

# *Standalone Weekend*

## **“Father’s Day with Abraham”**

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**Digging Deeper**

*Standalone Weekend: “Father’s Day with Abraham”*

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@c1naz.org)

### **Background Notes**

**Key Scripture Text(s):** Genesis 22:1-19; Hebrews 11:17-19

### **Introduction**

The selected Old Testament reading for this week's *Background Notes* is known within the Jewish community as the "Akedah," from the Hebrew verb meaning "to bind" (*‘āqad*). A great deal has been attributed to this narrative which depicts God's command to Abraham to offer up his son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. It certainly sparked the Hebrew imagination, especially since Roman times, as Rabbis speculated about what God intended by the command, how it was actually carried out, and its lasting significance for our time. Among the common criticisms of this passage is the charge that Abraham was being asked to engage in pagan human sacrifice, with the objection, "How could God ask Abraham to do that?" Beyond these "ethical issues" is the question of Abraham's faith. The passage clearly begins with the explanation that God was testing Abraham, and so some studies pay attention to the "trial of faith" theme found there.

In light of our theme this weekend, one key message we need to consider is the role of Abraham as "father": in relationship to his son, Isaac; in relationship to what God asks of Abraham. And we connect with that message in our own experience, though we might well struggle with the precise nature of Abraham's test *as a father on Father's Day*. Fathers, God does ask a great deal of us when it comes to our families. At the same time he asks considerably more of us in our walk with Him. Those loyalties may well collide, and tough "either/or" decisions must be made. How many times did you feel your choice for God might well conflict with your choice for your family? Or what about commitments to your family that distract from your wholehearted loyalty to God?

Abraham's story does not begin in chapter 22 of Genesis, at the point of our Old Testament reading. What we know about him stretches back into Genesis 11:27-32 and Genesis 12:1-8 where we encounter the man, then called Abram, who was called by Yahweh to leave his home and family in order to claim the land of Canaan as his "inheritance". Already Abraham had learned about making sacrificial choices in order to demonstrate his "faith" in the promises of God. Those earlier accounts tell us about the "covenant" God made with Abraham, swearing covenant-faithfulness, as expressed in the Hebrew word *hesed*, "steadfast love, loyalty". By all accounts, Abram was a "pagan" when Yahweh called him, living in Mesopotamia in Ur sometime between 2135 and 2025 B.C.E. From there he moved northward with his family, settling in Haran, a town named after one of his brothers. It is from Haran that Abram must make the final break with family, committing himself instead to the purposes of God. Though the text does not describe the scene of his separation from father and kin, we can only imagine the heart-rending moments as they said "good-bye".

What could possibly have driven Abram to so radically alter the fabric of patriarchal life in both Ur and Haran, leaving behind his Mesopotamian roots? The Bible tells us it was his obedience to God's call, as outlandish as that might appear to him (and to us!). But the fulfillment of Abram's promised future rested with God's fulfillment of a number of predictions. Among them was the idea that Abram's descendents would be enormously numerous, compared to stars (Genesis 15:5; 22:17) and to sand (22:17). Those were appropriate metaphors since they drew together both the heavens and the earth as witnesses to God's covenant with Abram. Both were "small" to the sight, but plentiful in number. The fortunes of Abram's blessed offspring lay out in the future much as the stars lay far up in the heavens. Yet as the sands of the seashore, they should be felt firmly

beneath Abram's feet. True, the promises of Abram's bright future would not arrive at his doorstep for some time to come, but they were nonetheless near him as he walked the sandy deserts toward the "holy" land.

But leaving family and embarking on this fantastic journey was not the last of Abram's moments of separation and heart-rending sacrifice. More lay ahead. We will examine one of them in its immediate context: "The Binding" of Isaac in sacrifice to God. Much is assumed during this study, particularly that the reader is somewhat familiar with the whole Abraham story which spans Genesis 11:27-25:18, which you are encouraged to read. Our text is narrower, however, and so we begin with its reading.

### **The Text (Genesis 22:1-19).**

1 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." 2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." 3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.

5 Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

So they went both of them together. 9 When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." 12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." 15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven 16 and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, 18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." 19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

### **An Outline**

The form of this biblical passage is that of a "story". As such it has a beginning, middle, and ending. In the Hebrew text, there is also additional artistic flair. Below, we follow Gordon Wenham's suggestion for an outline which captures the literary flavor of the text.

#### Introduction (1a)

1. God's command "Sacrifice your son" (1b-2)
2. Departure next morning (3)
3. The third day at foot of the mountain (4-6b)
4. Journey up the mountain (6c-8)
5. Preparations for sacrifice (9-10)
6. Angel speaks to stop sacrifice (11-18)
- Epilogue: Return to Beersheba (19).

Scholars call this arrangement of "scenes" as *palistrophic*, a concentric or symmetrical literary structure, also known as *chiasm* (the word *palis* in Greek means "again", indicating the repetition and closure of this literary form). We have indented each scene to illustrate the parallels: scene 1 with scene 6, scene 2 with scene 5, and

scene 3 with scene 4; all of them contained in the envelope formed by the introduction and epilogue. This arrangement communicates progression, suspense, and finally climax. The introduction makes plain that the story is about "God testing Abraham", and each scene contributes to the unfolding of the action. When at last the tension raised by the "test" has been resolved, everyone returns home.

Another way to analyze this passage is to focus on the "conversations" which took place between God and Abraham, Abraham and Isaac, and the Angel and Abraham. The following chart compares them:

Conversation One (1-6)	Conversation Two (7-10)	Conversation Three (11-14)	Conversation Four (15-19)
He said (1)	He said (7)	The angel called from heaven and said (11)	The angel called to Abraham (15)
"Abraham" (1)	"My father" (7)	"Abraham, Abraham" (11)	
He said (1)	He said (7)	He said (11)	
"Here I am" (1)	"Here I am" (7)	"Here I am" (11)	
		"Do not do anything" (12)	"You have done this thing" (16)
		"You have not withheld" (12)	"have not withheld" (16)
"your son, your only child" (2)	"my son" (7)	"your son, your only child" (12)	"your son, your only child" (16)
"for a burnt offering" (2)	"for a burnt offering" (twice, 7-8)	"for a burnt offering" (13)	
"he went" (3)	"the two of them went together" (8)	"he went" (13)	"they went together" (19)
"the place which God had told him" (3)	"the place which God had told him" (9)	"the place...as it is said" (14)	
"he took the knife" (6)	"he took the knife" (10)		

Words like "Abraham" (18 times), "Isaac" (5 times), and "son" (10 times) all predominate in the story and are spread between the four "panels" of conversation. Of special note, is the way the "my son" or "your son" span all four conversations, "binding" the story together around its true theme: that God tested Abraham by asking him to offer up "his only son", Isaac.

### Another Son; Another Sacrifice: Ishmael

If the reader of Abraham's story has been attentive to the details of the preceding chapters of Genesis, she will recall another painful scene in Genesis 21. We turn to it briefly to offer another horizon for the account of Isaac's offering by Abraham.

Remember that God promised offspring to Abraham as part of his original covenant in Genesis 12. But one nasty detail seemed to belie that prediction: Abraham and Sarah were well advanced in years, and Sarah, according to Genesis 11:30, "was barren". Aware of her "failure", Sarah attributed it to God by saying to Abraham, "Yahweh has kept me from having children..." (16:2). Whether Yahweh had anything to do with it or not, Sarah required some rationalization for the next offer she makes to her husband: "Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her". Is this an odd offer? Within the practices of the third millennium B.C.E. Ancient Near East, such arrangements were entirely at home, offering a woman like Sarah a way to honor her husband by exploiting her "ownership" of the maidservant to its full advantage. While we might cringe at the thought, Sarah was acting in ways common to her time and place. What we might contest is the whole idea that Yahweh caused Sarah's condition. Still more seriously we might question her homegrown solution.

Abraham agrees to Sarah's offer, and young Hagar becomes Abraham's wife. The outcome was bittersweet. Having conceived a child, Hagar sets herself up as Sarah's rival leading to hateful accusations against Abraham that the whole affair was his fault (16:5a). Sarah invokes the marriage covenant with the telling words, "May Yahweh judge between you and me" (16:5b). He pleads no contest ("Your servant is in your hands", 16:6), and

allows Sarah to adjudicate the perceived loss of honor. Somewhat cowardly, Sarah makes life so miserable for Hagar that she goes into exile. What happens next is wholly within the purview of God's role as "Judge". It seems Yahweh took Sarah at her word, that He should do the "judging". Not willing to allow Hagar's mistreatment to go unaddressed, no doubt out of respect for Abraham's covenant, Yahweh sends his angel to Hagar, finding her in the desert near a spring. He sends her back to Sarah with a promise. The balance of this account follows:

10 The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." 11 And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. 12 He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." 13 So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. 15 And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram (Genesis 16:10-16).

Later Abraham would circumcise his whole household, including Ishmael (17:23), but he would also hear Yahweh telling him that yet another son would be born, and that the long-term "establishment" of covenant would be with that offspring (Isaac), though Ishmael would be "a great nation" (17:20). The announcement of Isaac's future birth comes on the heels of this circumcision in Genesis 18. Finally, Isaac, the promised son makes his appearance in chapter 21:1-7. All seems to be well. But no sooner does Abraham rejoice in his new son, than trouble ensues between Isaac and Ishmael. The subsequent dialogue between Abraham and Sarah casts a shadow over the celebrations of the day:

10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." 11 And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son (Genesis 21:10-11).

In the Hebrew, the language for "very displeasing" actually means that Abraham saw it as extremely bad, perhaps evil (the root for the verb is *rā'āh*, "to be evil, harm, wicked, criminal" or "to distress, bring misery"). Abraham is deeply wounded by what is about to transpire.

Why have we spent time examining these narratives? There seems to be a conscious parallel between the story which follows in 21:12-19, involving the "casting out" of Ishmael, and the story of Isaac's sacrifice in 22:1-14. We capture the corresponding elements in the chart below:

God orders Ishmael's expulsion (21:12-13)	God orders Isaac's sacrifice (22:2)
Food and water taken (21:14)	Sacrificial material taken (22:3)
Journey (21:14)	Journey (22:4-8)
Ishmael about to die (21:16)	Isaac about to die (22:10)
Angel of God calls from heaven (21:17)	Angel of Yahweh calls from heaven (22:11)
"Do not fear!" (21:17)	"Fear God" (22:12)
"God has heard" (21:17)	"You have obeyed (heard) my voice" (22:18)
"I shall make into a great nation" (21:19)	"Your descendents will be like stars, sand" (22:17)
God opens her eyes and she sees a well (21:19)	Abraham raises his eyes and sees ram (22:13)
She gives the lad a drink (21:19)	He sacrifices ram instead of son (22:14)

From these parallels we continue to see the ways Yahweh was at work in the life of Abraham, his family, in spite of the adversity through which they passed. None of this could have been easy for him, and at critical moments, he offered quiet protest. One poignant passage is 21:11 which we cited above, especially these words: "..because it concerned his son". Though God had determined to extend the family tree "through Isaac" (21:12), Abraham never lost his sense of concern for Ishmael, nor did God ever brush aside as superfluous the role Ishmael would have: "I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring" (21:13). Here was a heavy burden for our "man of faith" to carry. As father of two sons (at this point in time; he would later father more children by another wife, Keturah, as seen in 25:1-4), he took seriously his responsibility to both.

But when the choice came down to obeying God's instructions, as revealed in His covenant with Abraham, he deferred to God's direction no matter how painful that might have been for him. In many ways, the Ishmael story might have been more difficult for Abraham than most of his trials. Cast out of his household, left completely in the hands of God, Ishmael's life would develop in ways scarcely known to his father. Scripture assures the reader on this matter with the words, "God was with the boy as he grew up" (21:20), while all the time we know that Abraham was absent from his life. For any father who has "lost a child" through conflict or crime, such a story resonates. Perhaps it was the knowledge that God would take care of Ishmael that assuaged the anxiety the patriarch must have felt. And perhaps that is why the writer of both Genesis 21 and 22 cast the narratives in such proximate and parallel ways. On the one hand, Abraham lost a son to exile; on the other, he nearly lost the heir of promise to death.

### **Abraham and Isaac: Introduction (1a)**

The writer of this account begins by using the generic name for God in the Hebrew language: *elohim*. Indeed, in the words "God tested Abraham", there is heard a strange and eerie portent. More trouble lies ahead for the man God called to father the chosen people. "After these things..." offers a somewhat vague timeframe in relationship to Isaac's birth and the events of chapter 21. Scholars have theorized that his son attained his teenage years. The Hebrew uses the word *na'ar* to describe both boys in chapter 21, though that word allows some latitude.

The Hebrew word *nāsāh* suggests "testing" in the sense that a thing has its true nature proven by passing through an ordeal, as in gold ore passing through fire to be refined. Covenants, in the ancient world, were commonly ratified or confirmed when their partners passed through such a trial. Already, Abraham has undergone the trial of circumcision (Genesis 17) in support of his covenant obligations. Such an ordeal as circumcision was highly suggestive: Just as a portion of skin was "cut" from the male genitalia, the "source" of procreation and the continuation of the family line, so through this rite a male was saying, "If I do not discharge my duties under this covenant, may such a "cutting" happen to me. "Cutting" ceremonies took many forms. If we re-read Genesis 15, we encounter the dark and ominous "cutting" ritual involving animal parts scattered along the pathway walked by Yahweh and Abraham in the sealing of their covenant. By comparison, circumcision was a "more personal and threatening" symbol of covenant judgment if the terms of the agreement were violated: both the person and their offspring might well be cut off.

Such ancient rituals seem strange to our ears, far removed from our time and place. None of us would like to find out that our neighbors were doing such things in their backyards! However, to men like Abraham such graphic symbolic actions reinforced their deep commitment to the terms of their agreements with God. For that culture, they were wholly fitting and understandable, and we must resist the temptation to read the validity of their experiences through the lenses of our own, but allow Abraham and those with him to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, even as we, within the new covenant are instructed to do the same (see Philippians 2:12).

Of what "stuff" is Abraham made? Surely God has witnessed "his man" grieve the loss of Ishmael and acquiesce to His instructions to "put out" the alleged heir in favor of the son born by promise. But does Abraham know his own heart? Has he untangled the competing affections of wife and offspring which conceivably challenge what God wants from Abraham through the covenant promise? In part, if not the whole, this "test" is for Abraham's benefit so that he might discover the depth of his loyalty of Yahweh. Perhaps also those around him might learn from his example: Sarah, his household servants, and Isaac himself whose very life will literally be "laid on the line". To understand such "testing" by God, we need only turn to Torah:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, *that I may test them*, whether they will walk in my law or not (Exodus 16:4).

And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, *testing you to know what was in your heart*, whether you would keep his commandments or not (Deuteronomy 8:2).

And lest we imagine such testing was only for ancient Israel, he would do well to listen to the exhortation of the New Testament as well:

5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." 7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Hebrews 12:5-11).

Here we see testing in terms of discipline, that rigorous subjection of human life to stress, strain, adversity, and challenge, all intended to make strong and improve the "backbone" of those willing to be under its regimen.

In Abraham's case, the test was the work of God, carefully crafted to extract the highest result and enhance the noblest of character. Still, the whole affair sends chills through our spines. As 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians, we are tested by God as well, and precisely for the same reasons the writer to the Hebrews advances: "God is treating you as sons...for our good...yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.. trained by it". Like Abraham, we too are in training during the course of our lives. As the Torah texts affirm, God wants to reveal what is "in our heart". Do we have a single, supreme desire to follow our Lord? Are their heart-filled obstacles obstructing our paths on the road to God's perfect will for our lives? How will we discover these? Through what life-changing "ordeals" will we need to pass to make that discovery?

We might do well to reflect on this matter as we pursue the test of Abraham. Far from telling us that God is far away, His tests prove His presence in our lives. We matter to Him, and so He tests us. Would He bother to "get involved" if we did not matter? "God is treating you as sons" should echo repeatedly in our ears as we encounter such things. Through our trials something is to be "revealed", brought to the forefront, called to the surface to be seen and known. Trials are not accidents. Trials are not punishments. Whatever else we imagine God is doing, it is not ill-willed, but due to this: "The Lord disciplines the one he loves..." It was so with Abraham, and it is true for us. If none of this convinces us, can we escape the implications of another *Hebrews* text, applied to Jesus himself:

8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9 And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:8-9).

And so, God tested Abraham.

### **1. God's command "Sacrifice your son" (1b-2)**

God calls his name first of all: Abraham! In this we have echoes of Genesis 3 where God once walked in the primeval paradise infected by the first ravages of sin and called out "Adam, where are you?" In the present instance, he calls to a man he already knows, whose covenant fidelity has been shown in incremental ways already in *Genesis*. Abraham is no stranger to "losing a son", for he has lost one already to exile and the requirements of God's covenant with him. Is Abraham up to this greater test? One that frankly makes no sense at all? Here is a wildly different "test", challenging the imagination in ways Abraham could scarcely grasp. In spite of this, the call is met by "Here am I", from the Hebrew word *hinnēni*. Commentators caution against formalizing this reply since it boils down to Abraham simply saying "Yes?". Perhaps it gains its power from its casual nature, as if to say, "What now?" Abraham stands "at the ready", obedient to the wishes of his covenant partner. Had his loss of Ishmael made him more likely to listen to God this time? Had the whole sweep of the breathtaking life he had lived up till now tempered the steel of his will? We shall see.

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go...sacrifice him there as a burnt offering...". In the Hebrew, the verb "take" is suffixed by a particle which means "please" or simply "let" (*na*'), suggesting that Yahweh is making an entreaty to Abraham, pleading with him, knowing full well that his request on the face of it seems outrageous.

If we had listened to this dialogue a few chapters earlier, would the words have been the same, or would we have heard, "Take one of your *two sons*, Isaac..." But there is *only one son left* over whom Abraham has any control *now*. This is the irony and power of the Genesis narrative. At one time, Abraham and Sarah seized control over *who their son would be*. All of that is gone, swept away by the currents of God's perfect will for all concerned. Abraham stands *alone* before God and before his *only* son. After all of the bargaining, scheming, jealousies and rivalries which often overtake family life, we are finally brought to the moment when Abraham must choose; the moment when the choice is meager indeed. "There's only one left..." Abraham no doubt internalized as he hears God's words. Everything rested with this one son. The whole weight of the covenant promise; the whole burden of the future pressed down on Abraham.

Ironic. Ironic and strange. How else do we characterize Abraham's situation. Consider the drama that at this very moment reaches its climax. Years before, out of the blue, Yahweh yanks Abraham from his contented life in prosperous Ur-Nammu, living as he was under the Sumero-Akkadian Empire in southern Mesopotamia, a city entering its heyday of power and prestige, a dynasty lasting over a century. "Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come..." might well have been Abraham's foreshadowing of Newton's later hymn. What more could happen? Abraham *might* well have said:

"Listen, God, this wasn't my idea. You called me, and I laid aside my agenda and took up yours, acting on the strength of your promise to me that from me a whole nation would rise, indeed, many nations would emerge, and my descendents would be like stars and sand for a multitude! And I believed you. Time and time again, I believed you. I even tried to help you make all of this happen, in light of Sarah's old age, by fathering a son through Hagar. But then I learned how ill-conceived that conception was! I agreed to send Ishmael away, though he was my son. So here we are, Lord Yahweh, we have *the son*, now my "only son", the one *you said* was the only way that my offspring would grow into the future to become a great nation. I did it your way, Lord Yahweh. That's why what you have now asked makes absolutely no sense. Do you really intend to kill off the one, single, hard-fought-for son which *You* raised up quite against my obstinate choices? Nonetheless, yes, here I am; what now?"

We write that Abraham *might* have said all of that. Of course, the Bible doesn't say that he said *any* of that, though its natural to suppose that he had "thoughts". Wouldn't you? Wouldn't I? And that's precisely what this test is likely about: to find out what Abraham was thinking, and where his "heart" rested at that very moment when God called out to him and asked him to give up the one thing everything else had "come down to". So, it's come down to this?

Human sacrifice. An ugly practice. In Israel's subsequent history, Yahweh rejected the sacrifice of infants in no uncertain terms. One Canaanite deity named Molech apparently had an insatiable appetite for human flesh, and through the Torah we find persistent commands against his worship (In the Hebrew, the expression *lammōlek* appears to indicate such sacrifices). Just a few examples will suffice:

You shall not give any of your children to offer them to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD (Leviticus 18:21).

2 "Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones. 3 I myself will set my face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name. 4 And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, 5 then I will set my

face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech (Leviticus 20:2-5).

Tragically, king Solomon subsidized the worship of Molech as a concession to his foreign wives, and this act of disobedience led to the division of the kingdom under his son Rehoboam. See 1 Kings 11:7-13, 31 for the salient details of that defection (see also Ezekiel 20:31 with the phrase "pass children through the fire"; also, 2 Kings 3:27).

According to A.R.W Green, who has studied extensively the practice of human sacrifice throughout the Ancient Near East, evidence exists throughout Mesopotamia, where Abraham once lived, that such offerings were made there. That would suggest Abraham's own perspective of what it meant to be a pagan *before his covenant with Yahweh* was colored by his birthplace. How did he react when Yahweh made such a request of him?

Some scholars proposed, supported by Jewish rabbinic authorities, that God was actually teaching Abraham about the evil of such ritual sacrifices, and that he should never return to his pagan roots in that regard, but instead choose alternative forms of ritual offerings. That might be true, but it hardly can support the weight of the test which Abraham must endure. God could surely have told him, "Don't sacrifice other human beings" if he wanted to overturn the ancient customs of Ur in Abraham's mind. If Abraham could accept the painful practice of circumcision as the mark of the covenant, he could surely accept the prohibition against ritual murder! We suspect more is at stake for the patriarch than this.

God speaks in generalities about the "place" where the sacrifice was to take place, only identifying the mountain region of "Moriah", a name which likely was applied only after the event as we shall see in our discussion of 22:14. What do we know about this region? One source summarizes this way:

In the book of Chronicles it is reported that the location of Araunah's threshing floor is "in mount Moriah" and that the Temple of Solomon was built over Araunah's threshing floor. This has led to the classical rabbinical supposition that this is at the peak of Moriah; a later Islamic tradition recounts that Moriah is the same location as the Foundation Stone, which Jewish tradition holds to be the former location of the Temple of Solomon. However, this tradition is not reported by the centuries earlier Books of *Samuel*, and biblical scholars view the tradition as somewhat implausible; according to a Biblical passage concerning Melchizedek, Jerusalem was already a city with a priest at the time of Abraham, and thus is unlikely to have been founded after this, at the site of a sacrifice made by Abraham in the wilderness.

An alternative tradition, regarded as similarly dubious by biblical scholars (again due to the Melchizedek narrative), is that Moriah refers to the highest peak of the mountainous ridge on which Jerusalem is built, which would place the location not at the Temple Mount, nor the hill now called Zion, but at the hill of Golgotha (777m elevation).

In consequence of these traditions, Classical Rabbinical Literature theorized that the name was a (linguistically corrupted) reference to the Temple, suggesting translations like "the teaching-place" (referring to the Sanhedrin that met there), "the place of fear" (referring to the supposed fear that non-Israelites would have at the Temple), "the place of myrrh" (referring to the spices burnt as incense). Targum *Pseudo-Jonathan* interprets the name as "land of worship", while the Samaritan Targum regards it as being "land of vision".<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Departure next morning (3)

A long journey, spiritually, morally and physically, lies ahead of the aged Abraham. "Early in the morning" implies a long and demanding day ahead, rising at first light, even as he did when expelling Ishmael (21:14, also 19:27 and 20:8). In another context, when Job's righteous life is described at the beginning of his saga, we read that he rose "early in the morning" to offering sacrifices so as to atone for sins committed by his children (Job 1:5), a sort of preventative ritual measure. When persons rise "early in the morning" to do something, it is the Hebrew way of saying they are in dead earnest about it, and want to waste no daylight in completing the task. In nothing else, Abraham's determination to see this through is underscored by his early departure.

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<sup>1</sup> Seligsohn, Max (1901–1906). "[Moriah](#)". In [Singer, Isidore](#); et al. [Jewish Encyclopedia](#). New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company.

One unusual aspect of Abraham's preparation is the way the Hebrew text serializes his actions by using a sequence of verbs: "saddled, took, cut", with his wood cutting done after virtually everything else was arranged. Some writers have noted that this points to his state of mind, that the very idea of the sacrifice, requiring the "wood", was shoved to the end of the list. Was he trying to hide his purpose for the trip or was he simply putting off the inevitable? No doubt cutting the wood, stroke by stroke, conjured up the images of his son's coming sacrifice, flooding his heart like so many arrows of death. On this, however, the text is utterly silent, leaving the reader to place herself in his place, and re-enact the moment through contemporary eyes.

He did not travel alone, but brought along two "young men" as servants. Judging from the use of the Hebrew word *na'ar* they were young as Isaac, perhaps even playmates from his youth. We do not know; their names are absent, nor did they speak. Traveling as "twos" they constituted in Hebrew thought a sufficient witness to anything that they might see, and could give a reliable testimony afterward. Ironically, as we shall observe, they saw little of what happened. Such is the nature of servants, unlike sons, they are not made privy to their master's intentions (see John 15:15 with a similar comparison). Still, how much did Isaac actually know? Time will tell.

Abraham went where God told him to go. That's how 22:3 ends. Part of God's conversation with Abraham is missing from the text since this verse implies explicit instructions about the "place" which the reader does not know. We sense something of the original call of Abraham in this wording. Recall that after God summoned him from Ur, Abraham then went to the place God indicated. Herein lies the power of the covenant Abraham has with Yahweh: an implicit trust appears in the patriarchs willingness to respond to Yahweh's entreaty, even when the outcome seems horrific.

### **3. The third day at foot of the mountain (4-6b)**

"Third day" language in the Bible has a life of its own. As New Testament readers, we are immediately connected to the significance of this time reference for Jesus: "...rose again *the third day*, according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4; also Luke 9:22; 13:32; 18:33; 24:7, 21, 46 and elsewhere). Wenham notes in his commentary that "Three days is a typical period of preparation for something important (Genesis 31:22; 40:20; 42:18). ... the mountain of God to which the Israelites sought to travel was three days' journey (Exodus 3:18; 5:3)..." [p.106]. For two whole days Abraham has been turning over in his mind the implications of what is about to transpire; here is time to make peace with the God who asks the seemingly impossible from him and time to set one's heart at rest.

The Hebrew expression, "He looked up and saw" (literally, "he lifted up his eyes and saw") points to the notice of something unusually significant (18:2; 24:63; 33:1, 5; 43:29). Not yet at the site, Abraham witnesses it "from afar", no doubt indicating its distance both in time, place, and emotion. "Not yet" but soon. "Not here" but coming. In so many ways Abraham was "not yet there". Will he continue on or turn back? The reader is left in suspense.

At this juncture in the story, Abraham does something odd. He orders his servants to remain with the donkey. Perhaps this is a signal to the readers that the journey up the mountain is steep and unsuitable for the beast of burden. What it clearly affirms is that the wood, carried up until now by the donkey, now is laid on the back of young Isaac: he must carry his own wood, the kindling for his own sacrifice, though yet unknown to him. Our attention shifts to Isaac as we think about his role in all of this, and what he represents in the story. Abraham alone carries the burden and the knowledge of what is about to transpire. Not even the servants know. Nor does Isaac. Yet, ignorant of his future, Isaac is made to bear the burden of the wood as he makes his way up the precipitous slope destined for the unspeakable destiny of consuming fire. Dare we miss the emotional content or the moral meaning apparent here? Does not the next generation often bear the burden without the full knowledge of the outcome? And does not the generation who parented them often bear the moral weight

without the physical burden? Can we miss the significance of coming generations being sacrificed for the decisions of their elders? Still, this story, a *Genesis* tells it, does not linger over such matters, but presses on.

#### **4. Journey up the mountain (6c-8)**

Skinner, in his remarks from the *ICC Commentary on Genesis*, notes: "The pathos of the dialogue [between Abraham and Isaac] is inimitable; the artless curiosity of the child, the irrepressible affection of the father, and the stern ambiguity of his reply can hardly be read without tears" [pp.329-330]. Truly, the way Isaac asks his question is naively trusting, or, as Jesus once put it, has the faith of a "child" about it (see Matthew 18:2; Mark 9:36). What was racing through Isaac's mind? As the load of firewood rested on his back or in his arms, and as he made his way up the hillside, steep and rocky, perhaps he looked over at his aging father and thought: "O, great! Here we've come two full days to this place, and here I am carrying this sliver-infested firewood up this godforsaken versant, and I'll bet you a shekel he's forgotten about the lamb!" Yes, his question in Hebrew is a bit artless: he names the inventory they are carrying (wood, fire, and ----), perhaps raising both hands, crunching his shoulders into a shrug, and looking toward Abraham incredulously. Teenagers do that, you know, especially when they look painfully at their elders.

If Isaac seems a bit glib and sarcastic in his question, Abraham responds deadpanned and serious. His words are anything but artless; they flow with a mystery tantalizing the reader even more: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (22:8). The Hebrew text may be purposely ambiguous. Does Abraham mean:

1. God, not you and I, will provide the lamb, or
2. God will provide Himself the lamb, or
3. In a wonderfully mysterious, prophetic sense, he means both.

If we opt for #1, then Abraham sets up Isaac and himself to witness a miracle of divine provision. Presumably high on Mount Moriah, deeply seated in the tops of that region, one was unlikely to find a suitable sacrifice, at least not a lamb or its equivalent. Nobody airlifted sheep or goats to the top of the mountain in advance of their arrival. However, Abraham implies by his response that he fully expects God to provide. The Hebrew word for "provide" is found in the sentence: *Elohîm yir'eh-lô haseh le'ôlah*. The verb is followed by the preposition "for" and the pronoun suffix "him": God will provide for Him(self). *What we learn from this simple Hebrew lesson is this: The sacrifice about to be offered does not belong to Abraham or to Isaac, but rather it belongs to God. That which God commands he will provide. From this simple sentence we gain the powerful sense that Abraham sees the whole matter as out of his own hands and entirely in God's.* Do we not observe here the whole point of the story? Through the entire ordeal Abraham comes to the point where he lets go, not only of his own son, but also of the very worship he is asked to offer to God when he arrives atop Moriah. Something of the name "Moriah" now rises from the text. It is a special form of the same verb "to provide", and in his reply to Isaac he is telling him, "We are on the mount where God provides; we will not worry about the sacrifice because the whole matter now belongs to God who commanded it."

One thing to note about the conversation between Abraham and Isaac is the way it is introduced and the way it concludes. Prior to the exchange we are told: "As the two of them went on together..." (22:6). After the reply from Abraham we read once more, "And the two of them went on together" (22:8). In literary terms we call this technique an "inclusio" since it acts like an "envelope" containing the rich contents of what lies between the two sentences. What is important is that they continue to walk on together, that the question and its answer does not suddenly alienate son from father, that they remain father and son, though in a more trusting and holy way.

#### **5. Preparations for sacrifice (9-10)**

No sooner do they arrive at the designated place of worship than Abraham busies himself with the ordinary task of making everything ready for the sacrifice. What passes through his mind at each step? Do his own words to Isaac echo in his head? He still has not told Isaac what's "a foot", only speaks to him the assuring words, "God

will provide for Himself a lamb." Imagine his stream of consciousness, the word of promise ever echoing in his thoughts, like a sweet summer breeze brushing aside the chilled air at mid-day:

- He builds the altar ("God will provide for Himself a lamb").
- He arranges the wood on it ("God will provide for Himself a lamb").
- But now comes the moment of decisive truth, the moment not only for Abraham but for Isaac. He binds his son Isaac (This is the Hebrew *Akedah*) ("God will provide for Himself a lamb").
- He lays him on the altar on top of the wood("God will provide for Himself a lamb").
- He reaches out his hand and took the knife to slay his son ("God will provide for Himself a lamb").

Time stands still. All creation waits in hushed suspense. Angels witness the unspeakable about to happen, an act so unethical, so impure, so unconscionable, and so unworthy of our hero of faith, Abraham. Shockingly to the reader Abraham does not wince a single moment, but plays his part to the bittersweet end, not missing a beat, driven on by the lingering and hopeful assurance that the God who made the promise of a son would not fail Abraham now. Even if Abraham did the unthinkable and ritually murdered his son on Mount Moriah. How far would God allow this determined man of faith proceed? Can't you hear the angels: "Now would be a good time to stop him, Lord!"

We would do well to contemplate the words spoken some centuries later by a different Hebrew writer, in a book written for the benefit of Jewish Christians living in the first century:

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Notice the language: "He was in the act of offering up his only son...", accurately captured by the translation of the ESV as it grapples with the Greek words used there. We can almost imagine the instant as the knife is raised, and as Abraham sweeps its blade, as he had for hundreds of animal sacrifices before, destined to slice the throat of his son and end his life before setting him ablaze on the altar. In his mind, we are told by the writer to the Hebrews, he "considered" that God was able even to raise him from the dead. The Greek word for "considered" is *logisamenos* from the root *logizomai* which has an "accounting" nuance to it, as in, adding up a column of numbers. Abraham had, according to Hebrews 11:19, drawn a spiritual conclusion, derived from an even deeper trust in the power of God: God would raise Isaac from the dead, even if he killed him. The verb used here is in the aorist tense using the participial form indicating that Abraham had arrived at a point in time at a settled conclusion, one which remained with him throughout his ordeal.

Yes, God would provide for Himself the lamb: whether that lamb was Isaac or a substitute mattered not to Abraham. He was prepared for either outcome because he knew God would give back his son. By all intents God had raised up Isaac that day *through the faithful thoughts of Abraham* as expressed in his actions on Mount Moriah. And it is through this drama that we glimpse the heart of Abraham, and we see it at its crucial crossroads where the father's *heart matters* most. "God will provide for himself a lamb." And He did.

The Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, in his famous work *Fear and Trembling*, recounts this story with moving passion. He hastens to point out that Abraham stood quite alone before Yahweh with no rules to guide him and no moral law to give him instruction. Abraham must make the final "leap of faith" into the arms of the God he had most recently called the "Everlasting God" (Genesis 21:33). Here was faith in its upper octaves. How would Abraham fare in this "trial by ordeal"? If Yahweh had given the covenant son to Abraham, would now he preserve that son, though his father raised his hand to slay him? Kierkegaard makes much of the fact that Abraham was not living his life at this point "by the rules", that is, following some carefully ordered code of conduct. Surely if he had, he would never have listened to the voice calling him to ritually murder his son. Would not the later Mosaic Law tell Israel, "You shall not kill?" And would not Torah categorically condemn

all forms of infanticide (see our notes above)? The ethical cannot help Abraham here, Kierkegaard concedes, only faith can. Faith in the God he has come to know, though filled with mystery.

Is this not a dark story?

### **6. Angel speaks to stop sacrifice (11-18)**

Suddenly, with the speed of heavenly lightning, a messenger from Yahweh calls out his name twice. And Abraham responds with his familiar, "Here I am." Though in the midst of the grisliest deed of his lifetime, the man of God is still listening for God's voice. It's a bit like a scene from death row. Families of victim and convicted alike sit tensely waiting for the execution. But somewhere in the prison the warden stands by the phone, waiting for word from the Governor. Will he stay the execution? Down to the last second before the scheduled time of the lethal injection. Keep the lines open! Maybe the call will come. And so, here is Abraham, his hand in mid-air, still listening for the voice that will stay the outcome, or, perhaps, the voice that will call the dead back to life again: "Isaac, come forth!" (compare the account of Lazarus in John 11:43).

"Do not..." Those are the only words Abraham needed to hear. Twice they are uttered. "Do not..." Those words are utter relief to Abraham, in spite of his mighty show of faith. Humanly speaking, he was ready for either outcome. But now comes the more profound statement, one which competes with God's original entreaty to sacrifice Isaac in the first place: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." Which is more perplexing to the reader? That God should require any human outcome in order "to know" anything? Or, that God required so horrific an action to make that knowledge possible? Scholars have parsed this text upside down and sideways in efforts to clarify the irony before us. Does not God know everything? Does he not possess omniscience as one of His "non-shared" attributes? How can anything that aged Abraham says or does change one iota of God's eternal understanding of all things?

To this profound question, much theological attention has turned over the years. Commonly, writers speculate that God indeed already knew that Abraham would react as he did, but that the test was for Abraham's benefit alone. Abraham needed to know of what "stuff" his trust in God was made, and that he was willing to give up his "only son" in the service of that trust. There is truth in this perspective and it should not be dismissed as a mere attempt to get "God off the hook" by putting the onus on Abraham.

Another solution which has arisen in recent years under the nomenclature, "Open Theism", contends that God's knowledge should not be thought of in abstract terms. After all, do we really know what the word "omniscient" really means? Some things God does not know, states this position. He doesn't know logically contradictory things, for example, such as  $2+2=5$ . Of course He knows that they are contradictory, but he doesn't know them as true. What else does God know? Without reservation we can surely say, God knows more than we do; God knows more than all sentient beings put together. He knows more about the world than anything in the world, or, he knows more about the world than the whole world put together. We might say he is "transscient" (my invented word) because his knowledge *transcends knowledge*. Still, asks Open Theism, are there some things that God might "come to know" as a matter of His own experience, especially as they pertain to His relationship with human beings. Was it not a matter of discovery *for both God and Abraham together* that Abraham feared God truly because he did not withhold his son from God? As a shared experience, it was not knowledge for God until it happened, though as a foreseen event it might have been.

Whatever the theory of God's knowledge comes into play, the writer of Genesis wants to make clear that Abraham's trial by ordeal was not useless or a mere formality with God. The living, breathing Abraham who took his living breathing son, Isaac up to Mount Moriah, intent on obeying God's entreaty to sacrifice him there, mattered to God in all that he thought, hoped, believed and did "on the third day". Nor does God simply turn to His angels glibly and say, "Alright, then, another faithful human passed the test. Next!"

Nor is this merely a story about getting Abraham (and Isaac) off the hook at the last moment, as if God hastily blurted out through his angel, "I believe you, I believe you. Stop!" Or, "Just testing!" The depth of God's seriousness was caught by its horns in the nearby thicket on Mount Moriah. He had, after all, ordered that a sacrifice of Isaac be made, and he had no doubt made entreaties of Abraham before to offer up animals for worship and forgiveness of sins. The original decree still remained and needed to be met. But no human sacrifice would be allowed that day. Or the next day, for two thousand years. In place of human life, held sacred by God who made it in His image, that of a suitable substitute would be made. By God's design that lamb would be found in the form of the ram Abraham spied, not in relief, but in gratitude that God was true to His word: "God will provide for Himself a lamb". The text is clear: the lamb was offered "instead of his son", in the Hebrew *tahat benō*, "in place of his son". What happened that day would reverberate throughout Jewish history for centuries to come. In what has become a "key text" for such sacrifices, God told His people:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life (Leviticus 17:11).

Abraham judiciously completes his assignment on Moriah, offering the ram in burnt offering sacrifice. Upon completing his worship, in which Isaac no doubt participated, Abraham speaks both gratefully and prophetically. We reprint 22:14 in its entirety so that each component of his confession stands out:

So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided" (Genesis 22:14).

The word "Moriah" can be derived from the verb form meaning "Yahweh will provide". What seems important is the tense of the verb. From Abraham's vantage point, the provision of the ram as Isaac's replacement was at first a future thing: he awaited God's provision in whatever form it might appear. Once it had appeared, Abraham does not suddenly change the tense of the verb so that the name means "Yahweh once provided", as if the provision is now past and no longer active in the present. Instead, Abraham combines both his own thankfulness that Yahweh provided *for him and Isaac*, at the same time he prophesies that "Yahweh will continue to provide". So significant are his words and their form that the editor of this passage (Moses, no doubt), turns them into a proverb and connects them to the place where Abraham's experience took place: "On the mount of Yahweh it shall be provided", suggesting that Abraham's descendants have every reason to believe that Yahweh will continue to make provision for His people "On the mount of Yahweh".

Throughout Jewish history, the Mount of Yahweh has taken on different meanings. As indicated in an earlier quotation, Judaism placed great significance on the area where Jerusalem and the Temple stood. Here it was that David determined Solomon should erect a Temple to Yahweh's glory, so that through the continuing sacrificial worship offered there, Israel might receive Yahweh's provision of forgiveness and grace. Still, long before the land of Canaan assumed importance for national Israel, the descendants of Abraham one day found themselves at the foot of another mountain: Sinai. At this site, Yahweh provided the holy Torah, His sacred word, offering guidance for Israel's holy life.

Nor can we stop there. Messianic followers of Yahweh, who embrace Jesus as God's provision for human redemption, look to yet another mountain: Golgotha, or Calvary where God's only Son bore the weight of sin on a wooden cross. And, true to Abraham's prophecy, "On the mount of Yahweh it shall be provided", found its lasting fulfillment.

Our text does not end there, but, as Wenham convincingly argues, continues with an important correlation between what happened on Moriah and what Yahweh intends to accomplish for Abraham in the future. Here is notable, powerful and incisive covenant language. The passage begins with "the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham from heaven, a second time..." (22:15). Whenever something happens "a second time" it normally indicates heightened significance and elevated importance. Voices come *from heaven* on rare occasions, but when they are heard "a second time", people sit up and take notice. Similar language occurs in the New Testament when it is predicted that Jesus will appear "a second time" (Hebrews 9:28) in an even more wonderful state than when he came the first time. In the current context, it's as if Yahweh is saying to Abram,

"If you thought this whole experience with Isaac was remarkable, just wait: more wonderful things will happen to you and your descendants!" And so Yahweh speaks *a second time*.

And what does He tell Abraham?

1. I swear by myself, declares Yahweh
2. Because of what you did, Abraham, in not withholding your son, your only son
3. I will surely bless you, making your
  - a. Descendants as numerous as stars in the sky
  - b. ...as sand on the seashore
  - c. ...take possession of the cities of their enemies
  - d. ...through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed
4. Because you have obeyed me.

Could Abraham have imagined what his obedience to Yahweh would produce? The language of this passage has a number of important features.

1. *Yahweh swears by himself*. Ordinarily, when covenants were concluded in the ancient world, the great kings of powerful nations would convene a covenant ceremony, complete with a ritual sacrifice led by his priests. Then, in support of his covenant with other nations or with his own people, he would swear by the gods in whose debt he considered himself. Not so with Yahweh, for beside Him "there is no god". The writer of the Hebrews states this nicely when he writes:
2. *13 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, 14 saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." 15 And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. 16 For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. 17 So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, 18 so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us (Hebrews 6:13-18).*
3. Abraham patiently waited, and in response to his patient faith, he obtained the promise. Nor was that a weak and vacillating promise, nor was Abraham's faith ill-founded. Yahweh wanted to show convincingly that he was determined to fulfill his purpose for Abraham's descendants, and so guaranteed it by an oath. What did Abraham take away from his whole experience on Mount Moriah? Simply this, God does not lie when He makes a promise. What does that mean for Abraham and for us? Confidently, it means this: that we can flee to him for refuge, and that we have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.
4. The oath Yahweh swore that day "by himself" became for Abraham's trial of faith *its final vindication*. The testing of Abraham and the binding of Isaac (the *massah* and the *akedah*) led to a deeper more grounded faith in Abraham's life. At last he let go of everything precious to him. He even let go of God's promise to him in the person of Isaac. Having done this, God tells his covenant partner, the future is assured for your descendants and for you.
5. *Yahweh will bless the nations*. What does it mean to be the "chosen people"? I am reminded of the little line in "Fiddler on the Roof": "Why did God have to choose me?" There are burdens to bear as the chosen people. Abraham found that out on Moriah. But he also learned that nothing God promises ever becomes a "possession", something to be grasped and held onto. It is possible that Isaac, the child of promise, Abraham's "son, his only son", might well have become for Abraham a possession: something he held tightly to his heart as if Isaac belonged to him. Such possessions cease to be promises and become pitfalls; they are no longer blessings, but burdens. Anything God gives us by His grace is in turn a temptation. Consider the gift of Torah to Israel, given by the hand of Moses. Israel had received the precious words of God, engraved in stone. What did Israel do with its Torah? At first, she broke it, lapsing into her idolatry. The gifts of God can be squandered and ignored. Later in her history she turned Torah into an idol, treating it as the source of eternal life. Her rabbis parsed its meanings, argued with each other about its application, bound its requirements on the backs of the people like yokes on oxen. That is why Jesus spoke out, not against Torah, but against the abuse of Torah: that which one time was intended for blessing, became a burden and a stumbling block.

6. So did the idea of chosenness. Covenant was for Israel alone. That became the false declaration of national Israel. Even prophets like Jonah shuddered at the thought that Yahweh might actually want to save the nation of Assyria, and so the reluctant prophet ran the other way when summoned to Nineveh to prophesy against it. But Jewish nationalist doused the fire of covenant blessing during the days of Jesus also. Many were excluded from the covenants of promise (see Ephesians 2:12) because they were not natural descendents of Abraham. But who are the children of Abraham, after all? both Jesus and Paul questioned their people. On the day Abraham saw Yahweh provide for him and Isaac, he also heard the angel speak of God's provision for "all nations on earth" because Abraham had obeyed God.
7. And in fact, all along, God intended to bring within the orbit of His "chosen people", the "other children of Abraham", those who lingered around the edges of religious history, who didn't quite make the cut within the nation of Israel. After all, could Abraham forget Ishmael his "other son"? Would he not appeal to Yahweh that this "other son" might "live before Him" (Genesis 17:18)? And by making such an appeal, does not Abraham show evidence that he accepts God's verdict that "all nations will be blessed" through Abraham's offspring?
8. What a test of Abraham's faith that must have been! But even more so, throughout the collective history of Israel, God's people were challenged to embrace the vision of Abraham which received its greatest test that day on Mount Moriah.

### **Epilogue: Return to Beersheba (19).**

For the third time we are told, "they set off together" in 22:19. Having "returned to his servants", Abraham, in the company of Isaac, journey back to Beersheba where the text says rather explicitly, "And Abraham *stayed* in Beersheba" (Hebrew: *yēsheb*). The man who was the quintessential "Hebrew", who was constantly "crossing over" and journeying from place to place, at last makes his home in Beersheba. A settledness comes to Abraham after he was on Moriah. He had, after all, surrendered his heart to Yahweh, as symbolized by his offering of Isaac. The covenant was firmly sworn by Yahweh and Abraham's "obedience of faith" had found its way into his heart. At last, Abraham had found his Sabbath in the purposes of God, and in the place where promises were no longer possessions.

### **Conclusion: The Gospel on Mount Moriah**

As we conclude these *Background Notes*, a few suggestive phrases from our text launch our thinking into the New Testament. One in particular which appears across all three conversation panels of Genesis 22, as we observed above (p.3, the Chart), is Isaac as Abraham's "only son". We cannot forget how Isaac came to have that status, certainly not at first. Painfully, Ishmael leaves the "holy family" of covenant promise, not once but twice: once unborn, but arriving in the wilderness; the second time exiled by Abraham, excluded from the covenant of promise. And so Isaac remains the "only son", the loving object of Abraham and Sarah's affections. Then the test on Moriah. We might well paraphrase Abraham's experience this way: "For Abraham loved God so much that he gave his only son, having believed that what God promised he would perform in due time". To those who read the story sympathetically there cannot help but be the deepest regard for Abraham's show of faith and the sacrifice he was willing to make out of covenant love for God. Across the centuries, his example remained a formative influence in the lives of the Jewish people. They spoke fondly of him as "Father Abraham", and prided themselves in being his sons (see Matthew 3:9; Luke 1:73; 3:8; John 8:39, 53; Acts 7:2; Romans 4:12; James 2:21).

How then does the New Testament find "good news" in this story for the restored people of God? A strange but wonderful "twist" is put in the tale, one which moves God into an odd but awesome position. It's as if the writers of the New Testament consciously reversed the roles of God and human beings. Among the clearest passages are these:

He who did not spare his *own Son* but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32).

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his *only Son* into the world, so that we might live through him (1 John 4:9).

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the *only Son* from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

For God so loved the world, that he gave his *only Son*, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of *the only Son* of God (John 3:16-18).

These Scriptures are no mere stylistic creations but gain value from their connection to the story of the *akedah*, the binding and offering of Isaac, Abraham's "only son". *But see how the roles are reversed in God's new plan for world redemption. God assumes the role of Abraham.* No one asks him to offer up His "only son", rather he is moved by the sheer power of His love for "the world". God does for the world through His son, what he asked Abraham to do. In Abraham's case, God "swore by Himself"; in God's case He swore by His love. Through his obedience to his Father's love, Jesus, God's only son, became the perfect offering for our sins. Bound to the cross by Roman nails, he bore our sins on the cross and became the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). This, then, is the good news, preached before to Abraham through the symbol of the *Akedah*, the binding and offering of Isaac, the fulfillment of the promise this time, that Jesus who himself is the true offspring of Abraham is the instrument of blessing to "all nations on earth".

In fact, the New Testament bears witness to the typological nature of what Abraham did, foreshadowing what Jesus would one day do. Consider Jesus' own words:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." 57 So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" 58 Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:56-58).

We have, then, Jesus' own witness that his existence preceded that of Abraham, and that during Abraham's lifetime, he "saw" Jesus' coming day of redemption. It's hard to imagine that Jesus could have meant anything else than the dramatic event on Mount Moriah. Through type and symbol in both Isaac, the "only son", and in the "ram caught in the thicket", we have strong signs of Jesus' worked prefigured in Abraham's day.

Through Paul, we are reminded that through Isaac, as son of the promise, God's promise is fulfilled to Abraham (Romans 9:7, 10). Isaac becomes for us the archetypal "son of promise" (Galatians 4:28). By offering up Isaac, James tells his readers, Abraham made good on his faith by putting it into practice (James 2:21-22).

The Good News, then, is preached in the story of Genesis 22. From Abraham we learn the essential lessons about the "trial of faith" which empties our hearts of all but God, and loves Him more than anything else. Abraham's discovery was the truth of Jesus' own beatitude, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God". Kierkegaard captured this truth best when he defined "purity of heart" as "to will one thing". In Abraham's case, it was to will the purposes of God above all else. From the Gospel flows this very message: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me" (Luke 9:23). God calls fathers to do this; fathers like Abraham.

**Glory to God! Amen**