

THE GOSPEL OF St LUKE 11.4

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who
is indebted to us;
And lead us not into temptation.



THE TRIAL OF THE DISCIPLE

An exegesis of the Gospel of St Luke 11.4 from the Aramaic,
with reference to Hebrew and Greek.

The exegesis places this verse in the context of the Rabbinic method
and relates it to Genesis 22 and the Fourth Servant Song.

The debate opened by Pope Francis forms part of the introduction.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 11.4

sins our forgive and

וְאַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

not and us offended have who all forgive we also for

אֲנִי וְכָל הָעָם לֹא אֵשָׁתָּהוּ לְךָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ

one evil the from us save but trial into us lead

וְלֹא תַּבְיַעַתְנוּ אִתָּנוּ כְּמִצְוֵי הַטֶּבַל

וּמִתְחִלָּה עַל-חַטֹּאתֵינוּ כִּי מִחֲלִים גַּם-אֲנַחְנוּ לְכָל הַחַיִּב לְנוּ

וְאַל-תְּבִיאֵנוּ לִידֵי נִסְיוֹן (כִּי אִם-הִצֵּילֵנוּ מִן-הַרְעָה¹)

And forgive us our sins; for we ourselves also forgive every one that is indebted to us.

And bring us not into temptation.

Καίάφες ἡμῖν τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίεμεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν. καὶ μὴ εἰσενέγκῃς ἡμᾶς εἰς πειρασμόν ἀλλὰ ρύσαι ἡμᾶς ἀπὸ τοῦ πονηροῦ

And forgive to us our sins! for also to them we forgive-- to all owing. And do not insert us for a test! But rescue us from the evil! (literal translation of the Greek)

This verse of the Lord’s Prayer has come under the microscope many times, with its disturbing suggestion that the Father might lead His children into temptation. This is not the meaning of the text and we will examine it in depth to see what Jesus was conveying, His rabbinic method, the linguistic clues it gives us to understand the Semitic mind which His hearers brought to it, and more.

In this exegesis we will work on both the linguistic and contextual levels. It is hoped in uncovering the connections between Genesis 22, the Servant Songs and Luke’s version of the Our Father that we will understand more deeply the real meaning of Our Lord’s teaching. Contemporary Jewish Christians have less difficulty with this verse than we have, knowing as they do the Rabbinic method and the Talmud and so they would have no difficulty with the exegetical link to Abraham and the Servant Songs in the Our Father.

The debate continues as to whether it was spoken/written first in Greek, or in Hebrew/Aramaic. In other words, are we looking at a Greek translation of Our Lord’s teaching in Aramaic. Also did He use Aramaic or Hebrew in response to the request ‘*Lord teach us to pray...*’? That is, was the original in Hebrew or Aramaic? Hebrew was still in use as a living language in Our Lord’s time. It was not yet superseded by Aramaic and confined to Liturgical and Biblical usage. After He had taught it to the disciples, Christ might well have used Hebrew for the Lord’s Prayer, given that it was a prayer. They might have switched between Hebrew and Aramaic in praying it during those years of His Public Ministry. Why

¹ Translated from the original Greek: *The New Testament in Hebrew and English*. Society for distributing Hebrew Scriptures. Cambridge University Press

not? We know that the Our Father was prayed three times a day by the first disciples after the Crucifixion. Most of them were native Aramaic speakers. As to the possibility of it being originally in Greek, all examination of the Semitic Rabbinic method so evident in it would suggest otherwise. The rhythms of the verse in Aramaic are less evident in the Greek, and those rhythms were part of the oral tradition and the teaching method: assonance, rhythm, parallelism, pun, word play, onomatopoeia, image were all used to aid memory.

Pope Francis has raised the possibility of a new translation of this verse, and Father Voltaggio, a native of Rome who now teaches sacred Scripture at the Studium Theologicum Galilaeae in Jerusalem, said he agreed with the Pope that the translation could be changed to make it more understandable...But he also said “it’s practically impossible to translate the Our Father into the right words in our languages,” as the words of God are a “treasure and so full of meaning.” What is needed most, he said, is better catechesis, “not just in grammatical aspects or the modern exegesis [interpretation], but also the Tradition of the Church,” so the faithful can better understand the true meaning of the petition. He welcomed modern exegesis, as it has “helped us to understand many things,” but he said that sometimes we make the mistake of looking for the “**exact translation for a word.**” Such an approach, he said, was “not in the mind of the rabbis and the Fathers of the Church,” and he pointed to the Greek word *peirasmon* that literally can mean either “temptation” or “trial.” It is the same in Hebrew and Aramaic, he added, as the word has the same root, and he cited as an example Genesis 22, when God puts Abraham to the test by requesting him to sacrifice his son Isaac. “Of course, we don’t say God introduced temptation to Abraham, but he gave him a test, a trial, an examination of his faith for the good of his growth in sanctity,” Father Voltaggio said, in common with Benedict XVI and the early Church Fathers. For this reason, he believes these discussions over new translations often “don’t consider the richness of terms of the Our Father in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic.” He said that as a scholar also of rabbinical literature, he is aware of the “important principle” of “double meaning,” where words in Scripture have a literal meaning and a symbolic or figurative one.²

The ‘problem’ is not the word *temptation* or *trial*. These things happen, as Our Lord said elsewhere in the Gospels.... *Woe to him who leads one of these little ones astray, it would be better for him to have a millstone tied round his neck and be thrown into the depths of the sea... temptations must come, but woe to him through whom they come...*³ This is my paraphrase, simply to swiftly bring this moment to mind. In the Aramaic of the Lord’s Prayer the English word *sin* is mostly rendered and understood to be *debt*.

In his examination of the Aramaic of the Gospels, Matthew Black⁴ points out that this verse has always been controversial and cites the medieval Italian Harmonies where the Venetian dialect renders this verse: *suffer us not to enter into danger or temptation*. The Hebrew and

² We are indebted to Edward Pentin, Vatican City for these comments from Biblical scholar Father Francesco Giosuè Voltaggio

³ Luke 17:2

⁴ An Aramaic approach to the Gospels and Acts: Matthew Black, second edition, *The Arabic and medieval Gospel Harmonies*, p. 227

Aramaic does make possible a translation such as *allow* or *suffer*. This attempt to understand this verse within the context of God's love and goodness, would find sympathy today when a new approach is sought.

Abraham was often in the mind of Our Lord's critics and his friends when they tried to understand Him as we know from the Gospels: *before Abraham was, I am*.⁵ It is my view that Father Francesco Giosuè Voltaggio is correct to locate this verse within the context of the binding of Isaac, although he points to the testing of Abraham rather than the binding of Isaac. Both are behind Our Lord's words, and in His thoughts, and both are profoundly connected to the Passion of Our Lord, I believe, as we will find when we introduce the Fourth Servant Song into the discussion of Luke 11.4. It fell to the Evangelists and Apostles to understand the place of the Servant Songs in so much of what Our Lord was communicating of Himself to those around Him, and the Our Father, in a real sense, suggests that the Fourth Song belongs also to the disciple who takes up his cross.

For this verb we translate in the English as 'lead us', in Luke 11.4, the Hebrew word used in **modern** Hebrew translations is תְּבִיאֵנוּ. This does not derive from the same Semitic root as the Aramaic root in the equivalent verse. In my view the modern Hebrew translation of this verse⁶, in choosing the verb בּוֹא *boh* meaning *to enter*, or *to lead*, completely misses the point and would suggest that it was influenced by the Greek which translates the Aramaic as literally 'insert' us not into temptation/trial. This illustrates, in our view, the problems arising from translations from a translation where something like sacred scripture is concerned. In saying this it is clear that I hold that the original prayer was spoken by Christ in Aramaic or in a Hebrew which is not in sympathy with the modern attempt to 'put it back' as it were from the Greek into Hebrew. But if we proceed to the root of the Aramaic we will discover its relationship to the Hebrew *concept* and what that indicates. Only by following the Aramaic are we able to penetrate the hinterland, the landscape, of this verse, for although the Aramaic also translates as *enter*, the verb does not correspond with the Hebrew modern translation. When we follow the actual Aramaic root, we find the text beginning to yield its Rabbinic depths and it takes us to its proper Hebrew equivalent and the Scriptures of the Early Church, the Old Testament, yield their treasure. It is important to grasp this distinction.

The Aramaic word for this English translation to 'lead us' is ܐܠܐܢܐ *TaElaN*. ܐܠܐܢܐ *al* and/or *alal* ܐܠܐܢܐ is the root and its primary meaning is to *enter*, *to come in*, *to penetrate to the truth*.⁷ It is used in the Imperfect tense in the verse which suggests an ongoing action, not a complete action. The Hebrew equivalent which is not the verb תְּבִיאֵנוּ above, is עָלַל *alal* meaning *to roll*, *to bind*, (note here the onomatopoeia of the action of binding, rolling) *to do*

⁵ John 8.58

⁶ Translated from the original Greek: *The New Testament in Hebrew and English*. Society for distributing Hebrew Scriptures. Cambridge University Press

⁷ Michael Sokoloff: *A Syriac Lexicon* p.1103

*something habitually, to glean.*⁸ (See footnote for Eucharistic image) This verb is a hidden pun. It floats as it were on the edge of the Lord's Prayer in the Semitic mind. It is there, I believe, in order to form a discreet bridge to themes in the Fourth Servant Song, and the binding of Isaac, which connect the Lord's Prayer at this point to the Passion of Christ and thence to the trial and passion of the disciple. It is a pun which is *sound based*, of course, an echo, a bridge. The thematic thread in the Fourth Song which it points to is the hiddenness of the Servant, His protective concealment by His Father. This is explicit in the Second Song but also resides in some images of the Fourth Song and its suggestion that the Servant was veiled, hidden, unrecognised. In the Second Song the verb used for this is סתר *sathar* and it carries with it the sense, not only of concealment but of protection. In addition to this it is often used to describe what is not known, to be concealed in terms of being unknown, secreted away. This concealment is by nature, secret. It is used in the Second Song for good reason and belongs with its specific content. But the verb we need to look at which means also protection through concealment, is עלם *alam* meaning *to hide, to conceal*. This forms the hidden pun which creates a bridge to a very important verbal root in the Fourth Song.

The next task, to examine the Hebrew roots connected with the Aramaic, is complex to explain, partly because it is intuitive for the Semitic mind, and consists of what is in the memory regarding the poetry and prophecy of the scriptures. It would not be analysed like this normally because it is instinctive, but here it must be in order to illustrate the Christological ambience of Luke 11.4 and how this informs the task of the disciple who must undergo trial, take up his cross and follow his Master. So let us proceed to these connections. We will see that the verbs עלל *alal*, עלם *alam*, אלם *alam*, create a constellation in the hinterland of the Aramaic verb אלל *alal* in Luke 11.4, they stand as points of light in the mystery of Christ, informing our Christology, illuminating our understanding of His Passion, and thus also the trial of the disciple. We learn more of how the Father cared for the Son in His Passion and therefore what we are asking of the Father as disciples in Luke 11.4. From this constellation we should not omit יעל *ya'al* *he grew up: he grew up before us like a root in dry ground* Isaiah 53.2 which belongs in the puns and carries the same nuances of silence, hiddenness, lack of recognition of the Servant. This is from the verbal root עלה *alah*, and among its meanings is, of course, *the above*, which in Chaldee Aramaic means *the Most High*. It is in itself a rich vein to be mined in terms of the Incarnation. So this constellation would be something like: *bound/unbound, hidden and protected, silent, and then lastly ascending/growing up*.

Let us note clearly that a pun is *sound based*. Thus the Hebrew עלל *alal* which we saw above is related to the Aramaic verb in Luke 11.4, forms a hidden pun with עלם *alam* meaning *to hide, to conceal* and it carries a nuance of eternity about it as it also means *eternal* as עולם *olam*. When this verbal root is used with an *aleph* instead of an *ayin* in the root,

⁸ Note the reflection of the Hebrew buried Eucharistic image in this below, and we recall *the gathering of the fragments* after the feeding of the five thousand, *so that nothing is wasted*. John 6.12

אִלָּם *alam*, it **sounds the same**, because in both roots the initial consonant is unsounded, only the vowel is sounded beneath it. אִלָּם *alam* means *to be silent, to be bound* as the grain is bound in the field and no longer has the wind singing though it, but it is silent.⁹ See also Augustine on the grain which is gathered.¹⁰ This is used in the Fourth Song Isaiah 53.7 of the Lamb silent and bound before His shearers. When we apply this to the passion of the disciple as indicated in this verse of the Lord's Prayer, the nuance of *being hidden* not only is consonant with the Lord's Passion as described in the Servant Songs, but also it describes that truth so vital in danger: *Your life is hidden with Christ in God*. This is also a Eucharistic image buried in the Fourth Song in Isaiah 53.7 and is used there of the Servant as the Silent Lamb bound before His shearers, the grain bound in its sheaf, silent. These riches of the Fourth Song include a cross reference to Isaac and His binding. The connection between Genesis 22 and the Fourth Song is profound as we will see. The actual verb used of Isaac's binding in Genesis 22.9 is עָקַד *akad* and is directly *to bind*. It takes us immediately to Isaiah 53.5 *by his stripes we are healed*, for as an adjective it means *striped, ring-streaked* and hence it describes the scourging of the Passion. These are all nuances, reflections of the Passion. We remind ourselves at this point that Our Lord is using the tools of the oral tradition of a teacher. Luke 11.4 is essentially a parallelism functioning as part of His Rabbinic method to present the symbolic meaning above and beyond the literal meaning of the words He chooses to use. The onomatopoeia in the verb עָלַל *alal* in both Hebrew and Aramaic conveys the sense of binding, and the verb אִלָּם *alam* of the Fourth Song continues it.

These images in multiple reflections are connected in multiple layers for those who have the poetry and prophecy of the Old Testament in their memories, as those living with the oral tradition had. For them it was intuitive, a spiritual instinct quickened by the Holy Spirit in a heart burning with love for the Lord. These are the first disciples, those who, like Cleopas on the road to Emmaus, responded to the opening of the scriptures. They listened to the Our Father in the context of the themes of the Magister's wider teaching, not as something isolated and narrow. Also we have to bear in mind always when dealing with the texts of the Gospels that **the Gospels are like a summary** of what happened and what was taught. There is always more, far more, behind them.

So we ask ourselves perhaps why all this intricate and delicate interweaving of image and nuance in the poetry of the Lord's Prayer and in the poetic prose of the Old Testament quoted above? I suggest that Our Lord was saying to the disciples that they were to take up their

⁹ Gesenius has a note on this verb as used in Psalm 56.1 *the silent dove among strangers*, as designating the subject of the Psalm.

¹⁰ "Your faith recognizes this Grain of wheat which has fallen into the ground, and has become multiplied in death. Your faith, I say, acknowledges this Grain, because it dwells in your hearts. For what Christ has said about Himself, no Christian hesitates in accepting. Yet it is clear that once that Grain had died and been multiplied, many other grains were scattered upon the earth... Listen to Him, for He cannot lie. What He advises, He has done Himself; He instructs by His precept, He shows what to do by His example. Christ did not love His life in this world... He was so powerful that He could say in all truth, *I have power to lay down My life and I have power to take it again. No one takes it from Me. I lay down my life, that I may take it again.*"

cross and follow Him or reminding them that their passion awaits them and how to pray regarding it. In the Our Father it is not a stark point that the Father would lead or bring or insert someone into temptation. Far be it. *“Let no one say when he is tempted: ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”*¹¹ But that temptation there will surely be and the prayer is that the **disciple be unbound by the Father**, loosed from the chains of temptation. When in temptation, Father unbind us. Such trials which might also be the passion of the disciple, who would be brought, like His Master before councils and judges, would necessitate a right silence, **a right being bound**, which is the redemptive aspect of the Passion. It is as if the disciple would be saying ‘reap me, harvest me, as the grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die, so bind me in my surrender...’ And we are reminded of course, of S Ignatius of Antioch in his martyrdom, also of the Didache (as grains of wheat scattered upon the hills...) We are reminded too of Isaac, bound in his surrender, trusting in the God his Father loves and knows. When considering the suggestions above it is important to remember what Fr Francesco Giosuè Voltaggio said ‘sometimes we make the mistake of looking for the “exact translation for a word.” Such an approach, he said, was “not in the mind of the rabbis and the Fathers of the Church,” ... and that therefore **the exegesis with its possibilities is a catechesis** rather than a literal translation of narrow exactitude which completely misses the point.

The above glance at the construction of the text and its poetic character, its interconnectedness with other scriptural prose poetry, creates the ambience of the problematic verse which both Christ and His hearers would be aware of. **Hence there is no explanation** of this offered by the **Evangelists**. Perhaps they assumed our knowledge of their scriptures (the Old Testament) which would have provided the context for this verse. So let us turn to these the scriptures of the Early Church, to learn more.

Specifically we are going to explore the journey from Beersheba to Moriah where Abraham was intending to offer his son as a burnt offering. This is a tender and profound narrative, and if you do not remember the details, it would be helpful if you would pause now and read it. Abraham was the friend of God¹². When this story of the binding of Isaac unfolds, Abraham has already met the Lord intimately, and talked with Him in past encounters. A trust has been forged between himself and God, there is knowledge, and there is love. When we enter the story, Abraham was in Beersheba, and Isaac, the miracle child, who has been born to him and Sarah, was a young man. The visiting angels who told him of the child of the promise¹³ were by then integral to **Abraham’s remembrance of how God relates to humankind**, and the voice of the Lord was known to this humble and obedient human being. Once more Abraham was approached by Divine Love.

The Church Fathers believed that Abraham knew that by obeying the command to sacrifice Isaac he was in some sense doing something which would have its completion in a future he

¹¹ James 1:13

¹² 2 Chronicles 20.7; Isaiah 41.8; James 2.23

¹³ Genesis 18.1-15

would never see from this world. By that they indicate that Abraham was a **type**¹⁴ of God the Father who sacrificed His Beloved Son, Jesus, and for whom there was no ram in the thicket who would remove this agony for both Father and Son. In Origen's words "... Abraham knew himself to prefigure the image of future truth. He knew the Christ was to be born from his seed, who also was to be offered as a truer victim for the whole world and was to be raised from the dead¹⁵." Also Saint Athanasius says "The Word 'took to himself descent from Abraham',¹⁶

Origen in particular has written extensively of the torment of the parent and child in this episode¹⁷. "'Take", therefore, the text says, "your dearest son Isaac, whom you love". Let it be, Lord, that you are reminding the father of the son; you add also, "dearest", whom you are commanding to be slain. Let this be sufficient for the father's torment. You add again also, "whom you love". Let the triple torment of the father be in this. Why is there need yet that you bring to mind also "Isaac"? Did Abraham not know that that dearest son of his, that one whom he loved, was called Isaac? But why is it added at this time? that Abraham might recall that you had said to him, "In Isaac shall your seed be called, and that in Isaac the promises shall be yours". The reminder of the name also produces hopelessness in the promises that were made under this name. But all these things happened because God was testing Abraham'. Also, many sermons have, I am sure, pointed to the virtue of obedience in Abraham, of his blind trust in the Lord to rescue him and his son from this sacrifice. **But** and this is a very important 'but' it must be remembered in reading Genesis 22, that Abraham says early on in the narrative to the servants...*stay here, the boy and I will go yonder and worship and we will return to you...* (my paraphrase) In this sentence Abraham reveals that he knows full well that God is good, moral, all Love, and that this is really an opportunity for Abraham to transcend himself and to reveal his faith in his Lord. He also says further on when walking with the boy, to the lad's question '*where is the lamb for the sacrifice?*' that *God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice...* Abraham is within a relationship of friendship with God, and he is entering into the present experience.

Preachers have brought out the significance of the ram as a symbol of the Christ who was the Lamb of God sacrificed for our iniquity many centuries after the episode on Mount Moriah. Let us pause for a moment to look at the nature of the command itself. This command from the Lord to Abraham was seemingly opposed to the very nature of God and contrary to the distinctive religion of Israel, for she did not practise human sacrifice. Also, through the Torah, the Priests and the Prophets, Israel had received a spiritual formation which eschewed such religious praxis. Yet this story endured in the Judaic canon and has passed into ours.

¹⁴ The *Catholic Encyclopaedia* (copyright Kevin Knight 2009) defines a *type* as follows: 'a person, a thing, or an action, having its own independent and absolute existence, but at the same time intended by God to prefigure a future person, thing, or action'.

¹⁵ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 8.1

¹⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Letter to Epictetus*, 5

¹⁷ See, for example, Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 8.2: The full extract may be found in *Ancient Christian Commentaries, Old Testament II*, ed Mark Sheridan OSB, IVP 2002, page 102.

Kierkegaard discusses this moment in the interaction between a good God of love, and the human beings involved, in terms of ‘the teleological suspension of the ethical’.¹⁸ Kierkegaard’s point is that **for a moment**, and for a reason, the ethics of Divine Love are **suspended**: therefore God is not violating the very nature of His own Being by making this command from whose consequences He knows He will ‘rescue’ all involved.

But for Abraham there is a testing. In Origen’s words: “What do you say to these things Abraham? What kind of thoughts are stirring in your heart? A word has been uttered by God that is such as to shatter and try your faith... What are you reconsidering? Are you thinking... that if the promise has been given to me in Isaac but I offer him for a burnt offering, it remains that that promise holds no hope...Or... that it is impossible for him who promised to lie; be that as it may the promise shall remain?”¹⁹ I suggest that Abraham’s faith is constant. And this is important for the connection with the Our Father. We need to understand Luke 11.4 in terms of our knowledge of God, and seek the deeper and wider reality of the verse.

The place Abraham has to journey towards is מֹרְיָה²⁰ which in the Hebrew means an ascent to a hill which is revealed by the Lord. The Patristic writers interpret this as the spiritual ascent which Abraham has to make in order to fulfil what is essentially a mysterious, and contrary command²¹. It is the Moriah near Jerusalem which later became the Temple Mount on which Solomon would build the Temple, and which Islam believes is the hill upon which this testing of Abraham actually took place. Jesus was crucified outside the walls of the city within sight of the Temple and the Al Aqsa mosque stands over it today²².

Let us turn to the quality of silence which surrounds this walk to Mount Moriah. It is eloquent. The silence actually begins immediately after Abraham has received the command from God, that is as the testing begins, at the onset of his passion. The text gives no response from him except that the following morning he rose early and saddled his ass to do what was asked of him. Refer to the silence of Our Lord’s Passion and that of the disciple as discussed above.

This silence tells me that I will only comprehend what was going on in Abraham if I recall the moment in Genesis chapter 18 when Abraham intercedes with the Lord for Sodom. In this extremely beautiful interaction between Abraham and the Lord, Abraham’s total confidence in his Lord is the governing factor. He can tease God, and humour Him, and it is done with absolute love and respect, for Abraham has understood that there is no one who is good but God alone²³. On that basis he presses on to conclude the conversation with God, and they take leave of each other in silence, both completely at one with each other.

¹⁸ This phrase is to be found in Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 1843, under ‘Problem 1: Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?’

¹⁹ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, 8.1. *ibid*, page 102.

²⁰ Moriah

²¹ For instance: Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 8.3 ‘Go into the high land’, *ibid* page 102-3

²² By long tradition it is believed that the Dome of the Rock a few metres from the mosque is the actual spot on which the testing of Abraham took place.

²³ Mark 10.18, Luke 18.19

If we remember this, and re enter the drama with the binding of Isaac, then Abraham's silence here is actually a silence of total confidence in the goodness of God. When Isaac breaks the silence to ask his question "where is the lamb for the sacrifice²⁴..." Abraham's answer is ready and true. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews understood this when he referred to Abraham's faith, for he states that "By faith Abraham did not hesitate... thinking that God is able to raise him (Isaac) even from the dead²⁵."

That belief that Abraham understood the future mystery with which his obedience was imbued **even to the point of belief in the resurrection**, is what underscores the conversation in the Gospel of John chapter 8²⁶ between Jesus and the Jewish authorities. If those who claimed to have Abraham as their father had understood what Abraham stood for they would have recognised in Jesus the Beloved Son who must be sacrificed. They would have understood the Heart of the Father.

This **link** between the conversation between Abraham and Elohim²⁷ (See footnote) in chapter 18 and that in chapter 22 is visible right at the start when God approaches Abraham calling him by the name which symbolises the promise made to him that he would be the father of many nations. That is, God does not call him as 'Abram'... thus indicating that the promise is in doubt. He says 'Abraham²⁸'. In other words the promise stands firm in the name by which he is addressed. **Abraham immediately recognises this** and enters the game as it were... Perhaps he really thought something like 'My Lord is calling me by the name which embodies the promise. Then He is telling me to do something which would destroy that promise. So He is testing me to see if I will always believe in His goodness, His trustworthiness. So let me go along with this. I will get up in the morning, saddle the ass, cut the wood... and then if He has not provided something other than Isaac by the time we reach Moriah, I will bind Isaac, and raise the knife in my hand...'

All this he actually did. All this God allowed to happen right up to the last moment! I wonder who was being put to the test, the Lord or Abraham, or both perhaps. What Abraham said in answer to Isaac's question is what happened. God provided, and only at the very last moment. But on another level entirely, **God the Father drew His friend Abraham into the wound at the heart of the Trinity²⁹**. This is very important for the understanding of Luke 11.4. This is

²⁴ Genesis 22.7

²⁵ Hebrews 11.17,19

²⁶ John 8.12 – end.

²⁷ Antiphon for Quinquagesima Sunday. In Genesis 18, when Abraham welcomes the three, he addresses them as 'My Lord', singular. This name for God which is linguistically plural and which is used in Genesis 22 is not used in Genesis 18. However, the visit of the three men in Genesis 18 to Abraham is reflected on by the Church in this traditional liturgical text: 'While Abraham dwelt in the plain of Mamre, he beheld three young men coming down by the way: he saw Three, and he adored One'.

²⁸ Abram is given the name 'Abraham' in Genesis 17.5 by God, Elohim.

²⁹ Caesarius of Arles, 470/1 – 543, understood the reference to 'the third day' in Genesis 22.4 to indicate the mystery of the Trinity. See his Sermon 84.2: 'The fact that he arrived at the place of sacrifice on the third day is shown to represent the mystery of the Trinity. That the third day should be accepted in the sense of a promise or mystery of the Trinity is found frequently in the sacred Books. In Exodus we read, "We will go a three days'

what the Early Church understood, and see Caesarius of Arles in footnote. Abraham was given insight and experience of the Divine Gift of the Son and the Divine Sacrifice of the Son. It is the use of the phrase “And they went on together³⁰...” in this story, which illuminates the entry of Abraham into this Holy Mystery.

We would like to look at this word ‘together’ in the original Hebrew. This phrase appears twice, at key points on the journey, in Genesis 22.6 and 8. The crucial word, *together*, shares a common root with the word *only*, as in *only son*, in verse 2. It is יחדו *yaghdau* from יחד *yaghad* and this means to be united, but it carries with it the sense of solitariness and I would suggest that within that solitude there is purity of heart. From this word comes the understanding of chastity which is essential to the monastic life³¹. Those who transmitted the oral tradition of this story and those scribes and redactors who wrote it down, chose this term because it expressed the **spiritual transcendence** which lay at the heart of this union and to which Abraham was being called in this testing. This spiritual ascent and transcendence was the essence of the journey to Moriah and its purpose. From this word one has the sense of that silence which encapsulates the father Abraham in his union with his beloved son and also with his union with God. This word is also used as a term of endearment: dear, or darling, beloved. It is this union which informs Abraham’s faith and which is the rock upon which it stands. Isaac is drawn into this union between Abraham and God by virtue of his role in the testing, and by virtue of the quality of Abraham’s silent confidence in the goodness of God.

It is this oneness which is at the Heart of the relationship between Jesus and His Father as He enters upon His Incarnate Life. “*You will all flee and leave me, but I am not alone. My Father is with me*”³². That is how it was for Isaac. That is also how it was for Abraham. It is also true for the disciple in his passion when Luke 11.4 is rightly understood.

It is also telling that when Abraham dismisses the servants, he tells them not that he is going ‘over there’ to sacrifice the child of the promise, but that they are going ‘to worship’³³. Let us look at this also in the context of all we have opened out so far. It stems from the root שחג *shaghash*. This means to bow down or prostrate oneself. It is an expression of obedience, an act of worship, from which Abraham tells his servants he and his son will both return³⁴. Once more we are in the realms of the Divine Mystery of a future Death and Resurrection which will have to be endured and from which there will be a return. The ram in the thicket will be

journey into the wilderness”. [Exodus 8.27] Again, upon arriving at Mount Sinai it is said to the people, “Be sanctified, and be ready for the third day”. When Joshua was about to cross the Jordan, he admonished the people to be ready on the third day. Moreover, our Lord arose on the third day. We have mentioned all this because blessed Abraham on the third day came to the place which the Lord had showed him”. Ibid, page 103.

³⁰ See the following paragraph.

³¹ See Sebastian Brock *The Luminous Eye*, Cistercian Publications, 1992. Chapter 8, *The Ascetic Ideal: Saint Ephrem and Proto-Monasticism*, contains a detailed exposition of the Syriac words used to describe different forms of consecrated life, including the *Ihidaya*. There is also a survey of *Purity of Heart* in early ascetic and monastic literature in a collection of essays published in 1999 by The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, under the title: *Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature*.

³² John 16.32

³³ Compare Genesis 22:5 with Matthew 26.36

³⁴ Genesis 22.5

the Christ, the Beloved of the Father. He will be sacrificed for sin and on the third day He will rise from Death. This mention of the third day is also integral to Abraham's inclusion in the Mystery for it is on the third day of his journey with Isaac that Abraham looks up and sees Mount Moriah in the distance³⁵.

Abraham believed, from the very moment of the command, that God would provide the sacrifice which God had asked of him. He believed all along in the goodness and holiness of the Lord. It is with this quality of togetherness, this spiritual transcendence and purity in his heart, that he acted upon the command.

This is the real meaning of Luke 11.4. It is rooted in the Paschal Mystery, the Passion and the Resurrection. In this Mystery the disciple is united with the Godhead and delivered from sin.

THY restless feet now cannot go
For us and our eternal good,
As they were ever wont. What though
They swim, alas! in their own flood?

Thy hands to give Thou canst not lift,
Yet will Thy hand still giving be;
It gives, but O, itself's the gift!
It gives tho' bound, tho' bound 'tis free!

Christ Crucified

By Richard Crashaw

³⁵ Genesis 22.4