

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC IN BYZANTINE ART – CHRISTOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF INTERPRETATION

Abstract

This study analyses the typological dimension of the sacrifice of Isaac, son of Abraham, which the Church Fathers consider as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The starting point of the research is the analysis of the Christological interpretations made by some of the most representative Fathers of Christian Antiquity from the 2nd to the 4th centuries, such as Meliton of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. John Chrysostom, and others. They identified in the sacrifice of Isaac a typological perspective anticipating the Savior's sacrifice on the cross. The study also analyses how these theological perspectives influenced Byzantine art between the 6th and 16th centuries. It focuses on artistic representations from Ravenna, Palermo, and Sicily, as well as relevant frescoes from the Macedonian and Cretan schools. The main objective of this research is to highlight the Christological elements and the interdependence between patristic texts and Byzantine iconography, thus emphasising the artists' ability to offer unique interpretations, while aligning them with the Church Tradition.



REV. STELIAN PAȘCA-TUȘA

Faculty of Orthodox Theology
"Babeș-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca
stelian.pasca@ubbcluj.ro

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Introduction

Isaac, the son of the patriarch Abraham, is considered by the Church Fathers a type/ symbol of Jesus Christ, and his sacrifice is seen in the same interpretive tradition as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of the Son of God on the Cross. This gives Isaac and his bloodless sacrifice a privileged status among the Old Testament persons/ events that

refer to Jesus Christ and his saving activity. Meliton of Sardis, Clement the Alexandria, Origen, St. Athanasius the Great, St. Cyril of Alexandria, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Ephrem the Syrian, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Gregory the Great are some of the Church Fathers who present in detail the elements that make the typological dimension of the event that took place on Mount Moriah (Pașca-Tușa and Vidican-Manci 2021, 150–64). Their interpretations, which intertwine and complement each other, provide an overview of how this Old Testament episode was received in Christian communities in both the East and the West.

Even if I have considered the evolution that the interpretation of the sacrifice on Mount Moriah had in the most representative Church Fathers of the 2nd-4th centuries, I will only insist on this aspect in the first part of the study, where I will present the main typological / Christological interpretation directions assumed by the Church Tradition. This perspective will allow us to understand the theological background from which the Byzantine artists/painters/iconographers drew their inspiration when representing the sacrifice of Isaac. In this study, therefore, I intend to highlight how Byzantine artists captured the Christological dimension of the event on Moriah. I will focus on the mosaics/ miniatures/ frescoes produced over a thousand years (6th-16th centuries) in the Byzantine area and in the territories influenced by this artistic style of representation (Italy, Sicily). I will pay particular attention to the mosaics from Ravenna, Palermo, and Sicily, to the miniatures of Cosmas Indicopleustes, and some representative frescoes from the Byzantine schools of painting: Macedonian (Gračanica Monastery in Serbia) and Cretan (Athonite monasteries of Stavronikita and St. Dionysius) to capture the histological representation of the sacrifice of Isaac in its complexity.

This line of research complements previous studies in which we first analysed the manner of representation of the sacrifice in the first centuries (I-VI), both in the Jewish and Christian environment (Pașca-Tușa 2016, 123–38), and then we considered the attitude of the patriarch Abraham during the sacrifice in Byzantine representations (Pașca-Tușa 2021, 62–76). Noting the lack of research that explicitly emphasizes the Christological elements in these artistic representations, I considered that such an approach would be welcome, especially since, in Romanian and international spaces, there are no studies in this direction. In the Romanian specialized literature, there is only one study by the professor of Byzantine Art, Marcel Muntean (2019, 249-60), which investigates how the sacrifice of Isaac passes from the scriptural word to the icon. The author mentions some elements that allow a Christological interpretation,

substantiates them patristically, and exemplifies them only with representations from the first Christian centuries. Our study adopts the methodology and results of this research, placing greater emphasis on the patristic texts and the remarkable Byzantine representations from the period in question. In international literature, the sacrifice of Isaac is analysed from several perspectives. The studies carried out by scholars focus on the evolution of the representation of the sacrifice in both Jewish and Christian environments and emphasize the particularity of famous representations, whether from Western or Eastern Europe (Van Woerden 1961, 214-55; Altripp 2015, 35-48; see also Smith 1922, 159-73; Gutmann 1987, 67-89; Bloch 2016, 96-130; Lowden 2003; Kessler 2004; Pentiuc 2019; Ștefănescu 1973), but without insisting on the Christological particularities, which are mentioned in passing.

Therefore, to achieve the objective of this study (to identify the Christological elements in the Byzantine representations of Isaac's sacrifice), we will first synthesize the Christological interpretations that the Eastern and Western fathers of the 2nd-6th centuries carry out on the subject of the Patriarch's sacrifice, and then we will analyse how this theological message was received in Byzantine Christian art from the 6th century until the golden age of the Byzantine schools of painting (14th-16th centuries). This scholarly approach will highlight the interdependence between patristic literature (tradition) and iconography. It will emphasize that Christian artists can realize an interpretation that is not dependent on or based on a scriptural/ patristic text. In other words, artists can develop a particular understanding of a biblical text. Still, they cannot position themselves by their way of relating to Holy Scripture outside the Church Tradition.

The Christological Character of Isaac's Sacrifice in the Patristic Tradition

Meliton, the bishop of Sardis, one of the most prominent personalities of the second century, gives in one of his homilies a succinct account of the main elements underlying the type-antitype relationship between Isaac and Jesus Christ: the carrying of the wood on his back; the acceptance of the sacrifice without resistance; the realization that he is to be sacrificed; and the binding of his hands and feet before the sacrifice. According to Meliton, Isaac's courage was due to his trust in his father. This led him to bear the Lord's model with fortitude:

“For as a ram he was bound / 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 shoulders

... / as he was led up to be slain like Isaac by his Father. / 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.” (*On Pascha and Fragments IX*) (Melito of Sardis 1979, 75).

Bishop Meliton believes that, in addition to the elements mentioned, other typological details can also be identified. These would be the ram, the tree or bush on which the sacrificial animal was placed, and, implicitly, the place where the sacrifice took place. In this case, the ram would refer to the Lamb of God, the tree to the cross, and Mount Moriah to Mount Zion, where Jerusalem is located. Concerning the sacrifice of the two, the Bishop of Sardis notes that one would have had a personal character and the other a universal one. For this reason, Abraham sacrificed the ram that prefigured Christ to pour out the good that resulted from the sacrifice on all mankind, not only on Abraham’s descendants (see also St. Ephrem the Syrian 2010, 169). The typological relationship between Isaac and Jesus Christ, expounded by Bishop Meliton in a sufficiently complex manner, mirrors how the Christian communities of his time had received the sacrifice of Isaac (Wood 1968, 583–5).

The interpretations of the other Church Fathers confirm the above statement. If we look more closely at where they came from or where they worked, we will see that it would have been impossible for some to have encountered Bishop Meliton’s writings. The Church Fathers in the present research are from Alexandria, Syria, Caesarea, Antioch, Constantinople, Milan, Lyon, Rome, etc. Therefore, their view of the Christological character of Isaac’s sacrifice is due to a standard teaching that Christian communities, regardless of the area in which they were located, received from the apostles and their followers.

The Church Fathers, to whom we will refer in what follows, confirm the elements already mentioned; they offer nuances that cast things in a new light, but they also bring new perspectives. For example, Clement of Alexandria in *The Paedagogus*, outlines the typological character of the relationship between Isaac and Christ, using the quality of son that they both possess (1982, 179). Origen considers that both Isaac and the ram prefigure Jesus; the former indicates the divine nature of the Son, the latter the human one. For this reason, Origen argues, and together with him also other interpreters, Isaac

was not offered as a sacrifice, because “the Word is not *uncorrupted* (1 Cor 15:42), that is, Christ through His soul does not die, a fact prefigured by Isaac.” (*Homilies in Genesis* 8, 9) (Origen 1982, p. 141). A similar interpretation is made by another Alexandrian interpreter, St. Cyril of Alexandria, who identifies Isaac with the Logos, and the ram with His human nature (*Homiliae Paschales*, PG 77,5) (see also St. Cyril of Alexandria 1992, 94). At the same time, I also note that St. Cyril identifies a new typological element: the quality of *one begotten* of the two (see also St. John Chrysostom 1989, 152). In the case of Isaac, the birth by promise is meant, not the one resulting from the patriarch’s union with his wife’s handmaid. In addition, he also points out that neither Isaac nor Jesus Christ had any personal guilt that involved a sacrifice of atonement; in the Lord’s case, the atonement concerned the sins of all mankind:

“That is, Isaac’s sacrifice is seen as a type of the Savior Christ’s sacrifice. And Isaac is one begotten, but also Christ is the Only Begotten. Isaac carries the sacrificial wood on his back, and Christ carries the cross. One ascends Mount Moriah; Christ Jesus ascends the road to Golgotha. Isaac was to be sacrificed without guilt, and so was the Savior crucified without sin. And everyone accepts their own sacrifice.” (our translation) (St. Cyril of Alexandria 1992, 94).

In an Easter Homily, the same interpreter identifies a new point of support for the typological relationship: the Father’s will. He argues that in both situations, the father/Father played a decisive role. The one who led the Son to sacrifice was the Father. It goes without saying that in this situation we are not dealing with any trace of coercion (*Homiliae Paschales*, PG 77,5).

In addition to the elements already mentioned, we still have a few that may serve the objective we have set ourselves, namely, to emphasize the typological/ Christological character of the sacrifice: Wishing to reinforce the typology mentioned, Meliton of Sardis goes beyond the limits of the scriptural text and argues that the sacrifice on Mount Moriah took place before a crowd. He intends to establish an identity with the sacrifice on Golgotha, which was performed in front of everyone (*On Pascha and Fragments II*) (Melito of Sardis 1979, 65). We find a similar situation in St. Ephrem the Syrian, who considers that Sarah also took part in the sacrifice, even though the pericope describing the sacrifice does not refer to this detail (Kessler 2004, 160). Origen argues that the three days Abraham and those who accompanied him spent are reminiscent of the three days

the Lord spent in the tomb before his resurrection (*Homilies in Genesis* 8.4) (Origen 1982, 140). Referring to the sonship of the two, St. John Chrysostom points to a new connecting element, namely that the two are beloved sons (St. John Chrysostom 1989, p. 152). An interpretation used in the second part of the research belongs to Tertullian, who claims that Jesus Christ appeared to Abraham and commanded him to bring Isaac as a sacrifice (*Against Praxeas* 22) (Tertullian 2002, 618). This perspective will be taken up by the mosaicists who represented the sacrifice in the Churches of Monreale and Palermo.

In one of his epistles, St. Cyril of Alexandria refers to the sacrifice of Abraham and gives some pictorial details, suggesting the most suitable manner for its artistic representation:

“If someone of us desired to see the story of Abraham portrayed in a picture, how would the painter represent him? Would he do it in a single painting showing him doing all the things mentioned, or in successive pictures and distinctively, or in different images, but most often Abraham himself, for example, in one picture sitting on his donkey taking his son along and followed by his servants; in another one, again, with the donkey staying behind down below along with the servants, and Isaac being burdened with the wood while Abraham holds in his hands the knife and the fire; and, indeed, in a different painting, Abraham again in a different pose after he has bound the youth upon the wood and his right hand is armed with a sword in order that he might start the sacrifice? But this would not be a different Abraham each time, although he is seen most of the time in a different pose, but would be the same man in every instance with the skill of the artist continually disposing him according to the needs of the subject matter. For it would not be likely or at any rate probable that one would see him doing all the actions mentioned in a single painting.” (*Letter*, 41.22) (St. Cyril of Alexandria 2010, 181)

This text indicates that the episode of the sacrifice, to be captured pictorially, requires several frames; a single frame alone is insufficient to convey the theological message of the key moments surrounding the sacrifice on Moriah. It is possible that St. Cyril here may have consigned a pictorial ensemble in which the hypostases he refers to were represented. This is highly probable. The sacrifice of Isaac had a substantial impact on early Christian communities for its Christological implications.

Elements of typology in Byzantine representations of the sacrifice of Isaac

Before explaining how Byzantine art captures the Christological character of the sacrifice of Isaac, it is appropriate to make a brief foray into the first centuries to note the presence of typological elements in the earliest attempts to represent the sacrifice of Isaac.

Scholars have noted that in the early centuries of Christianity, artistic representations of the sacrifice assumed a symbolic / Christological rather than a literal interpretation. This tendency could also be observed in the Jewish environment. It seems the message the artists wanted to convey was conveyed much better by such a representation. Given the simplicity with which they depicted the sacrifice's details, the Christological element most readily at hand was the sacrifice's wood. As a result, the painters depicted Isaac before the central point of the sacrifice. Thus, we find Isaac in some frescoes, such as the third-century depiction of the Catacomb of Priscilla, carrying the wood on his back (Van Woerden 1961, 214–55; Jensen 1994, 105). Although some have argued that we can speak of a Christological interpretation of this detail only after the Edict of Milan (313), Isaac's carrying of the wood could have been understood in a Christological context even before the Edict. It was easy to see in the previous chapter that the Church Fathers (Meliton of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria, Origen) early on saw Isaac carrying the wood as a prefiguration of the moment when Jesus Christ carried His cross. Christian communities were therefore familiar with the typological dimension of sacrifice and could easily make artistic use of this theological message.

The same can be said of the ram in the fresco in the Catacomb of Via Anapo (Rome) dating from the same period. The ram looking towards the patriarch and the wood of the sacrifice placed behind Isaac can be seen as Christological elements. This symbolism was also used in the Catacomb of St. Callixtus in Rome, dating from the beginning of the 3rd century, where the two protagonists of the sacrifice are depicted in a prayerful pose, with a ram, a tree, and the wood of sacrifice beside them (Van Woerden 1961, 222; Kessler, 2004, 157).

The ram and the tree would become an essential detail for the artists depicting the scene on the sarcophagus. Given that Isaac does not appear on the sarcophagus with the wood on his back, it can be said that the artists were not interested in emphasising the Christological character of the sacrifice. Their theological message focused on faith, redemption, and, inevitably, the resurrection. These emphases were because these stone coffins contained people who hoped for the resurrection. Returning to the specificity of

the depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac on a sarcophagus, it should also be noted that the space did not allow the artists to describe a scene narratively or to provide much detail; they focused their attention on a well-defined theological message, which they depicted with simplicity (Kessler 2004, 160). Likewise, the depiction of the sacrifice of Isaac on Eucharistic chalices, such as those preserved in the Museo delle Terme or the Berlin Museum, obviously involves Christological connotations (Smith 1922, 166).

These patterns of representation, specific to Christian catacombs and identifiable with Christological symbolism, were found in Byzantine mosaics and frescoes from the 6th century onwards. For this reason, I argue that the juxtaposition of events in the patriarch's life that are associated with a Christological interpretation is not accidental. One such case is the mosaic in the Church of San Vitale (Ravenna). The scene of Abraham's sacrifice, in which we find all the elements of a typological character (Isaac, the ram, the tree, etc.), is associated with the episode of the Theophany at Mamre. These episodes are indeed representative of the life of the patriarch Abraham, but they are also crucial for Isaac. At the feast under the oak tree, God, who appeared before Abraham in the image of three men (an image prefiguring the Trinity), announced the birth of Isaac. This event, along with the sacrifice on Moriah, has been identified by some of the Church Fathers as the moment to which Jesus Christ refers when he tells the Jews that Abraham saw his day and rejoiced. We do not know for sure whether the mosaicist had this perspective in mind. Most likely, he linked the two events because of their importance, but we cannot rule out a symbolic message behind this association.

Remaining still in the symbolism assumed by the artists of the first centuries, we turn our attention to one of the most important Byzantine representations that support the argumentative approach – the mosaic in the Church of St. Apollinaris, also located in Ravenna. Here, we are dealing with an obvious Christological interpretation. The mosaic places around an Eucharistic table three persons from the Old Testament who have profound Eucharistic/ Christological connotations. The first of these is Melchizedek, who is represented at the top of the table. He is a priest and therefore the officiator of the Eucharistic sacrifice – two loaves of bread and a bowl of wine. His gesture recalls the moment when he greeted Abraham with bread and wine after his victory over that coalition of kings (Chirilă, Pașca-Tușa, and Onețiu 2017, 3-15). In the mosaic mentioned, Abraham is also depicted mystically offering his son. The Patriarch is represented as a loving father who brings Isaac before this Eucharistic supper. On the other side of the table is Abel, holding a lamb in his hands outstretched towards

the altar. His gesture is a reminder of the sacrifice he has offered to God. Melchizedek is a type of Christ, a fact pointed out by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Hebrews (5:5-6.10; 6:20; 7:15-17). Abel is the image of self-sacrifice, the image of the righteous sacrifice which can be, and it is, related to Jesus Christ who was put to death without any guilt being found in him (Mt 23:35; Lk 11:51; Heb 12:24). Therefore, the juxtaposition of the three persons who mystically prefigure Jesus Christ, each in his way, brings out the Christological message that the mosaicist wished to convey. The fact that Isaac is led to the sacrificial table by his father may be a further reason to strengthen the arguments in support of the proposed objective. I recall that the Church Fathers also highlight the role of the father/Father in the realization of this sacrifice: he brings to the sacrifice his firstborn son/the Only Begotten, whom he loves completely. Because of this love, the son makes himself obedient to the will of his father and does not resist the sacrifice he is about to make.

In the same period (6th century) we can identify another representation containing an obvious Christological message. The miniature by Cosmas Indicopleustes, a monk from Alexandria who had previously been a Greek merchant, depicts Isaac in a pose like that of Jesus Christ as he carries his cross to Calvary. The way Isaac is described with the wood on his back suggests that the author intended to emphasize the typological character of his miniature (Van Woerden 1961, 230). It is therefore easy to see that the artists who emphasised the Christological content of the sacrifice of Isaac depicted him with the wood on his back. This perspective does not exclude the other typological elements, but the image of carrying the wood on his back allowed a quick association between Isaac and Jesus Christ.

Interest in the representation of Abraham's sacrifice reappeared in the 12th century, especially in Italy and Sicily, places where many mosaicists from Constantinople promoted the values of Byzantine art (Delvoye 1967, 91-2; Munteanu 2011, 138). Thus, the mosaics in the Palatine Chapel of Palermo (12th century) and the Cathedral of Monreale (Sicily – 12th century) are representative of the marking of this new stage of artistic rendering of the sacrifice of Isaac. Until then, artists had emphasised the symbolic and Christological nature of the sacrifice. From the Middle Ages onwards, there was a tendency to render the scriptural text depicting the sacrifice as faithfully as possible. The scene of the sacrifice was given a more generous rendering space. This made it possible to show several moments of the event on Mount Moriah. Thus, in the two mosaics, two stages are represented: the receiving of the commandment and the

climax of the sacrifice. I mentioned in the first part of the paper that Tertullian was recording a particular reality: The one who gave the commandment to Abraham was the Savior himself. This fact is captured in both mosaics. The Lord Jesus Christ replaces the hand of the Lord, which symbolically marked God's presence. This detail, which refers to a Christological interpretation of the event, is supported by two other elements in the Palatine Chapel mosaic that are typologically related: the wood on the altar, placed crosswise, and the ram. The placing of Isaac on the wood arranged in the form of a cross and the presence of the Savior in the first frame provide sufficient reason to believe that the author wished to emphasize the Christological dimension of this sacrifice.

The two great schools of painting, the Macedonian and the Cretan, placed a strong emphasis on depicting the climax of the sacrifice, the moment when Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac. The relationship between father and son captured the painters' attention. The father's turmoil, coupled with a calmness born of his faith in God and his son's perfect obedience to his father, is evident in the depictions from Gračanica in Serbia (now Kosovo) – 14th century, Stavronikita, and St. Dionysius (16th century). In the first chapter, we noted that the Church Fathers emphasised the typological dimension of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, which mirrors the perfect love of the Father and the obedience of the Son to the point of death on the cross. This boundless love the patriarch has for his beloved son is therefore the key to understanding the climax of the sacrifice, in which we find no trace of violence. The manner of perfecting the ritual of slaughter, even if it might arouse a certain repulsion on the part of the one contemplating this scene, does not in any way change the love of the father for the son who is to be sacrificed with his own hands (Pentiuc 2019, 347). The Church Fathers imagine a dialogue between God and Abraham in which the former reveals to the Patriarch that what he had accomplished silently on the mountain, he will achieve in a real way at the due time on Calvary. Thus, parental love, the son's obedience, and the sacrifice itself are typological realities that are implied in any representation of sacrifice (Pașca-Tușa 2021, 68–9).

Of the three frescoes mentioned, the most extensive in both space and the number of scenes is the one from the Monastery of St. Dionysius. The author narrates the main moments of the sacrifice, beginning with the reception of the commandment, continuing with the journey with the servants, then the ascent of the mountain, the carrying of the wood on the back, and ending with the actual sacrifice. The elements that have a Christological connotation are the red garment and the binding of the wood

of sacrifice with a rope. Within the same typological framework, the scene of the two of them going up the mountain can also be included, suggesting a dialogue between them about the sacrificial sheep. The text written above the scene indicates this discussion.

The model promoted by Theophan the Greek at Stavronikita and later continued by his disciple Zorzis at Saint Dionysius was to be generalised throughout Eastern Christianity (Ștefănescu 1973, 78). Where space permitted, the painters could opt for one or more of the frames mentioned at the Monastery of St. Dionysius. Gradually, the scene of the sacrifice was introduced into the apse of the altar at the Proskomedia table, along with other sacrifices that in a mystical way prefigured or referred to the supreme sacrifice on the cross (Dionysius of Fournna 2000, 234). With its introduction into the altar's iconographic plan, the typological/Christological dimension of the sacrifice was enshrined. Its prefigurative character could no longer be doubted. The representation of the central point of the sacrifice was sufficient to emphasize typology, without the need for another element of a typological character (I am referring here to the carrying of the wood on the back or to the ram).

Conclusions

With the Savior's words about the sacrifice of Isaac (Jn 8:56) as a point of reference, the Church Fathers began to search the Old Testament text describing the sacrifice (Gn 22) for elements that could support the association between the two events. Thus, they identified the following points of connection: Isaac's carrying the wood of the sacrifice on his shoulders; his taking up the sacrifice without any opposition; his perfect obedience to his father; his awareness of the sacrifice; his guiltlessness; the binding of his hands and feet before the sacrifice; his quality of only begotten son; his status as a beloved son; the ram; the branches of the tree in which he was caught; the high place chosen by God for the sacrifice. To these typological elements, the Church Fathers added others (even at the risk of moving away from the realities described in the scriptural text) to make the association between the two events as apparent as possible.

The interpretation of the Church Fathers was gradually taken up in Christian art. The painters, mosaicists, miniaturists, and iconographers sought to record and convey a message already known to the Christian community. To emphasise the Christological character of the sacrifice, Christian artists used several types of representation to convey this typological message. The most apparent Christological reference was the representation of Isaac with the wood on his back. This pictorial detail implied an

instant correlation with Jesus carrying the cross to the Place of the Skull. The ram and the bush (tree) are the other Christological elements that the artists used to establish the typology.

By including the sacrifice of Isaac in the apse iconography of the altar, around the Proskomidia table, the typological/Christological character of the sacrifice was confirmed. Isaac was a type of Christ, and his sacrifice was a prefiguration of the sacrifice on the cross.

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