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## **Abraham's Sacrifice: Gerhard von Rad's Interpretation of Gen 22**

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of Heilsgeschichte, Gerhard von Rad saw clearly that Genesis 22 deals with the possible annihilation of the covenant promise. A fresh approach to Genesis corroborates this view and demonstrates that innerbiblical exegesis has shaped the message of Genesis 22.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430806200305>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-4520>

Journal Article

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Schmid, Konrad (2008). Abraham's Sacrifice: Gerhard von Rad's Interpretation of Gen 22. Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology, 62(3):268-276.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/002096430806200305>

## **Abraham's Sacrifice: Gerhard von Rad's Interpretation of Gen 22**

Konrad Schmid

Gerhard von Rad has written many books and articles in his academic life and he has commented on nearly every biblical text. What is especially noteworthy about his interpretation of Genesis 22, the story which is commonly known as “The sacrifice of Isaac” or “The Binding of Isaac”? Furthermore, many of von Rad’s literary or historical judgments about this text are obsolete by today, as the assumption of an Elohist work to which Genesis 22 should belong to, no longer proves to be a feasible hypothesis. Nevertheless: His careful reading of Gen 22 still gives clues, that are indispensable for an accurate understanding of that story, clues that are not always provided in the same quality and density by the many articles and books on Gen 22 having appeared since von Rad’s death in 1971. The following observations and interpretations are especially relying on von Rads treatment of Genesis 22 in his commentary on Genesis and in his little booklet “Das Opfer des Abraham” which was published in the year of his death, 1971.<sup>1</sup> I will develop my case in three steps: 1. The long shadow of Hermann Gunkel’s interpretation of Genesis 22, 2. Gerhard von Rad’s main observations on Genesis 22, 3. Recent corroborations of Gerhard von Rad’s interpretive approach to Genesis 22.

A preliminary note, however, is in order. Genesis 22 is a highly controversial text and there are many hermeneutical possible approaches to it. Therefore, some restrictions

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A commentary*. Translation by John H. Marks, London: SCM 1972; idem, *Das Opfer des Abraham*, Kaiser Traktate 6, München: Kaiser 1971.

apply to the following considerations. It will not deal with *non*-historical approaches to the text. To be sure, such approaches are possible and necessary, but they need to be bracketed in for the purpose of this paper. Genesis 22 shall not be praised, criticized or blamed for its assumed or given lack of morality. Therefore, my paper has a limited scope in order to understand this text as a literary expression of specific religiously interpreted experiences of the past.

## I.

A glance at the discussion on Genesis 22 before von Rad is necessary because otherwise it is not possible to understand the background he is arguing against. I must be very brief here and just pick out the very famous interpretation of Genesis 22 by Hermann Gunkel in his 1901 commentary on Genesis<sup>2</sup> on which von Rad explicitly draws several times. As it is well known, Hermann Gunkel was especially interested in the oral prehistory behind the legends in Genesis which are the main constituents of the book. His commentary opens with the statement: The book of “Genesis [i]s a [c]ollection of [l]egends.”<sup>3</sup>

As for Genesis 22, Gunkel assumed a pre-israelite etiology being behind that story that favours animal sacrifices over against human sacrifices. The origins of Genesis 22 lie in

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<sup>2</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. Foreword by Ernest W. Nicholson, Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1997, 233-240.

<sup>3</sup> *Gunkel, Genesis*, vii.

a former oral tale which explained why God does not want human sacrifice, but animal sacrifice.

The look at the religious historical background of Genesis 22 – assumed by Gunkel – thus enabled the reader to turn the cruel story about God who wants Abraham to kill his son into a critical dismissal of human sacrifices. This interpretation which Gunkel himself *notabene* very explicitly only held to be true for the prehistory of Genesis 22, not for the present text itself, is still very widespread in theology and church – now however being applied to the story itself. According to this approach, Genesis 22 actually is a human, not an inhuman story. Ironically, the biblical text got in this explanation a – so to speak – “biblical” quality only by referring to its *pre*-biblical origins. As for the interpretation of the current text of Genesis 22, Gunkel held that the author “wants to portray a religious ideal through Abraham.”<sup>4</sup>

Some decades later, von Rad’s commentary on Genesis saw very clearly even if Gunkel’s religious historical reconstruction is correct (and von Rad agreed here with Gunkel) that this reconstruction does not help in understanding the present story in Genesis 22. It concerns its prehistory, but neither its content nor its theological profile. Gunkel, by the way, would probably have completely agreed to that.

It is noteworthy in this respect, that the present story contains no critique whatsoever on Abraham’s plan to sacrifice his son. To the contrary, Abraham is praised for being ready to do so. Additionally, it is quite clear that the story in Genesis 22 itself, from the outset, has no doubts that sacrifices are animal sacrifices: Isaac asks his father on the journey in verse 7: ‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-

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<sup>4</sup> *Gunkel, Genesis, 237.*

offering?’ Accordingly, also within the narrative, it is clear, sacrifices need *animals* to sacrifice. Gunkel’s determination of the prehistory of Genesis 22 is therefore hardly reflected in the biblical text itself. Genesis 22 is about something different. What is its topic, according to von Rad?

## II.

Gerhard von Rad saw two points very clearly on Genesis 22. First, he stressed that the story would not work with *any* child. It relies especially on Isaac, and second – nevertheless, and only at first sight a little bit irritating – Genesis 22 is actually not a story about *Isaac*, it is a story about *Abraham*. Therefore, his small booklet on Genesis 22 bears the title “*Abraham’s* sacrifice”, and not “Sacrificing Isaac” or the like. Both points need some explanation which, however, closely relate one to another. Von Rad wrote in the epilogue to his exegesis on Genesis 22 in the Genesis commentary: “Above all, one must consider Isaac, who is much more than simply a ‘foil’ for Abraham, i.e., a more or less accidental object on which his obedience is to be proved. Isaac is the child of the promise. In him every saving thing that God has promised to do is invested and guaranteed. The point here is not a natural gift, not even the highest, but rather the disappearance from Abraham’s life of the whole promise. ... There is thus considerable religious experience behind these nineteen verses: that Yahweh often seems to contradict himself, that he appears to want to remove the salvation begun by himself from history. ... One further thing may be mentioned: in this text God confronts Abraham with the question whether he could give up God’s gift of promise. ... God

therefore poses before Abraham the question whether he really understands the gift of promise as a pure gift. ... [W]hen Israel read and related this story in later times it could only see itself represented by Isaac, i.e., laid on Yahweh's altar, given back to him, then given life again by him alone. That is to say, it could base its existence in history not on its own legal titles as other nations did, but only on the will of Him who in the freedom of his grace permitted Isaac to live."<sup>5</sup> Thus, von Rad interprets Genesis 22 from the outset in light of the preceding Abraham story: Since Genesis 12, Abraham got promises from God, and finally, in Genesis 21, his heir, Isaac is born. And immediately after Genesis 21, literarily spoken, just one chapter later, God's gift to Abraham, his son Isaac shall be returned to God himself. Therefore, Abraham has not only to sacrifice his son, but also he has to give back all the promises God has given to him, as they are fully dependent upon the survival of Isaac.

Therefore, the story is not about child sacrifice in general, but it is on annihilating promise by sacrificing the only heir Abraham got. It is a not a story about the merely passive Isaac, but it is about Abraham who has to struggle with the fact that God is taking from him everything he formerly has given to him. In von Rad's own words: "Therefore, unfortunately, one can only answer all plaintive scruples about this narrative by saying that it concerns something more frightful than child sacrifice. It has to do with a road out into Godforsakenness, a road on which Abraham does not know that God is only testing him".<sup>6</sup> As it will become clear from the next paragraph of this paper, this exegesis is fully legitimate.

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<sup>5</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 239-40.

<sup>6</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 244.

Ironically or unfortunately, von Rad adheres in his commentary to specific literary historic decisions concerning Genesis 22 which in fact contradict this interpretation. He opens his commentary on Genesis 22 with the statement: “This narrative too, the most perfectly formed and polished of all the patriarchal stories, has only a very loose connection with the preceding. One can recognize from this that it existed a long time independently before it found its place in the Elohist’s great narrative work.”<sup>7</sup> Von Rad sticks completely to the documentary hypothesis, therefore, Genesis 22 is an E-text (although he has to struggle with fact that Genesis 22 not only uses Elohim [V. 8.9.12.13], but in V. 11.14 also the tetragrammaton). But, according to von Rad and others, E had not invented this text, but collected and recorded a former version of it in his great narrative work. Formerly, Genesis 22 was an entity unto its own.

Why do these historical statements contradict his theological exegesis of the text? In his theological interpretation of Genesis 22, von Rad points out that the *context* of the Abraham stories is presupposed: Isaac is not just Abraham’s child as every father’s child. Instead, he is the child of promise, which becomes only clear if one reads Gen 22 in the context of the stories in chapters 12-21. In his literary historical introduction, however, von Rad states that Genesis 22 once was an *independent* story. So one wonders how Genesis 22 might work as a text without context. For von Rad the answer was clear: Every reader of an independent story on Abraham’s sacrifice would have at least some basic *knowledge* of the whole Abraham tradition. Genesis 22, even as an independent text, is conceptually embedded in the Abraham tradition. Still according to von Rad, the reader even would know that the patriarchal story is the prologue to a

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<sup>7</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, 233.

much broader theological history encompassing the narrative bow from creation to the conquest of the land.

The reason for this presupposition can be found in the early datation of the so-called short historical creed (“das kleine geschichtliche Credo”), as for example found in Deuteronomy 26, by von Rad in his study on the form-critical problem of the Hexateuch from the year 1938.<sup>8</sup> Here, von Rad argues, that the notion of a salvation history that masters the narrative organization of the Hexateuch is a very old one, it goes back to the very roots of ancient Israelite religion.

Today, this presupposition holds no longer true, as many studies on the historical creed have shown.<sup>9</sup> The master narrative in the Hexateuch is not the presupposition but the consequence of the joining together its different themes. And the historical creed is not an early short form of that master narrative, but it is a later summary thereof. Therefore,

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<sup>8</sup> Gerhard von Rad, “Das formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuch (1938),” in idem, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, ed. Rudolf Smend, TB 8; München: Chr. Kaiser, 1971, 4th ed., 9-86. English translation: “The Form Critical Problem of the Hexateuch” in idem, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, Translated by E.W. Trueman Dickens; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd Ltd., 1966, reprinted: London: SCM Press, 1984, 1-78.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Christian Gertz, “Die Stellung des kleinen geschichtlichen Credo in der Redaktionsgeschichte von Deuteronomium und Pentateuch,” in: Reinhard G. Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann (eds.), *Liebe und Gebot. Studien zum Deuteronomium. Festschrift Lothar Perlitt*, FRLANT 190, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000, 30–45.



today, the literary consequences need to be drawn that result from von Rads theological interpretation of Genesis 22. And these consequences are the following: Genesis 22 cannot be a very old text. Obviously, Genesis 22 is a not a formerly independent source text, but a redactional text which literarily presupposes the context of, at least, the Abraham stories in Genesis 12-21 and the promises therein.

### III.

How has recent exegesis of Genesis 22 profited from von Rad's insights, how could it corroborate, and of course also modify, correct and develop his approach to this text?

To be sure, from a narratological point of view it is not a very bold statement to claim that Genesis 22 needs to be understood from its literary context. This is already made clear by the first verse of the story which states: *wyhy 'hr hdbrym h'lh* "and it happened after these things.". Obviously, this is not the beginning of an independent narrative.

Diachronically, it is not possible to eliminate these opening words in 22:1 from the story by assigning them to a later textual layer, because then Genesis 22 would begin with a *w – x – qatal* sentence in 22:1a *w'lhym nsh 'brhm* "and God tested Abraham."

Syntactically, this is not a beginning of a story.<sup>10</sup> From observations on the textual surface, it is therefore clear as well: Genesis 22 is a continuation of its preceding context.

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<sup>10</sup> Ina Willi-Plein, "Die Versuchung steht am Schluß," *TZ* 48 (1992), 100–108, 102; see also Timo Veijola, "Das Opfer des Abraham – Paradigma des Glaubens aus dem nachexilischen Zeitalter," *ZTK* 85 (1988), 129–164, 139.

A look into the specific formulations of the narrative itself can further corroborate this view. Genesis 22 draws heavily on formulations from the preceding chapters of the Abraham story in Genesis. The command to go to the Land Moriah in 22:2 is exactly formulated as the initial migration command to Abraham in Gen 12:1. One can also point to the command to Abraham to lift his eyes in 22:3 and 22:13 who might be reminiscent of the same wording in Genesis 13:14. Especially noteworthy are, however, the connections from Genesis 22 back to Genesis 21. They are so close that some biblical scholars have termed these two stories as twin stories.<sup>11</sup> It may be sufficient to point out the common main story line: Both sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac are encountering a life threatening danger, and both of them are rescued by an angel. There is also a set of close literary connections in terms of common vocabulary between Genesis 21 and 22.

Accordingly, it is clear not only by the opening verse in Genesis 22:1, but also by the whole story itself that it connects closely to the preceding Abraham story, by alluding

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<sup>11</sup> Irmtraud Fischer, “Möglichkeiten und Grenzen historisch-kritischer Exegese: Die “Opferung” der beiden Söhne Abrahams. Gen 21 und 22 im Kontext,” in: A. Franz (ed.), *Streit am Tisch des Wortes? Zur Deutung und Bedeutung des Alten Testaments und seiner Verwendung in der Liturgie*, PiLi 8, St. Ottilien: EOS, 1997, 17–36: 29; see also Otto Kaiser, “Die Bindung Isaaks. Untersuchungen zur Eigenart und Bedeutung von Genesis 22,” in: idem, *Zwischen Athen und Jerusalem. Studien zur griechischen und biblischen Theologie, ihrer Eigenart und ihrem Verhältnis*, BZAW 320, Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2003, 199–224: 209–10 (21:3/22:2; 21:14a/22:3a; 21:17a/22:11a; 21:17b/22:11b; 21:19/22:13; 21:21a/22:19b).

especially to Gen 12 and 21. So there is clear exegetical evidence for the basic correctness of von Rads theological (not historical) interpretation of Genesis 22. It deals with the problem of a fundamentally endangered promise. Can Israel survive as a people?

Some might wonder why such a contextual reading of Genesis 22 might have to be especially established. Is it not *obvious* to read biblical stories in context? Again, this necessity has to do with the long shadow of Gunkel: Gunkel splitted up the book of Genesis into individual stories which were supposed to have existed independently from each other. And at least in German speaking scholarship, the influence of that position is – consciously or unconsciously – still given.

If it is correct that Genesis 22 presupposes and reflects on the Abraham story in Genesis 12-21, if it is correct, that Genesis 22 is reminiscent of the promise texts in Genesis 12:1-3 and 13:14-17, then this leads quite clearly into the Persian period as the historical origin of Genesis 22. Of course, von Rad could never have imagined such a late date for Genesis 22, but today, this is no longer a revolutionary thesis, as especially the approaches of Timo Veijola, Georg Steins, Otto Kaiser, and others show.<sup>12</sup>

And indeed, the decrease of the population was an issue in Persian Period Judah, as for example the study of Charles Carter has made clear: His estimation is that “the population of the province [sc. Yehud] in the Persian period was about one-third of that

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<sup>12</sup> See Veijola, “Das Opfer des Abraham; ” Georg Steins, *Die “Bindung Isaaks” im Kanon (Gen 22). Grundlagen und Programm einer kanonisch-intertextuellen Lektüre*, Herders Biblische Studien 20, Freiburg: Herder, 1999; Kaiser, “Bindung.”

in the previous period.”<sup>13</sup> So, at that time, the promises of increase of the population given in the Genesis tradition were indeed in a critical status and demanded some theological reflection which the story of Abraham’s sacrifice provided: Abraham, who got God’s sincerest promises, is he also able to give these promises back to God? Is he willing to accept God’s freedom in dealing with his promises?

It is possible to elaborate further on on this, because Genesis 22, as especially the monograph by Georg Steins has shown, exhibits a large degree of intertextual relationships with other pieces from the Hebrew Bible. These relationships can be evaluated in terms of innerbiblical exegesis, and they provide further evidence for the fundamental correctness of von Rads approach: Gen 22 is a story about endangered promises, about the possibility of promises being annihilated.

First, it is fair to assume that Genesis 22, with its command to sacrifice Isaac, is aware of the deuteronomic polemics against child sacrifices, as expressed especially in Deut 18:10; 2Kgs 16:2; 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; Jer 7:31; 19:5; 32:35. The question cannot be treated here whether these polemical texts really hint at a practice of child sacrifice in ancient Israel (although I am rather hesitant about that),<sup>14</sup> but they exist as statements.

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<sup>13</sup> Charles E. Carter, *The Emergence of Yehud in the Persian Period. A Social and Demographic Study*, JSOT.S 294, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999, 247.

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion in Thomas Römer, “Le sacrifice humain en Juda et Israël au premier millénaire avant notre ère,” *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 1 (1999), 17–26; Ed Noort, “Genesis 22: Human Sacrifice and Theology in the Hebrew Bible,” in: idem and Eibert Tigchelaar (eds.), *The Sacrifice of Isaac. The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations*, Themes in Biblical Narrative. Jewish and Christian Traditions 4, Leiden

The fact that Genesis 22 is acquainted with deuteronomistic theology (and therefore certainly is post-deuteronomistic), is furthermore obvious from the fact that Abraham needs to travel to a special place to do the sacrifice: Genesis 22 knows and respects the claim for cult-centralization from Deuteronomy 12.

Why did Genesis 22, which certainly is a fictitious text, choose the specific topic of child sacrifice as test case for Abraham? The testing of Abraham is extreme and therefore it is pictured in the most outrageous way that can be imagined. To sacrifice a child, this is not only the most detestable action for Abraham, but – as the reader of the Bible, and especially of the just mentioned deuteronomistic passages knows – also for God. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the accusation of child sacrifice in 2Reg 17:17 and 21:6 serves as an explanation for the downfall and exile of Israel and Judah. Therefore, the polemics against child sacrifice already in their deuteronomistic context stand in a context which deals with the problem of annihilation of promise. If in Genesis 22 God asks from Abraham to sacrifice his son, God does not only ask Abraham to annihilate the promise of increase given to him, but he asks him to do so with an action that itself leads to the annihilation of promise, as 2Kgs 17 and 21 make clear.

Second, there are some hints, that Genesis 22 receives and reworks the Priestly texts concerning the sacrificial cult in Leviticus 8-9. This is, however, a matter of debate in recent scholarship, as some biblical scholars held the vocabulary concerning the sacrifice in Genesis 22 just to be due to the technical procedure itself, and not to be

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et al.: Brill, 2002, 1–20, 6–14; Karin Finsterbusch, Armin Lange, K.F. Diethard Römheld, in association with Lance Lazar (eds.), *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*. Leiden et al. Brill, 2006.

reminiscent of Leviticus 8-9. On the other hand, it is quite striking, that there are no other instances in the Bible beside Genesis 22 and Leviticus 8-9 where the combination of a burnt offering (*‘lh*), a ram and an appearance of God are combined.<sup>15</sup> Given the probable Persian period origin of Genesis 22, it is only to be expected that the sacrifice of Abraham’s son is described in terms of the current theology, namely that of the Priestly texts.

But in which way is Priestly theology reflected in Genesis 22? Probably, this is done in an ambiguous way: On the one hand, Abraham’s sacrifice prefigures the sacrificial cult established later on Mount Sinai. Genesis 22 secures the validity and meaningfulness of the sacrificial cult in hard times. On the other hand, Genesis 22 also – to a certain extent – relativizes the sacrifices: The most important aspect is not the sacrificial cult itself, but Abraham’s obedience, Abraham’s faith, or, as Gen 22:12 puts it: Abraham’s fear of God. The sacrificial cult is by no means a guarantee for Israel to find salvation. God is free to act with Israel how *he* wants do it, and Israel has to respect that. Not the cult, but the fear of God is the main element of Israel’s worship.

Third, one can ask whether Gen 22 is also reminiscent of Chronicles, especially 2 Chronicles 3, although such an assumption will be more disputed. It has always been supposed that the location of Genesis 22 in Moriah and the mentioning of the building of Solomon’s temple on Mount Moriah according to 2Chronicles 3:1 must have something to do with each other. The text in 2Chronicles 3:1 reads as follows: “Solomon began to build the house of Yhwh in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where ‘Yhwh’ had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had designated, on the

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<sup>15</sup> See Steins, *Bindung*, 191–202.

threshing-floor of Ornan the Jebusite.” Traditionally, the connection between Genesis 22 and 2Chronicles 3 has been evaluated in terms of clarifying the meaning of “Moriah” in Genesis 22: It is a hidden hint to Jerusalem. This is, in all probability, correct. But it was difficult for traditional scholarship to assume that Genesis 22, a classical “Elohistic” text, should be literarily dependent on Chronicles. Therefore, scholars reckoned with a common Moriah tradition or other *ad hoc* theories to hold the pre-Chronistic origin of Genesis 22. But this is not very compelling. On the contrary, it is quite probable that Genesis 22 presupposes Chronicles, but Chronicles does not yet know Genesis 22. The reason for determining the literary relationship in this way is provided by the text in 2Chronicles 3 itself: Is it really convincing to assume that *if* 2Chronicles 3 would have known the story of Abraham’s sacrifice that it explains the history of Moriah by hinting at the appearance of God to David which is reported in 1Chronicles 21?<sup>16</sup> Would the author of 2Chronicles 3 really have missed the opportunity to mention Abrahams test by God at this place if he knew this story?

If it therefore seems to be more likely to determine Genesis 22 as a reinterpretation of 2Chronicles 3, it is possible to see how Genesis 22 is replacing the mythic foundation of Israel over against the Chronicler’s notion. While Chronicles see the mythic foundation of Israel in the period of David and Solomon, especially in the erection of Solomon’s temple, Genesis 22 obviously held Abraham’s passing of the divine test on Moriah as the main foundational element in Israel’s history or prehistory. Israel’s existence is not

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<sup>16</sup> For 1Chr 21 see John Van Seters, “The Chronicler’s Account of Solomon’s Temple-Building: A Continuity Theme,” in: M. Patrick Graham et al. (eds.), *The Chronicler as Historian*, JSOT.S 238, Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1997, 283–300.

based upon the election of David and Solomon, it is not based upon the dynasty or the temple, but on Abraham's fear of God.

#### IV.

To sum up: Gerhard von Rad saw most clearly that Genesis 22 is a text that cannot be understood apart from its promise context of the Abraham stories. Theologically, Genesis 22 deals with the problem of annihilation of promise, a topic apparently triggered by seemingly according experiences in the Persian Period. Doing so, Genesis 22 makes heavy use of innerbiblical exegesis, first, in respect to Genesis 12-21 and second in respect to deuteronomistic, priestly and chronistic texts.<sup>17</sup> What is the legacy of von Rad's interpretation? Alluding to a famous self-characterization of his, one could say: He was able to read biblical texts, and he wanted to teach others to read biblical texts.

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<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed argumentation on these innerbiblical reception processes see Konrad Schmid, "Die Rückgabe der Verheißungsgabe. Der ‚heilsgeschichtliche‘ Sinn von Genesis 22 im Horizont innerbiblischer Exegese," in: Markus Witte (ed.), *Gott und Mensch im Dialog, Festschrift Otto Kaiser*, BZAW 345/I, Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2004, 271–300.