

**The “Akedah” -"The Binding" (הַעֲקִידָה):
Abraham’s Supreme and Final Test
Genesis 22:1-19**

*Well, God said to Abraham, “Kill me a son.”
Abe says, “Man, you must be puttin’ me on.”
God say, “No.” Abe say, “What?”
God say, “You can do what you want Abe, but
The next time you see me comin’ you better run.”
Well Abe says, “Alright, Where do you want this killin’ done?”
God says, “Out on Highway 61.”*

(Highway 61 Revisited, Bob Dylan)



Introduction

Abraham has trekked a long journey since he left Ur of the Chaldees (Iraq) to follow the voice of God. Now, in this story, his spiritual journey comes to its climax. He is now well over 100 years of age. He has learned many hard lessons about life and had learned to know much about the character of God. God has made very clear, repeatedly reinforcing His promises in the “Abrahamic Covenant,” that it would be Isaac through whom the promise of his descendants to bless the world would come. Abe has made the difficult decision to banish his firstborn son, Ishmael and his mother Hagar. After the miraculous birth of Isaac, Abe’s household is in order. Isaac is now a young man in his teens, maybe as old as twenty years of age.

This story presents a picture of stability, *“Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer Sheva, and called on the name of YHWH”* (Gen. 21: 33-34). The tree marked a treaty between Abe and his neighbors, Abimelech and the Philistines, and marked one of Abe’s worship sites. It would appear Abe has now “made it” and can live in the afterglow, ready to be both founder and father of his—and God’s— great nation. But he did not know that his greatest trial, his supreme ordeal was yet to come. He must yet be tested about his deep-heart relationship and ultimate loyalty to God, the Source of all. One day, out of the blue...

The Story

(ANNOUNCING THE TEST)

1 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, **“Abraham!”** And he said, **“Here I am.”**

2 He said, *“Take your son, **your only son**, whom you love so much, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains which I shall point out to you.”*

(PREPARING FOR THE TEST)

3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, along with **his son Isaac**. Then he split the wood for the burnt offering and set out for the place of which God had told him.

4 **On the third day** of the journey, Abraham saw the place in the distance.

5 Then Abraham said to his young men, *“Stay here with the donkey; I and my son will go over there and worship and then we will return again to you.”*

6 Abraham then took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on **his son Isaac’s** shoulders. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. **So they walked on both of them together.**

7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, **“Abba!”** And he said, **“Here I am, my son.”**

Isaac said, “We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

8 Abraham said, “God will see to it (provide) for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they walked on both of them together.

(TAKING THE TEST)

9 When they came to the place God had told him to go, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, over the wood. **10** Then Abraham took the knife and lifted up to kill his son as a sacrifice.

(INTERRUPTION OF THE TEST)

11 But at that moment, the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “*Here I am.*”

12 He said, “Lay down the knife. Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you truly fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, *your only son*, from me.”

(INTERPRETING THE RESULTS OF THE TEST)

13 Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering on the altar in place of his son.

14 So Abraham called the name of that place, **Adonai Yi-reh**, (“The Lord will see-to-it / Provide”). This name became a proverb: “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

15 Then the Angel of the LORD called again to Abraham from heaven **16** and said,

“By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have obeyed me and not withheld even your beloved son, *your only son*, **17** I will surely **#1** **bless you**, and I will surely **#2** **multiply your descendants** into the countless millions, as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your descendants will **#3** **conquer their enemies**, **18** and in your descendants shall all the **#4** **nations of the earth be blessed**, because you have obeyed my voice.” **(Four-fold blessing, the most expansive to date of the covenantal iterations in Genesis)**

(RETURNING HOME AFTER THE TEST)

19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they traveled home again together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived for quite some time at Beersheba.

Spiritual Observation & Questions

*Note that the story has the phrases (see color code below and match to text above):

- “**Here I am** - “Hi-neini” in Hebrew, an expression of readiness/availability (3 times);

-“**So they walked on both of them together.**” (2 times)

-“**Issac, his son**” (3 times); and

-“**your only son**” (3 times).

-The journey to Mount Moriah lasted 3 days

*What may be the significance of these repetitions?... , the number 3?

What do we make of this shocking story?

To highlight its importance in Jewish literature, the *Zikhronot* ("Remembrance") prayers of Rosh Ha-Shanah, there is an appeal to God to remember the *Akedah*: "Remember unto us, O Lord our God, the covenant and the lovingkindness and the oath which Thou swore unto Abraham our father on Mount Moriah: and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will with a perfect heart. So may Thy compassion overbear Thine anger against us; in Thy great goodness may Thy great wrath turn aside from Thy people, Thy city, and Thine inheritance." One of the explanations given for the sounding of the *shofar* ("ram's horn") on Rosh Ha-Shanah is as a reminder of the ram substituted for Isaac (RH 16a). **The story of the Akedah is the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Ha-Shanah** (Meg. 31a). During the Middle Ages, a number of penitential hymns took the *Akedah* for their theme and indeed a whole style of *piyyut* is known by this name. **Pious Jews recited the Akedah passage daily** and, following this custom, the passage is printed in many prayer books as part of the early morning service.

(http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0001_0_00627.html)

From a classical Jewish midrash, followed by Rashi, Abraham attempts to diffuse this shocking command from God by indicating the ambiguity in each phrase, such as:

- God said, “**Your son.**” Abraham said to Him, “*I have two sons.*”
- God said to him, “**Your only one.**” Abraham said to Him, “*This one is the only son of his mother, and that one is the only son of his mother.*”
- God said to him, “**Whom you love.**” Abraham said to Him, “*I love them both.*”
- God said to him, “**Isaac.**”

Abraham evades. Yet, God zeroes in on Isaac. Abe evades no longer.

-What might we learn about the character and ways of God from the choices Go makes in this story?

-What might we learn about Abraham from this midrash? What insight into God’s character?

- What might we learn about Abraham's character from what he does in this story? What other choices did he have than those he actually made?
- What might we learn about Isaac from what he says and does in this story?
- What are the results and the long-term impact of God's and Abraham's choices in story. Who/how many have ultimately been impacted?

Ponder these questions, discuss them, before reading further for Bjoraker's observations....

Note these two statements by Abraham during his ordeal:

1)

^{22:5} Then Abraham said to his young men, "*Stay here with the donkey; **I and the boy will go over there and worship and we will come again to you.***"

*Here we see Abe's faith that *either* he would be prevented for going through with the killing, *or* God would resurrect Isaac after Abe killed him.

2)

Isaac said, "*Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*" ^{22:8} Abraham said, "**God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.**"

*Here we see Abe's faith that God would provide a substitutionary sacrifice, either in place of Isaac, or if God allowed him to go through with the killing (if Isaac was the lamb), that God would resurrect him, as Abe's first statement in verse 5 declares.

These were reasonable conclusions based on Abraham's reasoned knowledge of God's character. Abe did not know why God asked him to kill his son. But he trusted that God knew why God was asking him to do it. And Abe knew why he trusted that God knew why. This was not blind faith, irrational faith.

"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).

We know from this inspired New Testament perspective that Abe's **faith** in God's promise was so strong, and his **obedience** so complete that he intended actually going through with killing Isaac, but believed that God would then raise him from the dead.

The idea of substitutionary atonement was first introduced here, was further inculcated into Israel thought the Mosaic sacrificial system and finds its ultimate fulfillment in the sacrificial substitutionary death and resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah.

THERE ARE TWO MAJOR THEOLOGICAL TRUTHS IN THIS STORY:

I. THE MESSIANIC PARADOX

This is arguably the deepest theological truth in this shocking story. It is most brilliantly stated by our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, "***He who seeks to save his life shall lose it; but he who loses it for my sake shall find it.***" (Mark 8:35-36). I call it "the Messianic Paradox."

C.S. Lewis came to discover the Messianic Paradox by experience,

"... I came to suspect that I was perceiving a universal law. ... (*I summarize Lewis' examples: a woman who makes a dog the center of her life...a man who makes alcohol his chief good...a man who clears the decks to make one woman the center of his universe...*). It may be stated as follows: every preference of a small good to a great, or a partial good to a total good, involves the loss of the small or the partial good for which the sacrifice was made. Apparently the world is made that way. If Esau really got the pottage in return for his birthright, then Esau was a lucky exception. You can't get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first. ..." ("First and Second Things" in *God in the Dock*).

**If you put second things first, you lose both the second things and the first things.*

A Philosophical Definition: The Messianic Paradox- The principle that when a goal, or object, or good is sought autonomously from (or inconsistently with) the given moral forms within which it is obtainable, it eludes the seeker. Humans naturally pursue many goods outside those forms. Humans can obtain those goods only when they (often against natural inclinations) seek to attain them within these given forms. Human life purpose and life fulfillment can only be realized when sought according to God-given forms consistent with the human *telos* (life purpose and ends). That principle is paradoxical due to the fact that since the fall of man, human nature exists in moral dualism—in the condition of a divided self—where what is sought by the lower (egoistic, fleshly) nature or self is destructive of what is sought by the higher (altruistic) nature or self. This inner contradiction and moral ambivalence is the universal human condition. Only new birth by the Spirit of God, through repentance and faith in Yeshua the Messiah (God the Father's Isaac) is there hope. (By Bill Bjoraker).

“The Akedah” was an enacted parable, or object lesson, in which Abraham demonstrated the Messianic Paradox—in giving up his son; he gained him, and so much more. Had he grasped him, refused to give him up, what might he have lost? Having failed this supreme test, he would not have qualified to be founder of the elect nation, and the Father of faith (so regarded in the three major world religions, about half the world’s population today—Jews, Christians and Muslims).

In putting God first, Abraham gained back not only his son, but also God’s four-fold blessing, his destiny fulfilled, his name revered. And, in a sense, it was not that he gave up his son in order to get something in return; his son already belonged to God... and Abe already had all things... and so do we, if we cling to God/Yeshua as our first love— *“for all things are yours—whether...the world, or life, or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours, and you are Messiah’s and Messiah is God’s.”* (I Corinthians 3: 21-23).

The fact that this principle is recorded in all four Gospels (Mark 8:35, and parallels: Math.10:39; Luke.17:33; John. 12:25) emphasizes that it is central to Yeshua’s life and teaching. It is a principle that works in every person’s life. Jesus demonstrated it supremely in his own substitutionary death on the cross and His resurrection. By giving up His life, he gained it.

Expanded as—

“Whoever seeks self-fulfillment directly as an end in itself, will lose it; but whoever will surrender his or her life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it; find a life of true flourishing (in authentic freedom) and realize his or her intended life purpose (love in the community of others).” (Mark 8:35 Bjoraker free and interpretive translation).

As Christian martyr Jim Eliot said, *“He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.”*

***When has God in the past, how is He now, how might he in the future ask for your “Isaac” (what or who is your Isaac?). Will you give him (or her, or it) up to God in faith? Therein is your fulfillment.**

II. THE FURTHEST THING BACK

Is the Moral Law the furthest thing back (the ultimate authority)?... Or is God Himself the furthest thing back? (Should Abe have obeyed the moral law through his conscience and refused to murder his son? ... Or should he have obeyed God despite the command, according to natural moral law and conscience, being immoral?)

The best-known treatment of the *Akedah* theme in general literature is that of the Danish Christian philosopher **Søren Kierkegaard** (1813-1855) in his work *Fear and Trembling* (1843).

Kierkegaard probed the moral dilemma of Abraham when God asked him to sacrifice as a burnt offering his beloved son, and the child of promise, the heir and carrier of the Abrahamic Covenant. Kierkegaard explores the issue of whether or not Abraham's faith was irrational, a blind faith. Is faith contrary to reason?

God promised Abe that Isaac would be his heir, but now asks Abe to kill his heir. Does God contradict Himself? Is God changeable, unpredictable? Is God capricious? Does Abe simply obey this God, even if what God commands is, by all Abe's lights and instincts, unethical? Surely Abraham would be thought to have experienced what modern psychologists call "cognitive dissonance"—the anxiety, exasperation, dread, guilt, anger, confusion that results from simultaneously holding two conflicting beliefs or values. When there is a discrepancy between beliefs and behaviors, a person feels something must change in order to eliminate or reduce the dissonance.

Kierkegaard sees Abraham as the "knight of faith" who differs from the "ethical man"; for the latter the moral law is universal (the furthest thing back) and it has a categorical claim to obedience by all; the "knight of faith," however, knows also of the higher obligation laid upon him as a free individual in his relationship to his God and this may involve him in a "teleological suspension of the ethical" (conventional or natural law ethics suspended for a higher end purpose). God is higher than the moral law. Abraham is called upon to renounce for God all that he holds precious, including the ethical ideal to which he subscribes and which he has constantly taught. According to Kierkegaard, this tension between these two conflicting obligations is what characterized Abraham as a "knight of faith." He states,

*"... to think that existing as the single individual is easy enough contains a very dubious indirect concession with respect to oneself, for anyone who actually has any self-esteem and concern for his soul is convinced that the person who lives under his own surveillance alone in a big wide world lives more stringently and retired than a maiden in her virgin's bower [hideaway]. It may well be that there are those who need coercion, who, if they were given free rein, would abandon themselves like unmanageable animals to selfish appetites. But a person will demonstrate that he does not belong to them precisely by showing that he knows how to speak in fear and trembling, and speak he must out of respect for greatness, so that it is not forgotten out of fear of harm, which certainly will not come if he speaks out of a knowledge of greatness, a knowledge of its terrors, and if one does not know the terrors, one does not know the greatness, either. Let us consider in somewhat more detail the distress and anxiety in the **paradox of faith**. The **tragic hero** relinquishes himself in order to express the universal; the **knight of faith** relinquishes the universal in order to become the single individual. (*Fear and Trembling* p. 75) (**Bolding mine**)*

That is to say—For “the knight of faith”, God Himself is the furthest thing back, regardless of any other humanly conceived system of ethics.

Yet the Moral Law (what C.S. Lewis called “the Tao” in his *Abolition of Man*) derives from God’s very Person. The God of Israel will not contradict His own Person; He has bound Himself to His own unchanging moral character. So questions and statements such as, “Can God make a rock so big He could not lift it?” are actually irrational, or non-sensical. God does not act in ways inconsistent with His character, nor with the natural laws by which He made the universe (though He can and does intervene to supersede them in a miracle, against the norm. But these are not irrational acts).

This view that God is the furthest thing back is often called “divine command” ethics in Christian tradition. In contrast, in Islamic theology Allah is the furthest thing back, **but** Allah can arbitrarily, capriciously, do whatever He wants; He is subject to no consistent law. Allah does whatever he wants. Yahweh has bound Himself to be consistent with His own unchanging character.

Jewish thinkers such as **Joseph B. Soloveitchik** (1903-1993) have found the Kierkegaardian insights fully compatible with Judaism. **Ernst Simon** (in *Conservative Judaism*, 12 (spring 1958), 15–19) believes that a middle position between the two views is possible (1. The moral law is furthest back, *or* 2. God is furthest back). Judaism is an ethical religion and would never in fact demand a teleological suspension of the ethical. Abraham is, therefore, ordered to stay his hand. But the original command to sacrifice Isaac is a warning against too complete an identification of God’s Word with naturalistic ethics. God’s commands may not always agree with natural law, or “the Tao,” at least as humanly understood. As God would later declare through Isaiah,

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994) went further than Kierkegaard by suggesting that the believer has the obligation to overcome his ethical duty and unconditionally obey the divine command. Leibowitz thus regarded the *Akedah* as a paradigm of the life of faith, a position unusual in Jewish thought, which generally maintains that the divine command is not opposed to ethical duty.

Jewish thought generally did not incorporate the theory of “divine command morality.” The *Akedah* thus became a basis for justifying sacrifice and devotion, but because of the centrality of morality (law, ethics) to Jewish tradition in general, and

specifically to *halakhah*, it was only with Soloveitchik and Leibowitz that the *Akedah* became a paradigm of religious-spiritual life, the life of faith itself.

Out of the God of Israel's own Person and character flows His moral law. His Word is an expression of His being and Person. When the Word became flesh, He expressed His essential being and character perfectly (John 1:14; Hebrews 1:3). Sometimes it is higher and deeper than human understanding, but never irrational or contradictory.

In the end, **God is the furthest thing back.**

I close these observations with this thoughtful meditation by Kierkegaard,

"We read: And God tested Abraham, and he said to him: Abraham, and Abraham answered: Here I am. We ought to note in particular the trusting and God-devoted disposition, the bold confidence in confronting the test, in freely and undauntedly answering: Here I am. Is it like that with us, or are we not rather eager to evade the severe trials when we see them coming, wish for a remote corner of the world in which to hide, wish that the mountains would conceal us, or impatiently try to roll the burden off our shoulders and onto others; or even those who do not try to flee — how slowly, how reluctantly they drag their feet.

Not so with Abraham, he answers undauntedly: Here I am. He does not trouble anyone with his suffering, neither Sarah, who he knew very well would be grief-stricken over losing Isaac, nor Eliezer, the faithful servant in his house, with whom, if with anyone, he certainly might have sought consolation. We read: He rose early in the morning. He hurried as if to a jubilant festival, and by daybreak he was at Moria, the place designated by the Lord. And he cut the wood for the fire, and he bound Isaac, and he lighted the fire, and he drew the knife. My listener, there was many a father in Israel who believed that to lose his child was to lose everything that was dear to him, to be robbed of every hope for the future, but there was no one who was the child of promise in the sense Isaac was to Abraham. There was many a father who had had that loss, but since it was always, after all, God's almighty and inscrutable governance, since it was God who personally obliterated, as it were, the promise given, he was obliged to say with Job: The Lord gave, the Lord took away.

Not so with Abraham — he was commanded to do it with his own hand. The fate of Isaac was laid in Abraham's hand together with the knife. And here he stood on the mountain early in the morning, the old man with his one and only hope. But he did not doubt; he looked neither to the right nor to the left; he did not challenge heaven with his complaints. He knew it was the weightiest sacrifice God could ask, but he also knew that nothing was too great for God. Of course, we all know the outcome of the story. Perhaps it does not amaze us anymore, because we have known it from our earliest childhood, but then the fault does not really lie in the truth, in the story, but in ourselves, because we are too lukewarm genuinely to feel with Abraham and to suffer with him. He went home happy, confident, trusting in God, for he had not wavered, he had nothing for which to reproach himself. If we imagine that Abraham, by anxiously

and desperately looking around, discovered the ram that would save his son, would he not then have gone home in disgrace, without confidence in the future, without the self-assurance that he was prepared to bring to God any sacrifice whatsoever, without the divine voice from heaven in his heart that proclaimed to him God's grace and love.

Nor did Abraham say: Now I have become an old man, my youth is gone, my dream has not been fulfilled; I became a man and what I yearned for you denied me, and now that I am an old man you fulfilled everything in a wonderful way. Grant me now a quiet evening; do not summon me to new battles; let me rejoice in what you gave me, in the consolation of my old age."

(Journals of Soren Kierkegaard IIIC 4 1840-1841)



"So long as men [sic] live in the world, they will turn to this story with unwaning interest. There is only one scene in history by which it is surpassed; that where the Great Father gave His "Isaac" to a death from which there was no deliverance. God and Abraham were friends in a common sorrow up to a certain point; though the infinite love of God stepped in to stay the hand of Abraham at the critical moment, sparing his friend what He would not spare Himself." (F.B Meyer, 1847-1929).



From a 14th century Icelandic Manuscript

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