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The Sacrifice of Isaac – Acknowledgement of a Biblical Typology in the Homilies and Commentaries of the Eastern Church Fathers

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Abstract

The Sacrifice of Isaac was included within the framework of biblical typology quite early. The Church Fathers considered Isaac a type of Christ and his sacrifice on Mount Moriah a prefiguration of the supreme sacrifice on Golgotha. Thus, patristic tradition identified in the text of Genesis 22, which depicts the sacrifice, numerous elements which reinforced the connection between Isaac and Jesus Christ. Recent scientist, coming mainly from the critical school of interpretation, consider this association is not very well defined, which is why it must be thoroughly argued for using the source text. The logic of these biblical scholars is not mistaken, just as the Church Fathers’ interpretation cannot be deemed inappropriate. In this case, we are faced with two types of exegesis, which are not consonant. In this study, we don’t aim to find arguments in favour of the patristic vision; we rather want to identify the possible starting point of the typology and to follow its evolution in the homilies and commentaries of important Eastern exegetes of the first six centuries of Christianity.

Keywords: Isaac-Jesus Christ, sacrifice, typology, Church Fathers, cross

I. Introduction

Patriarch Isaac was regarded by Church Fathers as a symbol, a type, who, through the sacrifice he willingly accepted to take part in, anticipated what would happen to Jesus Christ on the cross¹. This association conferred the second patriarch a very special status among the righteous of the Old Testament and among those who, through their life or through one of their deeds, prefigured the Incarnate Son of God. Patristic literature praised his courage and obedience to his father, who had to fulfil the trial God had ordained. The interpretation perspectives and the methodology offered by the typological construct provided the Fathers with the possibility to identify key elements which can consolidate the type-antitype relationship and highlight the way in which Isaac resembles Jesus Christ.

One of the most representatives' examples of specialised literature which tackled the patristic interpretation of the event from the Old Testament belongs to Edward Kessler. In his work (*Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians, and the Sacrifice of Isaac*), the author wanted to underscore the interdependence between the exegesis of the sacrifice on Mount Moriah provided by both Jews and Christians. In his endeavour, the renowned British philosopher and theologian highlighted the main lines of interpretation developed by the Fathers of the first centuries with respect to sacrifice. His work is a starting point for our research, in which we want to focus our attention exclusively on Christological interpretations. Since we will access and analyse the homilies and commentaries of the Fathers, we will only briefly refer to complementary literature², as we prefer to

¹ Saint Ephrem the Syrian claims that Isaac was “a foreshadowing of the Lord”. ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAC, “Cuvânt de Avraam și Isaac” [On Abraham and Isaac], transl. by Alexandru Prelipcean, in: *Ortodoxia* [Orthodoxy], VI (2014) 2, p. 130. Saint Gregory of Naziansus points to the fact that “Abraham, the great patriarch, makes an unusual sacrifice, the image of the great Sacrifice”. ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANUS, *Cele cinci cuvântări teologice* [The Five Theological Orations] II,18, transl. by Gheorghe Tilea and Nicolae Barbu, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 48-49.

² We recommend the following specialised literature: A. R. E. AGUS, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah*, State University of New York, Albany (NY), 1988. G. T. ARMSTRONG, “The Cross in the Old Testament According to Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem and the Cappadocian Fathers”, in: *Theologia Crucis: Festschrift*, coord. Erich Dinkler. C. Andresen and G. Klein, Mohr, Tübingen, 1979, pp. 17-38. S. P. BROCK, “Genesis 22 in Syriac Tradition”, in: *Mélanges Dominique Barthelemy*, coord. P. Casetti, O. Keel and A. Schenker, Editions Universitaires, Freiburg, 1981, pp. 1-30. J. DUNHILL, *Covenant*

work directly with the source texts. We aim to emphasise the way in which the Eastern Fathers identified bridges between the two sacrifices and later fructified them to consolidate the typology. For the patristic homilies and commentaries, we are referring to, we will consider the time between the 2nd and the 5th centuries. We will start our presentation with Melito, bishop of Sardis, one of the important theologians of the 2nd century, who systematised the main elements of the typology.

We will resort to the exegetes of Alexandria (Clement, Origen, St. Athanasius the Great and St. Cyril) and the exegetes belonging to the Antiochian school (Theodore of Mopsuestia and St. John Chrysostom), we will touch upon the Cappadocians, and our approach will extend as far as the Syrian Fathers (St. Ephrem the Syrian). We thus want to cover all the important regions of Eastern Christianity and to note down the interpretations made during the golden period of Christianity in the first centuries.

Before mentioning the lines of interpretation of the Fathers and implicitly systematising the way in which Eastern tradition underscored the typological connection between Isaac and Jesus Christ, we will try to identify the starting point or the factor which generated this kind of interpretation. In our endeavour, we have also found useful the indications of the Fathers, who refer to a few texts from the New Testament, which they consider sources of validation for their exegetic act. The most important reference can be found in one of our Saviour's orations, in which, according to the Fathers, the Lord makes a slight allusion to the sacrifice on Mount Moriah.

and Sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews, University Press, Cambridge, 1992. A. GABOURY, "Deux fils uniques: Isaac et Jésus: Connexions vétérotestamentaires de Mc 1,11 (et parallèles)", in: *Studia Evangelica* (1968) 4, pp. 198-204. J. D. LEVENSON, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*, Yale University Press New Haven, 1993. I. LÉVI, "Le sacrifice d'Isaac et la mort de Jésus", *Revue des Études Juives* (1912) 64, pp. 161-184. E. NOORT (eds.), *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its Interpretations. Themes in Biblical Narrative*, Brill, Leiden, 2002. H. J. SCHOEPS, "The Sacrifice of Isaac in Paul's Theology", in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1946) 65, pp. 385-392. J. E. WOOD, "Isaac Typology in the New Testament", in: *New Testament Studies* (1968) 14, pp. 583-589.

II. Abraham's Joy and the Mysterious Sight of the Sacrifice on the Cross

The Sacrifice of Isaac became particularly important for Christian communities after our Saviour alluded to the sacrifice on Mount Moriah during His great Eucharistic oration written down by Saint John. Jesus Christ refers to this event, invoking a mysterious understanding of the sacrifice by the one who takes up the role of its officiant. The Lord tells those who questioned his authority during the aforementioned oration that “Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (Jn 8, 56). It is easy to understand that the audience didn't understand anything from those words; they told Him he wasn't even fifty years old, and it was impossible to have seen the patriarch. After our Saviour told them that, before Abraham was, He was, they wanted to throw in the precipice the One Who, according to them, considered Himself older than Abraham.

The Lord's words would be understood only after the sacrifice on the cross took place. It was only then that John the Apostle, the first Christians and, later, the Church Fathers understood what Jesus Christ meant when He uttered those words. Besides the incarnation of our Saviour, Saint Cyril of Alexandria points to two additional events that the Lord might have envisaged: the theophany of Mamre³ or the sacrifice on Mount Moriah. They can all be justified, but the allusion to the sacrifice is much more appropriate and the Church Fathers generally favour this version. Saint Cyril believes that God

“shall grant that he [Abraham] truly saw the day of the Lord's slaughter (on account whereof all things have turned out auspiciously unto us and were made prosperous), when for a type of Him he was enjoined to offer up for a sacrifice his only-begotten and first-born, Isaac”⁴.

³ Saint Gregory the Great believes that the Lord referred then to the episode of Mamre, when Abraham received the three angels who prefigured the Holy Trinity. ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, coll. *Cistercian Studies Series*, vol. 123, transl. by David Hurst, Cistercian Publication, Kalamazoo (Mi), 1990, p. 116.

⁴ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Comentariu la Evanghelia Sfântului Ioan [Commentary on the Gospel of Saint John]*, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești [The Fathers of the Church]*, vol. 41, transl. by Fr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2000, p. 451.

The exegete of Alexandria emphasises here Isaac's quality of an "image" (type), prefiguring through his sacrifice the events that would take place on Golgotha. This interpretation is shared by most of the Fathers, who claim no other event in the life of the patriarch can match so well what our Saviour intended to convey to His interlocutors⁵.

Saint John Chrysostom considers that all the events which have to do with the sacrifice of Isaac were a "foreshadowing of the cross". He supports his assertion through the fact that our Saviour Himself mentioned the sacrifice of Isaac and told the Jews that Abraham had mysteriously seen His sacrifice on the cross and rejoiced (Jn 8, 56). "How did he see it if he lived so long before? In type, in shadow. Just as in our text the sheep was offered in place of Isaac, so here the rational Lamb was offered for the world. You see, it was necessary that the truth be sketched out ahead of time in shadow." ⁶We notice that Saint John considers the sacrifice of

⁵ ORIGEN, *Homilies in Genesis* 8.1, coll. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 71, transl. by Roland Heine, Catholic University of America Press, Washington (D. C.), 1982, pp. 137-138; ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, coll. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 14, transl. by Philip Schaff, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids (MI), 1995, p. 199; THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on John*, coll. *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. 4. 3, transl. by J. -M. Vosté, L. Durbecq, Louvain, 1940, p. 180. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons claims that, as Abraham was a prophet, he mysteriously saw, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the day when the Lord would come, and he immediately rejoiced seeing the fruit of the sacrifice on the cross. ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Against Heresis* 4.5.5, coll. *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1, transl. by Philip Schaff, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids (MI), 2002, p. 467. Saint Athanasius the Great (*Epistolae Heortasticae VI*, PG 26) and later Saint Ephrem the Syrian claim that Abraham didn't see Christ in the image of his son, but in that of the ram he brought as a sacrifice. Saint Ephrem supports his opinion with the help of another event with saving characteristics, namely the paschal lamb. Just as Isaac's offspring were delivered out of Egypt through the sacrifice of the lamb, so would all the gentiles be delivered when the One Whom John the Baptist called the Lamb of God would sacrifice Himself on the Cross to take away the sin of the world. ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron* 16,27, *Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement* 2, transl. by C. McCarthy, Oxford University Press for the University of Manchester, Oxford, 1993, p. 257. Saint Ambrose the Great believes that the ram prefigures Christ: "The ram is the Word full of peace, measure and patience. Through Him it is shown that wisdom is the good sacrifice, the knowledge of the face of deserving and gaining goodwill through sacrifice". ST. AMBROSE THE GREAT, *Scrisori* [Letters] 8,3, coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* [The Fathers of the Church], vol. 53, transl. by David Popescu, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1994, p. 53.

⁶ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Omilii la Facere* [Homilies on Genesis], coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* [The Fathers of the Church], vol. 22, transl. by Dumitru Fecioru, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1989, p. 151.

the ram as the main element of the typological relationship, without the nuances added by Saint Cyril. He focuses on the fact that the reality of the sacrifice on Golgotha was made known to Abraham through the shadow or, to use a Pauline wording, through guessing (I Cor 13, 21). Abraham knew in part what the contemporaries of Jesus would later fully understand⁷.

To be more explicit, Saint John develops the idea put forward and adds other elements to the basic idea, to reinforce the typological relationship: “an only-begotten son in that case, an only-begotten in this; dearly loved in that case, dearly loved in this”⁸. Nonetheless, the Antiochian exegete insists on mentioning that just as one cannot fully compare shadow and truth, so is full resemblance between Isaac and Christ impossible. The extent of His sacrifice is much greater than that of the son of the patriarch: “This rational Lamb, you see, was offered for the whole world; he purified the whole world; he freed human beings from error and led them forward to the truth”⁹.

The typological dimension of the sacrifice was consolidated by two other references from the New Testament, which, according to the Church Fathers, entail a Christological interpretation: Jas 2, 21-23 and Heb 11, 17-19¹⁰. These texts refer to the episode of the sacrifice on Mount Moriah, emphasising the faith of patriarch Abraham. Even if the Christological character doesn't fully transpire from their content, the Fathers believed that God revealed to the patriarch the mystery of the salvation of humankind, in response to his faith. On this occasion, God told Abraham that He would send His Son to die for the sins of mankind. Thus – St. Irenaeus of Lyons emphasises –, by analogy with what had happened on Mount Moriah, Abraham could understand the sacrifice that both the Father and the Son, Who fulfilled the will of His Father, would make¹¹. The Father sacrificed

⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia also refers to the episode of the sacrifice and adapts his interpretation to the context in which the Lord uttered these words. Christ brings forth Abraham as an argument to better testify of the Father before the sceptical and tells them that the patriarch rejoiced when he saw the fruit of the sacrifice on the cross and hoped to witness the time when the entire world would be saved. This divine mystery was revealed to Abraham only after he proved he had enough faith to sacrifice his only son. God made known to him that He would send His only Son to die to free men from sin. THEODORE OF MOPSUESTIA, *Commentary on John*, p. 180.

⁸ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Omilia la Facere* [Homilies on Genesis], p. 152.

⁹ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Omilia la Facere* [Homilies on Genesis], p. 152.

¹⁰ EDWARD KESSLER, *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians and the sacrifice of Isaac*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2005, p. 64.

¹¹ Françoise PETIT (ed.) *La chaîne sur la Genèse* (édition intégrale), Peeters, Louvain,

His beloved Son for the sins of mankind. It goes without saying that full resemblance is impossible. The reasons why the two sons (Isaac and Jesus) were called to sacrifice themselves were different. What is worth mentioning here is that God never asks people to do something He hasn't done or is incapable of doing¹².

III. The Typological Nature of the Sacrifice of Isaac and Its Christological Interpretation in Eastern Tradition

Melito of Sardis highlights on various occasions the typological dimension of the event on Mount Moriah, considering Isaac a type of Christ. The type-antitype relationship between the two is based on the following elements: ■ the fact that Isaac carried the wood for sacrifice on his shoulders corresponds to the moment when Christ was forced by the soldiers to carry His cross up to the place where He would be crucified; ■ both Isaac and Christ accepted the sacrifice without fighting against their father's will; ■ Isaac understood from the dialogue with his father that he would be sacrificed, while Christ became incarnate to make this sacrifice; ■ each of them was bound before the sacrifice (this doesn't go against the idea that the sacrifice was willingly accepted); ■ they both approached the sacrifice under the guidance of their father¹³.

1995, p. 1234. Caesarius of Arles opts for a double typology: Abraham – God the Father and Isaac – Jesus Christ. “When Abraham offered his son Isaac, he was a type of God the Father, while Isaac prefigured our Lord and Savior”. CAESARIUS OF ARLES, *Sermon 84,2*, coll. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 47, transl. by Roland Heine, Catholic University of America Press, Washington (D. C.), 1962, pp. 16-17.

¹² Pseudo-Gregory of Nyssa underscores the typological dimension of the patriarch in the act of sacrifice as follows: “It suffices for you [Abraham] that you have been honoured by being the type. I have an only born son who is beloved. This one will live in the world; this one will be sacrificed on behalf of the world. Your son having awaited the slaughter was of no profit to the world, patriarch; the slaughter of My only born Son will be the salvation of the world.” (*In Abraham*). S. I. MERCATI (ed.), *S. Ephraem Syri Opera*, Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, 1915, p. 103. Referring to Abraham's sacrifice and to its typological nature, Saint Cyril of Alexandria underscores the fact that it wasn't the intrigues of the Jewish leaders which sentenced Jesus Christ to death, but the Father's will was that which brought His Son to Golgotha (*Homiliae Paschales*, PG 77, 5).

¹³ Edward KESSLER, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 64

The interpretation made by Melito of Sardis would become normative for the majority of the Fathers of Eastern Christianity. The complexity of his interpretation and the impact of his personality determined posterity to take up the model he offered for the relationship between Isaac and Christ, which was expressed in a hymn as follows:

“For as a ram he was bound / and as a lamb he was shorn / and as a sheep he was led to slaughter / and as a lamb he was crucified; / and he carried the wood on his shoulders . . . / as he was led up to be slain like Isaac by his Father. / For it was a strange mystery to behold, / a son led by his father to a mountain for slaughter, / whose feet he bound and whom he put on the wood of the offering / preparing with zeal the things for his slaughter. / But Isaac was silent bound like a ram, / not opening his mouth nor uttering a sound. / For not frightened by the sword / nor alarmed at the fire / nor sorrowful at the suffering, / he carried with fortitude the model of the Lord.”¹⁴

We can easily notice that bishop Melito intertwines the two events, which he correlates. Isaac is described from the perspective of the One Whom he prefigures. The characteristics of the Messiah the Sufferer are ascribed to the son of the patriarch, while Christ is presented in accordance with the main details of the sacrifice on Mount Moriah¹⁵.

The bishop of Sardis believes that the event of the sacrifice also contains other typological elements, which he fructifies in his discourse, as we have noticed in the previous text: the ram, the thicket (the bush), in which it got caught and the place where the sacrifice took place. “And the Lord – says Meliton – was a lamb like the ram that Abraham saw caught in the bushes (branches of the tree). The tree foreshadowed the cross, that place, Jerusalem, and the lamb, the Lord who was taken to sacrifice”¹⁶. He therefore believes that the typological nature of the episode on Mount Moriah is much more complex than it might seem at first sight. Hence his clear intention to correlate as thoroughly as possible the two events¹⁷.

¹⁴ MELITO OF SARDIS, *On Pascha and Fragments IX*, transl. by Stuard G. Hall, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 75.

¹⁵ Melito of Sardis urges us to contemplate the binding of Isaac to understand the mystery of the Lord. MELITO OF SARDIS, *On Pascha and Fragments*, p. 75.

¹⁶ MELITO OF SARDIS, *On Pascha and Fragments*, p. 75.

¹⁷ The association between the place where the sacrifice took place and Jerusalem is not isolated. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea claims on several occasions that “The

To consolidate even more the typological relationship between the two, Melito creates a context which goes beyond the boundaries of the scriptural text. He claims that Abraham's sacrifice did not take place in a private context, quite on the contrary, many people were present at the sacrificial act. This perspective is due to the association he makes between Mount Moriah and the Golgotha hill. If the sacrifice of our Saviour took place among a great crowd of people, then the sacrifice of Isaac was also public¹⁸. This type of association is not singular. Besides the scriptural text, the Church Fathers usually offer complementary details to reinforce the theological message they want to convey. For instance, among the Syrian Fathers, there is the idea according to which Sarah, Abraham's wife, was present during the sacrifice on Mount Moriah. This has determined some artists, Jews, or Christians, to portray Sarah next to the patriarch during the sacrifice¹⁹.

As far as the ram is concerned, Melito of Sardis believes it appeared to be sacrificed instead of Isaac the righteous and to free the latter from the bindings which his father had prepared for the sacrifice. Similarly, Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself to loosen the bonds of sin, to redeem and save us²⁰. We notice that, according to Melito, the Christ sacrifice has universal connotations and Isaac had to be redeemed through sacrifice. Therefore, the interpretation of the Fathers is not confined to the actual details of the event but adapted to correspond to the details regarding the saving sacrifice on Golgotha. Under Melito's influence, Saint Gregory of Nyssa claims that the event gains greater importance through its association with the sacrifice on the cross²¹. Christ sacrifices Himself for the sins of the entire humankind, just as the ram is sacrificed instead of Isaac. The gesture of Isaac carrying the wood on his back conjures up the way in which Christ took upon Himself the sins of all mankind. Saint Athanasius the Great considers that Isaac's death did not have an expiatory character, which is why it brought no good to mankind. On the other hand, the death of our Saviour had a universal impact, freeing all mankind from sin²².

Lord appeared to Abraham where Jesus Christ was crucified". Françoise PETIT (ed.), *Collectio Coisliniana*, Peeters, Louvain, 1986, p. 1260.

¹⁸ MELITO OF SARDIS, *On Pascha and Fragments*, p. 65.

¹⁹ Edward KESSLER, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, p. 160.

²⁰ MELITO OF SARDIS, *On Pascha and Fragments*, p. 76.

²¹ ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *De Deitate Filii et Spiritus Sancti*, PG 46, 601C-D.

²² ST. ATHANASIUS THE GREAT, *Festal Letters* 6, in: <https://www.newadvent.org/>

The interpretation Melito of Sardis gives to the event of Abraham's sacrifice reflects to a great extent the way in which Christian communities received the Abrahamic sacrifice. The complexity of Melito's vision gives us a clear perspective of the way in which the Christians of the first two centuries of Christianity took up the sacrifice of Isaac, at least at the level of interpretation. This reality also transpires from the fact that other Church Fathers, who were unaware of the interpretation of the bishop of Sardis, interpreted the episode on Mount Moriah from a Christological perspective.

Clement of Alexandria was among the first Christian writers who pointed to the typological dimension of the event. He claimed that:

“Isaac is another type too (he can easily be taken in this other sense), this time of the Lord. He was a son, just as is the Son (he is the son of Abraham; Christ, of God). He was a victim, as was the Lord, but his sacrifice was not consummated, while the Lord's was. All he did was to carry the wood of his sacrifice, just as the Lord bore the wood of the cross. Isaac rejoiced for a mystical reason, to prefigure the joy with which the Lord has filled us, in saving us from destruction through his blood”²³.

Saint Clement identifies a few elements which outline the typological character of the relationship between Isaac and Christ: ■ their being sons; ■ they were both brought as sacrifice; ■ the carrying of the wood / the wooden cross up to the place of sacrifice. What differentiates the two is that one of them would be spared, whereas the Other would be sacrificed for the salvation of the world.

Saint Clement also provides a special interpretation to the fact that Isaac didn't suffer. According to him, this is due to the primacy that Isaac

fathers/2806006. htm (accessed on June 9th, 2021). This interpretation is also shared by Saint Ephrem the Syrian, who claims that the ram, which evoked the sacrifice of the Lord, was sacrificed for the good of all mankind. ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Commentary on Genesis* 20,3, coll. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 91, transl. by Edward Mathews and Joseph Amas, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington (D. C.), 2010, p. 169.

²³ CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Pedagogul* [The Paedagogus], coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* [The Fathers of the Church], vol. 4, transl. by Dumitru Fecioru, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1982, p. 179.

gave to the Son of God and to the fact that he mysteriously prefigured Christ's Godhead. This perspective would be taken up by several Fathers, who, in various forms, claimed that Isaac represented the divine nature of the One Who suffered on Golgotha, while the ram represented the body of the Lord, which suffered the ordeal until death. Thus, Isaac prefigures Jesus Christ the risen, not the One Who suffered.

Origen underscores the typological nature of this event, starting from Abraham. He believes that, since the patriarch was aware of the mystery he had been entrusted with, he knew that this sacrifice was not limited only to testing his faith. The patriarch knew that what would happen had to do with an extremely important truth. For him, the resurrection of his son following the sacrifice was not impossible. God had promised him life (a child and an endless number of offspring) from an old, sterile, mortified body and He had kept His promise. He may not have known how God would resurrect his son following the sacrifice²⁴. That is why Paul the Apostle gave Abraham as an example of faith in resurrection. Abraham saw in Isaac what would happen to Jesus Christ during His resurrection. Origen claims that Abraham saw in the image of his son's sacrifice the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ²⁵.

To Origen, Isaac is clearly a typological image of Jesus Christ. This fact cannot be challenged under any circumstances. He also identifies another typological image within the framework of these events, which he links to Isaac as well, namely the ram which was sacrificed by Abraham instead of his son.

“We said above, I think, that Isaac represented Christ. But this ram no less also seems to represent Christ. Now it is worthwhile to know how both are appropriate to Christ, both Isaac, who is not slain, and the ram, which is slain. Christ is *the Word of God*, but *the Word was made flesh*. One aspect of Christ therefore is from above; the other is received from human nature and the

²⁴ ORIGEN, *Homilies in Genesis*, p. 140.

²⁵ ORIGEN, *Homilies in Genesis*, pp. 137-138. Ephrem the Syrian takes up this idea and claims that Abraham is great before the Lord for two reasons: that he could sacrifice his son and that he believed that the Lord would raise him from the dead following the sacrifice. Abraham couldn't imagine going down the mountain without Isaac, because he knew that the Lord Who had promised him offspring from Isaac couldn't break His promise. ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Commentary on Genesis*, pp. 168-169.

womb of the Virgin. Christ suffered, therefore, but in the flesh; and he endured death, but it was the flesh, of which this ram is a type, as also John said: *Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sin of the world*. But the Word continued in *incorruption*, which is Christ according to the spirit, of which Isaac is the image”²⁶.

Therefore, Origen believes that the ram prefigures the bodily passion, whereas Isaac prefigures the immortality of the soul. He considers that this is also the reason why Isaac is not sacrificed; only the ram dies on the altar, just as Christ sacrifices His body on the cross. Along the same line of interpretation, Saint Cyril of Alexandria identifies Isaac as the divine Logos and the ram as Christ’s human nature²⁷.

Origen highlights on various occasions that Isaac is a type of Christ. His wish to establish a relationship as firm as possible between type and antitype made him force the interpretation of certain details of the sacrifice. He granted Isaac sacerdotal prerogatives, motivating his interpretation by saying that, if he had not been a priest, he could not have participated, together with his father, to the sacrifice ritual by carrying the wood for sacrifice. Thus, Isaac resembles the One he prefigures, except that he wasn’t a priest forever, like the Lord, after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110, 4)²⁸. Another element of interpretation which supports the typology is the three days that Abraham travelled up to Mount Moriah. Origen sees them as a prefiguration of the three days the Lord spent in the tomb until He raised from the dead on the third day²⁹.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria believes that the history of the sacrifice of Isaac represents, through all its details, “foreshadowing the mystery of our Savior”³⁰. According to him, the association between Isaac and Jesus

²⁶ ORIGEN, *Homilies in Genesis*, p. 145.

²⁷ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Homilae Paschales*, PG 77, 5.

²⁸ ORIGEN, *Homilies in Genesis*, pp. 140-141.

²⁹ ORIGEN, *Homilies in Genesis*, p. 140. This perspective is taken up by several Fathers, among whom Caesarius of Arles. He claims that the third day of the journey prefigures the resurrection, as it was then that the Lord revealed Himself to Abraham. CAESARIUS OF ARLES, *Sermon*, pp. 16-17.

³⁰ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Glafire. Despre Avraam și Isaac* [Glaphyra. On Abraham and Isaac], coll. *Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești* [The Fathers of the Church], vol. 39, transl. by Dumitru Stăniloae, the publishing house of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1992, p. 90.

Christ is made following the pattern of the type-antitype relationship: the sacrifice of the son of Abraham is seen as a prefiguration of the saving sacrifice on Golgotha.

“That is, Isaac’s sacrifice is seen as a type of the Savior Christ’s sacrifice. And Isaac is one begotten, but also Christ is the Only Begotten. Isaac carries the sacrificial wood on his back, and Christ carries the cross. One ascends Mount Moriah, Christ Jesus ascends the road to Golgotha. Isaac was to be sacrificed without guilt, and so was the Savior crucified without sin. And everyone accepts their own sacrifice”³¹.

The hierarch of Alexandria believes that the following elements characterise the typological connection between the two: ■ Isaac is the only-begotten son (born out of a promise) and Jesus is the only-begotten Son, born of the Father before all ages; ■ Isaac carries the wood necessary to perform the sacrifice, Jesus carries the cross on His back, up to the place of the Crucifixion; ■ the place of sacrifice is somewhere high – Mount Moriah and the Golgotha Hill; ■ the sacrifice of the two didn’t entail in any way a personal sin, as they were both innocent; ■ the sacrifice is accepted by each of them.

In another text, Saint Cyril identifies a new typological element, about which other Fathers also wrote, namely the ram. He prefigures Christ, but only from a certain perspective:

“Isaac escaped both death and suffering. And a God-given ram goes up to the sacrifice. And the Word that shone from the being of God and the Father was in His temple, that is, in the one taken from the Virgin and nailed to the wood. But being like an impassive and immortal God, he was out of death and passion. But it ascends in a fragrant odor to God and the Father through His body, which He says He has taken from the Father”³².

In the view of the exegete of Alexandria, the ram prefigures the bodily death of the Son of God. As He was the true God, the Word was immortal and eternal, but through the body He took from the Virgin, He could

³¹ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Despre Avraam și Isaac* [On Abraham and Isaac], p. 92.

³² St. Cyril of ALEXANDRIA, *Despre Avraam și Isaac* [On Abraham and Isaac], p. 94.

complete the sacrifice, dying for the sins of mankind. Therefore, the ram is a type of Christ under the conditions.

We can also notice that, besides the main typology (focusing on Isaac and Christ), patristic literature developed an auxiliary typology, which refers to Christ. Such an example is given by Saint Cyril of Alexandria, who considers that the servants who accompanied Abraham are

“a model of the two peoples who have been called into slavery as a result of the law, the two peoples of Israel and Judah, I mean. [...] And the fact that the two servants followed them until the third day and they were not allowed to ascend to the high and holy land, but were more vigorously commanded to sit there with the donkey, shows how the two peoples followed God. until the third time, that is, until the last, in which Christ appeared to us”³³.

In this case, we are faced with an indirect reference to messianic times. Most likely, this reference is made in relation to the main typology. Oftentimes, the Fathers make such associations to emphasise even more the type-antitype relationship between the son of the patriarch and the Son of God and to underscore once more the extent of the sacrifice of our Saviour, aimed not only at the chosen people, but at the entire humankind. The servants sitting next to the ass, “the image of ultimate irrationality”, show the hardness of Israel, which, according to Saint Paul, was only partial (Rom 11, 20). Nonetheless, Israel will be given once again the possibility to believe in Christ at the end of time³⁴.

Another complementary association is provided by their supernatural births. Isaac was born out of an old, sterile mother, who, according to the law of nature, could no longer give birth to a child. Jesus Christ was born out of a Virgin, free of the temptation of wedlock, who conceived of the Holy Spirit, without the contribution of a man. These two miraculous events reinforce the typology through the fact that they both received the news of the miraculous birth in a theophanic framework: God reveals Himself to Abraham at Mamre and announces the birth to Sarah and Angel Gabriel reveals himself to Virgin Mary in Nazareth. We could therefore say that Sarah, as a mother, prefigures Virgin Mary.

³³ ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Despre Avraam și Isaac* [On Abraham and Isaac], p. 92.

³⁴ Edward KESSLER, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 93.

IV. Conclusions

The Church Fathers interpret the sacrifice of Isaac from a typological/Christological perspective. Their exegesis is based especially on a text from the New Testament, which, in their opinion, refers directly to this event. The taking up of the prefigurative character of the sacrifice by our Saviour Jesus Christ is an indisputable argument for a typological interpretation. For some contemporary biblical scholars, the supposed allusion God makes to the episode on Mount Moriah during His great Eucharistic oration in the fourth Gospel (chap. 6) is not enough to generate such an interpretation. They believe that the typological nature of the sacrifice is questionable. However, the patristic perspective is not confined to a logic based on literal arguments. Most of the time, they take up the experience of the Church and the way in which Christian communities relate to scriptural events before interpreting the holy text. The two ways of interpretation (patristic and critical) resort to different reference points when tackling the sacrifice of Isaac. It is therefore only natural that the outcomes should not always be consonant.

In the view of the Fathers, the sacrifice of Isaac contains a lot of elements which entail and support a typological / Christological interpretation. They are their being sons, the father's love, the carrying of the wood on their back, the sacrifice of an innocent and the ram. The list is much larger, as the tendency of the Fathers to identify any element that might consolidate the typological relationship between Isaac and Jesus was obvious. In this respect, the Fathers sometimes force the text and introduce in their exegetic act details which are not present in the scriptural narration of the event. These do not alter in any way the exegesis of the Church Fathers. On the contrary, they provide new testimonies of the way in which Christian Communities approached the Holy Scripture.

In the future, it would be desirable to research the perception of the sacrifice of Isaac in early Christian art and in Byzantine art, which, oftentimes, presents patristic lines of interpretation.

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