

MASTER OF LIFE: WHY GOD COMMANDS ABRAHAM TO SACRIFICE ISAAC (GEN. 22)

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Commentators through the centuries have struggled to explain why God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the child born through a miracle to Sarah and him in their old age (Gen. 22).¹ Von Rad declared that the story is so rich in meaning that there is no primary interpretation.² A prevalent theory, based on the first verse of the chapter, is that Abraham not only passes the “test” of faith in what usually is called “the Binding of Isaac” or “the Akedah,” but also becomes the model of obedience to God for all time.

To refer to the passage in these ways, however, is to emphasize Abraham’s act rather than God’s command that sets the events in motion and begs the important questions; ‘Why does God need to try Abraham at this point in his life, after so many other trials, and why this horrible test? Did Abraham do something that prompted God to command this sacrifice?’ A popular interpretation is that God wants to demonstrate that the ritual of child sacrifice is now forbidden;³ most scholars have rejected this idea because Isaac is not an infant and there is no urgent crisis, the two situations when such offerings were made.⁴ The medieval commentator Rashi quotes a midrash that Isaac had boasted of his religious devotion, stating that he would gladly offer his life for God; God punishes him by bringing him to the brink of death.⁵ Polish offers the view that the command to sacrifice Isaac is God’s punishment of Abraham for expelling Ishmael from the camp. Since Genesis 22:1 begins *After these things*, the events referred to involve the treatment of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21; Abraham must atone for the expulsion of his son.⁶ I will counter that this politically correct interpretation is refuted by God’s explicit command for Abraham to listen to Sarah’s demand to expel Ishmael in Genesis 21:12 and that it is not so much atonement that God seeks from Abraham but a test to see whether he knows Who is the true Master of life.

Buber thinks that it is Abraham who must atone for questioning why he has not been granted an heir in Genesis 15:2-3; the command to sacrifice Isaac is made “as if to actively atone for that moment of doubt.”⁷ Yet Abraham’s

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doubts seem to be answered in that very moment as Abram *put his trust in the LORD* and God in turn *reckoned it to his merit* in Genesis 15:6. I believe that of much greater significance than this questioning of God in Genesis 15 is the ongoing doubts Abraham will have about God's plan to give him a child.

The best-known treatment of the passage is that of Søren Kierkegaard (*Fear and Trembling*) who sees Abraham as the "knight of faith" who is willing to be involved in a "teleological suspension of the ethical"; Abraham silently renounces everything he holds dear, including his love of Isaac and the sense of justice that compelled him to challenge God in His pronouncement of doom over Sodom and Gomorrah, to obey God.⁸ Many, such as Milton Steinberg, find this view abhorrent, saying that the whole point of the story is that God does not want immoral tribute.⁹ Simon argues that Judaism is a moral religion and would never suspend the ethical; this is why Abraham is ordered to stay his hand. The command to sacrifice Isaac is a way to warn against a complete identification of the religion with naturalistic ethics.¹⁰

While all these philosophical positions are interesting, it seems to me that the passage is not so much about ethics or love from a human point of view as it is all about God's demonstration of God's power over life and the perpetuation of the covenant.

Levenson states that the Akedah is a crucial moment in religious history. He argues that the Akedah takes the earlier promises of God (e.g., Gen. 12) that were rooted only in God's grace and grounds those promises "on the basis of Abraham's willingness to donate Isaac for sacrifice."¹¹ The force of the promises is now based on Abraham's act, not on God's Word. Levenson's reading is focused on Abraham and is heavily influenced by all the later sources that have been so important in the religious traditions. Blumenthal focuses, instead, on God and asks the question: 'What did God do in Genesis 22 that He had not previously done?' Blumenthal states that it is that He swears by Himself that He will keep the promises He had made earlier. For Abraham and the Biblical tradition, God's Word was not enough; God's grace, God's promise was not enough. Abraham forces God to go all the way and to actually swear by God's very own Self.¹²

I disagree with both of these interpretations. I do not think that Genesis 22 is foundational in the Hebrew Bible; it is never mentioned again in any bibli-

cal book.¹³ One would think that a foundational story would warrant some explicit reference. While I quite agree that we should focus on the reason for God's command, I believe that we should see Genesis 22 in the context of the Abraham saga.

While there is no further reference to this incident in the Hebrew Bible, the passage influenced Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought.¹⁴ I believe that, in a sense, Genesis 22 has been over-interpreted to the point that it is difficult to simply read the narrative without these layers of exegesis. Unlike commentary that, for example, emphasizes how "monstrous" God's test is,¹⁵ we have to rid ourselves of all preconceptions and biases and read the passage in its context. Our problems with this "difficult" narrative are just that, our problems. In a very different manner, I will suggest that God wants Abraham to demonstrate that he knows who is in control of life.

THE COMMAND TO SACRIFICE ISAAC IN CONTEXT

In the Book of Genesis, God speaks to Abraham eight times and all of these speeches relate to his children and/or descendants.¹⁶ These speeches are clear: God will provide him with innumerable progeny. In Genesis 12, God states: *I will make of you a great nation*. In Genesis 13, in approving of Abraham's separation from Lot, his nephew and presumptive heir, God states: *I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted*. In Genesis 15, Abraham complains to God that he is getting older and still does not have an heir: *O Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless ... Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir*. God replies, *That one shall not be your heir but your very own issue shall be your heir*. God assures him that He will provide a son, and Abraham bends his head: *And because he put his trust in the LORD, He reckoned it to his merit*. God approves of Abraham's submission and makes a covenant in dramatic fashion, declaring the future for Abraham's descendants.

And yet, in the very next chapter (Gen. 16), Abraham accepts Sarah's suggestion to cohabit with Hagar so that Sarah can have a son through her. Sarah acknowledges that God has closed her womb and wants to have a child through a surrogate.¹⁷ Sarah's idea and Abraham's compliance fly in the face

of what God has commanded and what Abraham had seemed to accept in the previous chapter. Abraham may have thought that since the promised child would be “his issue” and since God had not specified that Sarah had to be the mother, this course of action of producing a child through her maidservant in order to perpetuate himself and his covenant with God would be acceptable to God. But if this was Abraham’s thought-process, and since he had been so desperate for an heir (Gen. 15), and since Sarah was already way beyond the age when she could reproduce, why had he not taken another wife or concubine at an earlier point? He was 75 in Genesis 12:4 and 85 in Genesis 16:3 (cf. 16:16, where Abram is 86 when Ishmael is born, and 17:24 where Abraham is 99 when Ishmael is 13). Sarah is 90 in 17:17, which means that she was 76 when she made her request for Abraham to take Hagar some 14 years earlier. Sarah’s childbearing years had ended thirty years earlier, and yet Abram had made no move to produce a child with anyone else. Did he never have this idea until Sarah suggested it? Even if this restraint is partly a tribute to his love for Sarah, it seems that he has been waiting for God to fulfill His promise. Even though he has waited so long, his mistake still is that he does not wait for God to fulfill His promise.

Sarah herself regrets her idea soon enough and blames Abraham and Hagar, the people who listened to her and followed her instructions. Sarah looks terrible here, but very human, in trying to fix her mistake when she treats the pregnant Hagar harshly with Abram’s acquiescence. But if Abram agrees to be with Hagar in order to produce an heir, why does he tell Sarah she can do anything she wants with his pregnant concubine?

When Hagar flees from Sarah’s mistreatment, an angel speaks to this runaway Egyptian maidservant, which is the first time an angel speaks in the Bible (16:7-12). God’s reaction to Sarah’s plan is interesting. God goes along with it to a certain extent. Apparently, God recognizes that this diversion from His plan is not Hagar’s fault and that the child is the progeny of His chosen messenger. Indeed, God’s promise to Hagar seems to be the same promise God has made several times to Abraham in that Hagar will bear a son who will be a father of Abraham’s innumerable descendants (16:10-11). Still, this is different from saying that Ishmael will be the one to perpetuate the covenant.

It is now, in Genesis 17, that God will provide the heir to the covenant to Abraham through Sarah. Abraham scoffs at the possibility, and this skepticism shows that he has lost his faith in God's original promise. For thirteen years, Abraham has lived with Ishmael, the son produced because of Sarah's idea. When God speaks to Abram, renaming him as Abraham, creating a covenant with him based on the ritual of circumcision, Ishmael is very much a part of things, and Abraham looks upon him as his heir. The narrative mentions Ishmael's circumcision no less than three times (17:23, 25 and 26); his place in the tribe seems prominent. Abraham and Sarah receive new names at the same time as they receive the command of circumcision, the ritual of scarring the organ that will produce the promised fertility (Gen. 17). It seems that Abraham cannot produce the chosen heir until he is circumcised. Ishmael's age of 13 at this event reminds us that he was born well before his father is circumcised; his circumcision enables his fertility (Gen. 17:20).¹⁸

Abraham laughs at God's promise to produce another child with Sarah. If God reckons Abraham's faith in that promise as righteousness in Genesis 15, how does God reckon the demurral and mocking in Genesis 17?

All of this is about fertility: Abraham must know that fertility, life itself, comes from God. The promise of fertility must be fulfilled by God so that the world will see that He rewards those who do His will (Gen. 12:1-3).

After Gen. 17, God apparently feels the need to come back and visit Abraham and Sarah with the same message about the miraculous birth of Isaac in Genesis 18. Sarah scoffs at the announcement of a child, doubting God's ability to make her fertile (18:12). Note that there **is** no protest on behalf of Ishmael's rights; there is no mention of Ishmael at all in this story.

In Genesis 21, Isaac is born and grows; at a celebration of his weaning, Sarah sees Ishmael *metzahek* "playing" and demands that Ishmael be expelled from the clan so that he will not inherit the leadership ahead of her son Isaac. Ishmael mocks Isaac, the miracle child, as Abraham did.¹⁹ Abraham agrees, reluctantly, but only because God commands it (21:12-13).

In 17 and 18, Abraham and Sarah do not have enough faith, just as Abraham had not had enough faith that God would protect them from Pharaoh in Genesis 12:11-20.²⁰ It is possible that it is this lack of faith that provokes God's command to sacrifice Isaac. It is not just an 'uncanny' God who com-

mands these things; it is a God Who has a plan and will fulfill this plan no matter what the human characters do.

It may be that it was not so much that the mother of the child had to be Sarah, as that a child through the previously infertile Sarah (she is described as barren when we first meet her in Genesis 11:30) had been God's plan, and the plan could not be changed. We see both God's rigidity and flexibility. He insists on His original plan, but allows for the unplanned Ishmael, and will not let him die in the wilderness either in utero (16) or as a boy (21) and gives him a great destiny. Still, Ishmael is not to be the heir, so that when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, He states: *Take your son, your only son, Isaac*, as if Ishmael never existed.

Perhaps God commands the sacrifice of Isaac because Abraham has not sufficiently trusted in God, and wants Abraham to show that his trust is complete. For any objections we may have, this is what the narrative implies. The test of Genesis 22 is decreed to see if Abraham will do what he is supposed to do. Of course Abraham does not tell Sarah; it is her fault to begin with. God states: *For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me*. To paraphrase: "Now I know that you know that I am the master of all procreation and fertility." God keeps Sarah infertile during her child bearing years so that He can make her reproduce supernaturally for the first time at an extremely advanced age. He sends a series of Ten Plagues to show that the Egyptian magicians might replicate a few of them but cannot match the Plague of the Firstborn (Ex. 7:14-11:10). God leads the Israelites of the Exodus into a trap, a position with their backs against the Sea, to prove that His power trumps that of the strongest human political entity (Ex. 14). Miracles such as the birth of Isaac are not only designed to save but also to demonstrate God's Power.

Abraham and Sarah, in Genesis 17 and 18, respectively, mock God's Power in their laughter. The birth of Yitzhak, "he will laugh," certainly should have been more than sufficient response to their laughter. Perhaps Yitzhak should not be translated "he will laugh" but "**He** will laugh." Isaac's birth should have been sufficient to teach Abraham and Sarah that God has a plan for them and can perform any miracle. They should have integrated the meaning of this birth and understood that Isaac was the one to carry on the covenant. I do not think that God initially had any plans to do anything further in this

regard. God had told Abraham in Genesis 17 that Isaac would be the one to carry on the covenantal promise and that Ishmael would have a separate but great destiny.

It is the event described in Genesis 21 that motivates God to take further action. While it is not clear what Ishmael is doing, the verb *metzahek* is certainly loaded with meaning; Ishmael seems to be mocking the celebration of Isaac or both.

Sarah understands, on her level, that Ishmael will not make way for Isaac, and demands that Ishmael should be sent away from the clan so that he will be out of the picture. She is doing this for her own reason: ambition for her son.²¹

Abraham, for his part, still does not fully understand, either. He does not reprimand Ishmael for his mocking, scoffing that also disrespects God's miracle. In fact, he is grieved with the thought of expelling Ishmael.

Abraham, Sarah and Ishmael all have mocked God's power, even though they have witnessed an incredible miracle with their own eyes.

It is not that God forbids His chosen ones from taking initiatives. There are, however, special cases where God wants His commands to be followed to the letter. The first Hebrew child, Abraham's link to the future, will be a demonstration of God's promise that this people will be fertile and multiply. The miracle child will show the very special relationship the Israelites will have to God.

Abraham's union with Hagar is not the problem. God even saves Hagar in Gen. 16 when she runs away, and tells her to go back to Abraham. At the same time, He tells Hagar what her son's nature will be: *He shall be a wild ass of a man; His hand against everyone, And everyone's hand against him* (Gen. 16:12). God thus makes clear that Ishmael will not have the qualities to be Abraham's successor.

The union with Hagar is not the problem, but it does lead to problems. So when God announces the impending birth of Isaac in Genesis 17, Abraham not only mocks the whole idea of a miracle child, as Sarah will do, but pleads for Ishmael to be his covenantal successor. Abraham is not listening well to God's very specific plan. Perhaps this is why God and His angels need to come again in Genesis 18, not only so Sarah will hear but to reaffirm the announcement in person.

Abraham does not show a general lack of faith. But he does not show that He fears God about this all-important subject.

After these things. God now feels that He must take further action in response to all this mocking. If Isaac's birth has not convinced Abraham of God's power, maybe the threat of Isaac's death will. This is the test, not so much of Abraham's faith in God but that God is in complete control of life. Abraham wanted Ishmael to inherit the covenant in 17:18 and did not want to expel Ishmael in 21:11. What God wants to test is whether Abraham is beyond laughing and fully understands, as Job will (Job 1:21), that it is God Who gives and it is God Who can take it away. This is why God says: *Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me (22:12, repeated in 22:16)*, the implication being (perhaps), 'the way that you wanted to place your favored one Ishmael before My command.'

We can try to look at these events from God's perspective. God acts, but God also reacts to human actions. Very often, if God does something in the Bible that we find difficult to understand, the text does give us an explicit reason for the action, if we are willing to hear it. Take a couple of the most problematic of God's actions, such as His wrestling with Jacob at the Jabbok in Genesis 32 or God's killing of Nadav and Avihu in Leviticus 10. In the former story, Jacob has brought his family across the river, to the side where Esau will come with his army, and crosses back over to the safer side. God wrestles with Jacob to show him that if he can even struggle with God, he can certainly struggle with Esau, as God says: *... for you have striven with God and you have prevailed (Gen. 32:29)*. In Leviticus 10, God explicitly says why He killed Nadav and Avihu: *Through those near to Me I show Myself holy*; whatever Aaron's sons did wrong, it was clearly something that demeaned God's Holiness. God says what motivates His actions and reactions.

Even though God did not explicitly say, 'Do not take another wife/surrogate/concubine,' God thought that it was clear that God, and only God, would give Abraham his true link to his descendants. God can be displeased with certain acts even when God did not issue a command or express displeasure at the possible act. God does not say, "Do not go to the other side of the Jabbok" but takes action when Jacob does. God does not tell Moses, 'Do not hit the rock' but God is disappointed and angry that Moses does not

just speak to the rock (Num. 20).

And so in the Akedah. God's command and promise was: *I will make of you a great nation* (Gen. 12:1); *I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth* (Gen. 13:16); ... *for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fertile* (17:5-6). It is correct to say that God does not say: 'Do not go have a baby any way that you like. Do not go get a surrogate or another wife or a concubine.' But God does say: 'I will give you a child.' In all of these verses, the emphasis should be on the "I."

God says, *For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me* (v. 12); this means that God *did not know* this before. It is as if God is saying, 'When you mocked Me, when you allowed your son to mock Me, when you resisted My clear instruction about Ishmael and Isaac, I did not know if you truly feared me.' And then God says, in a different way immediately after this first statement: *Because you have done this and not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore, and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes* (22:16-17). Referring to the promise of descendants as many as the stars (15:5; and perhaps the sand/dirt of 13:16), God reaffirms that Abraham's life will go on forever through his progeny now that Abraham finally completely understands that as the Creator of the world and all human beings, God is the Master of Life.

NOTES

1. The bibliography is voluminous and includes many articles in this journal. Indeed, there are books about aspects of the interpretation of this famous passage. Some key examples that provide further references are: C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1981), pp. 429-30, E. tr. (Minneapolis, 1985; London, 1986), pp. 351-2; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, New York, 1964), pp. 165-6; G. von Rad, *Genesis* [2nd edn, London, 1972], p. 242, = *Das erste Buch Mos Genesis* [5th ed, Göttingen, 1958], p. 207.

2. G. von Rad, *Das Opfer des Abraham* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971), p. 238).

3. Some critics state that the original narrative was either a protest against human sacrifice (J. Skinner, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (New York: Scribner's, 1910), pp. 331-2) or an etiological legend explaining why the custom of child sacrifice was replaced by animal sacrifice (H. Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895), pp. 211-214). Reik states that Genesis 22 hides an ancient *rite-de-passage*, an initiation ceremony for young men who are coming of age (T. Reik, *The Temptation* (New York: George Braziller, 1961).

4. N. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS; Phil., 1989), pp. 392-3; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), p. 354.
5. *Genesis Rabba* 55:4.
6. D. Polish, "Akedat Yitzhak—The Binding of Isaac," *Judaism* 6 (1957), pp. 17-21; M. Gellman, "Abraham and Isaac," *Moment* 1 (1976), pp. 39-41.
7. M. Buber, *On the Bible*, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1968) 41; originally "Le sacrifice d'Isaac," *Dieu Vivant* 22 (1952), pp. 69-76.
8. S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1954).
9. M. Steinberg, *Anatomy of Faith* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), p. 147.
10. E. Simon, "Torat Hayyim," *Conservative Judaism* 12 (1958), pp. 15–19.
11. J. D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1993), p. 139.
12. D. Blumenthal, "Confronting the Character of God: Text and Praxis" in *God in the Fray: Divine Ambivalence in the Hebrew Bible*, a *Festschrift* in honor of Walter Brueggemann, ed. T. Linafelt and T. Beal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 38-51.
13. Two possible allusions to the Akedah in the Bible may be 1. Genesis 26:5: *inasmuch as Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings*, and 2. Nehemiah 9:8: *You are the LORD God, who chose Abram, Who brought him out of the Ur of the Chaldean and changed his name to Abraham. Finding his heart true to You, You made a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, to give it to his descendants*. I think that these are general evaluations of Abraham's actions, faith and character. If anything, the list of nations in Nehemiah 9:8 shows that it is a direct reference to the Covenant of the Pieces in Genesis 15:18-19, an event that happened long before the Akedah in Genesis 22.
14. See, for instance, Y. Sherwood, "Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the 'Sacrifice' of Abraham's Beloved Son," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 2004.
15. M. Moskowitz, "Towards a Rehumanization of the Akedah and Other Sacrifices," *Judaism* 37 (1988), pp. 302-323.
16. Speeches to and dialogues with Abraham that involve the promise of offspring: Genesis 12:1-3, 12:7, 13:14-17, 15:1-18, 17:1-22, 18:1-33, 21:12-13 and 22:1-3.
17. "The simple association of fertility with divine blessing ... leads to a master narrative of infertility as equally originating from the deity, often, if not always, as a form of curse or punishment" (C. R. Moss and J. S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 12.
18. Eilberg-Schwartz states that the circumcision of Ishmael is God's acquiescence "to Abraham's wish that Ishmael be a progenitor of multitudes" (H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 148). Yet God had already promised Ishmael this great destiny in Gen. 16.
19. J. Schwartz, "Ishmael at Play: On Exegesis and Jewish Society," *HUCA* 66 (1995), pp. 203-221.
20. Turning to medieval Jewish commentators, Ramban (Moses ben Nachman) says that Abra-

