

Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son in the Old and New Testaments: A Jewish Scholar's Report

THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF THE BELOVED SON.

The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity,

Jon D. Levenson. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press. 1993. xiv, 257.

The sub-title—child sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity—is enough to get your attention, even if it is “transformed!” But I had never even heard of the title, let alone the author, until Paul Wee, now pastoring Reformation Lutheran Church, right next to the Capitol in Washington DC, told us about it last September. Levenson teaches at Harvard Divinity School. His dean, Ron Thiemann, hypes Levenson as a super scholar of the Hebrew scriptures and a super theologian to boot. This book shows why Ron raves.

Levenson is an Orthodox Jew. But he reminds me—of all people!—of Martin Luther. In this way: Luther's degree was “Doctor in Biblia.” That degree bestowed on him—not exactly by his choice, he said—the obligation to be teacher (=the literal meaning of doctor) of the whole Bible, not just the New Testament. Levenson works both testaments too. Though the older half of the Bible, the Jewish scriptures, is his official turf, he knows the

Christian writings we call New Testament like a pro as well. They are, after all, also the product of “Jewish” authors.

Here’s the author’s own preface:

The idea for this book came to me in connection with my preparation for a course entitled “The Joseph Story and its Rabbinic Exegesis,” which I taught in the winter quarter of 1986-87 at the University of Chicago Divinity School. It occurred to me that the loss and restoration of Joseph to his father constitutes an analogy in narrative to the several Israelite rituals that substitute for the literal sacrifice of the first-born son. In the Joseph novella, as in those rituals, the father’s choicest son receives his life anew, and the man who, one way or another, gave him up or should have done so, gets back the offspring who had been marked for death. Further reflection led to the conclusion that the analogy holds for other important sons in Genesis as well – Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob – and for the man the Church believes to be the son of God. The prominence of this theme of the near-death and miraculous restoration of the first-born son (or of the late-born son promoted to that exalted rank) led me to question the universal assumption that the great prophets of the late seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. had eradicated the scourge of child sacrifice from Israelite culture. Both the rituals and the narratives that articulate this theme suggest that though the practice was at some point eradicated, the religious idea associated with one particular form of it – the donation of the first-born son – remained potent and productive. Indeed, it proves central to Israel’s efforts to render account of its origins and character, and it was, again with modification, to prove at least as central to the efforts of the early Church to do likewise.

Similarly, the rabbinic and Christian tendencies to celebrate

Abraham for his willingness to obey the gruesome command to slay and immolate his beloved son Isaac demonstrate that the matter is more complicated than the language of eradication allows. My term "transformation" is intended to imply that the strangely persistent impulse in question remains alive as a driving force behind the subtle and easily misunderstood theologies of chosenness that, again in their different ways, undergird both Judaism and Christianity.

I gladly acknowledge that I regard this transformation as highly positive, one that metamorphosized a barbaric ritual into a sublime paradigm of the religious life. Some will doubtless think that by drawing attention to the barbaric roots, I mean to deny the sublimity of the developments. I trust that discriminating readers who follow the argument through to its conclusion in part III will not make this mistake. Indeed, I dare to hope for something more: that my readers' appreciation of the later developments will be enriched rather than undercut by an awareness of the continuing influence of the old ideal of child sacrifice upon the classic articulations of the Jewish and the Christian traditions.

Radically transformed but never uprooted, the sacrifice of the first-born son constitutes a strange and usually overlooked bond between Judaism and Christianity and thus a major but unexplored focus for Jewish-Christian dialogue. In the past, this dialogue has too often centered on the Jewishness of Jesus and, in particular, his putative roles of prophet and sage. In point of fact, however, those roles, even if real, have historically been vastly less important in Christian tradition than Jesus' identity as sacrificial victim, the son handed over to death by his loving father or the lamb who takes away the sins of the world. This identity, ostensibly so alien to Judaism, was itself constructed from Jewish reflection on the beloved sons of the Hebrew Bible, reflection that long survived

the rise of Christianity and has persisted into the post-Holocaust era.

The bond between Jewry and the Church that the beloved son constitutes is, however, enormously problematic. For the longstanding claim of the Church that it “supersedes” the Jews in large measure continues the old narrative pattern in which a late-born son dislodges his first-born brothers, with varying degrees of success. Nowhere does Christianity betray its indebtedness to Judaism more than in its supersessionism.

So far Levenson.

Comment;

Nowadays it is “politically incorrect” for Christians to think, let alone to talk, in terms of supersession. It’s not kosher for Christians to say that God’s work in Jesus super-sedes [literally: takes a seat above] all that God had done from Genesis to Malachi. Ecumenical etiquette in Jewish-Christian relations says that’s a No-no. But with Levenson we have an Orthodox Jew showing us that supersessionism is “in the Bible,” the Hebrew Bible, where a younger son—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph—displaces the firstborn as the beloved son. He even urges us to use this “unexplored focus for Jewish-Christian dialogue.” The language of sonship “discloses a critical insight about the relationship of the two traditions. That relationship, usually characterized as one of parent and child, is better seen as a rivalry of two siblings for the father’s unique blessing.”

I’m a stranger in the field of today’s New Testament scholarship, so I don’t know if any Christian scholars are attending to this turf. Just in case we Christians need a primer to get started on this theme, Levenson does so with his final section III. THE BELOVED SON BETWEEN ZION AND GOLGOTHA. Here he

shows the NT's major authors—not only Paul, but John, and the synoptic Gospels too—arguing their claims for Jesus on “the scriptural base of the Hebrew Bible. . . the ancient, protean, and strangely resilient story of the death and resurrection of the beloved son.”

Levenson thinks Genesis, not the Exodus, is the place to find the cornerstone for Israel. He says, “Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac [is] the foundational act for the existence and destiny of the people of Israel.” That reminds me of the words of the late Rabbi Arnie Asher of St. Louis who claimed that Isaiah’s “suffering servant,” not Sinai, was the center of God’s revelation to Israel. Even though Asher and Levenson pointed to different centers, neither points to the Exodus from Egypt, to Moses and Sinai as Israel’s cornerstone. And you don’t even have to know Hebrew to see the parallel between the death of Isaiah’s suffering servant and the [almost] death of Isaac on the altar at Moriah.

Jesus’ own dialogue with his critics was on “the scriptural base of the Hebrew Bible.” Granted, he and they operated with different hermeneutics, but they had an agreed-upon text. Seems to me that Levenson is telling us that the “focus” in that Hebrew Bible really is the focus which later “Jewish” writers (Paul, John, the synoptic gospels) fastened upon. If that gets us back to “square one,” great. That’s much better than not even being on the same playing board. I wonder if Ron Thiemann—“our” Lutheran guy at Harvard—could get Levenson into face-to-face conversation with some of us. Participating in such an event would excite me a lot more than being in Jerusalem when Y2K arrives.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder