

## General Comments on Genesis 22

On this chapter, the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis states:

This section recounts the climactic event in the life of Abraham, the ultimate trial of faith. God asks the aged patriarch to offer up his son as a sacrifice. Abraham binds the child on the altar and poises the knife for the fatal thrust. But the deadly act is stayed by a heavenly voice. The Akedah, as the story is popularly called-- because of the Hebrew stem `-k-d, "to bind," in verse 9-- is organically connected with the preceding chapter. Abraham has lost one son and now it seems about to lose the other. In both narratives, the child is saved by divine intervention at the critical moment, the only two biblical instances of an angel calling from heaven to human beings. In both cases there is a fortuitous discovery: a well of water in the earlier story, a ram in the thicket here.

Beyond its connection with the foregoing chapter, the Akedah brings to a close Abraham's spiritual odyssey that began with God's call at Haran. The curtain rises and falls on the patriarch as he receives divine word that demands agonizing decisions. The first time God bids him to take leave of his father and to cut himself off from his past; now, in this last theophany that he is to receive, God asked that he sacrifice his beloved, longed-for son and thereby abandon all hope of posterity. On both occasions Abraham responds with unquestioning obedience and steadfast loyalty.

Read this last paragraph very closely. Now, recall what happened in Pearl of Great Price Abraham 1. There, in Abram's first theophany, we have not only his call "to cut himself off from the past" but also a very similar near sacrifice of himself. There is a strong parallel of the opening and closing events. The Torah Commentary continues:

This correspondence between Haran and Moriah encases the biography of Abraham within a framework of unwavering faith. For added emphasis, the two crucial

events are cast in a common literary mold so that chapters 12 and 22 share many connecting links. God's first call to Abraham is introduced by the declaration, "Go forth...to the land that I will show you"; and Hi last employs almost identical language, "Go forth...to the land of Moriah...on one of the heights I will point out to you." The Hebrew phrase *lekh lekha*, "go forth," does not occur again in the Bible, a fact that underscores the deliberate and meaningful nature of its use in these two passages. In both instances, the precise ultimate destination of the trek is withheld, and in both the tension of the drama is heightened by the cumulative effect of several Hebrew epithets, the last of which is the most potent: "your land, your homeland, your father's house"; "your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love." Both episodes culminate in promises of glorious posterity, the second one containing striking verbal echoes of the first. One blessing was received at the terebinth of Moreh, the other at the similar sounding Moriah; at both sites, it is stated, Abraham "built an altar there." Finally, just as the account of the initial call is preceded by a genealogy that introduces the main character of the next episode, so the story of the final call from God is followed by a genealogical note having the same function.

These comments present considerable insight into the meaning of the account. They also serve to establish the typical reading, largely that this was a test of Abraham's faith and he was generally ignorant of the symbolism and theological implications. But, how much of this was a test of faith and how ignorant was Abraham of the implications? Some points worth considering:

According to the Pearl of Great Price book of Abraham, Abraham was nearly sacrificed himself as a result of his father's actions (cf. Abr. 1:7), at which point he was filled with "the vision of the Almighty" (cf. Abr. 1:15, cp. v. 14). There are strong parallels between that event and the present one, even in addition to those pointed out in the Torah Commentary above. Did Abraham forget those lessons from early in life and need to be reminded?

Abraham never questions the Lord's command in the present account, whereas he typically questions the Lord in their prior encounters, cf. 15:2, 15:8, 17:17, 18:23.

Abraham says, "I and the lad will go yonder...and come again to you" (KJV) "we will go up...we will return to you" (JPS) in v. 5, suggesting he knew he would be returning with Isaac.

When asked by Isaac concerning the animal for sacrifice, Abraham cryptically says "God will provide himself a lamb" in v. 8. He does not allude at all to Isaac being the intended sacrifice.

New Testament and latter-day sources suggest Abraham was well-aware of the ministry of Jesus Christ and the concept of the Atonement, cf. JST Gen. 15:6, John 8:58, Hebr. 11:17-19, Jacob 4:5.

There is considerable evidence Abraham understood the symbolism of the requested act and knew Isaac would not be killed. How well he understood the particulars we do not know, but with the evidence above it is difficult to suggest ignorance or naivety on Abraham's part with respect to the symbolic nature of the Akedah.

Given the evidence, it seems likely the only question was how far Abraham willing go (i.e., did Abraham really think he would have to kill Isaac and then the Lord would resurrect him as Hebr. 11:17-19 suggests, or did Abraham suspect at the moment of execution it would be halted as occurred with him in his own near-execution?). The test here is not necessarily one of faith in that "Would Abraham be obedient no matter what?" but rather a test of faith in that "Does Abraham really know the Lord's will and future mission, and how the covenants made with him figure into it?"

There are many attempts in modern commentary to draw parallels between Christ's crucifixion and Isaac's near sacrifice by Christians. Some analogies are better than others. One point to note is none of the New Testament authors made use of this text as a messianic proof text by drawing parallels between the particulars of Christ's crucifixion and Isaac's near sacrifice. Similarly, it is never used in the Book of Mormon or Doctrine & Covenants in such a manner. As such, caution should

be used so as to avoid reading too much into the text. And, particularly note it was not Isaac that was sacrificed, it was the ram caught in the thicket that was sacrificed, and that ram was provided by the Lord. One has to wonder why Abraham did not see the ram in the thicket before he bound and nearly slaughtered Isaac.

Another noteworthy point is human sacrifice was common among other competing religions of the time. But, human sacrifice was never a part of any Abrahamic religion (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam), arguably because of this event.

On this chapter, Everett Fox, in his Five Books of Moses (1995, Schocken Books) writes:

This story is one of the great masterpieces of biblical literature. In a [famous article](#) by Erich Auerbach it is remarked how biblical style is exemplified here, in contradistinction to that of Homer and other epic bards, eschews physical and psychological details in favor of one central preoccupation: a man's decision in relation to God. The result of this style is a terrible intensity, a story which is so stark as to be almost unbearable.

Chap. 22 is a tale of God's seeming retraction of his promise (of "seed") to Avraham. The fact that other issues may be involved here (i.e., Israel's rejection of local and widely practiced ideas of child sacrifice) may be quite beside the point. Coming just one chapter after the birth of the long-awaited son, the story completely turns around the tension of the whole cycle and creates a new, frightening tension of its own. The real horror of the story lies in the this threatened contradiction to what has gone before.

Most noticeable in the narrative is Avraham's silence, his mute acceptance of, and acting on, God's commands. We are told of no sleepless night, not does he ever say a word to God. Instead he is described with a series of verbs: starting early, saddling, taking, splitting, arising, going (v. 3; similarly in v. 6 and 9-10). Avraham the bargainer, so willing to enter into negotiations with relations (Chap. 13), allies (Chap. 14), local princes (Chap. 20), and even God himself (Chap. 18), here falls completely silent.

The chapter serves an important structural function in the Avraham cycle, framing it in conjunction with Chap. 12.

The triplet in v. 2 ("Pray take your son./your only one,/whom you love") recalls "from your land/ from your kindred/ from your father's house" in 12:1; "go you forth" and "the land that I will tell you of" (v. 2; the latter, three times in the story) similarly point back to Avraham's call (12:1; "Go you forth...to the land that I will let you see"). There he has been asked to give up the past (his father); here, the future (his son). Between the two events lies Avraham's active life as man of God, ancestor, and intercessor. After this God will never speak with him again.

In many ways this story is the midpoint of Genesis. It brings the central theme of continuity and discontinuity to a head in the strongest possible way. After Moriyya, we can breath easier, knowing the God will come to the rescue of his chosen ones in the direst of circumstances. At the same time we are left to ponder the difficulties of being a chosen one, subject to such an incredible test.

The story is also paradigmatic narrative of the book. The Patriarch passes the test, and we know that the fulfilment of divine promise is assured. Yet there is an ominous note: love, which occurs here by name for the first time, leads almost to heartbreak. So it will be for the rest of Genesis.

All of this serves to explain the pathos and import of the text, but what prompts the Lord to put Abraham to the test in such a manner? The immediately preceding text of 21:22-33 answers that question. There, it is clear Abimelech does not trust Abraham at all (cf. 21:22-23), and he adjures him to deal justly with him, since Abraham is living in land he rules over. This is a problem, because Abimelech does not worship the Lord, and Abraham is to set an example to all nations:

<sup>17</sup> And the LORD said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do;<sup>18</sup> Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? <sup>19</sup> For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. (KJV Gen. 18:17-19)

<sup>17</sup> The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, <sup>18</sup> since Abraham will certainly become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? <sup>19</sup> For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him." (NASB Gen. 18:17-19)

Since Abimelech doesn't worship the Lord, he sees Abraham's God as no different from any other pagan god, a god of caprice, not a God of righteousness and justice, for all nations. Abimelech sees Abraham's God as one that shows favoritism to Abraham because he is Abraham, not because Abraham is righteous or just. This is because of the bad example Abraham set in ch. 20, which brought punishment on Abimelech.

Abraham's deceit gave the Lord a bad name and set a bad example among those whom he lived around. That bad example represents a threat to the covenant the Lord made with Abraham, because the Lord intends to prosper this great nation through their righteousness and justice, and their good example to other nations. But, clearly, Abimelech doesn't see it that way in 21:22-23.

The result is the Lord chastens Abraham (cf. D&C 101:4-5), because of his bad example, to make it clear the Lord is not like the other gods. The other gods of the nations are gods of caprice and favoritism, not of righteousness and justice. They are gods who demand human sacrifice (cf. 2 Kings 3:27, 2 Kings 16:3, 2 Chron. 33:6). Here, the Lord makes it clear to Abraham that He is not like the other pagan gods and his own bad example has jeopardized the covenant He made with Abraham under threat of failure by possibly turning the other nations against him. The Lord chastises Abraham for his bad example, and then apparently never speaks to him again. However, it is clear from the events in ch. 22 that Abraham has heard the message of the present text loud and clear, as he meticulously adheres to the local customs to obtain land to bury Sarah.

## **Comments on Genesis 22**

1 AND it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, [here] I [am]. 2 And he said, Take now thy son, thine only [son] Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

v1-3 The Lord puts Abraham to the test (v. 1) by asking him to offer his only son as a burnt offering (v. 2).

Here is a rather curious situation. Previously, the bold and verbose Abraham would question the Lord (cf. 15:2, 3, 8) and plead on the behalf of possibly righteous strangers living in a city he knew was generally immoral (cf. 18:23-33). Here Abraham is presented as not even saying one word, but rather completely submissive, obedient, and unquestioning.

v1 "God did tempt", the KJV translation is poor. A better translation would be "test", "try", or "prove".

v2 Isaac's age is uncertain. There is a great deal of speculation on the matter, all of which is unscriptural. Clearly Isaac was old enough to reason for himself given his comments in v. 7, but aside from this it is a matter of pure speculation.

"thy son, thy only son Isaac, whom thou lovest", Robert Alter in his Five Books of Moses (1996, W. W. Norton & Co.) says:

The Hebrew syntactic chain is exquisitely forged to carry a dramatic burden and the sundry attempts of English translators from the King James Version to the present to rearrange it are misguided. The classical Midrash, followed by Rashi, beautifully catches the resonance of the order of terms. Rashi's concise version is as follows: "Your son. He said to Him, 'I have two sons.' He said to him, 'Your only one.' He said, 'This one is an only one to his mother and this one is an only one to his mother.' He said to him, 'Whom you love.' He said to him, 'I love both of them.' He said to him, 'Isaac.'" Although the human object of God's terrible imperative does not actually speak in the biblical text, this midrashic dialogue demonstrates a fine responsiveness to how the tense stance of the addressee is intimated through the words of the addresser in a one-sided dialogue.

The issue being addressed is why is Isaac favored over Ishmael, and the reason is because the Lord promised Abraham an heir through Sarah. But, Sarah didn't believe it would happen, so

she gave Hagar to Abraham. That was not the Lord's doing, it was Sarah's doing. The heir through Hagar was not the Lord's will, it was Sarah's. So, when the Lord covenants with Abraham over an heir through Sarah, that is the one and only heir He is addressing.

"offer him there for a burnt offering", the Hebrew terms used here, and again in v. 7 and 8 (Hebr: [ala](#), [ola](#)), are different from the Hebrew term in v. 10 where Abraham goes to "slay" (Hebr: [sahat](#)) his son. Jewish commentators (e.g., Fox, Alter) point out this difference in the Hebrew points to Abraham's overall obedience to the Lord's command, but a misunderstanding in the finer details of the Lord's details and expectations.

3 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him. 4 Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. 5 And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid [it] upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here [am] I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where [is] the lamb for a burnt offering? 8 And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. 9 And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. 10 And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

v3-10 After receiving the command from the Lord, Abraham wakes up bright and early to do what the Lord has told him to (v. 3). After traveling for three days he sees their destination (v. 4). He tells the two men he came with to watch the animals while he and Isaac will go up into the mountain, and he tells them they both will return (v. 5). Abraham and Isaac then set off up the mountain (v. 6). As they are going up the mountain Isaac asks Abraham where the sacrifice is (v. 7) and he tells him God will provide it, and they continue (v. 8). They arrive at the location and Abraham builds the altar and ties Isaac and places him on it (v. 9). He then stretches out his hand to strike

Isaac (v. 10).

v3 "rose up early in the morning", there was no delay, no hesitation in his actions.

"took two of his young men with him", presumably this detail is included to make sense of v. 5 as he had to have been speaking to someone accompanying them.

v4 "on the third day", this is no impetuous act. Abraham had plenty of time to think it over, and that is exactly what the Lord wanted, otherwise the Lord would have selected a closer location.

v5 "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you", the JPS translates this as "The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you" which is a plainer translation. Note Abraham is saying both he and the boy will go up to worship and they both will return. The Hebrew here is so plain on Abraham's quote of both of them going up and returning that the typical Jewish reading on this is that Abraham is lying to the two servants in order to not disclose the imminent sacrifice. That is one possible reading, another reading is Abraham really does know that they both will be returning.

v7-8 Isaac realizes there is nothing around to sacrifice. Since human sacrifice, and sacrifice of your own children at that, was common at the time, it is not entirely unlikely Isaac was feeling a little nervous at that point. However, Abraham's answer in v. 8 is such that the two of them continue to walk on together.

This presents a setting where Isaac is comfortable enough with the situation to have voluntarily walked along side of his father as opposed to involuntarily going bound or under whatever circumstances. Especially note that v. 6, which precedes Isaac's question in v. 7, presents them as walking off together, and they are still walking off together after the question of v. 7 and Abraham's reply in v. 8.

Abraham says: "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering." Whatever it meant to Isaac it was enough to make him comfortable enough to continue to walk on with Abraham and not flee. Both Abraham and Isaac at this point probably understood what was about to happen and they anticipated the

sacrifice would be stopped at the last moment, or at the very least the Lord would restore his life after the fact. Surely if Isaac was old enough to reason things out in v. 7 he was old enough to discuss matters of symbolic theology with Abraham.

v9 "bound", the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis states, "The Hebrew stem `-k-d is found nowhere else in the ritual vocabulary of the Bible. In postbiblical texts it is a technical term for the tying together of the forefoot and the hindfoot of an animal or of the two forefeet or two hindfeet."

11 And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here [am] I. 12 And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only [son] from me. 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind [him] a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. 14 And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said [to] this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.

v11-14 Just as Abraham is poised to strike Isaac an angel calls out to him (v. 11) and tells him not to harm Isaac. The angel is a witness to Abraham's respect to God's commands such that he would not even withhold his own son from Him (v. 12). Abraham then sees a ram nearby caught in the shrubs, and makes a burnt offering of it (v. 13). Abraham then names the place "The Lord will see", from which the saying "On the mountain of the Lord there is vision" comes (v. 14).

v11 "Abraham!, Abraham!", recall that "Abraham" means "father of a multitude". Here the name is obviously significant, having "passed" the test he will be blessed in his posterity and having Isaac spared he will have posterity through him.

v13 The text does not indicate Abraham is commanded to offer the ram as a sacrifice. After Isaac is spared by divine fiat, Abraham sees a ram and offers it voluntarily as a burnt offering. Smith's Bible Dictionary states in the entry for "Burnt-offering":

The meaning of the whole burnt offering was that which is the original idea of all sacrifice, the offering by

the sacrificer, of himself, soul and body, to God, the submission of his will to the will of the Lord. It typified (see Hebr. 5:1, 3, 7, 8) our Lord's offering, the perfect sacrifice of his own human will to the Will of His Father.

Thus, the burnt offering was a self-dedicatory sacrifice, and presumably on the behalf of Isaac as well. The symbolism associated with it is the flames represented the consuming presence of God, a sanctification theme, the entire consumption of the offering was indicative of complete submission to God. The smoke represented the ascending prayers of the individual and also had obvious ascension themes. The sacrifice was also a type of Christ as indicated by the references in Hebr. cited above.

Note a ram is being sacrificed, not a lamb as is referred to in v. 8. Verse 8 is probably not predicting the events of v. 13 as it would be an inaccurate prediction at best. It can be safely concluded the statement in v. 8 is deliberately intended by Abraham to be symbolic and allegorical.

v14 This is a blatant rhetorical connection to the incidents of Abraham's earlier near-sacrifice, cf. Abr. 1:14. The name refers to the theophany of v. 11-12 and Abr. 1:15-19.

15 And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, 16 And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only [son]: 17 That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which [is] upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; 18 And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice. 19 So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

v15-19 The angel calls out again (v. 15) and affirms the previously made blessings offered to Abraham (v. 17-18) will be granted because of his obedience (v. 16). The group then returns home (v. 19).

v17-18 The angel repeats the blessings offered to Abraham previously in ch. 12 and 15. This blessing is received because

of verses 13-14.

v19 As predicted in v. 5, Isaac and Abraham return to his two servants.

20 And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor; 21 Huz his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram, 22 And Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. 23 And Bethuel begat Rebekah: these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother. 24 And his concubine, whose name [was] Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah.

v20-24 The Torah Commentary quoted in the General Comments suggests these verses parallel that of 11:27-32. However, these two sections of text are quite different. In 11:27-32 the primary theme is that of genealogy, where the present text is more concerned with children.

Abraham is promised multitudes of children in the immediately preceding text (v. 17-18) yet he has only one child at present. As such, v. 20-24 serve as an ironic comparison. Abraham's peers are having a lot of children while he has only one, but now Abraham has multitudes of children while the children of his peers have fallen into obscurity. It therefore serves to emphasize the manner in which the promise of v. 17-18 has been fulfilled. Abraham's peers had many children but presently have none while the Lord has made Abraham's children into many multitudes.

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