

LIBERTY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

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GENESIS

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## Introduction

In Genesis 22 God tests Abraham by requiring the sacrifice of Isaac, the seed of God's covenantal blessings. Abraham responds with unwavering faith and immediate obedience; thus, God is satisfied and the Abrahamic covenant is reconfirmed. It is the purpose of this writer to examine the covenantal promise to Abraham, the testing of Abraham, and the reiteration of God's covenantal promise to Abraham's descendants.

Genesis chapter 22 is largely recognized for God's testing of the Old Testament Patriarch Abraham. In this test God commands the binding of Isaac, "thy son, thine only son" (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16), to be sacrificed as "a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2).<sup>1</sup> The Orthodox Union identifies the Hebrew term "Akeidah" as, "the binding; as in 'Akeidat Yitzchak,' the 'Binding (as a Sacrifice is bound) of Yitzchak, and his offering by Avraham to HaShem, as a sacrifice, according to His Command.'"<sup>2</sup> Warren Weirsbe sees the Aqedah (binding) as a third test within a series: (1) from family (Gen. 21:1-21); (2) from neighbors (Gen. 21:22-34); and finally (3) from God (Gen. 22:1-24).<sup>3</sup> While considering such a paradoxical command from Yahweh the willful compliance of Isaac to be sacrificed adds even more bewilderment to this chapter. So what was the purpose of the Aqedah? One undergirding factor of Yahweh's command is resultant from a longstanding personal communion between Himself and Abraham. The initial covenantal promise is actually found back in Genesis chapter twelve. To gain a better understanding of this command, a deeper examination of the Near Eastern covenants foundational to Abraham's worldview is crucial.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture is from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Orthodox Union-Judaism 101: A Glossary of Basic Jewish Terms and Concepts. <http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/a.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe. *Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament: Genesis 21:1-22:24*. n.d. e-Sword, Version 10.0.5.

## God's Covenant

Covenants were common during Abraham's historical time era. Today, at least a few years back, a man's word and a handshake formed a loose form of a modern day covenant. Keeping the Aqedah of Genesis 22 in mind, it is important to understand the covenant was initially formed in Genesis 12:1-3, was particularly between God and Abraham. Now in Genesis 22, God wants to test Abraham's devotedness to Yahweh in the aforementioned covenant (Gen. 12:1-3); yet, not by way of a friendly handshake but by the sacrificial giving of Abraham's promised son (Isaac).

### Covenant Defined

Feinberg, in the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, notes the diversity of biblical covenants and categorizes them as:

[1] between nations: a treaty, alliance of friendships; [2] between individuals: a pledge or agreement; [3] with obligation between a monarch and subjects: a constitution; [4] between God and man: a covenant accompanied by signs, sacrifices, and a solemn oath that sealed the relationship with promises of blessing for keeping the covenant and curses for breaking it.<sup>4</sup>

The Hebrew word for covenant “בְּרִית” (*berit*)” is used with specificity in “Genesis 15:18 and 17:1-21” with regards to the Abrahamic Covenant; yet, in Genesis “12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-21; 18:17-33; 21:12-13; 22:1-18” the word covenant “בְּרִית” (*berit*)” is not particularly utilized though the passages record a comparable declaration to Abraham.<sup>5</sup>

### Given to Abraham

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<sup>4</sup> Charles L. Feinberg. “בְּרִית” (*berit*)” Pages 128-130 in vol. 1 of Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. 2 vols. Edited by R. Laird Harris. Chicago: Moody, 1980.

<sup>5</sup> Keith H. Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant.” *Masters Seminary Journal* 10:2 (Fall 1999): 192-193.

There are many variations amongst scholars regarding the delineation of the Abrahamic Covenant; Essex provides a simplistic and understandable threefold description: “(1) land; (2) seed; and (3) blessing.”<sup>6</sup> Longman III renders an expressive description of the Near Eastern covenantal process along with the uniqueness of the covenant between God and Abraham:

According to custom a number of animals were cut in half, and the person or persons who passed through the halves were in effect saying, ‘May I be killed and cut in half like these animals, if I dare break my promises.’ Strikingly, it is only God who goes through the parts, calling the self-curse on his own head, so to speak. God passes through the parts in the form of a ‘smoking firepot and a flaming torch’ (Gen. 15:17).<sup>7</sup>

Strikingly, the covenant with Abraham is exceptionally distinctive and made with only one man (Abraham), one family (Abraham’s seed), and one nation (Israel); whereas the Adamic and Noahic Covenants were with the “collective world of humankind.”<sup>8</sup>

#### Promised Through Isaac

Having established the covenantal parties (Yahweh and Abraham) it is imperative to examine the peculiarity of God’s command. Dilling, referring to the command as a “theodicy” notes, “The severity of Abraham’s test [to sacrifice Isaac] . . . was greatly multiplied by the soteriological implications of his action. The promise of salvation and blessing was to come through Isaac.”<sup>9</sup> Even more enigmatic is God’s promise, found in numerous Genesis texts, that Abraham will have “offspring numberless as the dust [Gen. 13:16; 28:14] or the stars [Gen.

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<sup>6</sup> Essex, 208.

<sup>7</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 131-132.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, The Covenant With Abraham: The Keystone of Biblical Architecture.” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 12:36 (August 2008), 7.

<sup>9</sup> David Dilling Jr., “The Atonement and Human Sacrifice.” *Grace Journal* 05:1 (Winter 1964): 24.

15:15; 22:17; 26:4] come forth to inherit the land of Canaan [Gen. 22:17].”<sup>10</sup> This brings about the climactic situation facing Abraham which was to test the authenticity of his faith.

### God’s Test

The Hebrew word *nasash*, transliterated by the King James Version as “tempt,” found in Genesis 22:1, “has the idea of testing or proving the quality of someone or something. . .” and in Abraham’s case it was “to refine the character of a man that he might walk more closely in God’s ways.”<sup>11</sup> It was through this test, beyond Abraham’s cognitive reasoning, that would prove Abraham’s faith that Yahweh was capable of actualizing the covenantal promises regardless of the severest circumstances.

### The Sacrifice of Isaac

The test of Abraham was more difficult than it appears. A three day journey with Isaac, knowing the task at hand, must have been heart wrenching. God’s command, to provide Isaac as a “burnt offering” would be inconceivable to any parent.<sup>12</sup> Walton characterizes it as stretching “the normal parameters of a test.”<sup>13</sup> Poole details its odiousness, “his throat was to be cut, his body dissected into quarters, his bowels taken out, as if he had been some notorious traitor, a file male factor and miscreant, and afterwards he was to be burned to ashes, that if possible there might be nothing left of him. . .”<sup>14</sup> Though today the idea of a child sacrifice is socially

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<sup>10</sup> Ellen F. Davis, “Self-Consciousness And Conversation: Reading Genesis 22.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 01:1 (NA 1991): 33.

<sup>11</sup> Marvin R. Wilson. “נָסָה (*nasa*)” Page 581 in vol. 2 of *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Edited by R. Laird Harris. Chicago: Moody, 1980.

<sup>12</sup> John H. Walton. *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 513.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Poole. *A Commentary on the Holy Bible: Volume I: Genesis- Job* (McLean: McDonald Publishing, n.d.), 51.

incogitable, and the “biblical prophets” and laws in Deuteronomy-Leviticus forbade it; in Abraham’s historical time-frame it was a common practice of numerous Near Eastern cultures such as the Canaanites.<sup>15</sup>

### **Abraham’s Responses**

What type of response would the action of child sacrifices solicit from today’s society? Though child sacrifice was a known practice of Abraham’s neighboring pagan cults, the command must have cut Abraham to the quick. Surprisingly, Abraham responded to God’s command with an unwavering faith and immediate obedience.

#### **Unwavering Faith**

Lawlor notes, “In “rapid-fire” succession the three imperatives (“take,” תָּקַח “go,” הֵלֵךְ “offer,” וְהִצַּדִּיקוּ) of v 2 inform Abraham what it is that God expects of him.”<sup>16</sup> The New Testament Book of Hebrews (Heb. 11:19) gives added insight with regards to Abraham’s faith that God was able to “raise him [Isaac], even from the dead.” This coincides with Abraham’s initial statement found in Genesis 22:5 where Abraham tells his servants, “abide ye here . . . I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.” Davis adds, “Far from showing the awakening of new ethical insight, this story portrays in the starkest terms Abraham’s blind unreasoning faith; as Luther says, here Abraham is called to perform the “mortification” of his own reason and will.”<sup>17</sup>

#### **Immediate Obedience**

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<sup>15</sup> Walton, 510.

<sup>16</sup> John I. Lawlor, “The Test of Abraham Genesis 22:1-19.” *Grace Theological Journal* 01:1 (Spring 1980): 22.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, 34.

We find Abraham's obedience constant throughout the text of Genesis. Essex notes, "The first clause of the Lord's speech to Abraham is the command to leave his "land" and go to the "land" that the Lord would show him (Gen 12:1)."<sup>18</sup> Johnson described Abraham's obedience to God's command to sacrifice Isaac as "quick obedience, or what Meyer has called, 'the habit of instantaneity.'"<sup>19</sup> Lawlor marks Abraham's immediate obedience through the grammatical structure of "two sets of triads" found in Genesis 22:3: (1) "saddled his donkey"; (2) "took lads" and "split wood"; (3) "arose" and "went."<sup>20</sup> Poole indicates the "sincerity" of Abraham's faith and "constancy of his obedience"; brought "God great honor" and was beneficial to the church in the ages to follow.<sup>21</sup>

### **Reconfirmation of the Covenant**

The covenant, initially established in Genesis 12:1-3, is confirmed on several occasions throughout the pages of Genesis (Chapters 13, 15, 17, and 22). Yet, with the completion of Abraham's test of faith, God once again substantiates His covenant with Abraham. It must be noted that in the New Testament Jesus Christ's atoning propitiation for sin satisfied God's demand; likewise, the faithful obedience of Abraham has met God's established criteria for the sanction of God's covenantal promise found in Genesis 12: 1-3.

### **God's Criterion is Satisfied**

According to Hebrews 6:13, the covenant was a surety because "God made promise to Abraham," and God "could swear by no greater" than Himself. Bullinger classifies Genesis

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<sup>18</sup> Essex, 197.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis S. Johnson Jr., "The Sacrifice Of Isaac, Or The Old Testament's Greatest Scene." *Emmaus Journal* 18:1 (Summer 2009): 25.

<sup>20</sup> Lawlor, 22.

<sup>21</sup> Poole, 51.



22:12, “knowing” and “seeing,” as a literary device known as an Anthropopatheia; which is used to ascribe “human passions, actions, or attributes to God.”<sup>22</sup> Bullinger clarifies, “God, of course, knew it already; but, in wondrous condescension, He stoops to make Abraham understand.”<sup>23</sup> So, what is God is seeking? Is it the active exercising of Abraham’s faith? Mackintosh notes, “Take away faith, and Abraham appears on Moriah as a murderer or madman: take faith into account, and he appears as a devoted worshiper—a God-fearing, justified man.”<sup>24</sup> God never wanted the burnt offering of Isaac; No, God wanted Abraham’s heart in its purest and fullest form. Genesis 22:12 states, “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.” This declaration is not for instruction only; no, it is the weighing out of Abraham’s character.<sup>25</sup> Johnson sees Genesis 22:10-13 as “the section that records the patriarch’s passing of his final exam in submission to the will of God.”<sup>26</sup>

#### Covenant is Reconfirmed

Chisholm makes a comparison between the obedience of a Near East suzerain-vassal covenant with Abraham’s covenant with God: “Abraham demonstrated his loyalty (22:12, 15–18) by obeying God’s command (cf. 26:5). God then elevated the patriarch to the status of a favored vassal who now possessed a ratified promise, comparable to the royal grants attested in the ancient Near East.”<sup>27</sup> In Genesis 22:17 -18, the covenant is recapitulated by promising:

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<sup>22</sup> E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible. Explained and Illustrated* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 871.

<sup>23</sup> Bullinger, 884.

<sup>24</sup> C.H. Mackintosh. *Genesis to Deuteronomy: Notes on the Pentateuch* (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers, 1989.), 98.

<sup>25</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., “Anatomy of an Anthropomorphism: Does God Discover Facts.” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 164:653 (January 2007): 15.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson, 28.

blessing, multiplication of Abraham's seed, the possession of his enemy's gates, and future global blessing through Abraham's progeny. Rogers Jr. notes, "In Genesis 22:16 God had just tested Abraham's faith in reference to Isaac; then in the light of this faith the promises were once more confirmed."<sup>28</sup> The biblical thread is established and the long line of Abrahamic descendants instrumental in the forthcoming incarnated Messiah is destined.

### **Conclusion**

Abraham's faithful obedience to sacrifice the seed, in which all God's covenantal promises were attached, resulted in an enduring confirmation of blessings of land, seed, and blessing. Walton notes, "The text maintains that the sequence of events is done for *God's Benefit* [22:12]. . . 'now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.'<sup>29</sup> The Aqedah of Genesis 22, an account abounding with the unexpected, ultimately serves as a prologue to the greatest story ever told to humanity. Johnson notes, "When the Greatest Father offered up his Isaac, the real Lamb of God, the scene pictured in the twenty-second chapter of Genesis found its proper climax and antitype."<sup>30</sup> In Genesis 22:13, God provided the necessary sacrificial requirement by way of a "ram caught in the thicket." As a result Abraham named that particular area of Mount Moriah, "Jehovah-Jireh." Mayhue describes the term "Jehovah-Jireh" as portraying "God as seeing, and thus anticipating His divine

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<sup>27</sup> Chisholm, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Cleon L. Rogers Jr., "The Covenant with Abraham and Its Historical Setting," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127:507 (July 1970): 252.

<sup>29</sup> Walton, 514.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson Jr., 19.

provision of the right supply at just the right time”; hence, a prelude to a time when God’s “Lamb” would come to take away “the sin of the world” (John 1:29).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Richard L. Mayhue, “The Authority of Scripture,” *Masters Seminary Journal* 15:2 (Fall, 2004): 230.

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