [above], a physician who works with the poor said painfully, "How can I make sense of a god who would ask a father to kill his child?") From another angle, would we ever become aware of God's will if it were never transverse our own? Even more widely, would we ever become aware of God at all unless encountering some resistance to what we want (Gn.3.3 onward)? The Akedah is an *a fortiori* story: it's impossible to imagine competition for a comannd to kill the only human being through whom the Promise can continue, & that one "Isaac, whom you love" (vs.2): it's the most horrendous & improbable demand imaginable, & therefore the best "test" (vs.1) to which God could put Abraham.

4 To us, the horror of the Akedah command is human sacrifice; to Abraham, it was the cancelation of the Promise's continuation through his only first-rank son: "Abraham could have considered the command to sacrifice his son entirely legitimate" in that world in which human sacrifice was common (THE TORAH: A MODERN COMMENTARY [Un. of Am. Heb. Congregations/81] 149). What is at stake here is not the gulf between our God-idea & Abraham's but only the question of whether Abraham is worthy of the command & can be God-trusted to **obey** the Bath Qol, the divine voice from heaven....A whimsical thought: In a certain British television comedy series, our hero regularly identifies his wife as "She Who Must Be Obeyed." For Abraham, God is He Who Is To Be Obeyed....An analogy: In biblical religion (OT & NT), obedience is the diapason, the deepest & basic organ-pipe. Two days ago I heard one as it lay on the floor of a great church (Community of Jesus, Cape Cod) in process of construction--its great boom resounding throughout the whole Romanesque-Byzantine structure. (I'll make nothing of the fact that I couldn't hear the "Willis Mixture," the smallest [pencil-size!] pipe.).....Irony: The Romans forbad child sacrifice (in the Akedah, we are to assume that Isaac was just barely old enough to carry the firewood), & slaughtered priests (in N.Africa [Carthaginian-Canaanite] & Britain [Druid]) who refused to renounce it.)

5 How rich is Jewish **lore** on the Akedah!* One might call this haggadah (sacred narrative) a multiple pregnancy, so many theological perspectives (Jewish-Christian-Muslim) have been born from it. Said von Rad, "One should renounce any attempt to discover one basic idea as *the* meaning of the whole. There are many levels of meaning.".....Here are a few clues in the Hebrew:

6 (1) "Please take your son" (vs.2, the polite "please" [*nah*] added, though +

* The range of Jewish Akedah themes includes theodicy, justice, guilt/forgiveness, merit/atonement, the father/son relationship, & martyrdom.

in no Eng. translation I know of): The biblical God commands to persuade, not to coerce. In contrast to the other earthly creatures, we have the double dignity of being made in God's image & of having the right to say no even to God. Abraham is the father of those who say, though sometimes sadly, yes.+...(2) "Go forth" (same vs.; an unusual reflexive phrasing almost certainly reminiscent of its use in the very 1st vs. of the Abra(ha)m story, 12.2): The divine directive is repeatedly heard by the carrier-bearer of the Promise, missio dei ("the mission of God" to bless all humankind): biblical religion from beginning to end is eschatological, leaning toward shalom (as at the beginning of the Lord's Prayer: God's kingdom come, his will done "on earth as in heaven")....(3) Abraham can't see (understand), but he can see to it (obey the divine directive). But in the fabric of the text, seeing is going on: "Moriah" (same vs.) means "vision" (Vulg.; LXX has "high" place--from which one can see; later, Mount Moriah was "seen" as the place to build the Jerusalem Temple--now, "Dome of the Rock"); vs.8, "God will see to the sheep"; vs.14, Abraham names the site "Adonai-yireh," "The Lord will see" [allusion to vs.8])....(4) God begins the directing (vs.1), but delegates the continuations (vv.11,15: "angel")....(5) The "God" who begins the directing (vs.1) is "Elohim," generic & less personal than "Adonai" (vs.14, apparently A.'s personal deity--cp. "Adon" & "Adon-is"), here synonymized to Moses' deity "Yahweh" (vv.11,15; Israel's central name for deity). While we're not to give a polytheistic reading to the text, we should note that the play of the three God-titles has theological significance. We're to use our imagination, but with canonical limits (Paul Fiddes, FREEDOM AND LIMIT: A Dialogue Between Literature and Christian Doctrine [Mercer U.P./99].)(6) All the story's references to seeing assume the divine benevolence/providence: God will-see--& *provide* (CEV has "provide" three times: 8,14a,14b)...(7) The terror of this horror story is intensified by the pell-mell, relentless, elliptical quality of its Hebrew. Abraham's obedience is fanatic, overriding natural affection (as Nazi chn. ratting on their parents). Religion transcends ethics: there's something even better than the good (a Kierkegaardian theme; we might call it the Akedah **shock** against the collapse of religion into ethics/morals, the central sin of liberal religion in S.K.'s time & ours). (Nietzsche's secular version: The "Overman" is "beyond good & evil.")

7 While the Issac/ram story is woven throughout Jewish liturgy & art as (I would say) a narrative definition of "emunah" (faith-faithfulness), the father-kills-son theme stops here: Judaism, unlike Christianity (Jn.3.16), has no further theological use for the story. In Judaism, we are responsible for **atonement** by "faithfulness" (A. is the prototypic "ish emunah," faithful person, trusting "El emunah," a faithful God (Deut.32.4 has this Hebrew): in Christianity, we are responsible for accepting/rejecting as gift, on the basis of Another's action, what we could never achieve on our own (Ro.5.8 plainly put [CEV]: "God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful"). Christian preaching here faces two temptations: (1) to *antinominanism* (Jesus paid it all, so I don't have to do anything but can do anything (countered in Ro.6.1); & (2) to *reductionism* (in Bonhoeffer terms, the joy but not the cost of discipleship; cheap grace; God-loves-you minus the Cross; even, with Jews, the rejection of the father-kills-son theme ["No man hanging on a cross is ever going to do me any good."--"Christian" theologian Delores Williams, Union Theol. Seminary, NY]). The legal definition of a vagrant is somebody found to have no visible means of support: I often hear purportedly Christian sermons with no invisible means of support, no gospel evidence for the bald, only anecdotal God-loves-you assertion. In H.Rich.Niebuhr's memorable phrase, "a Christ without a cross," Christianity reduced to (his CHRIST AND CULTURE [H&B /51] 16) "the love of love." Instead of being literalized, the Akedah shock forgotten. Neither Issac nor Jesus carries wood. Ram and Lamb, both forgotten.

8 Which was being **tested**, A.'s faith-trust (as Paul's πίστις *pistis* [Gn.15.6; Ro. 4.3; Gal.3.6]) or his faithfulness-loyalty? Both. God in Christ atoned (a double event: the Cross & our yes to it): we are to live the atonement-forgiveness life, to the glory of God in church & world (punctiliar-linear, event-process)....Paul & James agree: PAUL says we're dead until we repent in light of the Cross (Eph.2.1,5; Col.2.13); JAMES says our faith's dead (2.14-26). To Jews & Christians, Isaac's wood is incentive; to Jews, Jesus' wood the Cross is a "stumblingblock" (1Cor.1.23). But no Akedah,* a crucifixion but no (atoning) Cross: Abraham-Isaac said (in effect) before Jesus did, "not my will but thine be done" (Mt.26.39; M.14.36; L.22.42).

+ For more on the Akedah's "yes," see #2973, esp. §1 & §2.

* Abraham's soul-agony is especially well presented in Jn.Huston's 1966 film "The Bible," in which Geo.C.Scott is Abraham. And Kierkegaard's FEAR AND TREMBLING (1844) is on this theme. 2967.2

2967B

Steve from Willis, 7.23.99

Please don't say, in introducing an OT reading, "the Hebrew Scriptures."

1 Jewish Eng. usage is "the Holy Scriptures."

2 Since the Christian Bible is one, refer only to the book (e.g., "Job").

3 If by "Hebrew" you mean language, the accurate designation is "the Hebrew-&-Aramaic Scriptures."

4 If by "Hebrew" you mean religion, the accurate designation is "Jewish" (as our OT is the 1st-c. AD/CE canon of the Rabbinic Jewish religion (not the religion of the ancient Hebrews, the predecessors of the Jews).

5 If you say either "the Hebrew Scriptures" or "the Jewish Scriptures," the sardonic Jewish response is "Why are you Christians ripping off our sacred texts?" (Understandably, they are quick to smell antisemitism.)

6 Saying "the Old Testament" is both accurate (an expression in the NT's Letter to the Hebrews) & educational: it's senseless to speak of a "New Testament" without implicit reference to the OT.

7 The liberal-church dumping of "OT" is suspect: "Be kind to Jews" at the small price of historical obscuration. Jews do not appreciate this patronism, & historians/exegetes/theologians should abhor it.

8 Latter-day lectors who avoid "OT" are probably antisupersessionists, against evangelizing Jews (on the ground that they're saved without Jesus, in spite of Romans 1.16).

9 Yes, you've heard/read "the Hebrews Scriptures," & I'm sympathetic with your wanting to be up to speed. But slow down, please: no heresy in the Tabernacle!

c
Fackre
Davis