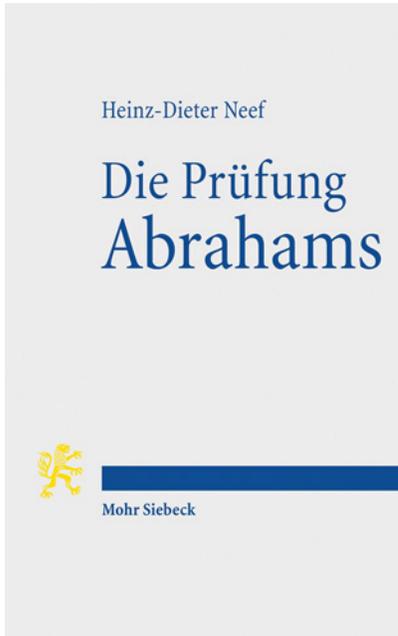


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Heinz-Dieter Neef

Die Prüfung Abrahams: Eine exegetisch-theologische Studie zu Gen 22,1–19

2nd edition

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This small but instructive study is the second edition of Heinz-Dieter Neef's work on Gen 22. It updates and revises the first edition, which was published by Calwer Verlag Stuttgart in 1998. The author deserves the gratitude of the scholarly world for bringing this fine introduction to the problems of Gen 22 up to date and the current publisher (Mohr Siebeck) for its willingness to support the new edition.

Genesis 22 is a text with which one never comes to an end. Whoever studies the Bible, whether the Jewish Bible (Tanak) or the Christian Bible with Old and New Testaments, whoever studies theology, will sooner or later stumble into this deep and profound, at times extreme and overwhelming, story. The text urges every reader to take a stance; it is impossible *not* to respond to Gen 22, as soon as one has heard of it. It is as well impossible to find one final (or "correct") answer to all the problems it poses, to sell this solution as the one and only answer, or even to find a key for oneself with which one sticks the rest of one's life. Every time one deals with this chapter of Abraham's story, one will have to reflect and reformulate again and again one's viewpoint on this passage. This is the undeniable background against which all studies of this passage must be seen and read.

Regarding the multiple dimensions of Gen 22, every suggestion to read and understand this intriguing and/or disgusting story is a welcome addition to our knowledge.

Regarding it as a valid and profound suggestion, one can learn much from Neef's study. After a brief introduction (1), two major parts provide an overview over the history of research (2) and an exegetical study (3). The shorter final part summarizes the interpretation and reads Gen 22:1–19 as a “theological narrative” (4). Neef regards the works of Henning Graf Reventlow (*Opfere deinen Sohn: Eine Auslegung von Genesis 22*, *Biblisch-Theologische Studien* 33 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1968]) and Rudolf Kilian (*Isaaks Opferung: Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte von Gen 22*, *Stuttgarter Bibelstudien* 44 [Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1970]) as a pivotal point in the research on Gen 22. Hence, he focuses his overview over the history of research on the past four decades that have passed since these studies. It is quite obvious that scholarly literature in German language plays a major part. Neef organizes his observations on the progress of research according to the major topics of form, history, and theological goal. He first summarizes remarks on language, style, and composition, on the relationship between Gen 22:1–14, 19 and 22:15–18, on the “land of Moriah” (22:2). Then he turns to diachronic questions: the ascription to the Elohist or the Yahwist, the general question of the date of origin, and the place of the story in the history of tradition and religion. The theological agenda begins with the analysis of the larger context of the pericope: Gen 22 within the Abraham cycle; the canonical-intertextual reading within the Torah, and the theological goal of the narrative. Here Neef identifies eleven different aspects (e.g., the characterization of the persons, including God; Gen 22:1–19 read as a plea for life; the question of theodicy; the replacement of a human sacrifice by a sacrifice of an animal; Abraham as a righteous one or as a disobedient person). Finally, Neef mentions briefly several recent studies that focus on the reception history of the pericope. This is a mere list of titles; however, it functions as a starting point for further study on the infinite aspects of how this story has been read and understood in the religions through the centuries. In his conclusion Neef stresses that the tradition-historical models of Reventlow and Kilian have almost been abandoned since then; research has focused more on style, philology, composition, and context. There is still no consensus about the origin and the theological place of the passage.

Chapter 3 provides Neef's own exegesis of Gen 22:1–19. His German translation is full of small raised letters marking philological problems that are explained in the following pages. Then Neef discusses the structure of the whole and its parts. As a life-long teacher of the biblical languages (especially Hebrew and Aramaic), Neef is an expert regarding language and style; hence, he provides a detailed analysis of the verbal syntax and poetic devices. The next twenty-two pages cover a verse-by-verse commentary clarifying the details. On the basis of his findings, Neef then criticizes the positions of Reventlow and

Kilian. He points out that the reconstruction of earlier stages of the narrative is highly hypothetical and does not help for understanding the final form. Neef also disapproves of the religion-historical interpretation that reads the story as a witness for the replacement of human sacrifices by sacrifices of an animal. The religion-historical background of child sacrifice is by far not as unambiguous as many studies suggest. The story itself shows no traces that it is intended as an etiology for such a substitute offering. Since this understanding is popular but also clearly misleading, Neef is to be commended for his warning to be cautious with this religion-historical hypothesis. Finally, Neef analyzes the connections of Gen 22:1–19 with its surrounding chapters of the Abraham cycle, before he delves into his own suggestion for the origin of the narrative within the history of theology. As the oldest unit (Gen 22:1–14, 19) does not refer to verses usually ascribed to the Priestly Code (P), Neef concludes that this piece antedates P. The differences between this story and the prologue to the book of Job and the discrepancies in the depiction of the angel between Gen 22 and Job 1–2 lead Neef to the assumption of a preexilic origin and a close relationship to the “Yehowist,” an early-Deuteronomic stratum of the pre-Priestly Pentateuch. Hence, the origin of Gen 22:1–14, 19 can be dated to the late seventh century BCE, while the addition of Gen 22:15–18 can be seen as a first interpretation stemming from postexilic times. Although this position is clearly deduced and presented with sound arguments, it is based on a variety of suppositions that nowadays are heavily disputed. Hence, not everyone will be convinced by Neef’s diachronic position.

As usual, the question of origin does not and should not distract from the theological interpretation. Thus, Neef offers in chapter 4 his reading of Gen 22:1–19 as a “theological narrative.” The *narrative* is indicated by the forty-four occurrences of the imperfect with *waw* consecutive and the overall description of the actions of the involved persons. The *theological* aspect emerges already with verse 1 with its clear indication that “*God* tested Abraham.” God holds the threads of the narrative firmly in his hands, and finally Abraham is approved as “fearing God.” The narrator packed his story with a dense tension, full of questions for ancient and modern readers that are not answered. For a correct understanding, one must place the pericope within its larger context: this is not the first story about Abraham and God, and not the only one. Both know each other; the story is based on their intense relationship and enlarges the mutual trust between God and Abraham even more. Abraham’s faith in God relates closely to God’s trust in Abraham. However, the story also bears many challenges. It poses clearly that God has the freedom to demand such a sacrifice—however, God does not want it in the end. The call of the angel “Abraham, Abraham” supersedes the command “Offer your son!” Abraham is challenged, as verse 2 describes his love for his only son in detail; between the precise preparations Abraham undertakes, readers can almost feel his grief and tears. Finally, readers of all times are challenged, but their questions are not answered in detail.

God, however, remains reliable and trustworthy: God finally wants life and is the only one who can redeem from distress and trouble. Here Neef attaches suggestions for a reading within today's Christian communities. He points out that this story provides a significant contribution for a correct understanding of the God of the Bible: God is sovereign and completely free, not bound to human expectations and wishes; however, God is also near and ready to help in ways God only knows, not always according to human ideas. Thus, Gen 22:1–19 is a theological narrative about trust in God and the future.

Again, these consequences of Neef's reflections on Gen 22 are a welcome suggestion to come to terms with this important and well-known story. His aims are twofold: an overview of scholarly positions and exegetical questions as well as guidance to read the pericope as part of Christian Scripture. Neef achieves a great deal to arrive at these aims. Today a presentation of scholarly literature on Gen 22 cannot be comprehensive; the material exceeds any given limits. However, one receives quite a good idea about the exegetical discussions from Neef's pages, although the brand-new discussions about the origin of the Pentateuch and its parts especially within Anglo-American scholarship are not reflected. One can recommend the study for students of the Bible and its theology especially within the German-speaking world as a fine introduction into the problems of Gen 22. This is, however, only a starting point for one's own considerations, which never can be replaced by any scholarly suggestion.

A technical aside: a second printing should replace the Hebrew *yod* with the correct transcription character for *aleph*; for example, on 21 “*yr^h 'l*” should read “*yr^h 'l*” (see also 37, 56, 57).