TOGETHER THEY WALKED: THE *AQEDAH*, *MIDRASH* AND SYNODALITY

Francis Olawale ADELABU*

Abstract
Genesis 22, otherwise known as the Aqedah, has drawn and continues to draw the curiosity of many readers over the ages, not only for the theme of child sacrifice but also for the drama involved in the near-filicide. The ancient rabbinic Midrash in the witnesses of Genesis Rabbah and Rashi has varying interpretations of the passage. The difference in the interpretations between the Genesis Rabbah and Rashi on Gen 22:6,8, which speak of the father and son walking together, constitutes a platform for the signs, intricacies, and tensions of synodality as a theme, model and demand of the future Church. What implications does the verbal phrase, 'walking together' have for communion, participation, and mission in the Church? If walking together implies unity of purpose, does it signify singularity of comprehension? What are the lessons to be learnt by the twenty-first century Church? These are the concerns of this article.

Keywords: Genesis 22, Genesis Rabbah, Rashi, Midrash, Synodality

1. Introduction

Gen 22 is a passage, which both for its plot and hermeneutical history, has drawn the interest and curiosity of so many readers and interpreters over the centuries. Kass avers, 'no story in Genesis is as terrible, as powerful, as mysterious, as elusive as this one. It defies easy and confident interpretations.'[1] It is a text that orchestrated a challenge to the Christian expectations of a life-giving and life-loving God, the Jewish wonder at the trial of their ancestral forefather, and the human horror at the thought of a father attempting to kill his only son. The extensive history of interpretation of the Pentateuchal chapter depicts the vivid interest and unabated query about this biblical narrative.[2] With some diverging

*Institute of Theology, Saints Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Bodija, Ibadan, Email: francisadelabu@yahoo.com, Tel: +234 8137812990

[1] Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 333.

[2] For a recent history of interpretation on Gen 22, see Johannes Roth, *Sie gingen, sie beide gemeinsam: Genesis 22 in der neuren Exegese und in Predigttexten*, OSB 7 (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2021); Johann A. Steiger and Ulrich Heinen, *Isaaks Opferung (Gen 22) in den Konfessionen und Medien der frühen Neuzeit* (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 101; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter, 2006). See also Jean Louis Ska, 'Genesis 22: What Question Should We Ask the Text?' *Biblica* 94.2 (2013): 257.

views, the passage was initially seen as an apologia against child sacrifice.[3] But today, it is more considered as an emphasis of Israelite redemption of firstborn as demanded by Exod 34:20. It is summarily referred to as the Aqedah, especially in the Jewish circles, in order to reflect the binding of Isaac by his father Abraham (the verbal form, *wayya'ăqōḏ*, a hapax legomenon, is used in Gen 22:9).

Gen 22 has generated even some meditations in the philosophical circles. Immanuel Kant exemplifies the narrative as a certain instance when man can be sure that it is not God who is speaking. For Kant, when a voice orders man to act against moral law, 'though the phenomenon seem to him ever so majestic and surpassing the whole of nature, he must count it a deception.'[4] The 19th century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard in his classic, *Fear and Trembling*, which was published under the pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, wrote a four-part reflection on Gen 22, in which he viewed various reactions of Abraham to the divine demand. Kierkegaard was convinced that the difficulty of the demand underscored its divine validity. Many years later, Erich Auerbach, the Jewish philologist and comparative scholar compared the biblical text with Homeric literature in order to explore the reticence of the biblical narrator as regards the inner life of its characters.

In this paper, we shall look at the text and context of Gen 22. After a structural analysis of the chapter, we shall have a close exegetical reading of its first six verses. This will be followed by an analysis of two ancient Jewish interpretations of the passage, namely, *Genesis Rabbah* and that of Shlomoh Yitzchaki (Rashi). The differences between these two ancient interpretations of Gen 22:6 and 8 will form a springboard for discussing their continuity and discontinuity with the theme of synodality in the Church today. Since the pericope is essentially a narrative, and a classic one at that, the method of the exegetical analysis will be basically narrative criticism, without neglecting essential diachronic questions within the text.

2. Genesis 22: Text and Context

Gen 22 is the story of the demand of God for the only son of Abraham, Isaac, who had been born to him after twenty-five years of waiting for the fulfilment of God's promise. No sooner is the son born in Gen 21 than God asks of him in Gen 22. The situation is more dire for Abraham, when the reader remembers that Ishmael, the son Hagar bore for him, had been expelled definitively together with his mother in

[3] See Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (HK I/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), 240-242.

[4] Immanuel Kant, 'The Conflict of the Philosophy Faculty with the Theology Faculty,' as quoted in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 354.

Gen 21:14. Thus, 'Abraham has lost one child, Ishmael. Now is he to lose his only other child, Isaac?... Is Sarah's 'get rid of Ishmael' now replaced by God's 'get rid of Isaac'?'[5]

As queer as the story of the *Aqedah* sounds, its place within Abraham cycle (Gen 11:27–25:11) has hardly been in doubt among scholars. Gen 22 exhibits a close lexical and thematic connection with the preceding chapter (Gen 21) and other parts of Abraham cycle. Similarities in content and outline with the Ishmael experience include the fact that in both chapters, God orders the action of expulsion and sacrifice; there is a journey (21:14; 22:4-8); both children were about to die (21:16; 22:10), and the angel of God calls from heaven (21:17; 22:11). Just as God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well (Gen 21:19), Abraham raises his eyes and sees a ram (Gen 22:13).[6] The Aqedah narrative again strikingly echoes the details of Gen 12:2-3, when God first promised Abram land, descendants and medium of blessing.

Structure of Gen 22

Before examining the nature of the Midrash and its interpretation of Gen 22:6,8, it might be apt to attempt outlining the structure of the chapter. The narrative division made by J.-L. Ska will be our lead. Ska divides the chapter into scenes:[7]

1. Introduction (v. 1a) N
2. God's command 'Sacrifice your son' (vv. 1b–2) M
3. Departure next morning (v. 3) N
4. The third day at foot of the mountain (vv. 4–6b) D
5. Journey up the mountain (vv. 6c–8) D
6. Preparation for sacrifice (vv. 9–10) N
7. Angel speaks to stop sacrifice (vv. 11–18) M
8. Epilogue: Return to Beersheba (v. 19) N

The scenes are arranged palistrophically in chiasms such that the first and last scenes are narrator's voice, while the second and seventh scenes are monologues, in which God commands Abraham in vv. 1b-2 and the angel speaks to stop him in vv. 11-18. The central part of the narrative, fourth and fifth scenes, contains the *only dialogues* in the entire pericope. And it is in v. 8 that God speaks for the last time to Abraham in the book of Genesis. His speech is again reminiscent of the

[5] Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50,* NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 99.

[6] For a comprehensive comparison of Gen 21 and 22, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 99-100.

[7] See J.-L. Ska, « Gen 22 :1-19 : essai sur les niveaux de lecture », *Bib* 69 (1988) 329. For its reproduction with a slight modification, see Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 100. N stands for Narrator, M for Monologue and D for Dialogue.

very first conversation he has with the patriarch in Gen 12:2-3. We shall now exegetically analyze the first six verses of Gen 22.

God tests Abraham: The Exposition (v.1)

The chapter begins with a notification of sometime lapse (‘*aḥar haddəḇārîm hā’ēlleh*, ‘after these things’) between the weaning of Isaac in Gen 21:8, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham’s home (cf. Gen 21:14) and the peace treaty-covenant made with Abimelech, king of Gerar, over the well of water Abimelech’s servants had seized. Westermann holds that the formula, ‘after these things’, as also found in Gen 15:1, 22:20, 39:7 and 40:1 is meant to insert a narrative into a larger corpus.[8] It is quite evident that the phrase, ‘after these things,’ underscores the time gap between the birth of Isaac in Gen 21:3 and his journey with Abraham in Gen 22.

The God who appears to Abraham is introduced in a unique way by the narrator with the expression, *hā’ĕlōhîm*, ‘the God’. The phrase also appears in vv. 3, 8, and 9. Hamilton gives a plausible insight by noting that it could as well be an emphasis that the God who communicates with Abraham is Abraham’s God and not just any other foreign deity.[9] This God *tests* Abraham.[10] This is the only time scriptures records God testing an individual.[11] More often, Israel is said to be the object of testing by God (cf. Exod 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut 8:2, 16). The testing is for obedience, as different from Israel’s testing in Exod 20:20, which was to ascertain the fear of God. God wanted to know how obedient Abraham was. Furthermore, ‘the suffering of a person is presented as a testing by God.’[12] The endurance of Abraham at the request for the life of an only son is indeed put to test.

[8] See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 356.

[9] See Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 100.

[10] The emphasis is evident in the Hebrew which suspends its more common word order, *verb-subject-object*, for an emphatic *subject-verb-object*. See Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 100. Furthermore, a dramatic irony is created from the beginning of the chapter as the reader has an elevated reading position. While he knows it is a test, Abraham remains in the dark. On reading positions in narrative criticism, see Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: 1985), 163-172; Jean Louis Ska, *‘Our Fathers have told us’: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narrative,* SubBi 13 (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2000), 54-56; Jean Pierre Sonnet, ‘L’analyse narrative des récits bibliques,’ in Michaela Bauks and Christophe Nihan, ed., *Manuel d’exégèse de l'Ancien Testament*, *MdB* 61, (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2008), 58-59.

[11] See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 108.

[12] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 356.

Abraham's Conversation with God (vv.1b-2)

The speech of God to Abraham is once again expressed by an interior monologue, which bears much semblance with Gen 12:1. God calls Abraham by name in Gen 22:2. God had only called Abram once by name in Gen 15:1 before he changed his name to Abraham in Gen 17:5. Since he got a new name, this is the first time God would call him by name. While in Gen 12:1-3, Abram had obeyed in silence, here in Gen 22:2, Abraham responds, *hinnēni*, 'here am I'. This response would be repeated in vv. 7 and 11, and 'each signals a tense new development in the narrative.'[13] The contents of God's request to Abraham is a startling one. He politely implores him to take his son: *qaḥ ̄nā' 'eṯ ̄binḵā*, 'do take your son'. Hamilton notes that *nā*, which normally has a precative nuance, is used only four other times in the Hebrew Bible within the context of God's speech to a person.[14] Most likely, the particle here has a fortifying nuance – God really intends Abraham to take Isaac.

The divine mention of Isaac was not straightforward. It came in three epithets which were almost tautologous: 'your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac' (v.2).[15] Here we find a gradation in the intensity of emotional attachment and implication: an only son is definitely more intense than just a son, and an only loved son is even more acute. Gen 22:2 again echoes Gen 12:1 when God tells Abram to depart from his country, kindred and father's house.[16] It is remarkable that the three objects, your son, your only one, whom you love, are all introduced in the Hebrew by the direct object marker, *'eṯ*. According to McEvenue, the triple naming downtrends the narrative time and accentuates the intensity of the imperative.[17]

The place God wants Abraham to offer Isaac makes the narrative even more interesting. Skinner quips, 'all attempts to explain the name and identify the place has been futile.'[18] Moriah as a place is only again mentioned in 2 Chr 3:1, the part of Jerusalem where Solomon is told to build the temple.[19] Hamilton underscores the fact that while it was mountain in 2 Chr, it is land in Gen 22. The puzzle, however, is why does the chronicler link the Mount only to David and not to Abraham? Hence, there have been attempts to repoint the lexeme, *mōrîya* to

[13] Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 104.
[14] The other four instances are Gen 13:14; 15:5; Exod 11:2; Isa 7:3. See Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 101.
[15] For a repeat of the phrase, 'your son, your only son', see Gen 22:12.
[16] For similarities between Gen 12 and 20, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, *II*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 310.
[17] See Sean E. McEvenue, 'The Elohist at Work,' *ZAW* 96 (1984): 323.
[18] John Skinner, *Genesis*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 328.
[19] This is also attested by Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, I: 226.

mōr'ehya or *mar'ehya*. Skinner and Tal discuss the Samaritan Pentateuch's preference of interpreting Moriah as a covert reference to Shechem; possible repointing to read land of the Hamorites and even a recourse to the verb, *rā'āh*, to see.[20] Whatever position is taken, the narrative holds that it is a place which God would show Abraham (though the narrator never states when God precisely does so).

At Moriah, Abraham is expected to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering (*'ōlah*). A burnt offering is that which is cut up and arranged on a prepared altar, to be burnt as a sacrifice to God. The question of the practice of human sacrifice in ancient Israel has been a huge debate among scholars. From the Hebrew Bible, it is evident that the idea is not impossible (cf. 2 Kings 17:17), even if unaccepted. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in Judg 11:30 is a human sacrifice carried out by an Israelite. A couple of other instances of child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible were carried out by non-Israelites: Hiel buried two of his sons in 1 Kgs 16:34 and the king of Moab offered up his eldest in 2 Kgs 3:27. Wenham inherently argues that the first born of every family is supposed to be offered up, literally sacrificed, to the Lord according to Exod 22:29, but this sacrifice is replaced with an animal offering in Exod 34:20. It is clear that biblical laws were quite unequivocal in their condemnation of human sacrifice (cf. Lev 18:21; 20:2-5; Deut 12:31; 18:10). It seems as if those who carried out child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, except Jephthah, were either repugnant like Judean king Ahab in 2 Kgs 16:3 or outright foreigners like Hiel and Moabite king earlier cited. Micah (6:6-7) raises the question as a rhetorical one that expected a negative response.[21] The Molech practice of passing a child through fire was also condemned in no unclear terms.

In all cases, it seems God never orders the sacrifice of a human person all through the Hebrew Bible. Apart from Gen 22, the other passage in which it seems as though God ordered a human sacrifice is Ezek 20:25-26. And here, it features as sarcasm: since Israel has refused to obey God's good laws (which would give them life), God therefore gives them abhorrent laws, like sacrifice of the first born, which

[20] See Skinner, *Genesis*, 329; Abraham Tal, *Introduction and Commentaries on Genesis, BHQ* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2015), 130-131. The position of Samaritan Pentateuch is comprehensible given their foundational creed that Mount Gerizim is the Mount of the Lord. Given that the Torah is their sole scripture, the clarification of Moriah in Gen 22:2 would be fundamental for them.

[21] For an analysis of child sacrifice in ANE, see Beate Pongratz-Leisten, 'Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East: Offering and Ritual Killing,' in Anne Porter and Glenn M. Schwartz, ed., *Sacred Killing: The Archaeology of Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 291-304; Kristine H. Garroway, *Children in the ancient near Eastern Household* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2014); Heath D. Dewrell, *Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017).

would lead to death and ultimate punishment.[22] This is quite different from our passage under treatment.

The shocking nature of God's demand to Abraham has drawn much attention in history. The ethics of a good God who would demand a human sacrifice has often challenged traditional notions of a good and life-giving God. The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, as earlier mentioned, also tackled the ethics of the divine command. He resolved it by creating a diptych, Abraham. The first Abraham respected universal moral law and rather convinced Isaac that the sacrifice command came from him, and not from God. While on the other hand, Abraham silently prayed to God for Isaac's life because he was obeying a law that was higher than universal moral law, which might demand 'a teleological suspension of the ethical.'[23] Hence, Abraham is divided between his desire to obey God and the veracity of the divine source of the command. He proceeds in *fear and trembling*.[24]

Obedience in Silence (v.3)

Just as Abraham obeys God's instruction in Gen 12:1-3 without any verbal response, so also does he in Gen 22:2. The narrator simply recounts that Abraham rose, saddled his donkey, took two servants and Isaac, split the wood, set out and went. It is a series of verbal *wayyiqtols*, a flurry of activity which underscores the immediate obedience of Abraham. The consecutive nature of Abraham's actions, as expressed by the *wayyiqtols*, inspired Rémi Lack to closely examine the sequential logic of the actions.[25] He opined that if the verbal phrase 'split the wood' were omitted, the sequence would have been more logical. Wenham, Hamilton and Westermann also note the queer order of the events, making a possible link to Abraham's state of mind due to the divine command.[26] What is the purpose of taking servants when he prepares the wood and saddles the donkey by himself? This will be later discovered in the narrative. Auerbach notes the reticence of the narrator on the emotions of Abraham as he set out with his son to the place of sacrifice. He contrasts it with the loquacious narrative style in Homer's Odyssey where the moment of Odysseus' discovery by his nurse, Euryclea, was

[22] See Daniel Isaac Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 636–637.
[23] Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 104.
[24] See Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 104.
[25] See Rémi Lack, 'Le sacrifice d'Isaac — Analyse structurale de la couche élohiste dans Gn 22,' *Biblica* 56.1 (1975): 1-12.
[26] See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 106; Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 106; and Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 358.

accompanied by a detailing of emotions, inmost feelings, flashback, and even non-verbal expressions of the characters.[27]

The narrator states that Abraham headed for the place that God had shown him (v. 3). There is a narrative ellipsis since the reader was not told when God showed Abraham the place. As at verse 2, God only promised to show Abraham. The reticence of the narrator is quite loud in v. 3 as much information is retained from the reader. This reticence serves to focus the reader on the core essentials of the plot and involve him in the emergence of the narrative.[28] The reader is invited to ponder on missing details, thereby putting him on the scene with the characters.[29] Westermann expresses the involvement of the reader in stark categories: 'the addressees are not the onlookers, but the participants, for whom it takes on another meaning. They know what it means to have to give up a child.'[30]

The Journey (v. 4)

In company of his son and two servants, Abraham sights their destination from afar on the third day. The third day has often been seen as a preparation for some important event (see Gen 31:22; 40:20; 42:18). The difficulty of identifying Jerusalem as the land of Moriah with certainty makes it more likely that the duration of the journey from Beersheba as three days was more idiomatic than factual.[31] The narrator must have employed this expression in a build-up to the narrative tension. The continual silence of Abraham and the reticence of the narrator create an atmosphere of uncertainty: uncertainty as regards the thoughts of the patriarch; uncertainty as regards the end of this journey and fear for the life of Isaac.

[27] See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 3-43.

[28] On the reticence of the biblical narrator, see Sternberg, *The Poetics,* 190-193; George W. Savran, 'The Character as Narrator in Biblical Narrative,' *Proof* 5 (1985): 11-17; Robert Alter, 'Anteriority, Authority, and Secrecy: A General Comment,' *Semeia* 43 (1988): 155-156; Sonnet, 'L'analyse narrative,' 65-66; Christopher T. Paris, *Narrative Obtrusion in the Hebrew Bible,* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 53-54.

[29] On the pact between the narrator and the reader, see Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts,* (Bloomington, IN 1979), 200-256; Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, IL 1983), 211-240; Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods,* (Cambridge, MA – London 1994), 15; Jean Pierre Sonnet, *L'alleanza della lettura: Questioni di poetica narrativa nella Bibbia Ebraica,* Lectio 1 (Roma – Cinisello Balsamo 2011), 9.

[30] Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 364.

[31] See Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 107.

Abraham's worship with Isaac (v. 5-6)

Abraham reduces his travelling troupe and sets out with Isaac alone for the mountain seen in the distance, leaving the servants alone with the donkey (see v.5). 'Why does he not want his servants to accompany him? Is the way too rough for the donkey? Did he not want the lads to see the sacrifice? Did he fear they might interfere? Was a donkey too unclean to take to a sanctuary? Had God simply told him to leave them?', Wenham rightly queries.[32] Again the reticence of the narrator comes into play, and the reader is given more space to be involved in the unfolding plot. The ancient rabbis notice this ellipsis and give a whimsical filling: the servants were instructed to wait with the donkey because they could not see the distant mountain. Their short-sightedness, according to the rabbis, coincided with that of the donkey.[33]

Abraham claims he is going to worship (*hištaḥawāh*) with Isaac (v.5), and not offer a burnt offering. Worship is a more general term than burnt offering.[34] Why did Abraham choose this vaguer term? Furthermore, he claims that they will return after the worship. Did he say this to shield Isaac from the true intent of his journey? Did he say this to assuage the servants he is leaving with the donkey? Did he say this because he believed that God would somehow intervene? Or did he say this because he had another plan in mind?[35] It is difficult to tell.

In verse 6, Abraham lays the wood of the offering on Isaac and bears the fire and knife. The reader is intimated for the first time that Abraham actually had a knife and fire with him. Whatever uncertainty and curiosity that might have been invoked in the reader in the previous verse, is slightly clarified in v. 6. When Abraham had said they would return, he had given room for the return of Isaac. But with the mention of knife, the suspense is heightened. Just as bread and water were placed on Hagar's shoulders in Gen 21, so also is wood placed on Isaac's in Gen 22:6. Just as he had spared the servants the task of splitting the wood, he spares the donkey the task of carrying it as he lays it on his son.[36] By carrying the wood for burnt offering, Origen likens Isaac to Christ carrying his cross. In fact, he sees Isaac as a victim and priest, because it is the priest who carries the wood for burnt offering.[37]

---

[32] Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 107.

[33] See *Genesis Rabbah*, 56.2.

[34] For a lexical analysis of the verb, *hištaḥawāh*, 'to throw oneself down, to bow down', see HALOT 1457; TDOT 14, 559-560.

[35] For the proponents of these positions, see Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 108.

[36] See Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 109.

[37] Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 8.6.29 as quoted in Mark Sheridan, *Genesis 12–50*, ACCS.OT 2 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 104.

Abraham and his son Isaac journey on together. They both journeyed together in obedience, the father in obedience to God, and the son in obedience to his father. They were then, in a way, united in character – that of trust and obedience. Isaac trusted Abraham just as Abraham trusted God. Though uncertainty hung over both of them, Isaac would soon ask about the animal for sacrifice and Abraham, uncertain of the future, nonetheless replied that God would provide. Father and son walked on in obedience towards Moriah.

Verses 6 and 8 fall within the central part of the plot. In fact, the clauses, 'so the two went on together', close the only two dialogues found within the narrative. According to Westermann, they form a sort of *inclusio* to the dialogue between Abraham and Isaac.[38] These clauses are again described by Wenham as frame markers.[39] Besides these modern interpretations of the verses, how did ancient Jewish authorities interpret Gen 22:6 and 8?

3. *Midrash*, Genesis *Rabbah* and *Rashi*

The Jewish re-reading of the Hebrew Bible is generally known as Midrash. The term comes from the root, *drš*, which means, 'to search, seek, examine, investigate' (cf. Lev 10:16; Deut 13:15; Isa 55:6).[40] The noun occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible (2 Chron 13:22 and 24:27). The Midrash can be described as that exegesis, which attempts to go beyond the literal sense of scriptures and derive unapparent interpretations.[41] It designates that special technique of learning 'through rigorous and painstaking, searching inquiry into the verses of the Bible'.[42] According to Moshe Herr, Genesis Rabbah is the *aggadic* midrash on the book of Genesis.[43] It is an exegetical Midrash which gives a consecutive exposition on the book of Genesis. Genesis Rabbah has long occupied an important position in the hierarchy of rabbinic interpretations of the Pentateuch. Though similar in language to the Jerusalem Talmud, its peculiarity in presenting a compendium of various rabbinic interpretations on every verse in the book of Genesis makes it stand out.

Having examined the general nature of the Midrash and Genesis Rabbah, let us turn our attention to the second interpretive phenomenon, Rashi. Rashi is the acronym for the renowned Jewish exegete, Shlomo Yitzchaki, who lived between

[38] See Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 359.
[39] Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 108.
[40] See HALOT, 550.
[41] See S. Horotivz, 'Midrash,' in *The Jewish Encyclopedia,* Vol. 8 (New York – London 1907), 548.
[42] Moshe David Herr, 'Midrash,' in Fred Skolnik, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 14 (Detroit: Thomson Gale 2007), 182.
[43] Moshe David Herr, 'Genesis Rabbah,' in Fred Skolnik, ed., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Vol. 7 (Detroit: Thomson Gale 2007), 448.

1040 and 1105CE in northern France. Rashi commented on the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) and the Talmud and his commentary remains the source of an impressive amount of secondary biblical literature. He prizes the *peshat* (plain meaning) meaning of the text and purports that the literal interpretation cannot be overlooked when examining a text. Rashi's interpretation of Gen 22 influenced both later Jewish and Christian interpretations of same passage.[44] Nahum Sarna says of Rashi,

> It may be asserted quite safely that, in the entire history of the written word, let alone the printed, no other commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures in any language has ever attained comparable recognition, acceptance, and sustained popularity or similar wide geographic distribution, or ever equalled it in its profound impact on human lives.[45]

According to Devorah Schoenfeld, in Rashi's mind, the Aqedah was meant to show the greatness of Abraham and Isaac to the non-Jewish world, namely, Ishmael, Satan and the nations of the world.[46]

It is important to note that Genesis Rabbah (and probably Rashi) considers Isaac to be a full-grown adult of thirty-seven years as at the time of the Aqedah (see Gen. Rabbah 55.4).

Genesis Rabbah on Gen 22:6

In chapter 56, Genesis Rabbah interprets Gen 22:6 thus: 'And they went both of them together (Gen. 22:6): one to bind and the other to be bound, one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered.' Genesis Rabbah views the verse in terms of the central description of the entire chapter: the binding of Isaac. By the time it interprets Gen 22:8, there is a modification in details: 'So 'they went both of them together' (Gen 22:8) — one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered.' The binding aspect has been removed because a crucial conversation had taken place in the meantime between a tempter, Samael, and the two travellers, Abraham and Isaac.[47] Samael had sought to convince Abraham not to, at a hundred years of age, slay his son Isaac. Samael even tempted Abraham with likely future disclaimer by

[44] See Irven M. Resnick, review of Devorah Schoenfeld, *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars: Polemic and Exegesis in Rashi and the Glossa Ordinaria* [New York: Fordham Press, 2013] SCJR 8 (2013): 1.

[45] Nahum Sarna, 'Rashi the Commentator,' LTQ 34.1 (1999): 2.

[46] See Devorah Schoenfeld, *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars: Polemic and Exegesis in Rashi and the Glossa Ordinaria* (New York: Fordham Press, 2013), 91.

[47] Samael etymologically means the poison of God. This perfectly describes his role as an angel of death and a seducer, accuser, and destroyer in Jewish Talmudic literature. See *Jewish Encyclopaedia* s.v 'Samael,' 665.

God that it was all a test and he never instructed Abraham to kill his son. According to Genesis Rabbah, Abraham insisted on continuing his journey.[48] Seeing that he could not change Abraham's side, Samael shifted to Isaac and tried to appeal to his emotions by reminding him of his mother's likely grief if he were to be slain.

Rashi on Gen 22:6

For the interpretation of Genesis 22, Rashi generally leans on *Genesis Rabbah*. Before his interpretation of Gen 22:6b, Rashi had quoted *Genesis Rabbah* a total of ten times in his commentary on Gen 22. But while explaining Gen 22:6b, he takes a break from Genesis Rabbah. He consciously tries to harmonise the purpose of father and son. Rashi writes, 'and they both went together: Abraham, who knew that he was going to slaughter his son, was going as willingly and joyfully as Isaac, who was unaware of the matter.'[49] He underscores the willingness and joy of both parties even though their levels of knowledge were different. The volition and joy that Rashi attributes to Abraham are surely at odds with Auerbach's proposal of the inner turmoil that Abraham must have experienced while taking his son to Moriah.[50] Similarly in Gen 22:8, Rashi holds that father and son went with one accord: 'Abraham, who knew that he was going to slaughter his son, was going as willingly and joyfully as Isaac, who was unaware of the matter.'[51] His citation of Gen Rabbah 56 at this point is almost counter-reflexive. He quotes the Midrash but actually gives a different content, because he unites the purpose of both, relating that they went with one accord. This is not exactly what the Midrash states, for the latter holds that one went to slaughter, and the other to be slaughtered.

The reason for Rashi's modification of the witness of Genesis Rabbah could stem from the effort to present Isaac in a more positive light. In other words, while Genesis Rabbah kind of mooted the idea that Isaac partially succumbed to the temptations and suggestions of Samael and thus asked his father, 'My father…here are the fire and the wood, where is the lamb for burnt offering?' (Gen 22:7), Rashi avoids any insinuation that Isaac entertained some unwillingness to be sacrificed.

4. Midrash and Synodality: 'Walking together' then and now

There are continuities and discontinuities between the imagery of Gen 22 and Pope Francis' invitation for the embrace of 'a process of fraternal collaboration and discernment' in synodality.[52] Etymologically, the Gen 22 image coheres almost perfectly with the Greek origin (*syn odos*, 'together on the way') of the term

[48] *Genesis Rabbah*, 56.
[49] Rashi on Gen 22:6.
[50] See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 10-11.
[51] Rashi on Gen 22:6.
[52]Ed Condon, 'What is 'Synodality'? Experts Explain', https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/39731/what-is-synodality-experts-explain. Accessed April 2022.

synodality, which is a derivative from the noun, 'synod'. The phrase, 'walking together' of Abraham and Isaac in Gen 22:6b.8b matches the nuance of the term, synodality. However, there is a discontinuity in the transition of both images. While the biblical figures had two different intentions, as noted by Midrash, the synodal way presumes and projects harmony of purpose between the members of the Church who are journeying to salvation. Nonetheless, we can still glean a similarity in an extended sense: by trusting and obeying his father, could Isaac be said to be obeying God? In the same way that Abraham obeyed God to the letter.

Furthermore, the individuality of the wayfarers is not overshadowed by their mutual obedience, the son's obedience to his father, and the father's obedience to God. The son spoke as a son (even though the Midrash presents him as a young adult), and the father responds with the wisdom and maturity of a father. In fact, Abraham assures Isaac, as though prophetically, that God himself will provide a lamb (cf. Gen 22:8). Synodality expresses the concern to hear the voice of every stratum of the mystical body of Christ, such that the general does not suffocate the particular, even as the particular is cognizant of the aim and destination of the general.

The image of Abraham and his son is so rich for the very concept of synodality and the identity of the Church. Apart from the fact that the near-sacrifice of Isaac has often been linked from the times of the Church fathers to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (and there are many motifs in both events – the wood, the place, the journey), the *syn odos,* 'walking together' in a loose sense already echoes the very definition of the Church itself. As the International Theological Commission writes, '[synod] in ecclesiastical Greek expresses how the disciples of Jesus were called together as an assembly and in some cases, it [synod] is a synonym for the ecclesial community.'[53] In fact, the Church is a convoked assembly, as nuanced by the Hebrew root, *qahal*.

However, it is essential to remember that the convoked assembly does not overshadow individual charisms and personal participation. In fact, the Church continues to call for a personal response to Christ's salvific invitation because Christianity is about an encounter with a person and not a system, which again requires a personal though not isolated response.[54] The Church's doctrine expresses it succinctly: 'No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith as you have not given yourself life.'[55] Hence,

[53] International Theological Commission, 'Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,' no. 3.
[54] See *Lumen Fidei*, 8&13. See also Pope Benedict XVI's Wednesday Audience, September 3, 2008.
[55] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 166.

synodality seeks to explore the richness of this wholistic participation and communal movement towards the renewal of the collective response to the universal call to salvation.

The final document of the synod on synodality reminds all that relationships and encounter were part of the bane of the synodal process.[56] All in the church are called to learn how to encounter one another and Christ in a spirit of conversion.[57] We are all together in the boat, going to the shores of salvation. In order for an authentic encounter to occur, openness of mind is essential. Prejudice cannot in any way contribute to the occurrence of a fruitful encounter between persons who are communally in search of truth. It is important to listen to the other in order to truly commune with them. Abraham listened to God and to his son. He replied the difficult question of Isaac, without disobeying God who had asked for a burnt offering. This is the message of the synodal process: that the hierarchy must be ready to listen to the lay faithful and vice versa. Listening and learning are necessary tools for growth in the mission of evangelization: 'When we listen to our sisters and brothers, we are participants in the way that God in Jesus Christ comes to meet each of us.'[58]

5. Conclusion

We began this paper with an examination of God's demand of an only child from Abraham as seen in Gen 22. We conducted a close reading of the classic passage and engaged the various exegetical and lexical problems inherent in the text. We explored the midrashic interpretation of Gen 22:6 and 8 in order to see how early rabbinic interpreters understood the phrase, 'and they went together'. We then viewed the implications of the verses and their midrashic interpretations for the synodal path defined by Pope Francis. We have seen that there are continuities and discontinuities, not just in Rashi's reception of Genesis Rabbah, but also in the application of the Abrahamic imagery to the concept of synodality as understood in Catholic Theology. The synod declared by the Pope remains an effort to further unite the Church in her mutual response to Christ her head. Synodality does not in any way, imply democratization of the church or a cession to parliamentarianism. It is hoped that the fruits of the synod on synodality would truly lead to deeper obedience to God and his Word.

[56] See Pope Francis, 'For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,' Final Document, 2024, no. 50.
[57] Francis, 'For a Synodal Church,' nos. 51 and 52.
[58] Francis, 'For a Synodal Church,' no. 51.