Early Jewish Understanding of the Sacrifice of Isaac

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I. Introduction: Historical Survey and the Direction of Research

Vermes contends that expiatory and redemptive theology has already been established in the Aqedah theology in the Jewish tradition, and that this has influenced Jesus in his understanding of his destiny as the fulfillment of the Sacrifice of Isaac (SI) as well as Pauline atonement theology as presented in the New Testament,1) while Davies and Chilton maintain that the Jewish Aqedah is really a response to the Christian theology.2) This dispute has a long history, and the issue is important in the understanding of not only the relation between Judaism and Christian theology but also the relation between the Old and the New Testament.

According to Swetnam, the first runner of the modern discussion of the SI was Geiger (1872) who argued that Judaism borrowed the concept of expiatory power of the SI from the Christianity.3) For Geiger, the association of the expiatory power with the SI was made in the third century AD by the link of the SI to the New Year Feast.4) Lévi (1912) argued on the contrary that Christianity drew its doctrine from the Jewish views. For him, the association of the SI with the New Year’s Feast was made before the first century AD. Thus, Judaism at this time was in possession of the expiatory theology

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3) Swetnam, Jesus and Isaac, 4.
of the SI.\(^5\)

Also for Schoeps (1946), who depends heavily on Lévi, the Jewish theological concept was prior to Paul, as Paul’s concept of the Cross cannot be interpreted “without his tacit references to the Sacrifice of Isaac.”\(^6\) Schoeps links Isaac with Jesus so closely that the resurrection from the dead in Judaism was ascribed to the merits of Isaac just as it is the fruit of Christ’s resurrection in Christianity.\(^7\)

The presumption of the Vermes’ study (1961) is that the Palestine targums contain the core of the first century tradition which has reappeared much later in the Jewish tradition. For him, the early Palestine targums contain the themes such as Abraham’s announcement on Isaac’s being a victim, consent of Isaac, Isaac’s request to be bound, Isaac’s vision of angels, and Abraham’s asking of God’s remembrance of his own obedience as well as Isaac’s willingness, these all forming the elements of the Aqedah theology.\(^8\) In his view, the targumic haggadah on the Aqedah resulted from the association of Genesis 22 and Isaiah 53, due to the reflections on the significance of the martyrdom from the beginning of the religious persecution under the Antiochus Epiphanes in 167 BC, and so this martyrdom theology develops into the Aqedah theology.\(^9\) In Jewish tradition, Isaac is ascribed to an active and prominent role in the story of the Aqedah,\(^10\) and thus the Jewish community had already begun to use the death and resurrection of Isaac as a model for the reward of the martyrs.\(^11\) Since much emphasis was put on Isaac’s self-offering in Jewish tradition, the episode of Genesis 22 is considered as the test of Isaac’s fidelity as well as the faith of Abraham.\(^12\) Thus, for him, the Aqedah was considered a sacrifice of atonement, which grants salvation and eternal life through the merits of Abraham and, principally, Isaac. So this naturally became the paradigm for the suffering of Jesus.\(^13\) He considers that the progenitors of the Aqedah theology include the Jewish Antiquities


\(^7\) Schoeps, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 385–386.

\(^8\) Vermes, *Redemption*, 195.

\(^9\) Vermes, *Redemption*, 203–204.


\(^12\) Vermes, *Redemption*, 197.