

Chapter fifteen

Excursus: The Passover/Aqedah motif in the Early Church.

Introduction.

When we come to examine the writings of the early church fathers we can divide the material into three sections. First is the most ancient material that existed which was used by the apostles themselves. This section would include bodies of tradition (1 Cor.15.3) as well as blocks of testimonia which the Gospel writers particularly are believed to have drawn upon. Alongside this material of course were the Old Testament scriptures themselves and the midrashim which the early Christian community with its heavy rabbinic influence would have soon been producing. This growing midrash material took the same form as the contemporary Jewish midrash which consisted in collections of comments of distinguished rabbinic authorities on Old Testament scriptures. The Christian midrash was a similar body of comment which was attributed either to the apostles themselves, their associates or the communities which they had influenced as a result of apostolic presence which influenced their understanding. Clement records how through a visit to Palestine he learnt things which he felt compelled to record for the sake of Gentile believers. By this visit he came into direct contact with a body of material and a way of understanding of which he had previously been unaware. A comparison between Clement and the epistle of Barnabas shows that parallels exist which would suggest that either one borrowed from the other, or more likely, that they used a common midrash. What is important about this material is that it is *'characteristic of a very archaic period of Christianity'*.¹

The second body of material is the writings of the early church fathers who retain the same basic exegetical methods as the New Testament writers. These are early second century writers and include such as Clement, Barnabas, Justin, Melito of Sardis and Hippolytus. They did not necessarily have access to all the traditions and material of the primitive church, but nevertheless they remained essentially under its influence as regards the way it tackled the task of the exegesis of the Old Testament scriptures.

The third body of material reflects growing Greek influence on the church which led to the adoption of the exegetical methods of the Greek schools of philosophy as previously applied for the Jews by Philo. There is no one who did this in the early church more enthusiastically than Origen. For him allegory was the dominant exegetical principle. Significance was seen in everything, whether it was numbers, colours, days or names; everything had a divinely imparted significance which the gifted teacher looked for in order that his students could benefit.

¹ Danielou *Theology* 89.

The most important of these three sections for our study is undoubtedly the first which includes the Christian midrash. The writers of this material are clearly influenced by extra canonical sources in their exegesis. Danielou sees the influence of the *Apocalypse of Baruch* on Papias, one of the writers of such midrash. Another source of midrash was Irenaeus but he was not sympathetic to the extraneous sources accepted by Papias and referred to them as *'strange teachings of the Saviour'*. He said that they had come down to Papias from unwritten traditions and that they were statements of *'mythical character'*. Irenaeus also referred to other data which he attributed to *'the Elders who were disciples of the Apostles'*. This is a clear reference to the same community as that from which Papias drew his traditions. Danielou, after examining the influence of these traditions concluded:

"Thus internal evidence confirms the external data pointing to the traditions reported by Papias as a form of Jewish Christian theology. These traditions clearly go back to a very early date: some may come from the Palestinian community before 70 AD....As will be seen later this particular stream in Jewish Christianity had a strong Messianist flavour....it is therefore an entirely new side of Jewish Christianity which is disclosed by Papias".²

With this material of Papias we must include that of Clement, for as we have seen, he visited Palestine personally and returned with information of which he had been previously totally unaware. Clement was deeply concerned to record this information because it had existed only in oral form until then and he feared that it might soon be lost to the church. He wrote concerning these sayings:

"They, preserving the tradition (paradosis [Gr]) of the blessed doctrine derived directly from the holy apostles Peter, James, John and Paul, the son receiving it from the father (but few were like their fathers), came - thanks be to God! - to us also to sow these fertile and apostolic seeds. And well I know that what will please my readers will not be the literary form in which they are now presented, but simply the traditions which these notes preserve. This sketch, then, is the work of a soul whose only desire is to guard intact the blessed instruction."³

A further source of early material is the use of Greek translations of the Old Testament by the early Christian community which was clearly undertaken to bring out a particular point. While the early church both revered and used the LXX they were not afraid to use or make other translations if they felt that the LXX had failed to make a particular point clear.⁴ The use of these translations in preference to the LXX, especially in the New Testament, ought to underline for us that the writers were anxious to clarify or emphasise a truth which the LXX

² op cit 48.

³ *Strom.*1,11:3-12:1.

⁴ See Ellis *Paul's Use*.

was failing to illuminate adequately. These textual variations and inclusions will therefore help us to determine better what was in the mind of the New Testament writers when they wrote.

Clement of Alexandria.

It is clear that Clement saw that there existed an important relationship between Isaac and Christ. He wrote:

“Isaac is a type of the Lord, being first of all a child inasmuch as he was a son (for he was the son of Abraham, as Christ is the son of God) and secondly a consecrated victim like the Lord. But he was not offered as a sacrifice as the Lord was; he, Isaac, only bore the wood (duxa[Gr]) for the sacrifice, just as the Lord bore the Tree (xulon[Gr]). He laughed with mystic meaning as a prophecy that the Lord would fill us with joy, we who have been ransomed from destruction by the blood of the Lord. But he did not suffer, not only leaving to the Logos, as is to be expected, the firstfruits of suffering, but what is more, by the fact that he himself was not slain he hints (ainittetai[Gr]) at the divinity of the Lord; for Jesus, after his burial, was raised up without enduring corruption, just as Isaac escaped the death of a sacrificial victim.”⁵

Whether or not the Jewish community had begun to develop its *Aqedah* doctrine it is not possible to prove on the basis of Targumic quotations. What can be claimed is that it is clear that very soon after the writing of the last of the New Testament works, we find that the Isaac/ Christ typology is fully developed in the thinking of the Christian community. It is difficult to believe that the presence of such a theology of Isaac, especially if it is reflecting the Palestinian origin that Clement has claimed for his distinctive ideas, did not produce an early reaction and reply from the Jewish community.

Clement elsewhere says of Isaac that he:

“is shown as one who possesses infused knowledge (automades[Gr]); that is why he is also a type of Christ”.⁶

Later, commenting on the preference shown by Isaac for Jacob over Esau he wrote:

“This ordering of things (oikonomia[Gr]) is also prophetic and prefigurative (tupika[Gr])”⁷

⁵ *Paed.*1,5:23,1-2.

⁶ *Strom* 1,5:31,3.

⁷ *Strom* 11,19:95,3.

Clement saw significance in the three days Abraham and Isaac spent travelling to Mount Moriah and wrote:

*“the three days may also be the mystery (musterion[Gr]) of the seal (sphragis[Gr]) through which one believes in the true God”*⁸

Danielou⁹ thinks this interpretation recalls the first three days of creation in terms of the three persons of the Trinity. Danielou sees Clement drawing back from the total Philonic domination of his exegetical method and to be coming to terms with the method and material he has discovered on his visit to Palestine.

In a Fragment from Clement’s last work *On The Pascha* preserved in the Paschal Chronicle, we find:

*“Accordingly, in the years gone by, Jesus went to eat the passover sacrificed by the Jews, keeping the feast. But when He had preached, He who was the Passover, the Lamb of God, led as a sheep to the slaughter, presently taught His disciples the mystery of the type on the thirteenth day, on which also they inquired. “Where wilt Thou that we prepare for Thee to eat the Passover?” (Mt. 26.17). It was on this day, then, that both the consecration of unleavened bread and the preparation for the feast took place. Whence John naturally describes the disciples as already prepared to have their feet washed by the Lord. And on the following day our Saviour suffered, He who was the Passover, propitiously sacrificed by the Jews.”*¹⁰

Isaac is the type *par excellence* of Christ in another passage of Clement where he wrote:

*“God selected for Himself Isaac in a figure as a consecrated sacrifice to be a type to us of the ceremony of salvation”*¹¹

But the most complete expression of Clement’s Isaac/Christ typology which gives an insight into the use of the *Aqedah* doctrine in the early Christian doctrine of salvation is:

“And where, then, was the door by which the Lord showed himself? The flesh by which He was manifested. He is Isaac (for the narrative may be interpreted otherwise), who is a type of the Lord, a child as a son; for he was the son of Abraham, as Christ the Son of God, and a sacrifice as the Lord, but he was not immolated as the Lord. Isaac only bore the wood of the sacrifice, as the Lord the wood of the cross, and he laughed

⁸ Strom V.11:73,2.

⁹ Danielou *Theology* 241.

¹⁰ cf. Eusebius *H.E.* vi 13.9.

¹¹ Strom 11.5

prophesying that the Lord would fill us with joy, who have been redeemed from corruption by the blood of the Lord. Isaac did everything but suffer, as was right, yielding the precedence in suffering to the Word. Furthermore, there is an intimation of the divinity of the Lord in His not being slain - For Jesus rose again after his burial, having suffered no harm, like Isaac released from sacrifice.”¹²

Daly¹³ lists the following features in the above passage as clearly reflecting the influence of the *Aqedah*. They are:

1) The laughter of Isaac. 2) The resurrection theme. 3) The specific mention of the redeeming merits of Christ’s blood. 4) The soteriological significance of the passage. 5) The conscious rejection or modification of specifically Jewish interpretations of the *Aqedah*. A major shift has clearly taken place, as in this passage there is not even a mention of Abraham on whom earlier *Aqedah* material had focused.

Justin.

The same Isaac typology is found to be present in the works of Justin. In a midrash on II Esdras Justin puts his case to his Jewish readers in the following way.

‘From the expositions (exaegeseis[Gr]) which Esdras gave of the Passover, they have removed this: And Esdras said to the people: This Passover is our Saviour (soter[Gr]) and our refuge. And if you reflect, and the thought arise in your heart that we are to humble Him on a cross (semeion[Gr]), and afterwards put your hope in Him, this place will never be laid desolate, saith the Lord of Hosts. But if you do not believe in Him nor harken to His preaching (kerugma[Gr]) you shall be a laughing stock of the Gentiles.’¹⁴

This passage which is an elaboration of II Esdras 6.19ff is clearly Christian in character. The expression “*This passover is our Saviour*” echoes Paul in 1 Cor.5.7 “for Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us”. The use of *tapeinoun* appears in Phil.2.8 in the context of Christ’s passion and the *semeion* is normally used for the cross in the New Testament writings. It is possible that this midrash which Justin used was part of a group of testimonia on the cross.¹⁵

The significance of this passage is that it shows that there was a Christian/Jewish encounter taking place in the early part of the second century which challenged

¹² *Paed.*1.5.
¹³ Daly *Sacrifice* 456.
¹⁴ *Dial* LXX 11,1.
¹⁵ Danielou *Theology* 102.

the Jewish community to think about the significance of the death of Christ in the light of the Passover. This suggests that the *Aqedah* doctrine will have been emerging, if not already in existence, earlier than the end of the second century as it is difficult to believe that such goading from the Gentiles in mocking the Jews for their unbelief in the fulfilment of the Passover typology could be left without a response to explain the Passover in another way.

There are two important passages in Justin's dialogue which refer to Christ as being the firstborn of every creature. The first has its setting in a debate Justin is conducting as to who was referred to when the Psalmist referred to the entering in of the king of glory. Justin argued:

“Again the prophecy which says, Lifts up your gates, O ye princes, and be lifted up, ye everlasting doors, that the king of glory may come in, some of you presumptuously explain to be said of Hezekiah, and others of Solomon: whereas it may be shown that it was spoken of neither the one nor the other, nor of any one of your kings whatever, but only of this Christ of ours; who appeared without comeliness and honour, as Isaiah and David and all the Scriptures say; who is Lord of Hosts, through the will of the Father who gave him to be so; who also rose from the dead, and went up to heaven, as the Psalm and the rest of the Scriptures shew: which also proclaimed Him the Lord of Hosts, as, if you will, you may easily be convinced, even by the things that are passing under your own observation. For through the name of this very Son of God, who is also the First-born of every creature, and who was born of Virgin, and made a man subject to suffering, and was crucified by your nation in the time of Pontius Pilate, and died, and rose again from the dead, and ascended into heaven, every evil spirit is exorcised and overcome and subdued. But if you exorcise them by every name of men who have been born among you; whether of kings or of righteous men, or of prophets, or of patriarchs; none of them will be subject unto you. If indeed any of you exorcise them by the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, they perhaps will be subjected unto you.”¹⁶

It is true that the phrase First-born of every creature comes straight after the mention of Jesus being the very Son of God and therefore could be claimed to have an ontological oriented meaning, but that is not the only evidence in the context in which it is used. First is the fact that Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus being without comeliness and honour has been mentioned earlier in the passage and this cannot but introduce the concept of the suffering servant setting. into the stream of Justin's ideas. Second, the reference to the king of glory being allowed through the gates of Jerusalem cannot but suggest the entry of Christ as he rode into the city and was hailed as the king of the Jews. He rode in to face the betrayal and suffering that were imminent. Third, Justin immediately goes on to refer to the virgin birth (Mary's firstborn) and his suffering, death and

¹⁶ *Dial Tryph* 85

resurrection. Finally we see how Justin taunts the Jews over the fact that there is power in the name of Jesus to exorcise demons. That power, exhibited at the Passover when the power of the angel of death was thwarted, was a power Jesus possessed by virtue of his conquest over the forces of evil through his death.

The next passage from Justin is taken from his argument over the significance of Noah and the deluge. he says:

“You know then, Sirs, I said, that in Isaiah God has said to Jerusalem, In the deluge of Noah I saved thee; but what God said was this, that the mystery of mankind who are saved was in the deluge. For righteous Noah with the others at the deluge, that is his wife and his three sons, and their wives, making eight persons in number, were a type of that day on which our Christ appeared when He arose from the dead, which in number indeed is the eighth, but in power is always the first; for Christ being the first-born of every creature, was also made again the beginning of a new race which is regenerated by Him through water, and faith, and wood, which contains the mystery of the cross; as Noah also was saved in the wood, being born upon the waters with his family.”¹⁷

It is clear from elsewhere¹⁸ that Justin tends to use firstborn loosely with the title Son of God and that the title tends to have the Greek oriented idea of priority built into it. But here Justin is linking the title firstborn with the events of the deluge which is a type of salvation, and distinctly refers to the wood, which is an obvious reference to the cross. Not only this, but he also goes on to link the title with Christ being the head of a new race, i.e. the second or last Adam figure with all of its federal representative implications.

There is another text which is attributed to Justin, but is generally accepted as pseudepigraphic. It is the so called letter to Diognetus. It is questioned as to its authenticity because there are no Old Testament quotes [and this is totally foreign to Justin’s style] and because there is no respect for philosophy. It also is different from the style that Justin uses in his authentic letters. However this may be, it is nevertheless an early document which gives some information regarding the theme we are pursuing. The text says:

“Let your heart be knowledge, and your life the true teaching that your heart contains. If you bear the tree of this teaching and pluck its fruit, you will always be gathering in the things that are desirable in the sight of God, things that the serpent cannot touch and deceit cannot defile. Then Eve is not seduced, but a Virgin is displayed, and the apostles are interpreted, and the Lord’s Passover goes forward, and the seasons are brought together and set in order, and the Logos rejoices as he teaches

¹⁷ *Dial Tryph* 138

¹⁸ e.g. *Dial* 125

*the saints - the Logos through whom the Father is glorified. To him be glory forevermore. Amen.”*¹⁹

What is of interest in this passage is first the mention of the tree. Clearly it would have a twofold meaning, the tree from which Eve took, and the tree upon which Christ died. The first defiled whereas the second does not, and that is the point being made here. So the cross is to the fore of this section. Secondly, the reference to ‘a Virgin’ is clearly referring to Mary. Immediately the passage goes on to say salvation has been displayed.... and the Lord’s Passover goes forward. It would suggest that the writer is linking the Virgin’s offspring, who must be her firstborn, with the Lord’s Passover. Elsewhere Justin takes up the Passover theme using it to illustrate the significance of Christ’s death:

*“The mystery, then, of the lamb which God enjoined to be sacrificed as the Passover, was a type of Christ; with whose blood, in proportion to their faith in Him, they anoint their houses i.e., themselves, who believe on Him.. ..and that lamb which was commanded to be wholly roasted was a symbol of the suffering of the cross which Christ would undergo. For the lamb, which is roasted and dressed in the form of the cross. For one spit is transfixed right through from the lower part to up to the head, and one across the back, to which are attached the legs of the lamb.”*²⁰

Once again Justin directed Trypho to the significance of the Passover when he wrote:

*“For the Passover was Christ, who was afterwards sacrificed, as also Isaiah said, ‘He was led as a sheep to the slaughter’ (Isa. 53.7). And it is written, that on the day of the Passover you seized Him, and that during the Passover you crucified Him. And as the blood of the Passover saved those who were in Egypt, so also the blood of Christ will deliver from death those who have believed.”*²¹

Barnabas.

We have seen from our earlier study how scholarship has failed to appreciate the significance of Ezekiel 45.21ff, where Ezekiel saw the merging of the feast of Passover with the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement. We saw how this merger has explained some of the confusion that has existed in interpreting the significance of the purpose and value of the Passover sacrifices and we shall shortly see that it explains much more. We see this merger of the two feasts in the early church fathers as they follow the example the New Testament writers had set. One of the early fathers who clearly demonstrates this merger is

¹⁹ Cited by Richardson *Library* 1:224.

²⁰ *Dial* 40.1-3.

²¹ *Dial* 113.3

Barnabas. He had no problem in seeing the typological significance of the Passover lamb. He wrote:

*“The mystery of the lamb which God commanded to be sacrificed as the Passover was a type of Christ.”*²²

He was able to bring other sacrificial offerings from other feasts under the same Passover motif, as is shown when he explained:

*“The offering of fine flour, which it was handed down should be made on behalf of those cleansed from leprosy, was a type of the bread of the Eucharist.”*²³

Barnabas quotes an ancient text which is a midrash on Lev.16.7-8, the ritual for the Day of Atonement. It is obvious how he allows the ritual of the Atonement to merge with the details of the passion of Christ as the following extract illustrates.

*“Attend ye to the commandments which he gave. Take two goats (trogous[Gr]) fair and alike, and offer them, and let the priest take one for a whole burnt-offering for sins, but the other one - what must they do with it? Accursed (epikataratos[Gr]) upon it (katakentasate[Gr]), and place scarlet wool about its head, and so let it be cast into the wilderness.”*²⁴

Danielou points out the similarities in this passage with the passion of Christ:

*“The rites mentioned at the end of the quotation may still be traditional but the manner in which they are presented and the choice of words certainly indicates a Christian origin. It has already been remarked that tragos replaces ximaros in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The word epikataratos echoes Gal.3:10. The detail of the ‘spitting’ (emptuoute[Gr]) recalls the scene of the mocking in the praetorium, where Matthew uses the same verb (eneptusan[Gr],26.67); the goading (katakentasate[Gr]) reminds us of Jn.19:37 which has exekentasan; finally, the scarlet wool (kokkinos[Gr]) crowning the head of Jesus. Behind the scapegoat stands the figure of Jesus in the praetorium.”*²⁵

Barnabas continues to quote the same source when he wrote:

²² Dial 40.1
²³ Danielou Early 201-2
²⁴ op cit 202
²⁵ Danielou Early 99.

“And when it is so done, he taketh the goat into the wilderness leadeth it, and taketh off the wool, and putteth it upon the branch which is called Rachia.”²⁶

The juxtaposition of the mention of scarlet (*kokkinos[Gr]*) and thorns would appear to be connected with the reference to the scarlet (*kokkinan[Gr]*) tunic and the crown of thorns in the praetorium scene in Matt 27.28f. Barnabas has earlier compared the sacrifice of the goat with that of Isaac. Here we find in the clearest way the connection between Isaac/Passover/Day of Atonement and the passion of Christ. The ram immolated in the place of Isaac, hanging from a bush of thorns is clearly:

“an incident regarded as a figure of Christ at a very early date”²⁷

Melito of Sardis.

Possibly the most significant of the patristic writers for our study is Melito of Sardis. This is because we have his Homily on the Passion, the most relevant piece of writing from this period of the church that bears upon our enquiry. Not only is the homily about Christ’s passion, but it was delivered on Easter day which in the second century was the same day as the Jewish Passover. Because, like Clement of Alexandria, Melito had visited Palestine, he had been directly exposed to the unique traditions of the Palestinian Christians.

Melito’s argument is that the type is only of use until its fulfilment arrives. He likens a type to a sketch which a sculptor uses. An onlooker by observing the sketch can see what the sculptor is working to produce. The sketch is of little use once the masterpiece has been produced. So Melito argued that the Passion of Christ fulfils that which the Exodus type pointed to.

Two important extracts of the homily for our thesis reveal the progress that the early church was making in understanding the relationship between Isaac and Christ. The first passage shows how Melito held that the celebration of the Passover is worthy of high honour because it signified the mystery of Christ. Melito said:

*“When the blood of the lamb stayed the hand of the destroying angel, it was not the blood which checked him, but the type (*tupos[Gr]*) of the Lord, (v.31) and when ‘He saw the mystery (*musterion[Gr]*) of the Lord in the death of the lamb’.²⁸*

²⁶ VII,8.

²⁷ Early 99.

²⁸ On Pascha 5-35.

What is important to notice in this extract is that it attributes to the type something that it normally does not possess in typological exegesis. Types normally are nothing more than a pointer to a future event of which they are the shadow. Here however the very significance of the future happening actually endows the type with a power that has an effect on the outcome of the event in which it participates. This development is very much like the use of the type made in the *Aqedah*, but in the Jewish version the type does not look forward but backwards. The Passover is the type, reminding rather than anticipating, and receives its power from the offering of Isaac.

In his homily Melito regularly refers to Isaac, likening Christ's arrest to the Patriarch's binding. The references do not go beyond this incident and they are always set in the context of other types of Christ's suffering, suggesting no great significance is being put on Isaac.

“But if you look carefully at the model, you will perceive him through the final outcome. Therefore if you wish to see the mystery of the Lord, look at Abel who is similarly murdered, at Isaac who is similarly bound, at Moses who is similarly exposed, at David who is similarly persecuted, at the prophets who similarly suffer for the sake of Christ. Look also at the sheep which is slain in the land of Egypt, which struck Egypt and saved Israel by its blood”.²⁹

Later on in his homily, Melito again uses similar imagery, bringing together the various strands of typology under the theme of the Pascha. He wrote:

“He is the Pascha of our salvation. It is he who endured many things: and it is he that was in Abel murdered, and in Isaac bound, and in Joseph sold, and in Jesus exiled, and in the lamb slain, and in David persecuted, and in the prophets dishonoured. It is he that was enfleshed in a virgin, that was hanged on a tree”.³⁰

It is clear in both passages, ie, 58-60 and 69-70, that Melito is unable to use the Isaac type fully. Because there was no wound, no death, the type fell short of what was required. To compensate for this lack in the typology of Isaac he brought other themes together, using the death of the Paschal lamb to convey the idea of substitutionary death. We shall soon see that Melito did not lack appreciation for the potential of the Isaac type, but he was clearly restricted by it because of the fact that Isaac never experienced death in the context of his binding. What did exist for Melito to develop was the picture of the father giving up his son. It is this parallel that some scholars see behind such biblical passages as John 3.16, Rom 8.32 and Gal. 3.13. Later in the homily Melito speaks of Jesus as God's firstborn. In this section he seems to be accusing Israel of not living up

²⁹ *On Pascha 58-60.*

³⁰ *On Pascha 69-70.*

to her name nor recognising the true Israel and of putting Him to death. Melito writes:

“O lawless Israel, what is this unprecedented crime you have committed thrusting your Lord among unprecedented sufferings. Your Sovereign, who formed you, who made you, who honoured you, who called you Israel? But you did not turn out to be `Israel`. You did not `see God`, You did not recognise the Word, You did not know, Israel, that he is the firstborn of God. who was begotten before the morning star. who tinted the night, who lit up the day who divided off the darkness.”³¹

In the setting of the homily on the Pascha in which he has been speaking of Jesus being thrust through and experiencing unprecedented suffering, reminiscent of Zech 12.10, the reference to Jesus being the `firstborn of God` would have clear soteriological significance. Another significant text occurs later in the homily where Melito writes:

“I am the one that destroyed death and triumphed over the enemy and trod down Hades and bound the strong one and carried off man to the heights of heaven; I am the one says the Christ, Come then, all of you families of men who are compounded with sins, and get forgiveness of sins. For I am your forgiveness, I am the Pascha of salvation, I am the lamb slain for you; I am your ransom, I am your life I am your light, I am your resurrection I am your being I will raise you up by my right hand, I am leading you up to the heights of heaven there I will show you the father from ages past.”³²

As has been mentioned, Isaac typology has been restrained in the homily ‘On Pascha’, but it is still clearly there. It is not that Melito could not develop the type adequately to bring out the full significance. It would seem it was style and purpose that restricted him. To develop the type of the *Aqedah* fully he would need to so qualify and explain the inadequacies of the type that it would have worked against the whole scheme of ‘*On Pascha*’. The force of the argument would have been lost and the power of oratory severely hindered. But we do have fragments of other works of Melito and these demonstrate both Melito’s understanding of the *Aqedah* and his ability to use it.

Of blessed Melito of Sardis:

“For as a ram he was bound (he says concerning our Lord Jesus Christ), 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 shoulder as he was led up to be slain like Isaac by his Father, but Christ suffered, whereas Isaac did not suffer; for he was a model of the Christ who was

³¹ *On Pascha* 81-82.

³² *On Pascha* 102-103.

going to suffer. But by being merely the model of Christ he caused astonishment and fear among men. 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. Thus Isaac was offered in the midst foot-bound like a ram, and Abraham stood by and held the sword unsheathed not ashamed to put to death his son.”³³

Again in another fragment the theme of the *Aqedah* is taken up:

“On behalf of Isaac the righteous one, a ram appeared for slaughter, so that Isaac might be released from bonds. That ram, slain, ransomed Isaac; so also the Lord, slain saved us, and sacrificed, ransomed us.”³⁴

And a little further on:

“For the Lord was a lamb like the ram which Abraham saw caught in a Sabek-tree. But the tree displayed the cross, and that place, Jerusalem, and the lamb, the Lord fettered for slaughter”.³⁵

“Caught by the horns the Syriac and Hebrew express as hanged, which prefigures in the plainest way the cross. But the word ram also makes this explicit: it did not say a lamb, young like Isaac, but a ram, full-grown like the Lord. And just as it called the holy cross a tree of Sabek, that is of forgiveness,”³⁶

Irenaeus.

We find Irenaeus (c130-200) referring to *Aqedah* and interestingly in a way that stresses Abraham’s part rather than Isaac’s as is common in the older strands of the *Aqedah* material. Irenaeus views the willingness of Abraham to be the grounds upon which God was willing to give His Only Son.

“For Abraham, according to his faith, followed the commandment of the Word of God, and with ready mind gave up his only and beloved son, as a sacrifice to God, in order that God might be pleased to offer His beloved and only Son for all His offspring, as a sacrifice for our salvation”³⁷

³³ Fragment 9
³⁴ Fragment 10
³⁵ Fragment 11
³⁶ Fragment 12
³⁷ Cited by Dahl *Atonement* 150

Hippolytus.

Again in yet another of the early Fathers we find the Passover theme was interwoven with the sufferings of Christ to explain their significance:

“And for this reason three seasons of the year prefigured the Saviour Himself, so that He would fulfil the mysteries prophesied of Him, in the Passover season, so as to exhibit Himself as One destined to be sacrificed like a sheep, and to prove Himself the true Paschal-lamb, even as the apostle “Even Christ”, who is God, “our Passover was sacrificed for us” (1Cor.5.7).”³⁸

In another passage entitled the *Refutation of all Heresies* Hippolytus links Christ explicitly with the Passover theme saying:

“They do not, however, attend to this [Fact], that the legal enactment was made for the Jews, who in times to come should kill the real Passover, which has spread to the Gentiles and is discerned by faith and not now observed in letter.”³⁹

Gregory of Nyssa.

Gregory spent time in his work ‘*Against Eunomius*’ explaining Christ’s title Firstborn of all creation. He first reasoned that there was a logical difference between Firstborn and only begotten, a difference that existed because Firstborn implied others like himself, whereas only begotten clearly implied uniqueness.

“Who does not know how great is the difference in signification between the term “only-begotten” and “first-born? For “first-born” implies brethren, and “only-begotten” implies that there are no other brethren. Thus the first-born is not “only-begotten,” for certainly “first-born” is the first-born among brethren, while he who is “only-begotten” has no brother: for if he were numbered among brethren he would not be only-begotten. And moreover, whatever the essence of the brothers of the first-born is, the same is the essence of the first-born himself.”⁴⁰

Gregory went on to point out that firstborn was used by the Apostles four times. He agreed that each of these terms gave their meaning to firstborn of all creation:

³⁸ Fragment from the Discourse on Elkanah and Hannah, GCS 1,2(11)122,10-11
³⁹ Refutations VIII.1. - GCS 26(111) 237,19-22.
⁴⁰ Against Eunomius Book 7.

“In what sense then does He become “the first-born among many brethren”? In what sense does He become “the first-born from the dead”? Assuredly this is plain, that because we are by birth flesh and blood, as the Scripture saith, “He Who for our sakes was born among us and was partaker of flesh and blood,” purposing to change us from corruption by the birth from above, the birth by water and the Spirit Himself led the way in this birth, drawing down upon the water, by His own baptism, the Holy Spirit; so that in all things He became the first-born of those who are spiritually born again, and gave the name of brethren to those who partook in a birth like to His own by water and the Spirit. But since it was also meet that He should.”⁴¹

What clearly is happening in Gregory’s exegesis is that he is seeking a soteriological understanding for firstborn of all creation. His problem is that because he does not put the title back into a Passover context he lacks the setting that would expose its full soteriological meaning. This soteriological setting is not consistently held by Gregory. In ‘*Against Eunomius*’ Book 2 he asks:

“But how can he who refers the name of ‘firstborn’ to the pretemporal existence of the Son preserve the proper sense of the term ‘Only-begotten’.”⁴²

In other words Gregory could not help but see in the title an ontological significance which inevitably clouded the meaning of the title. Indeed he again referred to the theme in ‘*Against Eunomius*’ Book 4 and acknowledged that there was a question that naturally suggested itself regarding the title firstborn of all creation. He wrote:

“They will perhaps raise a question from the very apostolic writings which we quoted, ‘How could He be called “The firstborn of creation,” if He were not what creation is?’ for every firstborn is the firstborn not of another kind, but of its own.”⁴³

Gregory resolved this by accepting the adjustment on the basis that it was agreed that the whole creation is of one essence with God the Father. This then led Gregory into a discussion on the metaphysical nature of the universe and of Christ’s nature. And yet Gregory was able to a degree to recover from his metaphysical excursion and came back to a soteriological context, still however lacking the decisive Passover setting.

“Of this new creation therefore in Christ, which He Himself began, He was called the first-born, being the first-fruits of all, both of those

⁴¹ *Against Eunomius* Book 8.

⁴² *Against Eunomius* Book 2, 8

⁴³ *Against Eunomius* Book 4.3

*begotten into life, and of those quickened by the resurrection of the dead, 'that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living', and might sanctify the whole lump by means of its first-fruits in Himself. Now that the character of 'first-born' does not apply to the Son in respect of His pre-temporal existence the appellation of 'Only-begotten' testifies. For he who is truly 'Only-begotten' has no brethren, for how could any one be only-begotten if numbered among brethren?'*⁴⁴

Athanasius.

Of all the Patristic writers Athanasius stands out as the champion of Christological orthodoxy. His deep concern over the widespread acceptance of the views of Arius expressed itself in a series of polemic writings as well as in his almost solitary stand at the Council of Chalcedon. Athanasius was acutely aware of the value of the firstborn of all creation for Arius. It was the Achilles heel of the orthodox school. It was vital that the title was shown not to have the meaning Arius was convincing multitudes it had ie the clear implication of Christ's inferiority to the Father and his beginning at some point in pre-history. How did Athanasius handle this text? Once again we will see, like others before him, he sought a soteriological setting, but never found one that was totally convincing.

*"If then we are by nature sons, then is He by nature creature and weak; but if we become sons by adoption and grace, then has the Word also, when in grace towards us He became man, said, 'The Lord created me.' And in the next place, when He put on a created nature and became like us in body, reasonably was He therefore called both our Brother and 'First-born.' For though it was after us that He was made man for us, and our brother by similitude of body, still He is therefore called and is the 'First-born' of us, because, all men being lost according to the transgression of Adam, His flesh before all others was saved and liberated as being the Word's body; and henceforth we, becoming incorporate with It, are saved after Its pattern. For in it the Lord becomes our guide to the Kingdom of Heaven and to His own Father, saying, 'I am the way' and 'the door,' and 'through Me all must enter.' Whence also is He said to be 'First-born from the dead, not that He died before us, for we had died first; but because having undergone death for us and abolished it, He was the first to rise, as man, for our sakes raising His own Body. Henceforth He having risen, we too from Him and because of Him rise in due course from the dead.'*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ *Against Eunomius* Book 4.3

⁴⁵ *Four Discourses Against the Arians.* Discourse 2.61

Athanasius went on to try to distinguish between only begotten and firstborn and wrote:

“But ‘first-born’ implied the descent to the creation; for of it has He been called first-born; and ‘He created’ implies His grace towards the works, for them is He created. If then He is Only-begotten, as indeed He is, ‘First-born’ needs some explanation; but if He be really First-born, then He is not Only-begotten. For the same cannot be both Only-begotten and First-born, except in different relations: that is, Only-begotten, because of His generation from the Father, as has been said; and First-born because of His condescension to the creation and His making the many His brethren. Certainly, those two terms being inconsistent with each other, one should say that the attribute of being Only-begotten has justly the preference in the instance of the Word, in that there is no other Word or other Wisdom, but He alone is very Son of the Father.”⁴⁶

Thus Athanasius sought to use the term Firstborn to speak of Christ as the origin of creation, which he argued was totally different from the title only begotten, which spoke of his generation from the Father. But like other Patristic writers, Athanasius clearly could not let go of the soteriological significance of the title, and later in the same work wrote:

“He is called ‘First-born among many brethren’ because of the relationship of the flesh, and ‘First-born from the dead,’ because the resurrection of the dead is from Him and after Him; and ‘First-born of the whole creation, ‘because of the Father’s love to man, which brought it to pass that in His Word not only ‘all things consist,’ but the creation itself, of which the Apostle speaks, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God, shall be delivered’ one time ‘from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.’ Of this creation thus delivered, the Lord will be First-born, both of it and of all those who are made children, that by His being called first, those that come after Him may abide, as depending on the Word as a beginning.”⁴⁷

Clearly Christ’s status as firstborn of all creation is being put in the context of the redeemer who will release the universe from its bondage and suffering, i.e. the firstborn in redemption. Athanasius continued in this setting when he taunted the heretics of the weakness of their arguments saying:

“Because His coming into the world is what makes Him called First-born of all; and thus the Son is the Father’s only-begotten, because He alone is from Him, and He is the first-born of creation, because of this

⁴⁶ Four Discourses Against the Arians. Discourse 2.62

⁴⁷ Four Discourses Against the Arians. Discourse 2.63.

adoption of all as sons. And as He is First-born among brethren and rose from the dead 'the first fruits of them that slept,' so, since it became Him 'in all things to have the preeminence,' therefore He is created 'a beginning of ways,' that we, walking along it and entering through Him who says, 'I am the Way' and 'the Door,' and partaking of the knowledge of the Father, may also hear the words, 'Blessed are the undefiled in the Way,' and 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.'"⁴⁸

Athanasius immediately developed the salvific theme for the firstborn in the next section of the discourse saying:

"And thus since the truth declares that the Word is not by nature a creature, it is fitting now to say, in what sense He is 'beginning of ways.' For when the first way, which was through Adam, was lost, and in place of paradise we deviated unto death, and heard the words, 'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,' therefore the Word of God, who loves man, puts on Him created flesh at the Father's will, that whereas the first man had made it dead through the transgression, He Himself might quicken it in the blood of His own body, and might open' for us a way new and living, 'as the Apostle says, 'through the veil, that is to say, His flesh;' which he signifies elsewhere thus, 'Wherefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation, old things are passed away, behold all things are become new.' But if a new creation has come to pass, some one must be first of this creation; now a man, made of earth only, such as we are become from the transgression, he could not be. For in the first creation, men had become unfaithful, and through them that first creation had been lost; and there was need of some one else to renew the first creation, and preserve the new which had come to be. Therefore from love to man none other than the Lord, the 'beginning' of the new creation, is created as 'the Way,' and consistently says, 'The Lord created me a beginning of ways for His works; 'that man might walk no longer according to that first creation, but there being as it were a beginning of a new creation, and with the Christ 'a beginning of its ways,' we might follow Him henceforth, who says to us, 'I am the Way:' - as the blessed Apostle teaches in Colossians, saying, 'He is the Head of the body. the Church, who is the Beginning, the First-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the preeminence.'"⁴⁹

Clearly Athanasius saw that there was a soteriological significance in the title firstborn, and linked it with his status in the new creation which He was instrumental in bringing about. However, he clearly missed the New Exodus

⁴⁸ *Four Discourses Against the Arians. Discourse 2.64.*

⁴⁹ *Four Discourses Against the Arians. Discourse 11.65.*

theme for the new creation. Had he not, he might have made the final step of linking the title to Christ's role as the Paschal victim.

This survey of the early church fathers shows that they had moved away from a Hebraic understanding of firstborn with the result that it created philosophical problems which they could not adequately resolve. Some clearly saw a soteriological meaning in the term, but because the original context of the expression did not determine its meaning, they failed to explore the soteriological significance of the title.

The contours of Pauline theology.
Chapter 15. Excursus: The Passover/Aqedah motif in the Early Church.