

## **Item #65 (Some Second Thoughts on Oxford)**

**Another version of what follows can be found in Item #18 on this website. For me these two Items encapsulate a plausible view of what is the correct interpretation of Scripture as regards Scripture's essential message.**

In the year 1981 I was awarded a D.Phil. at the university of Oxford in Oxfordshire, England. It was the result of three years of labor while in residence at Oxford and two years of revision while I was in residence in Rome engaged in teaching, editing and administrative work at the Pontifical Biblical Institute. What follows is not intended in any way as a negative critique of the supervision and library facilities I was accorded while I wrote my dissertation at Oxford. On the contrary, what follows, even if it is due in part to subsequent thought and study, would not have been possible without the foundation of my work at Oxford. Which work, of course, was made possible by my previous study at Rome and elsewhere. It is now 2021, forty years after the awarding of my degree. I am 92 years of age, hardly an age when I can expect much more time for reflection. What follows is, of course, written with the same supposition as was underlying my previous interpretations of Scripture: it is intended to be plausible and nothing more. But hopefully it will attract the attention of scholars who can provide the insight for a correction of what I have written or a confirmation, so that God's Word can exercise its salutary effect in years to come.

In what follows I shall try in this Item to be as complete as necessary for an intelligible outline of my up-dated ideas in the context of my ideas that were the basis for their origin. Thus consultation of my two books and numerous articles on Hebrews will not have to be made. But if there is anyone who is interested in a detailed presentation of the relevant material, bibliographical references to all I have written on Hebrews is given on this website under the heading "Bibliography" in "About Me". This includes the publication of my dissertation at Oxford in 1981 (*Jesus and Isaac. A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*), and my study of the entire epistle published in 2016 (*Hebrews—An Interpretation*).

### **1 ) Hebrews 5,7-10**

A suitable point of departure is Hebrews 5,7-10. In my dissertation at Oxford I interpreted this passage as meaning that Jesus is asking His Father permission to die, not, as was normal at the time and probably still is, that Jesus was asking to be spared death. My interpretation was the result of much poring over the Greek of the verses in question, and my reasoned differing from the books and articles I consulted.

### **2) The Agony in the Garden**

If one holds that in Hebrews Jesus is pleading to die one faces an obvious challenge, for the traditional interpretation of the "Agony in the Garden" is that Jesus is fearful of death and seeks to avoid it. I have countered this view by pointing out that what Jesus is seeking is to avoid drinking the Chalice of His Blood which was brought into being at the Institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and that this conflict was occasioned by the temporary overlap of the Old Law with the New. Thus the scene is really a dramatic illustration of the

Real Presence of Christ's Blood in the Eucharist. (See Item #11 [The Agony in the Garden] on this website.)

### **3) The Purpose of Hebrews 5,7-10 in Its Context**

Subsequent to the decision to view Hebrews 5,7-10 as describing Jesus' plea to die, I worked out an outline of the epistle incorporating my discovery of the importance of the Jewish ceremony of the *todah* for the institution of the Eucharist by Jesus, with the resulting roles of Jesus as Priest and Victim in the celebration of the Eucharist. Hebrews 5,7-10 occupies a section devoted to Jesus as Victim, which, obviously, is appropriate for His pleading to die, and not for his being spared death. See this website, Item #27 (Suggested Outline of the Epistle to the Hebrews).

### **4) The Source of Jesus' Knowledge of His Role As Victim**

Chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis portray the failure of God's original plan for a human race untainted by any sin that would take away His special gifts. But God did not abandon the human race after the "original sin" of Adam and Eve that did just that. He picked a suitable person whom He selected to be the antecedent of one who would begin repairing the damage caused by the sin of Adam and Eve. The name of the antecedent chosen by God was Abraham (see Genesis 12,1-3), and the name of the one through whom the promise to Abraham would be realized was Isaac, his legitimate son (see Genesis 18,10.18; 21,12 and their context). But God wanted to see how strong Abraham's faith in God's promise about Isaac was, so He put Abraham to a test: He ordered Abraham to offer Isaac in sacrifice (Genesis 22,1-2). Abraham passed the test, but before he could actually sacrifice Isaac God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac and Abraham offered the ram as a holocaust. In the Epistle to the Hebrews 11,17-19 this holocaust of Isaac by Abraham is viewed from the standpoint of Abraham's intention, with Abraham receiving Isaac back from the dead, so to speak, as a "symbol" (see Hebrews 9,9 for this meaning). (In the context of his life it would seem that Abraham's act of obedience in being willing to offer up Isaac as a holocaust was based on his experience in Isaac's being conceived when both Abraham and Sarah his wife were well beyond the age when conception was naturally possible, thus showing God's dominion over death.) But if the story of the testing of Abraham's faith-test was complete in Genesis, the offering of a holocaust was not. The lack of a human sacrifice as ordered by God was obvious, and Abraham receiving Isaac back from the dead, so to speak, is an obvious symbol for Christ's Resurrection. It is this symbol that is the source for Christ's knowledge of His role as victim. Only with Christ's Resurrection is the story of Abraham's being tested complete from the standpoint of the One who was to make good the prophecy made to Abraham.

### **5) Paul's Evocation of Isaac and Christ at Galatians 3,16**

Paul in this text alludes to the promise by God to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through Isaac (Genesis 22,28). Paul claims that the promise is fulfilled in Christ despite the changes in covenant between the time of Abraham and the time of Christ. This in turn suggests that in addition to the written texts recording the changes in covenants that there was a continuity in the Tradition accompanying the written texts carrying the message that the fulfillment of the prophecy was yet to come. "Scripture and Tradition" applies to the tradition

accompanying the Mosaic Covenant and to the New Covenant that is Christ Its Originator and Fulfillment. The singularity of the bearer of the blessing given to Abraham is stressed by Paul (“offspring” or “seed”) but it was already stressed in the time of Isaac himself when God distinguishes Isaac from Ishmael, the offspring of a slave woman, with the insistence that Isaac is the bearer of the promise (see Genesis 21,12 and Galatians 4,21-31).

**6) The Effect of Abraham’s Obedience**

In Genesis 22,15-18 God’s messenger gives a second message to Abraham in which God swears a second oath in which He states that Abraham’s obedience in his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac will merit its own reward. God thereby incorporates human merit in all that follows in the redemptive life of Jesus Christ. It is merit which is subordinate to the divine initiative, obviously, but it is merit nonetheless.

**7) The Role of the Todah in the Fulfillment of the Promise to Abraham**

In His fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham Jesus Christ could not have has the faith-trust that Abraham had in Genesis 22, for Jesus enjoyed the Beatific Vision even as human. But He could and did have the faithfulness to the “symbol” given Him by the unfilled sacrifice of Isaac. And when He instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper He incorporated the faith-trust of Abraham and transformed it into the celebration of His Resurrection which He knew was to come. Thus the Eucharist is the definitive answer of God to the lack of trust expressed by the “original sin” of Adam. **(January 20, 2021)**