

# SACRIFICING ISAAC: A NEW INTERPRETATION

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The almost-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis has been the subject of extensive analysis and commentary over the centuries, by both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars. The latter use the story to support their unique beliefs. The Jewish scholars have been plentiful, and I am not one of them if the criteria are vast biblical, historical, or linguistic knowledge. Their interpretations have been uniformly orthodox; that is, in brief, that Abraham quite willingly offered Isaac's death. The conventional interpretation would have us believe that the ethics of this special man could be kept out of the way for the several days that the story takes to unfold.

I would like to propose what seems to be a new (as far as I know) and radical departure from all previous interpretations of the call-to-sacrifice events. I have given much thought to this topic because I feel that the test of Abraham, on the surface, does not make sense. Consider that the birth of Isaac to the far-too-old Sarah was a miracle. Second, Abraham sent away his first son, Ishmael, from his household, against his wishes but upon the insistence of Sarah and with the approval of God. Third, Abraham is assured that his mission will be properly carried into the future by Isaac, who will become the father of a great nation. It does not make sense to me that God would now request an act that makes earlier events a painful waste or a false promise. There must be an interpretation of the near-sacrifice that is logically reasonable.

It was not unusual in those days for nobility to sacrifice offspring to their various gods. Abraham's willingness would not be particularly outstanding in terms of devotion. God's request, taken in a straightforward way, would not differentiate Abraham from his contemporaries or his God from those that the nearby peoples were worshipping.

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Therefore, I suggest that the commentaries I have read miss the moral of the story. Most chapters of the Five Books of Moses have very serious lessons to teach. The first few are particularly important because they lay the ethical foundation of this new group, the Israelites, and begin to point out the differences between their God and all the others worshipped at that time or since. The near-sacrifice story is pivotal in that it shows us, if we are willing to read the lines and between them, a heightened ethical sensibility on the part of Abraham and Isaac and a clarification of what God wants of us, or, stated more accurately, what He definitely does not want.

It is my thesis that the test was not whether or not Abraham would willingly slaughter his son. In my thinking, God would find blind obedience a disappointing performance, far below the potential for making ethical decisions that was the reason for Abraham's selection in the first place. The test was whether the request would open Abraham's thinking to new questions, new possibilities, a re-examination of his mission, and a better understanding of his and our God. Simply put, God did not want Abraham to be all-that-willing to sacrifice Isaac. God wanted to hear an argument put forth from Abraham's ethical nature, that side of him that had many problems with human sacrifice. God also wanted to make the statement once and for all that He does not want human sacrifice.

In going through the story line by line my textual evidence is not overwhelming. There are some verses that support my approach, but there is also much that is unsaid in the Bible. In those places I will try fill in what I believe was happening. I will also pay some attention to the important "supporting" character in this drama; namely, Isaac. Another person whose influence may have been felt at a distance was Sarah. Her entire happiness and reason for living were part of the high stakes. In fact it is not hard to imagine that, had the sacrifice not been stopped, she and Abraham, and the Israelites' claim to be an ethically advanced society would have been utterly destroyed.

#### EXAMINING THE TEXT

*And it happened after these things that God tested Abraham*

-- There is a very special lesson coming.

*and said to him, 'Abraham,' and he replied, 'Here I am' (Gen. 22:1).*

-- To do as You command.

*And He said, 'Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac*

-- Why does God remind Abraham that he has only one, very much loved son? Does Abraham need reminding? Does God want to make this trial even harder for Abraham? No, God is cautioning him, saying, "Be careful how you handle this." All throughout history parents who have sacrificed children to any cause suffered greatly, but Abraham's loss of Isaac would be uniquely painful considering all that has come before.

*and get yourself to the land of Moriah.*

-- This was quite a journey. As we shall read later, after three days of travel Abraham's destination was finally visible but still far away. Why not perform the sacrifice nearby? Perhaps God wanted to give Abraham plenty of time to think things over, to exercise his ethical good sense.

*Bring him up there as an offering [l'olah] upon one of the mountains which I shall indicate to you' (v. 2).*

-- It has been pointed out by scholars that God could have used the word for "slaughter" but He did not. He used a slightly more ambiguous word that still conventionally meant "sacrifice" but left open some other interpretations, in my opinion. There is more than one way a father can offer his son to God. He can offer his son's life-long service, or he can offer his son's blood and burned body. Abraham started to think about this.

*So Abraham awoke early in the morning and he saddled his donkey; he took his two young men with him and Isaac, his son. He split the wood for the offering and rose up and went to the place which God had indicated to him (v. 3).*

-- Abraham is not hesitant in his actions. He methodically gets things ready for the journey and leaves without delay. Right from the start, it would be unseemly for him to waver. The people in the Bible were not robots or puppets. They were usually of extraordinary character. In the case of Abraham, we have a special sense of ethics. It is my thesis that when we analyze the story we have to take this into consideration his humanity, his heart, and his mind.

Why did he rise early in the morning? It seems likely to me that he wanted to leave before Sarah saw what was happening. She would not have let him

take Isaac, and Isaac would have been torn between the conflicting wishes of his parents. Abraham could not have separated Isaac from Sarah. You may fault him for stealing away but also empathize with him in this predicament.

*On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar* (v. 4).

-- What could have been happening during those three days after an unusually ethical man has been requested to bring his son as an offering? The Bible does not say! I say that Abraham was tormented, and that his mind was trying to make sense of things. At first God's command may have been staggering, unbearably painful.

Gradually though, Abraham started to collect his thoughts and his reasoning may have been as follows: "I must not be understanding the command properly. How can Isaac do all that has been foretold if I slaughter him? God would be contradicting Himself. Would my God act in such an erratic way, one year miraculously giving my wife a child and another year taking him away from us? No, I have trouble believing He is like that.

"Was I told to leave my home in Haran only to slaughter my child on a mountaintop? No, I cannot believe it. But on the other hand, I just don't know what God wants and what I should do. Would He ask for the same kind of child butchery that the gods worshipped by the neighboring Canaanites seem to desire? I can't believe He would want that.

"I need God to tell me very clearly what He wants me to do, what kind of offering He wants. Does He want me to offer Isaac's life-long service? That's what I hope He wants, and I will gladly do that. Does He want me to slaughter my son? I am willing to do that, but with great sadness and disappointment. Does He want human sacrifice in general or is that something abhorrent to Him?"

All of this meditation on the part of Abraham has a background of great anguish. However, the more he turned things over in his mind though, the more confident he became that God was going to give him a clear answer; one that would confirm his beliefs and allow him to go home with his son.

*And Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here by yourselves with the donkey, while I and the lad will go yonder; we will worship and we will return to you'* (v. 5).

-- Commentators have tried various ways of explaining how Abraham could say *we will return to you*. It is problematic if you believe that Abraham was wholeheartedly going to offer his son as a corporeal sacrifice. The statement presents no problem for me. As I mentioned already, at this point Abraham was fairly convinced that he would not be allowed to sacrifice Isaac.

*And Abraham took the wood for the offering, and placed it on Isaac, his son. He took in his hand the fire and the knife, and the two of them went together* (v. 6).

-- Abraham must see this through until the possibly bitter end. He must be ready for a conventional offering. He must go ahead until God stops him.

*Then Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'Father.' And he said, 'Here I am, my son'* (v. 7).

-- Abraham is saying that he will not hide from his son's difficult questions.

*And he said, 'Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?'*

Isaac's age is unclear from the text but he has no doubt noticed that his father has been suffering and absorbed in some serious thinking. Isaac finally addresses his father with a simple question of supplies.

*And Abraham said, 'God will seek out for himself the lamb for the offering, my son'* (v. 8).

-- God will make clear His wishes in that regard. He will let us know what type of offering He wants. Obviously the "lamb" is a generic term. As it turns out, the sacrifice was not a lamb at all. Abraham appears to be evasive but, I believe, his statement was just the beginning of a dialogue between father and son. Depending on Isaac's age, Abraham may have had to tell him the command and his interpretation of it. Now, Isaac was a gentle soul following his father's example of devotion to God. If told, he would have been satisfied with his father's plan of seeking clarification.

*And the two of them went together.*

-- The two of them proceeded with the same understanding of the command and what they needed to do.

*They arrived at the place which God designated to him. Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood; he bound Isaac, his son, and he placed him on the altar atop the wood* (v. 9).

-- Isaac seems to be a willing partner in the proceedings and allows himself to be bound so that he would not panic and desecrate the event. Abraham and Isaac are brimming with tears, no doubt, for they loved each other and the significance of their actions was immense.

*Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slaughter his son* (v. 10).

-- Abraham was now holding the knife in a way that Isaac could be slaughtered. He was not going to maintain that position for long; that would be improper also. He would need to be stopped right away.

*And an angel of God called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham! Abraham!'* (v. 11).

-- The signal comes as hoped for. It is a tone of emergency.

*And he said, 'Here I am.'*

-- "Trying to obey You. Tell me what You want."

*And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad nor do anything to him.'*

-- "Offering him to Me does not mean harming him. No, I do not want his death. I do not want any human sacrifices. Let that be clearly understood, now and forever."

*'For now I know that you are a God-fearing man, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me.'*

-- "I know that you honor Me in every way. You were willing to slaughter your only son. You exercised your ethical judgment but were not sure that I would reject Isaac as a sacrifice. I want your and Isaac's ethically-discerning nature, and your knowledge of what I do want, to go forward. That will be your people's distinguishing characteristic and your contribution to the peoples of the world."

In conclusion, the story of Isaac's near-sacrifice is very different than a lesson in blind faith. Rather, it is an eye-opening revelation of the patriarchs' ethically-guided faith and of the God they chose to follow.