

c) The Story of the call for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac has been understood as the climax of the entire Abrahamic cycle. What explanation would you offer for this high regard the story has had in the history of interpretation.

RGB1005H – Introduction to the Old Testament

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The story of the “binding” of Isaac, sometimes referred to as the *Aqedah*, continues to fascinate, because it dramatically demonstrates the complex relationship of God with humankind in the person of Abraham.¹ It is a personal encounter that develops into an irrevocable covenant and universal blessing. We grapple with the trial that Abraham must undergo. A God who enters into a covenant and then asks for a child sacrifice seems antithetical, especially when it appears that the death of the child will jeopardize that covenant. There is a natural progression that culminates with Abraham’s test of faith. Scott W. Hahn suggests that there are three covenants found in Genesis 15, 17 and 22, “each building on the previous one.”² With every successive covenant, God slowly initiates Abraham into relationship with Him as a Father to a son, as it was understood in ancient times. Abraham as a son, was becoming “intimately related by means of submission, service, loyalty, trust and reverential fear.”³

The *Aqedah* is the confirmation of the covenant and turning point; however, at every stage of the call and the covenant, Abraham is being tested.⁴ The intervention of God is in a way ironic in that Abraham’s response to God’s call and covenant is a break from kinship based on blood or clan. Abraham listens to God as he would in the ancient world, listen to his father. Further, God promises land but the sign of covenant, circumcision, is a way to maintain the covenant without requiring “an independent state to live in.”⁵ The intended sacrifice of Isaac would appear to be an extension of that covenant sealed in blood. Abraham travels to the land of Moriah without knowing the outcome. In any age, from ancient to modern, the test of Abraham models for us the spiritual benefit of giving up control on an individual level. On a universal level, it confirms God’s everlasting covenant with “the nations on earth.” (Gen. 22:18)

1. Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship and Covenant: A Canonical Approach to God’s Saving Promises*, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library, (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 108.

2. Hahn, *Kinship and Covenant*, 103.

3. Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant*, 132 – 33, “Notes on the Love of God in Deuteronomy and the Father Son,” *Relationship between Yahweh and Israel*,” CBQ27, (1965) 145.

4. Michael Kolarcik, “A Covenant of Promise,” *Introduction to the Old Testament Class Notes*, (Toronto: Regis College, University of Toronto, 2017), 16.

5. Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. Second Edition, revised and updated by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington, (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 115.

Abraham demonstrates obedience to God by going to the land of Moriah. We are told that he cuts the wood and travels for three days with Isaac and the two male servants. We are not told in the story that there is any hesitation in carrying out God's directive, but the details regarding the cutting of wood, the journey by donkey, the fire and the knife suggest his reluctance. There is no indication that Isaac resists when his father binds him and lays him on the altar. Isaac too is obedient. We do not know if Abraham will follow through with the killing of Isaac. He reaches out to take "the knife to kill his son" but is then interrupted. (Gen. 22:10) Abraham's obedience is rewarded with a much deeper relationship to God.⁶ At the point that Abraham is interrupted, the name of God, within the text, changes from *Elohim* to *YHWH*, the divine name that "stands precisely where the divine intervention occurs."⁷ Abraham's test deepens his covenant with God, which at this point, becomes unconditional.

Abraham is loyal to God. He listens to God's voice and responds to God's call. With each successive covenant, God's requests become more challenging. When he is tested, Abraham is present to God and does not question the sacrifice that God requests. As a son to a father in the ancient world, Abraham submits to God's will. When called by God, his first response is "Here I am." (Gen.22:1) In the same way, Abraham is also present to Isaac when he says "Here I am, my son." (Gen. 22:7). At the intervention of the angel, Abraham again calls out "Here I am". (Gen. 22:11) Abraham's willingness to follow through is not homicidal, nor is he blind to reason. God works within the patriarchal structure, but relationship with Him is beyond and transcendent of familial bonds. Abraham struggles with this loyalty to God. Walters suggests that the perfective form of the verb, "did not hold back" suggests that the act took place.⁸ In the text, it states that "Abraham returned to his young men" (Gen. 22:19) The ending is deliberately ambiguous, although we know that the ram replaced Isaac as the burnt offering. The absence of Isaac's name suggests that there is a change in Abraham's identity. His commitment

6. Kolarcik, "Covenant and Treaties in the Scriptures," 16.

7. Stanley D. Walters, "Wood, Sand and Stars: Structure and Theology in Gn 22:1-9," *Toronto Journal of Theology*, (Toronto: Knox College, University of Toronto, 1987), 320.

8. Walters, "Wood, Sand and Stars," 319.

to God is fundamental to who he is. Abraham's relationship with God is primary.

Abraham puts his trust in God. He has every reason to trust in Him even when this last test would, on the surface, seem to be the undoing of the covenant. God has promised that “no one but your own issue shall be your heir.” (Gen. 15:4) Often in the story of Abraham and Isaac, the focus has been on the God of Israel, characterizing Him as unfeeling and brutal. The God of the Old Testament is the Creator who already knows what the outcome will be. The test is for Abraham, not of Abraham. The focus truly belongs on Abraham who needs this test to cement the covenant and deepen his relationship with God. Therefore, when Abraham tells the young men who have accompanied them, that “the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you” he carries a hope in his heart of deliverance. (Gen. 22:5) He has no reason to lie since, as the patriarch of the clan, he has the power of life and death. There is evidence in the Bible of child sacrifice where a son or daughter is required to *pass through fire*.⁸ However, in all cases, there is no indication that God is requesting this. Isaac trusts Abraham, even though there is “no lamb for a burnt offering.” (Gen. 22:8) He follows his father without reservation. Abraham is delivering himself up to God as much as he is delivering Isaac. All his hope and belief has been placed on that altar with Isaac. By offering to sacrifice Isaac, he expresses his poverty and dependence on God.

The story of Abraham and Isaac encapsulates the human dilemma of living in the spiritual and material world. This is not a story about a brutal or unfeeling God of Israel. Abraham was tested to deepen his love and “become free of a smothering attachment” to Isaac.⁹ This is God's invitation to Abraham to take an active role in the covenant through obedience, loyalty and trust. The paradox is that the more Abraham comes to recognize God as the Father in the spiritual realm, he will ensure the prosperity of his clan in the material one. The promises made by God to Abraham continue to have implications in the Middle East to the present time, both socially and politically.

9. John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Second Edition, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 97.

10. Kolarcik, “Covenant and Treaties in the Scriptures,” 17.

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