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Fulfilling the Law in the Brome *Abraham and Isaac*

Edgar Schell

Preserving the historical integrity of biblical types is essential to a carefully worked out typological scheme, for, as St Augustine has pointed out, unless we imagine the type realistically, unless we understand that what is said to have happened really did happen just as it is narrated, we 'seek to build as it were in the air'.¹ A moment in the York play of the Parchmentmakers and Bookbinders, perhaps the simplest of the six plays on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, offers a clear and contained example of how Corpus Christi plays contrive to focus precisely both historically limited and prophetic meanings. When they come to the place of sacrifice, Abraham tells Isaac that 'this wode behoues the bere/ Til thou come high uppon yone hill,'² thus bringing together both literal and prophetic senses of the word 'behoues'. It is proper for Isaac to carry the wood in the somewhat self-conscious sense that the image of Isaac bearing the wood was at the imaginative center of the typological complex of the Abraham and Isaac story, particularly in its dramatic form. His prophetic function thus requires that he do it. But it is also proper in another way that grows out of the peculiar relationship between Abraham and Isaac created by the York play and that grounds the prophetic sense in reality. Isaac's age is not mentioned in the biblical account of the sacrifice but all of the plays except York treat him as a young child.³ In York, however, following a tradition that goes back ultimately to Josephus,⁴ he is 'thyrt yere and more sumdele', so close to the age of Jesus at the time of the crucifixion, and Abraham is aware from the first, even before the sacrifice has been ordained, that his own physical powers have declined and that he must now rely on Isaac's strength. 'Now is he wight hymselfe to welde', Abraham says of Isaac, 'and fra me is all wightnes wente,/ Therefore sall he be my beelde' (57-59). So it behooves Isaac to bear the wood simply because Abraham can no longer bear it, just as it will later behoove Abraham to bind Isaac, providing another figure of the Passion, because, as Isaac explains,

I know myselfe be cours of kynde
My flesshe for dede will be dredande.
I am ferde that ye sall fynde
My force youre forwarde to withstande,
Therefore is beste that ye me bynde
In bandis faste, booth fute and hande,
Nowe whils I am in myght and mynde
So shall ye saffely make offerande . . .

(209-16)

Such details, at once literal and prophetic, serve to universalize the remote and puzzling story of the sacrifice, and so make it intelligible. And when they are combined with the antitype to which they refer they begin to make the story usable as well. 'The juxtaposition of type and antitype', D. W. Robertson has remarked, 'implies tropology'.⁵ Martin Stevens draws out the tropological implications of setting the sacrifice and the Passion side by side:

. . . the role of Abraham allows us inferentially to understand the emotional meaning of the sacrifice made by the father as well as the son. The Passion will never allow us that private insight into God the Father. The type scene has humanized and grounded that grief for us, so that it remains in our consciousness throughout. The type scene also prepares us for a deeper understanding of the antitype. It elevates the motivation of self sacrifice, from the mere impulse to obey, to the larger purpose of making a gift of oneself for the benefit of the other. (In that sense, Jesus' act is an exemplary act for grown men; Isaac's is an exemplary act for children.) Moreover, the antitype converts the self-sacrifice from an act of sheer pathos to one of tragic fulfillment and eventual comic resolution. With Isaac we anticipate death as final; with Jesus, we see it as a necessary step in the journey to Resurrection. Finally the antitype elevates the sacrifice from the arbitrary to the purposeful.⁶

But the uses of typology in this sense are somewhat distant from the particular treatment of the Abraham and Isaac story in any particular play. Stevens is here

ostensibly talking about the N-Town 'Abraham and Isaac', but what he says does not speak to the peculiar features of that play – its almost unique interest in categorical relationships, for example. His subject, indeed the subject of most typological readings of the Abraham and Isaac plays, is really the generalized story of the sacrifice related to a generalized Passion. When the plays are considered individually, however, in all their wonderful variety, their uses often turn out to be more complex and pointed.

For many readers the typology of the sacrifice has tended to dominate the plays to the detriment of both usable history and of drama itself. Noting that the Chester Expositor identifies Abraham as a type of God the Father, one reader, for example, concludes about the character of Abraham in general that, 'since he is a type of God the Father he can feel no conflict nor judge the situation as a tragic dilemma', though the Abraham in the play from Brome Manor, some fifteen lines before God retracts his command, cries out,

I may not fyndygh in my harte to smygh.
My hart wyll not now thertoo,
3yt fayn I woold warke my Lordys wyll;
But this 3owng innoſent lygh so ſtyll,
I may not fyndygh in my hart hym to kyll.
O Fader of Heuyn! what ſchall I doo?

(300-05)⁷

And another reader asserts that 'Abraham, as a type of God, necessarily offers his sacrifice willingly, out of faith and love', though the Towneley Abraham declares, 'To slo hym thus, I thynk grete syn . . . he will never out of my mynd', and he can bring himself to fulfill the command only by banishing from his mind what he has been called on to do.⁸ The truth is that the story of the sacrifice is far too capacious and the system of typological prophecy far too supple to be bent to a single mold. We seem to have grown so remote from the living faith of the middle ages that we are sometimes tempted to treat it as the brittle superstition of a primitive tribe, regularly and mechanically observed, rather than as a system of belief held by mature, intelligent and sophisticated artists.

One could scarcely find two brief plays telling the same story within the same framework of belief that are more different than the Abrahams of Brome Manor and Towneley. I have set out my reading of the Towneley play elsewhere and in the

course of it badly misrepresented the Brome play,⁹ so I want here to make amends by looking carefully at Brome's use of its extensive set of typological references and in particular at how it makes Isaac's role as a type of Christ usable. That is to say, I want to look at its peculiarly dramatic development of the tropology of the sacrifice.

The plays from the Towneley manuscript and Brome Manor share one important feature: they are the only plays on the sacrifice in which God explains why he will order Abraham to kill Isaac. Brome's reasons are first to 'asay/ Wethere that he be stedfast or noo', and second, which I take to be an explanation of 'steadfast', to 'asay now hys good wyll./ Whether he lovyth better hys chyld or me' (35-36, 43-4). The latter was St Basil's understanding of the purpose of the sacrifice,¹⁰ so it is not so easily dismissed, though it is certainly complicated by God's confidence that everyone will find in Abraham an example of faithful obedience.

We can see in the series of prayers Abraham makes at the beginning of the play why God might pose that test, for Abraham's gratitude to God for all his blessings and in particular for Isaac, comes to focus at last in a petition that God will keep Isaac 'both nygth and day/ That neuer dessese nor noo fray/ Cume to my chyld in noo place' (23-25). It is precisely that feeling that one's children ought to be kept safe from the rhythms of change, as natural as such hopes may be, that the Doctor who draws out the moral significance of the Brome play speaks to. Asking rhetorically whether anyone in the audience would complain about or resist an 'angell [who] commawndyd zow zowre chyld to slayn', he concludes that there are surely 'thre ore a fowr or moo', and he turns to indict in particular 'women that wepe so sorowfully/ Whan that hyr chyldryn dey them froo,/ As nater woll, and kynd;/ Yt ys but folly', he explains 'to groche azens God or to greve zow;/ For ze schall neuer se hym myschevyd' (443-54). And thus, so it would seem, it ought to be folly for Abraham to expect that Isaac could be kept free from all 'dessese' and 'fray'. As the Brome play constructs the sacrifice, then, God's command that Abraham kill Isaac just at the moment that Abraham is most filled with love for him simply stages mythologically a fact that life itself would inevitably bring him to confront: that Isaac, like everyone, lives inescapably on a knife's edge between security and peril; that is to say, that inescapably, in the natural course of things, Isaac's life can only be surrendered to the will of God.

David Mills has suggested that the moral epilogue to the Brome play may owe something to Origen's application of the story of the sacrifice to parents, whom he urges to acquire patience when tragedy strikes their children by bringing in 'Abraham as an example for [yourself] and set his magnanimity before [your]

eyes'.¹¹ Origen's reading of the story of the sacrifice may indeed have suggested more than the moral epilogue. There is what we might be tempted to call a pointed cruelty about the beginning of the Brome play quite unlike any of the others. Abraham's prayer that Isaac be kept safe is the ironic cue, theatrically and spiritually, for God to decide to test Abraham by ordering him to kill Isaac, and when Abraham, not knowing God's intention, prays that God will reveal to him 'what maner best' would most please him in sacrifice, that is the bitterly ironic cue for the angel to enter and announce that Isaac is to be the beast. It is just that quality of pointed cruelty in the story of the sacrifice in Genesis that catches Origen's attention. 'Behold to what an extent the test is heaped up', he says, having noted how Abraham's love for Isaac is deliberately teased to the surface of Abraham's mind by the use of 'dear and sweet appellations repeated frequently' so that, 'by awakening memories of love the paternal right hand might be slowed in slaying his son and the total warfare of flesh might fight against the faith of the soul'. Why is Abraham told to take Isaac to a mountaintop and kill him there? And why, if Isaac must be sacrificed in that spot, should God not have waited to order the sacrifice until they arrived? Origen's answer is so that 'while he is walking, while he is making the journey, throughout the whole trip he might be torn to pieces with his thoughts, that hence he might be tormented by the oppressing command, hence he might be tormented by the struggling true affection for his only son'. And why should the test have been made as painful and difficult as possible? So that Abraham will become a model in extremis of how men must clarify their fear of God to themselves. 'These things are written on account of you', Origen explained to his congregation, 'because you too indeed have believed in God, but unless you shall fulfill "the works of faith",¹² unless you shall be obedient to all the commands, even the more difficult ones, unless you shall sacrifice and show that you place neither father nor mother nor sons before God, *you* will not know that you fear God nor will it be said of you: "Now I know that you fear God"' (137-43, emphasis added). And that of course is what the angel declares when he breaks in on the sacrifice near the end of the Brome play: 'Owre Lord thanke the an hundyrd sythe/ For the keypyng of hys commawment./ He knowyt þi will and also thy harte,/ That thow dredyst hym above all thyng' (318-20).

It was Abraham's test that St Augustine had in mind when he explained that 'there is normally no other way for the human soul to attain self-knowledge than by giving an account of its powers, not to itself, but in deed and to some temptation which, as it were, plays the part of a prosecutor'.¹³ If we read the Brome play in

light of Origen and Augustine, it becomes a play designed to clarify for Abraham, in St Basil's words, whether 'he loved God with his whole soul and his whole heart'. Clearly he thinks he does at the beginning of the play, even after he has been given the command, when he says 'I love my chyld as my lyffe,/ But 3yt I love my God myche more'(81-82). But as the test is 'heaped up', chiefly, from the point of view of the audience, by the characterization of Isaac as a bright, sweet-natured child, Abraham comes very close to failing it – at least to the extent that a character in a known myth might be imagined to do something other than the myth demands. It is here that totalizing theories of the operation of medieval typology lead us astray by replacing Brome's particular Abraham with the idealized Abraham that theory requires. But recognizing this Abraham's near failure is important for the same reason that the difficulty of the test is important for Origen and the vigour of the prosecutor for Augustine, because what is at stake is the condition of Abraham's soul at the pivotal moment of the play, the moment Aristotle calls the anagnorisis. When Abraham realizes at line 304 that 'I may not fyndygh in my hart hym to kyll,' he seems to have learned two things he did not know before which together define his soul's confusion: how very deeply he loves Isaac, and how very closely his love for Isaac rivals his love for God – indeed at the moment the issue between them is in doubt, and with it more than can be easily named.

But at that moment, in the eyes of the audience, Isaac is no longer simply Isaac. While not the most tactful of plays, Brome makes every effort quite early to build its typological references on a real foundation. So with deft complexity it treats Isaac as a realistic child as he and Abraham approach the sacrifice. As children do, he is quick to catch Abraham's mood. And sensing that something is wrong, he is quick to draw inferences from small hints, growing more and more fearful as Abraham evades his questions:

my hart begynnyth to quake
To se that scharpe sword in 3owre hond.
Wy bere 3e 3owre sword drawyn soo?
.....
Bere 3e 3owre sword draw for me?
.....
Dere fader, I prey 3ow, hydygh not fro me,
But sum of owr thowt þat ye tell on.

(147-67)

On that realistic foundation Brome builds the most extensive set of typological references of any of the plays on the sacrifice.¹⁴ There is of course the familiar theatrical icon, Isaac bearing the wood on which he is to be sacrificed as they climb the mount, and there is the steady obedience to his father that *The Miroure of Man's Salvacioune* noted among the common traits of both Isaac and Christ. But there are also echoes of a series of moments in the Passion story that come together to create a peculiarly dramatic form of typological reference. The largest to my mind is the sequence in which Isaac first pleads for his life and then, learning that God has commanded the sacrifice, says, 'aʒens my Lordys wyll/ I wyll neuer groche, lowd nor styll' (190-91), which seems to recall the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane when Christ prays, 'Father . . . remove this cup from me; yet not what I will but what thou wilt' (Mark xiv 36).¹⁵ We might hear that moment focused later when Isaac says, 'I am full sory thys day to dey./ But ʒyt I kepe not my God to greve;/ Do on ʒowre lyst for me hardly./ My fayer swete fader I zeffe ʒow leve'(251-54).

Martin Stevens has noted that what distinguishes Christ's Passion from its type is that the Passion is offered for the benefit of others. One of the curious features of Brome, shared partly with the Chester play of Abraham,¹⁶ that suggests a certain reaching after that quality of the Passion, is Isaac's concern for others as he prepares for his own death, first to console Abraham – 'ʒe haue other chyldryn, on or too./ The wyche ʒe schuld love wyll, by kynd' (197-98) – and then to protect Sarah from knowledge of what has happened – 'good fader, tell ʒe my moder nothyng./ Sey þat I am in another cuntre dwellyng' (205-06). A moment later Abraham attempts to bind Isaac so 'that thow schuldyst not let me, my chyld', and alone among all the Isaacs Brome's protests, 'Nay, iwysse, fader, I wyll not let ʒow' (246-47). So only Brome's Isaac is left unbound and thereby permitted to anticipate Christ's liturgical gesture of voluntarily stretching out his limbs upon the altar in pure and perfect sacrifice. When Isaac's sweetness touches Abraham's heart, so that he asks Isaac to 'speke no more', Isaac's answer, echoing Christ's warning to his disciples at the Last Supper that 'yet a little while I am with you' (John 13.33), is 'dere fader, werefore?/ We schall speke togedyr her but a wylle' (226-27). And when Isaac believes that he is about to die, his 'last words' are Christ's: 'Lord, reseuye me into thy hand' (296).

For even the dimmest member of the audience, then, when Abraham, stands over Isaac at the penultimate moment of the play, unable to bring himself either to strike or to withdraw, his love of Isaac and his fear of God in terrible balance, the issues of the play are extremely complex. The figure on the altar is Isaac, to be sure,

but with a concentrated power of assertion unique among the biblical plays, Brome has made the image of Christ approaching his own sacrifice almost equally vivid. The effect, I suggest, is the dramatic equivalent of what might be achieved if the paired images of Isaac and Christ found in the typological triptychs of the *Biblia Pauperum* were superimposed one over the other. And the meaning of the play, I suggest, depends on that effect, on the image of Isaac overlaid with the image of Christ. For what frees Abraham to strike – that is, what comes between Abraham's cry, 'O Fader of Heuyn! what schall I doo?' and his declaration 'I wyll no longer let' – is Isaac's terrible plea that Abraham master his indecision and get it over with:

A, mercy, fader, wy tery ze so,
And let me ley thus longe on þis heth?
Now I wold to God þe stroke were doo.
Fader, I prey yow hartely, schorte me of my woo,
And let me not loke thus after my degth.

(306-10)

If Aristotle is right that *post hoc* logic is most natural to narratives, it is clearly not obedience that moves Abraham at this terrible moment, it is the same loving concern for the welfare of his son that has animated him from the beginning of his play. It is his compassion for Isaac that tips the balance between Isaac and God and brings Abraham at last to act on that principle he had not grasped at the beginning of the play, that Isaac's life at its most dear, indeed because it is most dear, can only be surrendered to God's will. What Brome dramatizes, then, is a peculiarly Christian sequence in which law, embodied in the command that Abraham obeys unhesitatingly in Genesis, can be completed and fulfilled only by love. 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets', Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount, 'I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them' (Matthew v 17). As Isaac/Christ inspires Abraham to fulfill the law through love, Abraham raising his sword and the angel appearing suddenly to take it from him, what we in the audience see is that in the end love for others and obedience to God are one. On those linked imperatives 'hang all the law and the prophets' (Matthew xxii 40). And together they elicit grace, which here takes the form of God's reiterated promise that 'off yow schall cume frewte gret [won]/ And euer be in blisse withowt 3ynd,/ For ze drede me as God alon' (398-400).

NOTES

¹ Quoted in Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1959), p. 39. Hugh of St Victor, quoting and enlarging on Gregory the Great, lays out the relationships among the literal, typological and tropological meanings: "The foundation and principle of sacred learning, however, is history, from which like honey from the honeycomb, the truth of allegory is extracted. As you are about to build, therefore, "lay first the foundation of history; next, by pursuing the 'typical' meaning, build up a structure in your mind to be a fortress of faith. Last of all, however, through the loveliness of morality, paint the structure over as with the most beautiful of colours".' *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St Victor*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York and London, 1961), p. 138.

² I have used *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London, 1982), lines 151-12. Hereafter I will give line numbers in my text.

³ The reason, Rosemary Woolf suggests, is to make Isaac's willingness to die 'more dramatically convincing by recourse to [the familiar] character type . . . of the innocent child who shows a virtuous simplicity in the face of hardship, physical pain and death'. Her examples are the boy in the *Prioress's Tale* and the children of Hugolino in the *Monk's Tale*. *The English Mystery Plays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1972), p. 149.

⁴ Isaac is also thirty in the *South English Legendary*, but the principle medieval conduit for Josephus seems to have been Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*. The tradition is sketched in Minnie Wells, 'The Age of Isaac at the Time of the Sacrifice', *Modern Language Notes* 54 (1939), 579-82, cited in Woolf, p. 378.

⁵ 'The Question of Typology and the Wakefield Mactatio Abel', *Essays in Medieval Culture* (Princeton, 1980), p. 221.

⁶ *Four Middle English Mystery Cycles* (Princeton, 1987), p. 236.

⁷ Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, p. 147. For Brome I have used *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman Davis, EETS ss 1 (London, 1970).

⁸ John R. Elliot, Jr, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac as Comedy and Tragedy', *Studies in Philology* 66 (1969), 36-59; rpt. in *Medieval English Drama*, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan Nelson (Chicago, 1972), pp. 157-76, 161. Cp. Donna Vinter, who in the course of arguing for a Brechtian conception of character in the Towneley 'Abraham' nevertheless has this to say about Abrahams in general: the playwrights 'never have him ask why God has commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, nor is his dilemma ever what choice he will make': *Comparative Drama* 14 (1980), 125. For Towneley I have used *The Towneley Plays*, ed. George England, EETS es 71 (London, 1897; rpt. 1966), lines 219-21.

⁹ 'The Distinctions of the Towneley Abraham', *Modern Language Quarterly* 41 (1980), 315-

27.

¹⁰ Homily 11 in *Exegetic Homilies*, trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way (Washington, D.C., 1963), pp. 175-76; 'Now the heart of Abraham was searched to see if he loved God with his whole soul and his whole heart, when he was commanded to offer Isaac as a holocaust, in order that he might show that he did not love his son above God'.

¹¹ Mills has in mind Homily VIII on the Book of Genesis: 'The Doctor's Epilogue to the Brome Abraham and Isaac: A Possible Analogue', *Leeds Studies in English* 11 (1980), 105-10. In that homily Origen is a good deal less smug than the Brome Doctor, reminding his congregation that they are not required to bear all of Abraham's trials: 'And indeed this greatness of soul is not required of you, that you yourself slay your only son. All these services are not asked of you. Be constant in purpose, at least, and mind. Offer your son to God joyful and immovable in faith. Be the priest for your son's life. It is not fitting that the priest who offers to God weep': *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church*, 71 (Washington, D.C., 1982), p. 142.

¹² The reference is to 2 Thessalonians i 11. Encouraging the church at Thessalonica to resist oppression, Paul prays that they may 'fulfill every good resolve and work of faith by [God's] power'.

¹³ *The City of God*, trans. Gerald Walsh and Grace Monahan, *The Fathers of the Church*, 7 (Washington, D.C., 1952), p. 544.

¹⁴ They were surveyed first by Rosemary Woolf, 'The Effect of Typology on the English Medieval Plays of Abraham and Isaac', *Speculum* 32 (1957), 805-25.

¹⁵ This sequence is, I think, a telling counter example to Peter Travis's observation that 'in drama the form best suited to typological demonstration is normally an emblematic vignette or a tableau vivant momentarily frozen within the ongoing mimetic action': *Dramatic Design in the Chester Cycle* (Chicago and London, 1982), p. 81.

¹⁶ One example in the Chester play is Isaac's desire to take off his clothes so that they don't get bloody (ll. 401-04). It seems clear that what is desired is a theatrical foreshadowing of Christ stripped by the torturers but all the critical charity I can muster doesn't keep me from feeling that Chester is simply bathetic at this moment.