

‘FRÁ ÞVÍ ER GUÐ FREISTAÐI  
ABRAHAM’:  
GENESIS 22 IN OLD NORSE-ICELANDIC  
LITERATURE

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Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is one of the most problematic and controversial passages in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, not least because it is the only place where God demands a human sacrifice.<sup>1</sup> It depicts a God who is problematically either deceitful or inconsistent, who either ‘pretends’ to ask Abraham to do something impossible (put to death the son through whom he has been promised descendants and a future) or contradicts himself, first asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, then changing his mind and telling him not to. When he interrupts Abraham’s intended infanticide, God declares that ‘Now I know thou fearest God’ (Genesis

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<sup>1</sup> Kalimi, ‘The Binding of Isaac’, p. 3; Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 30.

22:12),<sup>2</sup> as if he had not known it before; in fact, if He did already know of Abraham's obedience and faithfulness, it is not clear why He needed to 'tempt' him.<sup>3</sup> The character of Abraham raises problems too; what he may think or feel is purposefully blanked in this scene.<sup>4</sup> Whereas elsewhere in the cycle of stories about him, Abraham questions God or argues with Him precisely about the destruction of innocent human lives, here there is no mention of his interior world. The only reference to emotion comes in God's command: 'Take thy only begotten son Isaac, whom thou lovest' (Genesis 22:2). Then there is the problem of Isaac's agency, and whether we can see Abraham's obedience as exemplary given Isaac's apparent lack of consent.<sup>5</sup> In his study of this passage in *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach describes how 'everything remains unexpressed', leaving the whole 'mysterious' and 'fraught with background'.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that Jewish and Christian exegesis sought to explicate the scene, on both a literal and a figurative level. One imagines that it is precisely scenes like this of which Augustine (354–430 AD) was thinking when he wrote in *De doctrina christiana*: 'Let him refer the figure to its interpretation, but not the act to his life'.<sup>7</sup> Although Isaac's sacrifice is barely mentioned in the New Testament, figural

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Vulgate are taken from *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. by Fischer and Weber, rev. by Gryson. All English translations of the Latin Vulgate are from the Douay-Rheims Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch*, pp. 111–37.

<sup>4</sup> Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch*, pp. 97–110.

<sup>5</sup> Kalimi, 'The Binding of Isaac', pp. 17–19.

<sup>6</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> 'Figuram ad intellegentiam referat, factum uero ipsum ad mores non transferat'; Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, ed. and trans. by Green, Book III, Chapter 22, pp. 164–65.

readings of the scene go back to the second century, and were well known in the West through Rufinus of Aquileia's (c. 345–c. 410/11) Latin translation of Origen of Alexandria's (c. 185–c. 245) *Homilies on Genesis*, written around 239–43 CE.<sup>8</sup> Origen's method of exegesis was twofold: to use Scripture, understood as a whole and complete unit of divine revelation, to interpret Scripture, and to read the Old Testament through the New Testament, with Christ as the end-point and fullness of human history.<sup>9</sup> For Origen, then, Abraham's faith is faith in the Resurrection: he supplies Abraham's missing thoughts through Hebrews 11:19 ('Accounting that God is able to raise up even from the dead').<sup>10</sup> Abraham thus becomes a 'type' of God the Father offering up his son, while Isaac, who carries the wood for the sacrifice, prefigures Christ as both 'victim' and 'priest', solving the problem of his consent. The ram that substitutes for Isaac represents the humanity of Christ, while Isaac reflects his divinity. The three-day journey, meanwhile, is a 'sacrament' of the Exodus and Resurrection and was later linked to the mystery of the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> By the fourth century, the sacrifice of Isaac was read during the Easter Vigil in Jerusalem and Milan; it was part of the canon of the Mass from the fourth century on, where it is tied to the stories of Abel and Melchizedech, all prefiguring the Eucharist.<sup>12</sup> In the twelfth-century *Glossa Ordinaria*, the standard authoritative gloss to the entire Vulgate Bible, which draws on Augustine,

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<sup>8</sup> Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality*, pp. 115–30.

<sup>9</sup> Heyer, 'Sacrifier la promesse?', p. 408.

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. by Heine, p. 136–147. The Latin text can be found in *Origenes. Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufin Übersetzung. Teil 1: Die Homilien zu Genesis, Exodus und Leviticus*, ed. by Baehrens, pp. 120–135.

<sup>11</sup> Sheridan ed., *Genesis 12–50*, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 107.

Bede, and Alcuin, among others, the marginal gloss to Genesis 22:8 cites and perpetuates these Christological readings: ‘Abraham ergo Deum Patrem significat, Isaac Christum’ (‘Abraham therefore signifies God the Father, Isaac Christ’).<sup>13</sup> In his influential essay ‘Figura’, Auerbach described the sacrifice of Isaac as ‘one of the most famous examples of the realistic type of figural interpretation’.<sup>14</sup>

Given the difficulties posed by Genesis 22, it is of some interest to see how it is interpreted in the Old Norse-Icelandic Bible translations in *Stjórn*. Although *Stjórn* is edited, and sometimes treated, as one work, it in fact represents three separate translations: *Stjórn* I, which runs from Genesis 1 to Exodus 18, *Stjórn* II, which is a summary of the rest of the Pentateuch, and *Stjórn* III, which runs from Joshua to II Kings.<sup>15</sup> Only Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 226 fol. (folios 1v–100r), dated to c. 1350–1360, contains all three of these parts, and the leaves containing *Stjórn* II (folios 62r–69v) were inserted later.<sup>16</sup> The biblical translations are followed by *Rómverja saga*, *Alexanders saga*, and *Gyðinga saga*, showing a clear interest in universal history. The manuscript was made in the West of Iceland at the monastery of Helgafell, an Augustinian house of canons, which was part of the Victorine congregation by c. 1458–72, and perhaps even as early as 1184.<sup>17</sup> *Stjórn* I is also found together with *Stjórn* III in Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum,

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<sup>13</sup> Schoenfeld, *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars*, p. 145.

<sup>14</sup> Auerbach, ‘Figura’, pp. 36, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Kirby, *Bible Translation in Old Norse*, pp. 52–67; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, ‘Heroes or Holy People?’, p. 109.

<sup>16</sup> Wolf, ‘A Comment on the Dating of AM 226 fol.’, pp. 275–77; Wolf ed., *Gyðinga saga*, p. xvi.

<sup>17</sup> Liepe, *Studies in Icelandic Fourteenth Century Book Painting*, pp. 94–95, 120.

AM 227 fol., which dates to c. 1340–1360, and was made at the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyrar in the North as a partial Bible, perhaps for the cathedral school in Skálholt.<sup>18</sup>

If the Prologue of *Stjórn* I is to be believed, the translation of Genesis was made during the reign of the Norwegian king Hákon Magnússon (r. 1299–1319), either in Norway or (more probably) in Iceland. While Reidar Astås identified the translator as a Norwegian Dominican, recent research has suggested that the context for the translation may well be Victorine.<sup>19</sup> This is important because the Victorines were highly influential in renewing interest in the literal or historical level of biblical interpretation.<sup>20</sup> Hugh of St Victor (c. 1098–1141), who taught at the Parisian Abbey from 1125 to 1140, developed a new theology of history, which he divided into *opus conditionis* (works of creation/foundation) and *opus restaurationis* (works of restoration). The works of restoration—postlapsarian salvation history—were the subject of Sacred Scripture.<sup>21</sup> Hugh used the traditional Gregorian model of the Scriptures as a building with three levels of interpretation—literal, allegorical, tropological—but emphasized in his *Didascalicon de studio legendi* (*Didascalicon, On*

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<sup>18</sup> Selma Jónsdóttir, *Illumination in a Manuscript of Stjórn*, p. 63; Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir, ‘Handritálýsingar í benediktínaklaustrinu á Þingeyrum’, p. 389.

<sup>19</sup> Sverrir Tómasson, ‘*Stjórn*’, pp. 121–28; Bekker-Nielsen, ‘The Victorines and their Influence on Old Norse Literature’, pp. 32–36; Gunnar Harðarsson, ‘Viktorsklaustið í París og norrœnar miðaldar’, pp. 138–48; *Littérature et spiritualité en Scandinavie médiévale*, pp. 18–42.

<sup>20</sup> Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, pp. 83–195, Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, III, pp. 211–67.

<sup>21</sup> Harkins, *Reading and the Work of Restoration*, pp. 6–7, 148, 170.

*the Study of Reading*) the importance of history as the foundation: ‘Just as you see that every building lacking a foundation cannot stay firm, so also it is in learning. The foundation and principle of sacred learning, however, is history, from which like honey from the honeycomb, the truth of allegory is extracted’.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, in *De scripturis et scriptoribus sacris* (*On Sacred Scripture and its Authors*), his *accessus* to the study of the whole Bible, he insisted that: ‘To ignore the letter is to ignore what the letter signifies and what is signified by it’.<sup>23</sup> In other words, allegorical and tropological interpretation depends on a careful investigation first of what the ‘letter’ means. For Hugh and his successors, the literal level of interpretation involved establishing the text, uncovering the historical referents, and reconstructing the historical narrative.<sup>24</sup> Both Hugh and, later, Andrew of St Victor (c. 1110–1175) were in close contact with the Parisian rabbinical school of Rashi, acronym of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040–1105) and made frequent use of Jewish exegesis.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the purpose of reading the Bible was still primarily monastic: to reform the human soul in the likeness of God through meditation, prayer, action, and contemplation.<sup>26</sup>

One of the best-known pupils of the Victorines was Peter Comestor (d. c. 1187), dean of the cathedral school in Paris and chancellor of Notre-Dame, who retired to the

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Fundamentum autem et principium doctrine sacre historia est, de qua quasi mel de fauo, ueritas allegorie exprimitur’, in *Hugonis de Sancto Victore. Didascalicon*, ed. by Buttner, Book VI, p. 116; translated in *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St Victor*, trans. by Taylor, p. 138.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Litteram autem ignorare est ignorare quid littera significet, et quid significetur a littera’, in Hugh of St Victor, *De scripturis et scriptoribus*, col. 13d; translated in Hugh of St Victor, ‘On Sacred Scripture’, trans. by van Liere, p. 217.

<sup>24</sup> Harkins, ‘Introduction’, pp. 34–35.

<sup>25</sup> Berndt, ‘The School of St Victor in Paris’, pp. 467–94.

<sup>26</sup> Harkins, *Reading and the Work of Restoration*, p. 187.

monastery of St Victor in 1169.<sup>27</sup> It was there in c. 1173 that he wrote his *Historia scholastica* ('Scholastic History'), a 'running commentary on the entire historical sequence of the Bible'.<sup>28</sup> It combined Hugh's notion of the Bible as history with the textual and critical exegesis offered by Andrew; but Comestor's innovation was to integrate biblical text and gloss into a single coherent whole.<sup>29</sup> The *Historia* became one of the most widely read books in Christian Europe and, as Kirsten Wolf has shown, the West Norse area was no exception.<sup>30</sup> The prologue to *Stjórn* I is lifted straight out of the *Historia scholastica*, and the text of the Vulgate is glossed throughout with commentary from Comestor, either marked by rubrics or silently blended with the biblical text. Moreover, the Book of Joshua in AM 226 fol., referred to by Astås as *Stjórn* IV, is translated directly from Comestor, as is a fragment of 1 Samuel 22–28 in Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 1056 IV 4to (c. 1300) and the second part of Brandr Jónsson's *Gyðinga saga*. The *Historia scholastica* is also used occasionally and without specific attribution in *Stjórn* III and is frequently cited in Grímr Hólmsteinsson's (d. 1298) *Jóns saga baptista*.<sup>31</sup>

With this in mind, I now come back to Genesis 22, the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac. We might expect this tricky passage, as translated in *Stjórn* I, to reflect the renewed interest in the literal level of biblical interpretation.

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<sup>27</sup> Clark, *The Making of the Historia scholastica*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*, p. 160. The only part for which there is a critical edition is the book of Genesis: *Petri Comestoris Scolastica Historia. Liber Genesis*, ed. by Sylwan.

<sup>29</sup> van Liere, 'Exegesis at St Victor', p. 239.

<sup>30</sup> Wolf, 'Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica*', pp. 149–66.

<sup>31</sup> Wolf, *The Legends of the Saints*, p. 164. On *Jóns saga baptista*, see Marner, *glosnur lesnar af undirdiupi omeliarum hins mikla Gregorij, Augustini, Ambrosij ok Jeronimi*, especially pp. 212–21.

Indeed, Astås has argued for ‘a certain continuity in Norse anti-mystical tradition’ (‘en viss kontinuitet i norrøn anti-mystisk tendens’), characterised by discomfort with ‘mystical’ or allegorical readings of the Bible: in his monograph on *Stjórn*, for example, he describes the translator as ‘holding back when it comes to allegorical-typological textual interpretation’ (‘tilbakeholden overfor allegorisk-typologisk tekstutlegning’), and focused on ‘the scholastic interpretation of the Scriptures’ (‘det skolastiske skriftutlegning’) rather than ‘the meditative piety of the monk’ (‘den mediterende munkefromhet’).<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, he argues: ‘There existed in native learned circles a resistant attitude to mysticism. They show that the mystical tradition had difficulty gaining a foothold in Norway and in Iceland, in the High Middle Ages as well as earlier’ (‘Det i det hjemlige lærde kretser eksisterte en avvisende holdning til mystikken. De vitner om at den mystiske tradisjon hadde vanskelig for å vinne rom i Norge og på Island, i høymiddelalderen så vel som tidligere’).<sup>33</sup> However, if the translation in *Stjórn* I were produced in a Victorine context, one would not expect resistance to the ‘mystical’ sense of the Scriptures. The literal level required such careful attention precisely because, when properly understood, it provided a firm grounding for the correct allegorical and tropological interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

At first glance, the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac certainly seems to uphold Astås’s views on the ‘anti-mystical’ stance of *Stjórn* I. The translator-compiler does not mention God the Father or Christ, nor comment on the allegorical significance of the number three. Rather, he fills the gaps in the biblical narrative with literal

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<sup>32</sup> Astås, ‘Spor av teologisk tenkning og refleksjon’, p. 144; *Et Bibelverk fra Middelalderen*, p. 177.

<sup>33</sup> Astås, *Kirkelig/skolastisk terminologi*, p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> Berndt, ‘Exegesis in Quest of Progress’, p. 215.



commentary, making historical and geographical additions from the *Historia scholastica*. He tells us that Isaac was twenty-two years old ‘epter sōgn iosephí’ (according to what Josephus has said) and that Moriah—the mountain on which Abraham was commanded to sacrifice him—was said ‘af ebreskum monnum’ (by Hebrew men) to be the site of the Temple Mount; not, as some of the Church Fathers had suggested, of the crucifixion.<sup>35</sup> The three days are explained not as a ‘mystery’, but used in a geographical deduction: ‘Huaðan af þat er profat at þeir villaz seger commestor sem hann segia þa býgt hafa milli bethel ok hay þuiat þaðan er æigi meir enn eins dags ferð til fiallzens moría’ (From this it is proven that they err, says Comestor, who say they lived between Bethel and Hai, since it is not more than one day’s journey from there to the mountain Moriah).<sup>36</sup> Likewise, he shows no interest in the ram as the humanity of Christ, but he does specify that it was not newly created for this sacrifice, but merely moved to its location by the angel. He adds that ‘ebreskir menn’ (Hebrew men) say Isaac was liberated on 1 September, and they celebrate this event by blowing a horn ‘iminningh hins hornotta veðrs’ (in memory of the horned ram).<sup>37</sup> The primary concern is to establish the historical coherence of events with the aid of the literal exegesis from Comestor.

The style of the translation, moreover, shows an interest in the story as a story, in other words, in how it works on a literal level. The translator-compiler proceeds in two ways: he both replicates some of the stylistic techniques of biblical narrative and engages in his own ‘saga-style rewriting’, to borrow Wolf’s phrase, through the use of

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<sup>35</sup> *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås (hereafter *Stjórn*), pp. 195–96; Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 90.

<sup>36</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 197; *Petri Comestoris Historia scholastica*, ed. by Sylwan, pp. 109–110.

<sup>37</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 200; *Petri Comestoris Historia scholastica*, ed. by Sylwan, p. 111.

native stylistic touches and idioms.<sup>38</sup> For example, he is careful to reproduce the ‘meaningful repetition’ in the Vulgate between God’s two speeches to Abraham, in which he first commands Abraham to slay his son Isaac and then prevents him from doing so.<sup>39</sup> The Vulgate duplicates God’s call (‘Abraham, Abraham’) and Abraham’s response to it (‘Adsum’), while *Stjórn* I repeats the present participle:<sup>40</sup>

Hann vitraðiz honum **suá segiandi**.

Þa kallaði guðs engill af himnί til hans, **sua segiandi** [my emphasis].

(He appeared to him, saying this.

Then God’s angel called to him from heaven, saying this.)

The parallelism tacitly draws attention to the apparent contradiction on a literal level between God’s command to kill and to save life. The blanking of Abraham’s emotion, likewise, is carefully reproduced in the translation, as can be seen in an unmarked addition from Comestor, when Abraham’s departure is described:<sup>41</sup>

Abraham reis upp þegar áa naattartima ok sagði engum manni sína fyrer etlan

[Comestor: *nemini quod facturus erat indicans*], kleddi meðr reíða einn asna.

kallandi meðr ser .ij. sueína ok svn sínn hinn þriðia.

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<sup>38</sup> Wolf ed., *Gyðinga saga*, p. cxxii.

<sup>39</sup> On ‘meaningful repetition’, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 115; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 104.

<sup>40</sup> *Stjórn*, pp. 195, 199.

<sup>41</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 197; *Petri Comestoris Historia scholastica*, ed. by Sylwan, p. 109.

(Abraham rose up at once during the night, and told no one his intention, put a saddle on a donkey, calling two servants to come with him and his son as the third).

We are told what Abraham does, but crucially not what he thinks; only that he does not tell others what he intends. The play of perspectives is nicely captured here: Abraham is ignorant of what God intends, while the servants are ignorant of what Abraham intends, as are Isaac and Sarah. Only the native idiom ‘svn sinn hinn þriðia’, delayed to the end of the sentence, hints at reluctance on Abraham’s part.

Similarly masterful is the translator’s rendering of Abraham’s journey with Isaac. When they leave the servants and donkey behind them, we are told:<sup>42</sup>

Siðan talaði [talar AM 226 fol.] hann til sueinanna. Biðit her í hia asnanum. **við smasueínninn** fõrum skiotlega fram enn nõkkuru lengra, ok komum þegar aptr til ykkar er við hõfum beðiz fyrir sem okkr likar’ [emphasis mine].

Then he said [says AM 226 fol.] to the servants: ‘Wait here by the donkey. The small boy and I will go quickly a little further, and will come to back to you as soon as we two have prayed to our satisfaction.

Here, the use of the dual pronoun, together with a native idiom (‘við smasueínninn’), makes it clear that Abraham is saying he and Isaac will both return, although it gives no insight into whether he actually thinks they will. In AM 226 fol., there is a shift from

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<sup>42</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 197.

past to present tense at this point, a common technique in saga narrative. The choice of *smásveinn* (small boy) for *puer* (boy) creates an element of pathos, but with characteristic ‘biblical’ or saga-style economy.<sup>43</sup> Finally, there is the dialogue between Abraham and Isaac with its relentless play on the ignorance of both:<sup>44</sup>

Ok sem þeir foru .ij. samt talaði sueinninn til síns feðr. **Faðer minn** sagði hann. huat villtv sun minn sagði abraham. Se **faðer minn** sagði sueinninn. Elldrinn ok treín erv her til reiðu. enn huar er þat er offraz skal. hann suaraði: Gvð sialfr mun sia ser forn til handa **son minn** [emphasis mine].

And as the two of them travelled together, the boy said to his father: ‘My father’, he said. ‘What do you want, my son?’ said Abraham. ‘Look, my father’, said the boy, ‘the fire and the wood are ready, but where is the sacrifice?’ He answered: ‘God himself will provide a sacrifice, my son’.

The repetition of ‘my father’, ‘my son’, ‘my father’, is taken from the Vulgate, but developed here to fine emotional effect. The scene ends, very much in saga style, by linking the story to a place-name, and the place-name to a proverb (‘orðskuiðr eðr maalshaatr’), before rounding off with a genealogy.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> On ‘biblical’ economy, see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 24; Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, p. 114.

<sup>44</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 190.

<sup>45</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 200.

At the same time, the translator-compiler's other additions suggest an underlying assumption that the allegorical signification of the passage is understood. At the opening, for example, he excerpts a passage from Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*, marked out by rubrics, explaining why Abraham's obedience is exemplary and what it means to say that God is tempting him:<sup>46</sup>

Freistaði guð trvar ok lyðní Abrahe íþersum sialfs hans elskulegum ok eingetnum syni. æigi fyrer þann skylld at hann vissi æigi aaðr vtan helldr til híns at hann giðrði þersa hans krapta kunniga oss til epter demis þar sem hann villdi meðr efanar lausum hugh ok hiarta sefa sinn sun fyrer guðs boð skap af sialfs hans samvizku hvar fyrer er hann er beði lofandi af þeiri sinni staðfestu sem hann villdi sinn sun fyrer guðs saker offra. Ok af þeiri tru sem hann truði at hann mundi siðan lifgaz ok upp reisaz af hueríum er hann heyrði ok fekk þat fyrir heit at af honum mundi hans kyn aukaz ok uppvekiaz.

(God tested the faith and obedience of Abraham in his own beloved and only begotten son, not because he did not already know this, but rather in order to make his virtues known as an example to us, since he was willing without a doubting mind and heart to sacrifice his son at God's command by his own conscience, for which he is both to be praised for his faithfulness that he was willing to sacrifice his son for God's sake, and for the faith with which he believed that he would

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<sup>46</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 196. There is an digital edition of the fourteenth-century Douai version of Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum historiale* (MS Douai 797) available online; otherwise, only extracts have been edited. The passage concerning Isaac and Abraham is Book II, Chapter 107.

afterwards be raised up, about whom he had heard and received the promise that through him his kin would grow and multiply).

It is specified that Abraham's faith is faith in the resurrection: he knows that it is from Isaac his descendants will branch out. This is confirmed later in an imaginary dialogue, also from the *Speculum historiale*, in which Abraham affirms to the narrator (Vincent of Beauvais, erroneously called 'Jakob' in the translation): 'Ek truer fullulega at guði er vel mááttvleght at reísa hann vpp af dauða' (I believe fully that it is possible for God to raise him from the dead).<sup>47</sup> This interpretation depends on a christological reading of the passage through the lens of the New Testament, identifying Isaac as a prefiguration of Christ. Likewise, in a later passage attributed to both *Speculum historiale* and the *Historia scholastica*, we are told that Abraham assures Isaac that God will 'reisa hann siðan upp til þers at fylla með honum fyrer sogð sin fyrir heit' (raise him up afterwards to fulfil in him his previously stated promise).<sup>48</sup> In consequence, Isaac goes 'giarnsamlegha til alltarissins ok sins dauða' (willingly to the altar and his death), which neatly solves the problem of his agency and allows his action to prefigure more closely the 'willing' self-sacrifice of Christ.

Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale* was deeply indebted to Hugh and Richard of St Victor (d. 1173); it draws on Hugh of St Victor's theology of history, and quotes extensively from Comestor's *Historia scholastica*.<sup>49</sup> However, it also adds to

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<sup>47</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 198.

<sup>48</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 199.

<sup>49</sup> Poirel, 'Dominicains et Victorins à Paris', p. 179; Frunzeanu et Paulmier-Foucart, 'Saint-Victor et les premiers dominicains', p. 4.

Comestor allegorical and moral interpretations, many of which have been taken up in *Stjórn* I.<sup>50</sup> Most interesting for Genesis 22 are those passages that derive from Origen's *In Genesim homiliae* (*Homilies on Genesis*). These extracts confront head on precisely what the biblical narrator does not tell us: what Abraham might think and feel. So, after God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, we are told:<sup>51</sup>

I þeim orðum sem guð talaði til hans. Tak þu son þinn ysaach þann sem þu elskar ma vel hugsa huersv hettlega feðrins aastuð ok elskhughí mundi kueykiaz ok upp vekiaz til sins sunar af sua morgum setum nafna giptum til þers at hans hōnd vyrði lettlegha þui seinni at sefa sialfs síns sun sem elskugans ok kierleiksins minní uaknaði meirr meðr honum af þers haattar sunarnofnum ok setum amínningum ef hann hefði eighi þilika trú ok staðfestu haft til guðs.

(In the words which God spoke to him—take your son Isaac, whom you love—one may well imagine how dangerously the father's affection and love for his son might be kindled and awoken by so many sweetly-given names, so that his hand might easily become more reluctant to sacrifice his own son, in so far as the memory of his affection and love was awoken in him by this kind of filial address and sweet reminders, if he had not had such faith and steadfastness towards God).

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<sup>50</sup> Paulmier-Foucart and Nadeau, 'The History of Christ in Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*, p. 119.

<sup>51</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 196.

This sets Abraham's natural affections and paternal love for his son against his faith and obedience to God. It manages both to convey sympathy for his human emotions ('sweetly-given names', 'sweet reminders') and at the same time to warn the reader that this is a dangerous indulgence, a potential 'awakening' (cf. 'uppvekiaz', 'vaknaði') of sin. Yet, the whole extended conjecture ('ma vel hugsa'—it may well be imagined) is shut down by the final conditional clause 'ef hann hefði eighi þilika trú ok staðfestu haft til guðs' (if he had not had such faith and steadfastness towards God). We are invited, so to speak, behind the scenes of the story to reimagine the drama from within.

The translator-compiler returns to Abraham's inner life in his next borrowing from Vincent of Beauvais, depicting the three-day journey as an interior struggle between the desires of the flesh and the demands of the spirit:<sup>52</sup>

Fyrer þann skylld var honum sua langr vegr lagíðr at hann skylldi afíallit upp fara at mannlig áástuð ok guðlig trua. kjötligr kierleikí ok guðlegr elskugi. vináátta nalegra sýnligra luta [ok bidandi uan ukominna luta] mettí fáá noga stund á öllum þeim dögum ok degrum til kappsamlegrar kieru ok þrautar sín imílli.

(The reason why such a long journey was laid on him, in that he had to travel up the mountain, was so that human affection and divine faith, carnal love and divine charity, attachment to present visible things [and the patient hope of things to come] might have some space during all those days and nights for a vehement debate and contest between themselves.)

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<sup>52</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 197.



The three antitheses in the Latin—*affectus et fidens* (affection and faith), *amor Dei et amor carnis* (the love of God and the love of the flesh), *gratia presentium et expectatio futurorum* (the grace of things that are and the hope of things to come)—are elaborated through alliteration and parallelism, and personified in the idea of debate and contest. Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac has become a psychomachia of the soul. In his final addition, the translator-compiler goes on to outline the heart-rending scenes between father and son:<sup>53</sup>

Allan þriggia dagha tíma vanz þeirra vegr ahuerium er fǫðurlegr hugr ok hiarta  
þiaðiz ok pinaðiz af angrsamligum ahyggjum, þuiat á ǫllum þersum tíma sua  
lǫngum leít hann ok saa upp á sinn sun ok áátu baaðer samt a sua morgum náttum  
haalsspentí sueinninn meðr sœtum bliðskap sinn fǫður ok láá viðr hans briost meðr  
fǫðurlegu faðmlagi.

For three whole days the journey lasted, in which the father’s mind and heart was enslaved and tormented by sorrowful thoughts, because, during all that time, for as long as he looked and gazed upon his son, and both ate together, for just so many nights the boy embraced his father with sweet affection and lay on his breast in a father’s embrace.

Isaac is no longer a twenty-two-year old here, but the small boy of the early Church Fathers.<sup>54</sup> The added word-pairs with alliteration and homeoteleuton (‘hugr ok hiarta’,

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<sup>53</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 198.

<sup>54</sup> On the age of Isaac, see Kessler, *Bound by the Bible*, p. 107.

‘þiaðiz ok pinaðiz’), further alliteration (‘föðurlegu faðmlagi’) and repeated emphasis on sweetness (‘meðr sætum bliðskap’) all intensify the affective and psychological aspects of the scene. The translator-compiler then appeals directly to the emotions of his readers:<sup>55</sup>

Huart etlar þu at nokkurum af oss afliz sua mikill hugar styrkr af þersarri frasogn at hann setti þenna hinn eingetna ok elskulegha sun abrahams fyrer sín hugskotz augu sér til hugar styrktar ok epter demís. þann tima sem nokkurs vaars sun er at kominn naatturvligvm dauða þeim sem ǫllum er skyldugr ok sam eiginligr.

(Do you think that any one of us would gain such great strength of mind from this story, that he would set that only and beloved son of Abraham before the eyes of his mind to give him strength of mind and as an example when one of our sons has come to a natural death, as is due and common to all?)

The example to be followed is no longer obedience to a divine command of infanticide, but lies rather in our acceptance of human mortality and surrender to God of those objects of our natural affections. The reader is encouraged to relive this particular historical event within his own heart and mind and allow it to transform him, to reorder his loves, as he reflects on his culpable attachment to material things. This strongly psychological and affective reading of the scene is exactly what the Church Fathers would have defined as ‘mystical’: ‘The core of mysticism consists in the stories and

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<sup>55</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 199.

metaphors of Scripture being translated into an inner drama of the soul'.<sup>56</sup> The move from historical event, to invisible truth, to the reformation of the self closely models Hugh of St Victor's pattern of reading.

The translator-compiler, then, handles this scene in two different ways, almost as if he were drawn in two different directions. On the one hand, he fills the gaps in the Vulgate with geographical and historical details from Comestor's *Historia scholastica*. On the other, he uses Origen's exegesis, mediated through Vincent of Beauvais, to reflect on the interior meaning of the scene and how this is appropriated by the reader. These two directions are marked not just by the rubrics that indicate each of his sources, but also by the style of his translation. While the translation of the Vulgate and the *Historia scholastica* is characterised by parataxis, native idioms, and meaningful repetition, the style used for Vincent of Beauvais is very different: the lexis is overwhelmingly from romance and religious literature; the syntax is complex, and the style is ornate, making ample use of word-pairs and alliteration, as well as imaginary dialogue and rhetorical questions. Although this might suggest that we are dealing with two different layers of translation, it is equally plausible that the translator-compiler is purposefully using two different styles to mark out two different levels of interpretation: he uses a plain style for the literal level, but shifts into an ornate style for the allegorical and tropological sense. At one point, he explicitly registers this move from one level of style to another: 'Skal her nu um eína stund fra snua ok til sǫgunnar aptr huerfa' (Now we shall turn from this for a while and return to the history).<sup>57</sup> A similar phrase is used earlier in *Stjórn* I, when the translator-compiler transitions from an allegorical reading

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<sup>56</sup> Schumacher, 'Breaking the Bread of Scripture', pp. 107–26.

<sup>57</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 197.

of Genesis 2:5–6 (taken from Augustine’s *De Genesi contra manichaeos*) to the literal account of the creation of man in the Vulgate.<sup>58</sup>

In AM 227 fol., the ‘mystical’ sense present in the text is heightened by the visual exegesis on folio 23v (Fig. 1). In the historiated initial T of ‘Thare’, the opening word of the Abraham cycle, is a depiction of Abraham in the act of raising his sword to kill Isaac, capturing that suspended moment when Abraham ‘greíp siðan suerðit meðr annarri henði ok etlaði at hoggva hann’ (grasped his sword with one hand and intended to kill him). Often, illustrations of Abraham, such as the one in the Winchester Bible (c. 1160–1175), portray him dramatically in the act of twisting round towards the angel, his sword still lifted over Isaac. Here, however, he stands poised and dignified, untouched by emotion, as if unaware of the angel’s intervention. The allegorical signification of the scene is brought out in several ways: Isaac is depicted as a small child, kneeling upon a Christian altar, recalling his presence in the Canon of the Mass as a prefiguration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The presence of both Isaac and the ram, its horns caught in the foliage [...], acts a reminder that both represent Christ; Isaac his divinity, in which he cannot die, and the ram his humanity, in which he suffers. The dove in the margin, whose outstretched wings and tail echo the shape of the angel above it, implies a Trinitarian reading, just as the Church Fathers read the three-day journey as a ‘sacrament’ of the Trinity. The placing of this scene at the opening of the Abraham cycle invites us to reflect on it in this light.

[Insert Figure 1]

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<sup>58</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 47.

Fig. 1 The sacrifice of Isaac. Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, AM 227 fol., fol. 23v. This and figure 2 courtesy of the Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

Moreover, the illustrations in the lower margin suggest a wider allegorical reading of the cycle (Fig. 2). Although they could be interpreted as Abraham departing for Moriah, the details do not fit: Sarah should not be in this scene (since Abraham ‘told no one his intention’, she cannot seek to dissuade him from it), and the boy behind Sarah is leading not a donkey, but a cow.<sup>59</sup> It seems more likely that this is Abraham, Sarah and Lot (with their cattle) departing from Haran in Genesis 13, towards the text of which the figure of Abraham is pointing. While a determined Abraham strides forward, holding the sword that he will later raise to kill Isaac, Sarah remonstrates to his back, and Lot gestures in the opposite direction, while struggling with an unruly cow. Sarah holds out a small round object that looks like the apple held by Eve in the temptation scene on folio 1v, or the round stone held by the boy in the Temptation of Christ on folio 33v. Their evident reluctance to go seems to dramatize the pull of ‘carnal habits’ and ‘sins and vices’ that the Christian, like Abraham, must resist and leave behind when he departs from his homeland in this world.<sup>60</sup>

[Insert Figure 2]

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<sup>59</sup> Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir, ‘Handritálýsingar í benediktínaklaustrinu á Þingeyrum’, p. 245.

<sup>60</sup> Sheridan ed., *Genesis 12–50*, p. 5.

Fig. 2 Abraham, Sarah and Lot leave Haran. Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, AM 227 fol., fol. 23v.

Some small differences between AM 226 fol. and AM 227 fol. suggest further that the compiler of AM 227 fol. in particular wished to highlight the spiritual meanings of the text. While Genesis 22 is entitled in AM 226 fol. ‘Her segir fra huersu guð freistaði. Abrahams ok huersu hann uar stað fastr til guðs’ (Here it is said how God tempted Abraham and how he was faithful to God), in AM 227 fol., the title reads: ‘Frá þi er guð freistaðe Abraham ok hann fornferði ueðrinn i stað ysáchs’ (About how God tempted Abraham and he sacrificed the ram in place of Isaac).<sup>61</sup> Emphasis is placed on sacrifice and substitution, intrinsic to the allegorical meaning, rather than on the virtue of faithfulness. There are additional references to sacrifice in the text as well: where AM 226 fol. has ‘offra mér hann þar’ (offer him to me there) and ‘hann offraði honum þar sun sinn’ (he offered to him there his son), AM 227 fol. has ‘offra mér hann þar meðr fornþring’ (offer him to me there with sacrifice), and ‘hann offraði honum þar sefanði sinn sun ysaach (he offered to him sacrificing there his son Isaac).<sup>62</sup> Both translate the Vulgate ‘in holocaustum’ (for the holocaust), meaning ‘as a sacrifice’, which is read allegorically in the *Glossa ordinaria* as ‘signum veri holocausti’ (a sign of the true sacrifice): Christ.<sup>63</sup> One intriguing difference is found in the first passage from *Speculum historiale*, where ‘með efanarlausum hugh’ (with a mind free of doubt) in AM 227 fol., is written ‘með hefndarlausum hugh’ (with a mind free of revenge) in AM

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<sup>61</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 195.

<sup>62</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 195.

<sup>63</sup> Schoenfeld, *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars*, p. 140.

226 fol.<sup>64</sup> The reading in AM 227 fol. is the correct one, translating ‘indubitantī animo’ (undoubting in his spirit) in the Latin (ultimately derived from Alcuin’s *Interrogationes et responsiones in Genesin*), but the change in AM 226 fol. may reflect an emotional response to the literal level of the text, and the strong cultural imperative to avenge a son. Given these differences, it is interesting to note that, while the Prologue to AM 227 fol. reads simply ‘Byriaz þessor giorð ok hefz af sǫgðum guðs hallar grund uellí. þat er af ritnín-garennar upphafí ok ǫnduerðri genesí’ (This work opens and begins with the foundation of the aforementioned God’s hall, that is with the beginning of the scriptures and the start of Genesis), AM 226 fol. adds to the end of this sentence ‘af sialfre sogunní en ægi af hennar skyrín-g. eda skilningi’ (with history itself and not with its interpretation or signification).<sup>65</sup> This may indicate a difference in approach relating to the main use of each manuscript: as universal history in AM 226 fol. or as a partial Bible, for devotional and liturgical use, in AM 227 fol.

This examination of Genesis 22 has shown that, while the translator-compiler of *Stjórn* I is interested in reconstructing the literal or historical level of sacred scripture, he is certainly not averse to the spiritual or ‘mystical’ meaning. While he does not identify Abraham as God the Father or Isaac as Christ in this passage, he is certainly aware of this signification, which lies at the heart of his emphasis on resurrection. Elsewhere in the Abraham cycle, he does state explicitly that the seed of Abraham is Christ: ‘Hann svor þa viðr afkiemi abrahe, þat er viðr ihsvm xpistum’ (He swore by Abraham’s seed, that is by Jesus Christ).<sup>66</sup> More importantly, though, he transforms the

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<sup>64</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 296.

<sup>65</sup> *Stjórn*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>66</sup> *Stjórn*, p. 203.

historical event into a psychological drama of faith versus the natural affections: Abraham is exemplary not because he obeys God's problematic command to sacrifice his son, but because he is willing to offer up his attachment to the things of this world in the hope of the world to come. This is exactly what one would expect if the compilation were produced in a Victorine context: history is valued not for itself, but because it is the foundation for allegory, which leads in turn to the restoration of God's image in man.



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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how the Old Norse-Icelandic translation of Genesis in *Stjórn*

I navigates the difficulties posed by Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis Chapter 22. Although it has been argued that *Stjórn*, and Old Norse religious writing more widely, was broadly resistant to 'mystical' readings of biblical texts, this paper argues that the translator-compiler's work functions on two levels, establishing first the literal-historical level of meaning, before turning to a psychological and affective interpretation of the passage as an allegorical drama of the soul. This two levels of meaning, moreover, are foregrounded through the use of two different styles: saga-style in the sections translated from the Vulgate and Peter Comestor, and florid style (marked by word-pairs and alliteration) in sections translated from Vincent of Beauvais, which ultimately derive from Origen's Homilies on Genesis. It is argued that, if the

translations in *Stjórn* were produced in a Victorine context, this move from history to allegory to moral – the reformation of the soul – is exactly what one might expect. In addition, it is noticeable that the two main manuscripts of *Stjórn*, AM 226 fol. and AM 227 fol., handle this chapter in slightly different ways: whereas AM 226 fol. focuses on the exemplary quality of Abraham's obedience, AM 227 fol. uses the visual exegesis of the historiated initial and marginal illumination to encourage a reading of Isaac as a prefiguration of Christ. These differences in emphasis may reflect different audiences or functions: whereas AM 226 fol. shows the interest in universal history among the canons regular at Helgafell, AM 227 fol. is a partial Bible (Genesis to IV Kings), made at the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyrar, for liturgical purposes or personal study.