This collection of eighteen essays, most of them of considerable length and depth, is centered upon the interpretation of what in Christian tradition is commonly called “the sacrifice of Isaac” (Gen 22) in early modern Europe. The essays stem from an international and interdisciplinary conference in March 2005 in Emden, Germany. The various articles look at the understanding of and the depiction of Gen 22 in the church as well as in the arts (e.g., commentary, disputation, sermon, theatrical play, devotional guide, meditation landscape, altar tableau, sacred poem), and they explore the ways in which stage, painting, sculpture, and sacred music modify and enhance the interpretation of the biblical text. All the articles are written in German by a group of primarily German scholars, although several hold an academic position outside of Germany (e.g., France, Holland, Sweden, Switzerland, United States). The contributors are active in a variety of academic fields, including German literature, musicology, art history, theology, and church history.

The first three articles look at various expressions of Gen 22 in painting. Friedhelm Hartenstein opens the volume with an exegetical and theological discussion of what he calls the “hiddenness of the saving God.” His article serves as a guide to the structure and the content of Gen 22 as well as to the literature relating to its theological message. The first part of the article is devoted to the literary features of Gen 22, while the second part...
looks at Gen 22 in the context of Gen 21:8–21 and Exod 20:20, with focus on God’s distance from but also availability to humankind. The third and last part ponders the question of God’s character and behavior as displayed in Gen 22.

Ulrich Heinen then highlights the various aspects of the portrayal of the sacrifice of Isaac in the artistry of the Italian renaissance artist Ghiberti, famous for his sculptures and metalworking, and his contemporary, the architect Brunelleschi. Heinen focuses on the portrayals of the sacrifice of Isaac situated on the bronze doors of the Baptistry in the cathedral in Florence, and he demonstrates how these portrayals mark the beginning of a new epoch in art history.

Christine Göttler’s article centers on the portrayal of Abraham and Isaac in the so-called Viennese Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy, a typical example of Dutch painting of the fifteenth century. She explores the function of such paintings as a means of evoking the viewer to meditation and reflection, with specific focus on Isaac as a typology for Jesus.

The following three articles focus on early Protestant interpretation of Gen 22. First, Johann Anselm Steiger investigates Luther’s understanding of the sacrifice of Isaac, with a focus on God’s testing of Abraham and on Abraham’s faith in God. Luther’s commentary encourages Christians to differentiate between God’s testing and that of the devil. Steiger further looks at the subsequent interpretative tradition in Lutheran Protestantism during the Baroque period, during the Enlightenment, and in the nineteenth century.

Alexander Dobbert-Dunker continues with a related essay about Lutheran interpretations of the account of Jacob’s wrestling with God (Gen 32). Luther compares this passage to Gen 22, as both texts deal with God’s role as a tempter of humankind and with the role of faith in God in fighting God/his temptation. Jacob is thus to be regarded as an example of faith for each individual Christian.

Daniel Bolliger stays in the same period of the Reformation. Genesis 22 serves as an example in his investigation of the characteristics of the exegesis of the early Reformation movement (e.g., Jean Calvin, Hyldrych Zwingli, Jean Crespin). He looks at six concepts in relation to Abraham’s actions: child sacrifice; the unity of God; the unity of faith and work; the unity of faith and renunciation; the unity of confession and public life; and the unity of faith and duty.

Barbara Mahlmann-Bauer notes the motif of Abraham as a suffering father in patristic and Protestant exegesis, exploring its influence upon the religious dramas of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. She highlights how Gregory of Nyssa enabled the hearers/readers of his sermons to take part in the drama of Gen 22, as did subsequent Protestant
exegetes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She then discusses the religious dramas, all concerning the sacrifice of Isaac, by Theodor Beza and Jacobus Jacomotus (sixteenth/seventeenth century), by Jesuit scholars (e.g., Jacob Schöpfer), and by Jacob Pontanus and Johann Caspar Lavater.

Ralf Georg Bogner continues with the theme of drama. He looks at German-speaking theater performances about Abraham and Isaac in the early modern period, with focus on the plays by Hand Sachs, Christian Weise, and Johann Caspar Lavater. In particular, he investigates how the biblical text is transformed through the change of media (text to drama) with regard to its plot and the perspectives through which the story is told.

The following three articles return to the interpretation of Gen 22 in art. Joseph Imorde explores the concepts of obedience and pardon as conveyed by the motif of the sacrifice of Isaac, with focus on the painting of the Italian artist Andrea del Sarto. Nils Büttner then investigates the motif of the sacrifice of Isaac as found in Dutch landscape paintings from the sixteenth century. In particular, he explores the ways in which the choice of scenery in the painting interacts with the biblical narrative. Finally, Christian Tümpel highlights the influence of Protestant literal readings of the Old Testament upon the portrayal of Abraham and Isaac in the paintings by Rembrandt and his contemporaries. The depiction of a despairing Abraham, as torn between the love for his son and his obligation of obedience toward God, is one example thereof.

The final seven articles return to the world of words. (1) Marius Reiser investigates the interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac in the biblical commentary by the Jesuit Benito Perera (1535–1610). The commentary takes the form of fifteen disputations (questions and answers), with focus on theological issues. Reiser discusses the characteristics of the commentary, with focus on Perera’s use of Philo, Josephus, and medieval Jewish exegetes and on his relation to his own Catholic tradition. (2) Renate Steiger explores the Isaac-Christ typology as found in the Lutheran reflections from the Baroque period on the passion of Christ. She looks at Bible commentaries, paintings, arias, cantatas, and the like. Among other things, she explores the ways in which both Isaac and the ram were understood as foreshadowing Jesus’ death on the cross. (3) Vanessa von der Lieth discusses the poetic writings of the seventeenth-century Austrian mystic and poet Catharina Regina von Greiffenberg. She focuses on the allusions to the sacrifice of Isaac in Greiffenberg’s sonnets and explores Greiffenberg’s theological reflections about faith and about the steadfastness of God’s word. (4) Heidrun Führer investigates the depiction of Abraham’s and Jephthah’s human sacrifices in the Jesuit educational plays by Jacob Pontanus and Jacob Balde. In particular, she highlights the interaction between human free will and obedience to God, as well as the interaction between the suffering of the true believer and God’s grace, as portrayed in the plays. (5) Hermann Jung explores the use of
the Gen 22 narrative in librettos from the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. In addition, he provides a useful list of classical music with Abraham and Isaac as its theme, ranging from 1619 to 1997. (6) Lothar Steiger discusses the role of Søren Kierkegaard as author. He also includes his own sermon on Gen 22, composed “in the spirit of Kierkegaard” and preached in January 2006. (7) Finally, Theodor Mahlmann provides a translation of Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation of Gen 22 from the Greek text. The book also includes a number of color prints of some of the paintings discussed, an index of the persons discussed, and a source index of the biblical passages referred to.

This is a valuable volume for biblical scholars who are interested in the reception history of Gen 22 and/or in the ways in which art interprets biblical accounts. Most of the articles are written by experts in fields outside biblical scholarship, and they often contain technical discussions demanding at least some knowledge in art history. In fact, many of the articles place the emphasis on the artistic aspects of a given painting or sculpture. On the one hand, this might increase their value for readers coming from outside the immediate field of biblical scholarship and those whose interest is first and foremost religious art. On the other hand, it might make this volume less attractive to the typical Old Testament scholar who is primarily interested in the resulting exegesis of Gen 22. More specifically, as many of the (very long) articles do not feel the need to differentiate clearly between the discussion of the artistry and the hermeneutical discussion, it is difficult for the average biblical scholar interested in Gen 22 to gain an impression of the exegetical value of a given piece of art without reading the whole article. Despite these possible shortcomings, however, this is an impressive and valuable volume.