

Chapter Fifteen

The Displacement of Isaac and the Birth of the Church

The identification of Jesus of Nazareth With "the beloved son" on which our discussion has focused comes early in the Synoptic Gospels. It is first made through a heavenly announcement during Jesus' ablution at the hands of John the Baptizer:

"You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22; 2 Pet 1:17)

The wording recalls the designation of Isaac in the aqedah, wherein the Hebrew term *yahid* ("favored one") is consistently rendered in the Septuagint as *agapetos*, "beloved" (Gen 22:2, 12, 16), the very term that appears in this heavenly announcement.¹ "Take your beloved son, the one you love," the Septuagint renders Gen 22:2, "and offer him up there as a burnt sacrifice." In light of the mounting importance of the aqedah in the Judaism of the Second Temple period, it is reasonable to suspect that the early audiences of the synoptic Gospels connected the belovedness of Jesus with his Passion and crucifixion. Jesus' gory death was not a negation of God's love (the Gospel was proclaiming), but a manifestation of it, evidence that Jesus was the beloved son first prefigured in Isaac. As we shall see, the point was vital to the self-definition of the nascent Christian community.

The announcement of Mark 1:11 (and the parallels) is no less indebted to another Jewish text with rich resonances²:

This is My servant, whom I uphold,
My chosen one, in whom I delight,
I have put My spirit upon him,
He shall teach the true way to the nations. (Isa 42:1)

This is only one of several passages in Isaiah 40-55 that speak of the enigmatic figure of "the servant of YHWH." The most developed of these is Isa 52:13-53:12, which depicts the servant as an innocent, humble, and submissive

man who was, nonetheless, persecuted, perhaps even unto death. These persecutions were not meaningless, however: they served a redemptive role, for through them the servant atoned vicariously for those who maltreated him. Isa 52:13-53:12 came to exert an extraordinary influence upon the way that early Christians reconceived Jesus after his execution (see, for example, Acts 8:26-35), enabling him to accomplish through his death the cosmic transformations denied him in life. The identification of Jesus with the suffering servant of the Book of Isaiah thus became a mainstay of Christian exegesis. It was not shaken until the twelfth century, when Andrew of St. Victor, anticipating modern critical study, interpreted the servant as a representation of the Jewish people as they suffered during the Babylonian exile. In light of the longstanding Christian investment in the figure of the suffering servant, it is no cause for wonderment that some Christians reacted negatively to Andrew, accusing him of "judaizing."³

Whether the interlacing of Gen 22:2, 12, and 16 with Isa 42:1 was original to the evangelists or a legacy of prior Jewish exegesis is unknown:⁴ Either way, the equation of Isaac with the suffering servant has its own potent midrashic logic. For if the binding of Isaac had already been reconceived as foreshadowing the sacrifice of the paschal lamb and the liberation and redemption that it heralds (Jub 17:15-18:19), the suffering unto death of the servant of *YHWH* had also been analogized to the condition of a sheep about to be slaughtered, and in Scripture itself:

He Was maltreated, yet he was submissive,
He did not open his mouth;
Like a sheep being led to slaughter,
Like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her,
He did not open his mouth. (Isa 53:7)

The servant's acceptance of his fate conforms, as we have seen, very much to the image of Isaac as it develops in some important Jewish sources from the first century C.E. That these two revered figures, both obedient unto death, should have been identified with each other and, in Christian sources, with Jesus after his humiliating demise, is hardly surprising. It may well be that the catalyst for this second midrashic equation was the prior identification of Jesus with the paschal lamb, an intertextual move that, as we shall discover, predates the composition of the Gospels.

The application to Jesus of the two not dissimilar Jewish traditions of Isaac and the suffering servant sounds an ominous note, easily missed by those who interpret God's love in sentimental fashion: like Isaac, the paschal lamb, and the suffering servant, Jesus will provide his father in heaven complete pleasure

only When he has endured a brutal confrontation with nothing short of death itself. The midrashic equation underlying the heavenly announcement of Mark 1:11 and its parallels makes explicit the theology of chosenness that lies at the foundation of the already ancient and well-established idea of the beloved son: the chosen one is singled out for both exaltation and humiliation, for glory and for death, but the confrontation with death must come first.

It is in the proleptic glimpse of Jesus' future glory vouchsafed to his disciples that we next hear the identification of him as the beloved son in the Synoptic Gospels:

Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." (Mark 9:7; cf. Matt 17:5; Luke 9:35)

In this narrative (Mark 9:2-8 and parallels), traditionally known as the Transfiguration, the last sentence adds a new note to the theme of the beloved son in the New Testament. Though marked for sacrifice and thus s unspeakable humiliation, the son is also invested with authority and thus destined to receive the homage of others. In this case, the affinities with Isaac are less to the point than those with another of the beloved sons in Genesis, Joseph, whom "Israel loved ... best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age" (Gen 37:3). As we have argued in chapter 13, the tale of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 is, in part, the story of how its hero came to earn the privileged status that had been granted him in childhood, how, through multiple symbolic deaths (the first of which his father takes to be a literal death), Joseph was catapulted into a position to issue directives to his older brothers-and to see them heeded. We can go further: the Gospel story of the Transfiguration functions as a rough analogue to Joseph's report to his brothers and his father of his dreams of domination (37:5-11). In each case, the narrator presents us with a vision of the coming grandeur that seems preposterous at the moment Joseph's brothers and parents prostrating themselves before him in Genesis, Jesus conversing with Moses and Elijah in the Gospels (Mark 9:4-6 and parallels). And, in each case, what falls between the vision and its realization is the crucial event-a confrontation with death, as the one designated as the beloved son is betrayed and abandoned, never to be seen again. Or so it would appear.

What the Joseph story more than any of the other tales of the beloved contributes to the Gospels is the theme of the disbelief, resentment, murderous hostility of the family of the one mysteriously chosen to rule. the Christian story, this theme is concentrated in the figure of Judas, who betrays Jesus in exchange for thirty pieces of silver (Matt 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-56 and parallels).

It would seem more than possible that the episode of Judas has been molded upon the sale of Joseph for twenty pieces of silver in Gen 37:26-28 (if "they" in v 28 is understood to be the brothers rather than the Midianite traders), an arrangement suggested by none other than his brother Judah. The names are the same. The number in Genesis correlates with Lev 27:5, which fixes the worth of a male between five and twenty years of age at twenty shekels. It will be recalled that Joseph is seventeen when he is sold into slavery (v 2).

The sum in the Gospels may derive from Zech 11:12, an obscure text in which a shepherd is paid thirty silver shekels. Note that in the same passage the shepherd breaks his staff named "Unity, in order to annul the brotherhood between Judah and Israel" (v 14). This alone would suggest (at least to the midrashic mind) some affinity with the story of Joseph, in which, as we have seen, Judah is Joseph's most important brother and the one among the twelve who takes the lead in healing the catastrophic rift in the family. Ezekiel 37:15-28 may have aided in the association of Zechariah 11 with Genesis 37, for in that passage God likewise speaks of two sticks, one representing Judah and one representing Joseph, and orders the prophet to join them, symbolizing the reunion of the separated brothers. In light of these biblical precedents, it was not an unlikely move for the Gospels to associate the fatal rift among the twelve disciples with the betrayal of Joseph, their father's beloved son and the one among the twelve destined to rule despite his brothers' enmity and perfidy.⁵

The theme of authority draws the traditions of the beloved son into relationship with another important stream in Jewish tradition, that of messianism. This stream originates within the royal theology of the Judean dynasty, the House of David. In the Hebrew Bible, its most characteristic literature centers on the divine commission to the Davidic king or heir-apparent, the latter in some cases only a newborn or even as yet unborn. The practical point of such literature is often to elicit homage for the king in a moment in which his rule seems shaky. Psalm 2, for example, paints a scenario in which nations and their rulers intrigue together "against the LORD and His anointed" (v 2), the last word being the Hebrew term of which "messiah" is simply a crude transliteration. In response, YHWH gives forth a mocking laugh from his heavenly throne, terrifying the conspirators with his reiteration of the threatened king's divine commission:

"But I have installed My king
on Zion, my holy mountain!" (Ps 2:6)

The king himself then speaks, reciting the terms of that commission:

⁷Let me tell of the decree:

the LORD said to me,
"You are My son,
I have fathered you this day.

⁸Ask it of Me,

and I will make the nations your domain;
your estate, the limits of the earth.

⁹You can smash them with an iron mace, shatter them like potter's ware." (Ps 2:7-9)

The dominion of the king enthroned upon Zion is a function of his status as the son of YHWH.⁶ How literally this status was understood is difficult to know. A minimalist position would see in the decree rehearsed in v 7 only a metaphor that conveys the unique covenantal relationship of the Davidic king With Israel's ultimate suzerain, their God YHWH. For the language of fatherhood and sonship in the biblical world doubled as the terminology of suzerainty and vassalage (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 16:7 and Ps 89:27-29). A maximalist position would not deny the covenantal denotation, but it would see in this language something more than the frozen forms of diplomatic convention: it would see a living metaphor, a dynamic communication of the heavenly source of the earthly king's authority. The rule of the Davidic king enthroned upon Mount Zion is a manifestation of the universal dominion of the God of Israel. The former issues from the latter like a son from the father who begot him, and for those who refuse to "listen to him," as the story of the Transfiguration puts it in reference to the beloved son, this has catastrophic consequences.

The emphasis in some of the messianic oracles in the Hebrew Bible upon the birth of the king speaks persuasively for the maximalist interpretation of the divine sonship of the ruler from the House of David:

⁵For a child has been born to us,
A son has been given us,
And authority has settled on his shoulders.

He has been named
"The Mighty God is planning grace;
The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler"- .

⁶In token of abundant authority
And of peace without limit
Upon David's throne and kingdom,
That it might be firmly established
In justice and in equity
Now and evermore. (Isa 9:5-6)

The prince is not merely an ordinary person elevated to regal status through covenant with YHWH. He is, rather, a miraculous figure, and his accession is an event that transforms ordinary reality and ushers in the reign of justice traditionally associated with YHWH's own lordship. It is possible that oracles like the one excerpted above were recited not at the heir-apparent's literal birth, but upon his enthronement, at which point, as Psalm 2 would suggest, he assumed the status of God's son, exchanging, as it were, human for divine paternity.⁷

Regardless of the king's chronological age at the time, the miraculousness and giftedness of his birth establish another link with the tradition of the beloved son in the Book of Genesis. For, as we have observed, the men there so designated are rather consistently born to barren women—Isaac to Sarah, Jacob to Rebekah, Joseph to Rachel—and in each case the birth is owing to God's intervention. In the case of Isaac, the supernatural character is underscored through the emphasis placed upon his mother's advanced age at the time of his birth (Gen 18:11), ninety in the reckoning of the Priestly source (17:17).

The notion that heroic figures are born outside the course of nature, to barren mothers, is not unique to the account of Israel's origins. It can be found also in the stories of Samson and Samuel (Judges 13; 1 Samuel 1), two of the nation's most renowned deliverers. One function of these stories is to legitimate the special status of the person to whom miraculous birth is attributed. His authority is not something that he has usurped: a gracious providence has endowed him with it, thus to benefit the entire nation. As Isa 9:5 puts it, "a child has been born *to us*,/A son has been given *us*" (emphasis added). In the case of Isaac, Jacob, and perhaps Joseph as well, what the stories legitimate is the lineage that descends from them. Isaac and not Ishmael, Jacob and not Esau carry on the chosen line of their fathers. Given the royal consecutions of the tribe of Joseph in the north, the story of Joseph may originally have played a similar role, perhaps at the expense of the House of Judah, from which the Davidites hailed: the true monarchy is Josephite, not Judean. But given the emphasis in Genesis 37-50 on authority, one might also see in Joseph's birth to a barren woman something akin to the miraculous (re)birth of the Judean kings so prominent in the messianic oracles of the Hebrew Bible. Precisely because the beloved son rules by the grace of God, it is by that grace and in startling defiance of common experience that his birth comes about.

The New Testament equivalent of this Israelite notion of the birth of the beloved son to a barren woman is the story of the virgin birth of Jesus (Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38),⁸ an idea whose prominence in later Christian dogma

obscures the fact that it seems to have been unknown outside Matthew and Luke. In the former, the idea is midrashically linked to Isa 7:14, which speaks of a "young woman" ('alma) giving birth to a son named "Immanuel." The midrash in question seems to depend upon the Septuagint rendering of 'alma as *parthenos*, a Greek word that often denotes a virgin (Matt 1:22-23). In the case of Luke, the idea of the Virgin Birth is associated with the titles "Son of the Most High" and "Son of God" and with Jesus' claims upon the Davidic throne (Luke 1:32-35). Underlying this is an extremely literal understanding of the Judean royal theology and its characterization of the Davidic king as YHWH's son. Within the overall structure of the Gospels, however, the two vocabularies of sonship, that of the beloved son and that of the Davidic king as the son of God, reinforce each other powerfully.⁹ They yield a story in which the rejection, suffering, and death of the putatively Davidic figure is made to confirm rather than contradict his status as God's only begotten son.¹⁰

It would seem to have been the timing of Jesus' execution that accounts for the Gospels' identification of him with the beloved son. One of the few things upon which all four canonical Gospels agree is that his death occurred in the season of Passover. Precisely when within that season is another matter. According to the three Synoptics, Jesus was executed on the first day of Passover. Since Jewish festivals begin at sundown, this means that the Last Supper occurred on the evening the holy day began and thus likely had a paschal purpose (Matt 26:17-20; Mark 14:12-17; Luke 22:7-15). The Gospel according to John, however, dates the crucifixion to the day before Passover, that is, to the day at the end of which the festival would begin, with the sacrifice of the paschal lambs (John 13:1; 18:28). This would seem to mean that the Synoptics and John differ as to the year in which the trial of Jesus took place. The Synoptics assume a year in which Passover began on a Thursday evening, whereas John assumes one in which the holy day began on a Friday evening.

John's chronology therefore precludes his interpreting the Last Supper as paschal in a strict sense. Thus, the words of consecration prominent in the Synoptic accounts of the Last Supper ("Take this; this is my body ... This is my blood" [Mark 14:23-24; cf. Matt 26:26-28; Luke 22:14-20] are altogether missing from the Fourth Gospel. This should not be taken to mean, however, that John does not interpret the end of Jesus' life as sacrificial. It does mean that the association of Jesus' body with the paschal lamb will be made explicit not at the Last Supper but at Golgotha, on the cross itself:

³¹Now since it was preparation day, in order that the bodies might not remain on the cross on the sabbath, for the sabbath day of that week was

a solemn one, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken and they be taken down.³² So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus.³³ But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs,³⁴ but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out.³⁵ An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may (come to) believe.³⁶ For this happened so that the scripture passage might be fulfilled:

"Not a bone of it shall be broken." [Exodus 12:46; Num 9:12]³⁷ And again another passage says: "They will look upon him whom they have pierced." [Zech 12:10] (John 19:31-37)

The first scriptural quotation refers to the paschal lamb. It appears here in order to demonstrate that Jesus' passing away earlier than the two men with whom he was executed was providential. Had he remained alive and thus suffered the broken legs, he would have been rendered unfit to serve as the sacrificial offering of the first night of Passover. In John's thinking, Jesus' body has thus rather literally taken the place of the lamb consumed by the worshipers at the sacred Passover banquet. Regardless of the intention of the Romans and Jews who carried it out, the crucifixion of Jesus was, in the Johannine view, a sacrifice, the offering of the son of God in place of the paschal lamb.

The second scriptural quotation, Zech 12:10, is brought in order to make sense of the Roman soldier's thrusting his lance into the dead man's side: according to the evangelist, this, too, fulfills a prophecy. Here it is useful to remember that the relevance of a verse often extends beyond the words that the midrashist cites. In the case of Zech 12:10, it is highly suggestive to note the words that follow those cited in John 19:37:

... wailing over them as over a favorite son and showing bitter grief as over a first-born. (Zech 12:10c)

We have already had occasion to observe that the word here rendered "favorite son" (yahid) seems to have been, at least on occasion, a technical term for the son sacrificed as a burnt offering. It is, once again, the term applied fully three times to Isaac in the aqedah (Gen 22:2, 12, 16). In the Septuagint to Zech 12:10, yahid is rendered exactly as in the Septuagint to those three verses, agapetos, "beloved one." It would thus seem likely that John is here reflecting the old equation of the first-born and beloved son with the paschal lamb but

asserting a relatively new equation as well—the Christian equation of the firstborn and beloved son and paschal lamb with the figure of Jesus.

The threefold identification of the beloved son, the paschal lamb, and Jesus would seem also to underlie John's version of the baptism of Jesus:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29)

On the one hand, John the Baptizer's words upon first setting eyes on Jesus contrast markedly with the heavenly proclamation that the Synoptic Gospels all report at the same point in the story: "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt 3:17; Luke 3:22). If, on the other hand, the author(s) of the Fourth Gospel had assumed the equation of the beloved son with the paschal lamb, then the dissonance between the two proclamations, though still significant, is of lesser import. Here the end of John the Baptizer's little speech that opens with John 1:29 is revealing: "Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God" (v 34). The implication that the "Lamb of God" is to be equated with the "Son of God" once again takes us back to the ancient Israelite rite by which a sheep substitutes for the first-born son destined for sacrifice (Exod 34:20). This is a rite that, as we have seen, is crucial to both the binding of Isaac (Gen 22:13) and the Exodus from Egypt (Exod 13:11-15). In a certain sense, the dynamics underlying this ritual-mythical pattern come full circle in this New Testament material: the son takes the place of the sheep who took the place of the son. The Jewish parallels suggest, however, that the sheep and the son should never be conceived of as totally separate, that the ransom and the one redeemed were always tightly associated. Recall the late midrashim that report that the ram sacrificed in Isaac's stead was itself named "Isaac."

The Johannine account of the crucifixion of Jesus, with its explicit reference to Exod 12:46 (John 19:36), provides powerful additional evidence that the "Lamb of God" of John 1:29 is paschal. It might be retorted, nonetheless, that since the paschal lamb was never a sin offering, the clause "Who takes away the sin of the world" argues for a different animal, such as the sheep of Lev 4:32-35, offered by a commoner in expiation of wrongdoing. The latter is, however, not necessarily a lamb, and we must not assume that the fine technicalities of sacrificial classification weighed heavily upon the minds of the evangelists as they drew upon biblical materials for their own purposes. More importantly, the unclassifiable passover sacrifice of Exodus 12 does indeed have much in common with a sin offering, for it is through the blood of the lamb that lethal calamity is deflected, as the mysterious Destroyer is prevented from working his dark designs upon the Israelite first-born (vv 21-23).

It is not at all hard to imagine that in the heated apocalyptic Judaism that served as the matrix of Christianity, the Destroyer would be transmuted into a personification of the Israelites' own mortal sins, and the blood of the paschal lamb would be seen as effecting not only escape from death, but purification from moral pollution as well.

A close analogy to the process here reconstructed is patent in Rev 12:10¹¹. There it is the blood of the lamb that overpowers the "accuser" (*kategor*, a title of Satan) and enables the Christ to come into power. Like Prince Mastema, the diabolical figure who institutes the aqedah (and thus, indirectly, Passover as well) in Jub 17:15-16, this "accuser" has a striking analogue and perhaps also his root in the eerie Destroyer of Exod 12:2³. In all these instances, Jewish and Christian alike, it is the offering of the sheep or the son identified with it that defeats the demonic forces and brings blessing out of near-catastrophe, life out of the jaws of death.

As a reference to the Passover offering, the "Lamb of God" of John 1:29 correlates nicely with the explicit identification of Jesus With the paschal lamb in 19:36. The location of these two verses in the Gospel's narrative is telling: the man introduced as the lamb that takes away the sin of the world dies according to the laws governing the offering of the paschal sacrifice. Thus has the evangelist placed the earthly story of Jesus within brackets drawn from the story of Passover-the story of how the preternatural forces of death were foiled and the doomed first-born miraculously allowed to live.

Probably the earliest identification of Jesus with the paschal lamb occurs in a document that predates both the Synoptic and the Johannine Gospels:

⁶Your boasting is not appropriate. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens all the dough? ⁷Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. ⁸Therefore, let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and Wickedness, but With the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (1 Cor 5:6-8)

Here the apostle Paul, writing in about the year 54 C.E., employs an allegory of the sort one finds occasionally among the rabbis but more frequently in Hellenistic Judaism. Its basis is the law of Passover in Exodus 12-not so unlikely a topic since Paul seems to be composing his letter to the Corinthians about the time of Passover and Easter.¹¹ His allegory identifies the leaven forbidden to be eaten or even seen during the week of Passover with boasting, malice, and wickedness and urges his correspondents to prepare for the holiday by ridding themselves of the proscribed substance, as Exod 12:15 mandates. The genesis of the allegory lies in the last clause of 1 Cor 5:7: "For our paschal

lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed." It is the equation of Jesus with the paschal lamb, almost certainly already traditional by the time Paul wrote, that rids his little allegory of the odor of arbitrariness. If Jesus is the Passover offering, then all those who are "in Christ" (to use a Pauline idiom) must be continually in the moral equivalent of the state of high ritual preparedness for Passover. Indeed, if the lamb/Christ has already been sacrificed, as the tense of the verb at the close of v 7 indicates, then such preparedness is doubly urgent, for the festival has begun though the leaven remains--an intolerably dangerous situation.

Given the threefold equation of the paschal lamb, the beloved son, and Jesus that we found lurking beneath the surface of the Gospel of John, we should not be surprised to find Paul identifying his Christ not only with the Passover offering but also with Isaac, the beloved son par excellence of the Hebrew Bible (the only Bible Paul knew). Indeed, the boldness with which Paul projects Jesus (and the Church) into the story of Abraham is a midrashic tour de force that has affected Jewish-Christian relations ever since:

¹³Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed be everyone Who hangs on a tree," ¹⁴that the blessing of Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

¹⁵Brothers, in human terms I say that no one can annul or amend even a human will once ratified. ¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his descendant. It does not say, "And to descendants," as referring to many, but as referring to one, who is Christ. (Gal 3:13-16)

Paul's midrash in v 16 turns upon his interpretation of the morphologically singular collective noun *ulezar'aka* (Greek, *kai to spermati sou*) in Gen 13:15 and 17:8 as therefore semantically singular as well: not "to your offspring" in the sense of many people but "to your one offspring," whom Paul identifies as the Christ.

The association of the individual Isaac with the collective noun *zera`*, "offspring," is familiar from the Book of Genesis. Recall God's reassurance to Abraham when Sarah insists on the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael: "Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring will be continued for you" (Gen 21:12). It is as though Abraham's offspring through Ishmael are not really his *zera`*, or at least not in the same way as those descended from his beloved younger son, Isaac. A discussion in the Talmud cites this verse to explain why the *halakhah* obligates Jews but not Edomites to practice circumcision:

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"For it is in Isaac that offspring will be continued for you." Then the descendants of Esau should be obligated! "In Isaac"-not all of Isaac. (h. Sanh. 59b)¹²

In other words, because the Edomites, though descended from Isaac's son Esau, are not included within the subgroup of Isaac that the rabbis here dunk the preposition "in" implies, they are not included in the Abrahamic covenantal act that is circumcision. Abraham's real offspring are those descended from Isaac alone. Whereas Gen 21:12 excludes the Ishmaelites from the status of Abraham's prime lineage, the Talmudic discussion uses the same verse to exclude the Edomites. Both passages, however, presuppose the association of Isaac and the singular collective noun, *zera`*, "offspring."

It is precisely this association that Paul ruptures when he glosses "and to your descendant" in Genesis with the words "who is Christ" (Gal 3:16): the beloved son to whom and about whom the ancient promises were made is no longer Isaac but Jesus, no longer the Israelite patriarch in whom the future of the Jewish nation is prefigured but the messiah of Christian belief whose mystical body is the Church. Paul's midrash on the one word *ulezar'aka*, "and to your descendant(s)," exemplifies a familiar and uneventful Jewish exegetical technique.¹³ But in it loom the future separation of Christianity from Judaism and their crystallization as mutually exclusive traditions.

Once Jesus has displaced Isaac, it follows that the promises and blessings that had been associated with the beloved son par excellence in Genesis must be available instead through the Christian messiah. This is, in fact, the implication of Paul's first clause in Gal 3:14, "that the blessing of Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus." In the Hebrew Bible, the exact words "blessing of Abraham" occur only in Gen 28:4, in a passage in which Isaac, having directed Jacob to avoid intermarriage, pronounces upon him the Abrahamic blessing of progeny and land (vv 1-4). It is surely relevant to Paul's purpose that this passage has to do with Isaac's confirmation of Jacob as his-and Abraham's-rightful heir. It is surely no less relevant that part of the Abrahamic blessing is that Jacob shall "become an assembly of peoples" (v 3). Given Paul's motivation in composing his letter to the Galatians, a passage like this must have held an enormous appeal for him. For his dominant purpose in this letter is to argue that Gentiles can inherit the status of descent from Abraham, and all the promises that go with it, without having to convert to Judaism (and become circumcised). The idea that the blessing of Abraham should entail that Jacob/Israel "become an assembly of peoples" fit Paul's polemical intentions beautifully. As he read Gen 28:1-4, it almost certainly implied precisely the possibility for which he was doing battle-that by becoming

Christian, Gentiles could have the best of both worlds, retaining their non-Jewish identity and yet falling heir to the promises to Abraham.

"That the blessing of Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:14x) recalls another passage in Genesis as well, one much more focused on the relationship of Abraham and Isaac. This is the second angelic address toward the end of the story of the aqedah:

¹⁵The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said, "by Myself I swear, the LORD declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, ¹⁷I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. ¹⁸All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves [alternatively, "be blessed"] by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command." (Gen 22:15-18)

In chapter 14, I observed that the effect of this speech is to make the blessing to Abraham contingent upon the aqedah. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac has become a foundational act, indeed the essential foundational act for the existence and destiny of the people Israel. As Paul read this text through his own particular christological lenses, the key point would probably have been this: it is the father's willingness to surrender his beloved and promised son unto death that extends the blessing of the Jews to "all the nations of the earth."

The equivalent for Jesus of the binding of Isaac is, once again, his crucifixion. It is undoubtedly this that underlies Paul's citation of Deuteronomy 21:23 (Gal 3:13). The law therein forbids allowing the impaled body of a person executed for a capital offense to remain on its stake overnight. The words that Paul (or the translation from which he is working) renders as "cursed be everyone who hangs upon a tree" are probably more accurately translated "an impaled body is an affront to God." In positioning this clause before his mention of the blessing of Abraham (v 14), Paul develops a polarity between the curse that, in his view, comes from biblical laws and the blessing that comes from biblical promises. This, too, befits one of his central objectives in composing the letter to the Galatians—to argue against those apostles who maintained that the laws of the Torah were still valid and in no way voided by the Christian revelation. Though far from an antinomian, Paul rather consistently associated the laws of the Torah with sin, curse, condemnation, and death, all of which are antithetical to those things he associated with Jesus. In the juxtaposition of Gal 3:13 and 3:14, we can thus hear a recapitulation of the whole movement of Pauline salvation history: from curse to blessing,

from law to spirit and faith, from Israel to the Church, from the crucifixion to the blessings contingent upon it-ultimately, to use language not yet available in Paul's time, from Judaism to Christianity.

Nils Dahl has made the intriguing suggestion that the combination of the aqedah with the law of the impaled criminal in Gal 3:13-14 turns upon the equation of the man hanging on the tree in Deut 21:23 With the "ram caught in the thicket" of Gen 22:13. More problematic is Dahl's conclusion, that "here there is an element of typology, but the ram, rather than Isaac, is seen as a type of Christ."¹⁴ If Paul does see a foreshadowing of his Christ in the ram, the ram, in turn, derives its significance for the history of redemption only from its status as a stand-in for Isaac. For the extension of the blessing of Abraham to the nations that is so important to the apostle to the Gentiles is a consequence not of Abraham's sacrifice of the ram, but of his unfaltering resolve to obey the command to offer his beloved son.

But even to speak of a typology of Isaac and Jesus here (rather than one of the ram and Jesus) has its difficulties and must be attended by important qualifications. An Isaac Jesus typology does indeed develop in early Christian literature,¹⁵ but it must not be projected into texts that move in another, and much more radical, direction. For Gal 3:13-14 cannot be detached from vv 15-16, and v 16 makes clear that Isaac does not foreshadow Jesus at all. Rather, Paul argues that the "descendant" who is the heir of the promise to Abraham *is not* and *never was* Isaac or the Jewish people collectively. His whole point about the putative semantic singularity of the word "and to your descendant" is to connect the promise with Jesus alone. The descendant of Abraham who is Isaac has disappeared from the story altogether. Paul never mentions his name. If Gal 3:13-16 is still to be seen as a typology, it is a typology of such intensity that the antitype has dislodged the archetype: in Paul's theology Jesus has so thoroughly displaced Isaac that even Genesis testifies not to the second of the Jewish patriarchs, but to the messiah of Christian belief. Paul's Jesus does not *manifest* Isaac. He *supersedes* him.

None of this is to deny that Isaac can function typologically in Paul's thinking. He is most explicitly a type, however, not of Jesus but of the Church, and it is in his interpretation of Isaac's conflict with Ishmael, and of Sarah's with Hagar, that we see the full boldness of Paul's appropriation of the traditions in Genesis about the beloved son:

²¹Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the freeborn woman. ²³The son of the slave woman was born naturally, the son of the freeborn through a promise. ²⁴Now this

is an allegory. These women represent two covenants. One was from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; this is Hagar. ²⁵Hagar represents Sinai, a mountain in Arabia; it corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery along with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is freeborn, and she is our mother. ²⁷For it is written:

"Rejoice, you barren one who bore no
children;
break forth and shout, you who were not in
labor;
far more numerous are the children of the
deserted one
than of her who has a husband." [Isa 54:1]

²⁸Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of the promise. ²⁹But just as then the child of the flesh persecuted the child of the spirit, it is the same now. ³⁰But what does Scripture say?

"Drive out the slave woman and her son!
For the son of the slave woman shall not
share the inheritance with the son" [Gen 21:10]

of the freeborn. ³¹Therefore, brothers, we are children not of the slave woman but of the freeborn woman. (Gal 4:21-31)

In this allegory, Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, represents two closely related images of bondage. The first is the site of the giving of the Torah, Mount Sinai, which, lying somewhere between the land of Israel and Hagar's homeland, suggests the slave woman's abortive flight to freedom and her reenslavement (Genesis 16). The second is the earthly Jerusalem, where, in Paul's time, some form of Torah observance was normative for the Church. The first great innovation in Paul's reading of Genesis is this identification of Hagar's slavery with Torah. It bears mention that in rabbinic literature, Torah and Mount Sinai often represent true freedom (and the other positives that Paul associates exclusively with Jesus).¹⁶

The other mother in Paul's allegory is obviously Sarah, the freeborn woman whom he associates with a heavenly Jerusalem not obligated by the Torah. Sarah's infertility, miraculously overcome in accordance with God's promise, leads Paul to associate her son Isaac with promise and spirit. This, in turn, makes Hagar's son Ishmael, born through the altogether natural means of surrogate motherhood, a "child of the flesh." The rivalry of Ishmael and Isaac, and of Hagar and Sarah (Gen 21:9-10), is thus allegorized into a stark opposition between slavery, Torah, and flesh, on the one hand, and freedom,

promise, and spirit, on the other. Ishmael's persecution of Isaac, attested in ancient Jewish interpretation of Gen 21:9,¹⁷ thus becomes a figure for those Jewish Christians who opposed Paul's message of a Torah-less Gospel and sought, instead, to evangelize the Galatians into Torah-observant Christianity. It was this that Paul considered a perversion of the Gospel and urged his Galatian correspondents to avoid (Gal 1:6-9; 5:1).

The second major innovation in Paul's allegory of Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, lies in his association of Sarah and Isaac with a Torah-less religion, that is, with a form of Judaism in which the injunctive dimension of the Torah has been voided. If we had only Gal 4:21-31 and lacked the antecedent Pentateuchal texts, we would never have guessed that it was actually Isaac's descendants rather than Ishmael's who stood at Mount Sinai and received what in Pentateuchal and later Jewish thinking alike is regarded as the incomparable blessing that is the Torah of Moses. With his reading of Genesis 21, Paul thus effects a startling inversion, one fraught with significance for the future character of the Church and, needless to say, for its relation to the Jews into our own day.¹⁸ The literal descendants of Sarah and Isaac have become the moral and spiritual progeny of Hagar and Ishmael. Isaac has ceased to be the first critical link in the great chain that will lead from Abraham to redemption in the promised land. Instead, he has become a type for the possibility of a spiritual life of freedom apart from the Torah-more than that, in contradistinction to the Torah, which Paul now reinterprets as fleshly and enslaving rather than spiritual and liberating, as the rabbinic tradition would continue to conceive it. For, Whereas in the Pentateuch Mount Sinai is the first great destination of those freed in the Exodus (Exod 3:12), in Paul's Gospel Mount Sinai is the point of departure for the exodus, the equivalent of the house of bondage. "For freedom Christ set us free," he concludes his allegory; "so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1).

In the post-Enlightenment world, this freedom from Torah is often used to reinforce the portrayal of Paul as a universalist, a person, that is, to whom ethnic identity is of no account. Similarly, Paul's critique of Judaism as he knew it (or reconstructed it after his conversion) is seen as premised upon an opposition to particularism and exclusivism and a corollary affirmation of the natural dignity of all humanity, regardless of whether the individual is Jewish or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Gal 3:28). This line of thought has traditionally served powerfully to reinforce an image of Judaism as separatist, exclusivistic, and chauvinistic, in contradistinction to Christianity, which is thought to be integrationist, inclusive, and non-particularist. That this rejection

of particularism should have fueled the lethal fires of anti-Semitism is one of the larger ironies of modern history.

A consideration of Pauline and other early Christian theology in its historical context immediately casts this convenient polarity into grave doubt. For in Paul's lifetime and for a significant period thereafter, it was actually Judaism that was the larger community, spread throughout the known world, with influence even in the centers of power, and attracting converts and semiconverts. The Christian Church, by contrast, was a very new sect, small and beleaguered. To attribute godliness and freedom to the Church--and especially, as Paul did, to the Torah-less subgroup within it--was hardly to strike a blow for universality and inclusiveness.

The allegory in Gal 4:21-5:1 shows us a different and more historically plausible picture of Paul. His point there is anything but the oneness of the human family or the irrelevance of belonging to Abraham rather than to the nations. He does not argue that Hagar and Sarah, Ishmael and Isaac, are ultimately one, nor that the distinction between Jew and Gentile has, through the Christ, yielded to an affirmation of their common humanity. All to the contrary, it is a point of capital import that it is Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, rather than Adam, the father of the human race, whose blessing Paul seeks to appropriate exegetically for the Church (Gal 3:29). In Paul's theology, one of the prime consequences of the Gospel is a grafting of the Gentiles onto the tree of Abraham *in place of the Jews*, who have been lopped off but are to be re-engrafted in the eschatological future when God's rage against them comes to an end (Rom 11:11-29).¹⁹ Whereas Christian universalists like to imagine Paul's christology as offering a way out of Jewishness and into an undifferentiated humanness, the actual thrust of the theology of the apostle to the Gentiles is the reverse: the undifferentiated humanity that is the nations of the world, the "wild olive shoot" as Paul disparagingly terms them (v 17), can, through the Christ, become the equivalent of the Jews. Thus and only thus can they shed their worthless Gentile status and attain the only status that Paul thinks has value in the sight of God--the status of Isaac, the son promised to Abraham and conceived outside the course of nature, in contradistinction to Ishmael, the son of his wife's slave, conceived through the natural and perhaps not altogether honorable means of surrogate motherhood. Pauline ecclesiology is premised upon the possibility and the legitimacy of borrowed ethnicity--a very different thing from universalism or inclusiveness for its own sake.

For Paul, then, participation in the Christ is the equivalent of conversion to Judaism, but it is more than that: it is also the *only* means of conversion to Judaism, for the Jewish means--acceptance of the Torah and its commandments,

symbolized in men by circumcision--have, in Paul's mind, ceased to be efficacious. For reasons that remain unclear, Paul insists that the two modes of conversion to the status of children of Abraham must not be combined: contrary to the Gospel of his opponents, Paul demands that a Gentile who comes into the Christ must not become circumcised and practice the Torah. To do so is to forfeit the precious status of the promised son—Isaac—and to fall into the carnality and subjugation of the offspring of Abraham whom Isaac displaced and superseded—Ishmael, son of Hagar the Egyptian slavewoman. The division between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, between Israel and the nations, and between those (of whatever origin) who have accepted the Torah and those who have not, has become the division between the baptized and the unbaptized, between the Church and the world, between those who have accepted the Gospel and those who have not. But in both the Jewish and the Pauline frameworks, the issue turns upon the question of which community can lay just claim upon the status of Abraham's beloved son. This could not be more different from the way modern universalists approach such matters.

At first glance, Paul's elaborate allegorical reading of Genesis 16 and 21 appears so forced as to suggest utter arbitrariness. The apostle to the Gentiles has, it would seem, a theological message to get across, and his choice of the rivalry of Isaac and Ishmael and their respective mothers as his proof-text is without an anchor in the text itself. I submit that the matter is quite the opposite: Paul focuses on Isaac's right of inheritance because, in his mind, the Church is to be identified with Isaac on grounds altogether independent of the particular texts about the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. For, as we have seen, Paul believes that Jesus was the promised son of Abraham that Jewish tradition had (and has) always interpreted as Isaac. Moreover, Paul points out on more than one occasion that the Church is the body of Christ and individual Christians should therefore view their relation to each other on a biological analogy. "For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function," he writes to the Roman Christians, "so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another" (Rom 12:4-5; cf. 1 Cor 12:27). Now if Jesus is the true Isaac, and the Church is the body of Jesus, it follows as night the day that the Church, when it turns its attention to Genesis, must see itself in the role of Isaac, that is, as the promised son of the freeborn woman who, with God's full endorsement, demands nothing less than the expulsion of the rival claimant to her husband's estate. Given the controversy in which Paul finds himself embroiled as he writes to the Galatian churches, it is natural for him to associate that rival claimant with the apostles who preached a rival Gospel to his own—a

Gospel, that is, that included the observance of the Torah and thus demanded circumcision as an entrance requirement for male converts. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael thus could be pressed into service in support of Paul's own uncompromising insistence that fidelity to the Christ and practice of the Torah are incompatible. Indeed, Paul's allegory is intended to make the Torah itself endorse this very message—to set the *theological message* of the Torah against its own *commandments*. "Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" (Gal 4:21).

To attempt a comprehensive explication of the story of Jesus of Nazareth as it appears in the New Testament lies beyond the purview of our inquiry. What has been essayed here is an analysis of some of the ways in which the earliest Christian writers utilized the longstanding Jewish traditions about the beloved son to interpret the life and career of their departed master. Jesus' execution at the onset of Passover rather naturally led to an identification with the paschal lamb, and, given the already ancient associations of the aqedah with Passover and, by implication, of the same lamb with Isaac, this identification, in turn, drew in its train an ensemble of Isaac traditions that the earliest Christian authors sought in various ways to redirect to Jesus. Much early christology is thus best understood as a midrashic recombination of biblical verses associated with Isaac, the beloved son of Abraham, with the suffering servant in Isaiah who went, Isaac-like, unprotesting to his slaughter, and with another miraculous son, the son of David, the future messianic king whom the people Israel awaited to restore the nation and establish justice and peace throughout the world.

In the hands of Paul, a person whose influence on the subsequent Christian tradition it is difficult to overemphasize, the identification of Jesus and Isaac assumed an especially forceful and far-reaching statement. In one Pauline formulation, verses that in their biblical context refer with utter clarity to Isaac were reconceived as referring to Jesus exclusively. The latter thus becomes the promised seed of Abraham and the man through whose impalement the patriarchal blessing is extended to the nations. Isaac himself becomes a type of the Church, the individual members of the body of Christ, defined now in stark opposition to those obligated in the practice of Torah. In the case of Gentile Christians, this means those who would seek to change their status through circumcision and the other commandments incumbent upon Jews. The effect is to drive a hard wedge between the Abrahamic and the Sinaitic moments in the history of redemption. Sinai becomes a symbol not of freedom, but of enslavement, the destination not of the descendants of the freeborn matriarch Sarah, but of the offspring of her Egyptian slave Hagar. As the younger son Isaac displaced his older brother Ishmael, so, in Paul's

thinking, does the new community, the Christian Church, displace the senior community from whom they received the Scriptures. The Jewish people are to undergo the spiritual equivalent of Ishmael's fate of expulsion into the wilderness of Sinai. It is no small irony that to argue this position, Paul had no alternative but to rely on the Jewish Scriptures-the only Bible he knew or could imagine-and to utilize exegetical procedures that the rabbis would use, with at least equal dexterity, in the defense of the inseparability of Abraham's life from subsequent Jewish experience, the continuing validity of the Torah, and the spiritual vitality of the Jewish people when they, at whatever cost, heed the voice of Sinai.

There is another sense, however, in which Paul and the ongoing rabbinic tradition stand in profound agreement. In insisting against so many of his fellow Christians that Torah in its injunctive, nomistic dimension is incompatible with the Gospel, Paul (whatever his perception at the time) helped ensure that the two communities would be separate. The community of Torah and the community of Gospel would appeal to the same Scriptures (until the New Testament documents would themselves be reconceived as biblical) and seek to practice virtues that overlap to a high degree. This is as we should expect from traditions that each revere the memory of Father Abraham. But, as we shall see in the next chapter, in laying claim to their Abrahamic status, Judaism and Christianity necessarily replicate the dynamics of the patriarchal family of Genesis seeking to establish a prime lineage in the face of an unexpected and disquieting segmentation. Their appeal to their common root in Abraham ensures that Judaism and Christianity will be mutually exclusive.