

SACRIFICING ISAAC

PART I. A NEW INTERPRETATION

The almost-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis has received extensive analysis and commentary over the centuries, from both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars. The latter use the story to support their various beliefs. The Jewish scholars have been plentiful and I'm not one of them if the criteria are vast biblical, historical, or linguistic knowledge. Their interpretations have been uniformly orthodox, i.e. that, in brief, Abraham quite willingly offered Isaac's death.

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 Sara and with the approval of G-d. 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 doesn't make sense to me that G-d would now request an act that makes earlier events a painful waste or a false promise.

There must be an interpretation of the almost-sacrifice that is logically reasonable. Furthermore, 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. 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. G-d's request, taken in a straightforward way, would not differentiate Abraham from his contemporaries or his G-d from those that the nearby peoples were worshipping.

Therefore I feel that the moral of the story has been missed by the commentaries I've read. Most chapters of the Five Books of Moses have very serious lessons to teach and the first few are particularly important because they lay the ethical foundation of this new group, the Jews, and begin to point out the differences between their G-d and all the others worshipped at that time or since. The almost-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 G-d 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 G-d 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 reexamination of his mission, and a better understanding of his and our G-d. As you'll read when I go 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 by the Bible. In those places I will try fill in what I believe was happening.

Simply put, G-d didn't want Abraham to be all-that-willing to sacrifice Isaac.

G-d wanted to hear an argument from Abraham's ethical nature, that side of him that had an awful lot of problems with human sacrifice. G-d also wanted to make the statement once-and-for-all that He does not want human sacrifice.

In PART II of this essay, I will look at the text line by line. I will also pay some attention to the important “supporting” character in this drama, namely Isaac. Another person whose influence was probably felt at a distance was Sara. Her entire happiness and reason for living were part of the high stakes. In fact, it’s 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.

What if you are a person who has difficulty believing in G-d? In PART III of this essay, I will give an interpretation of the story that you might find more satisfying, but please read PART II anyway. I do this in the hope of convincing you that Judaism, in the form of the Five Books of Moses, has much to offer anybody. Not believing in G-d, you should still take these books seriously because there is much wisdom here, for our century and the future.

PART II. LET’S EXAMINE THE TEXT

And it happened after these things that G-d tested Abraham (Gen. 22:1)

There is a very special lesson coming!

(Again, if you have difficulty believing in G-d, you might be interested in an alternative approach to the story in PART III of this essay. What’s important is that there’s a lesson here for you all

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

Here I am, to do as You command.

And He said, ‘Please take your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac, (Gen. 22:2)

Why does G-d remind Abraham that he has only one, very much loved son? Does Abraham need reminding? Does G-d want to make this trial even harder for Abraham? No, G-d is cautioning him, saying, ‘Be careful how you handle this assignment.’

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; (Gen. 22:2)

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 do the sacrifice nearby?

My interpretation is that G-d wanted to give Abraham plenty of time to think things over, to exercise his ethical good sense.

Bring him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains which I shall indicate to you.’ (Gen. 22:2)

It has been pointed out by scholars that G-d 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 G-d. 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 G-d had indicated to him. (Gen. 22:3)

Abraham is not hesitant in his actions. He methodically gets things ready for the journey and takes his leave without delay. It would be unseemly for him to waver right from the start. The characters of the bible were not robots or puppets. They were people usually of extraordinary talent. In the case of Abraham, we have a special sense of ethics. When we analyze the Bible, it is my contention that we have to take this into consideration.

Why did he awaken early in the morning? It seems likely to me that he wanted to leave before Sara 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 Sara. 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. (Gen. 22:4)

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 doesn't say! I say that Abraham was tormented and that his mind was trying to make sense of things. At first G-d'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? G-d would be contradicting Himself. Would my G-d act in such an erratic way? One year He miraculously gives my wife a child and another year He takes the young man away from her? 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 G-d wants and what I should do. Would He ask for the same kind of child butchery that the gods worshipped in neighboring areas seem to desire? I can't believe He would want that.

I need G-d 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 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 in the background of great anguish because he just doesn't know whether he will be allowed to slaughter Isaac. The more he turned things over in his mind though, the more confident he became that G-d 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.' (Gen. 22:5)

Commentators have tried various ways of explaining how Abraham could say 'we will return to you'. It's problematic if you believe that Abraham was wholeheartedly going to offer his son as a physical 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 slaughter 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. (Gen. 22:6)

Abraham must see this ordeal through until the possibly bitter end; he must be ready for a conventional offering.. He must go ahead until G-d stops him.

Then Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'Father.' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' (Gen. 22:7)

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?' (Gen. 22:7)

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

And Abraham said, 'G-d will seek out for himself the lamb for the offering, my son.' (Gen. 22:8)

G-d 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 wasn't 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 of the command and the interpretation of it. Now, Isaac was a gentle soul following his father's example of devotion to G-d. If told, he would have been satisfied with his father's plan to seek clarification.

And the two of them went together. (Gen. 22:8)

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

They arrived at the place which G-d 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. (Gen. 22:9)

Isaac seems to be a willing partner in the proceedings and allowed himself to be bound so that he would not panic and desecrate the event. Abraham and Isaac were 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. (Gen. 22:10)

Abraham was now holding the knife in a way that Isaac could be imminently 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 Hashem called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham! Abraham!' (Gen. 22:11)

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

And he said, 'Here I am.' (Gen. 22:11)

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. (Gen. 22:11)

Offering him to me does not mean harming him. No, I don't want his death. I don't want any human sacrifices. Let that be clearly understood, now and forever.

For now I know that you are a G-d fearing man, since you have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me.' (Gen. 22:11)

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 conventional 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 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' special faith and of the G-d they chose to follow.

PART III. AN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETATION

Here I will try to interpret the almost-sacrifice story for the benefit of those who find it difficult or impossible at this time to believe in G-d. I feel there is much to be learned by everyone. Important ethical dilemmas and human stories fill the Bible and an intelligent person will study this book for the wealth of wisdom it contains, irrespective of his/her ability to accept every single concept. Don't throw away the Five Books of Moses; try to understand it.

I want those who believe in G-d and those who don't to be patient with each other. I especially want the former to let G-d decide how to handle the latter. You would be presumptuous to hate or do violence to the sincere non-believers. You bring honor to G-d by letting everyone learn from the Bible at their own pace, in their own way.

On the other hand, it would be inappropriate for the non-believers to dismiss the other group. If you contend that you can be ethical without believing in G-d (and I have no problem with that idea), then be sensitive and let the believers find ethics where they choose.

Another reason for patience between believers and non-believers, in my opinion, is that whether we believe in G-d is not entirely of our own choosing. Like love, it is not a decision.

So with regard to the almost-sacrifice, imagine an elderly man, Abraham, who really did love his god and tried to do whatever he thought god wanted of him. He had taken his family away from Haran because the culture was disturbing to him. He had a wife, Sara, whom he loved and a child, Isaac, born to her quite late in life. He saw the boy as transmitting his new ideas to future generations.

Now in his old age, Abraham begins to wonder whether he has done everything he could for his god, or should he make one more grand gesture. It seems entirely reasonable to me that a very devout person should think this way.

Well, what hasn't he done yet? In the surrounding lands, people show their devotion to gods by sacrificing their children, and so Abraham also takes it into his head that maybe he should do the same. Even he can't help being influenced by local practices.

On the other hand, human sacrifice seems wrong to Abraham. His ethical sensitivity is definitely ahead of his contemporaries'. So we have here a disturbing conflict in Abraham's mind, should he or shouldn't he. He thinks that the pain of losing his son is what would give the gesture more power or value. We have days of anxiety and

indecision. The situation will need resolution but in the meanwhile Abraham has put himself into a very difficult bind.

He goes off with his son for some intensive soul-searching. He musters arguments for and against the sacrifice but is torn and cannot make a decision. Finally, he prepares for a sacrifice and goes right to the brink of slaughter but cannot go through with it. He considers his god different from the other gods in many ways (for example in his unity) and, in any case, a god that would welcome this sort of sacrifice is not the type of god he wants to worship. He does make that decision and returns home with Isaac. Both have been significantly affected by this experience. Now that they have decided that their god would not want human sacrifice, they have even more faith in him and more hope for the future. The path seems clearer, their outlook is bolder.

(Please see my upcoming article, 'Trying to Understand Animal Sacrifices')

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