

1. INTRODUCTION

The patriarch Abraham is a significant figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. His story, as depicted in Biblical, Quranic, and other religious texts, reflects themes of faith, obedience, and the complex relationship between humankind and God.

This essay will explore the characteristics and reception of Abraham, particularly his role in the narrative of the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, as interpreted through Marc Chagall's painting, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac.' Chagall produced several variations of this work, culminating in a final presentation in 1966, which will also be referenced to illustrate his interpretation of Abraham in the Akedah.

The approach of this essay includes a brief exegesis of the relevant Biblical texts referenced in Chagall's work, while also considering interpretative differences in Jewish traditions. Additionally, it will examine how both traditions are reflected in Chagall's final painting through critique before a conclusion is offered.

2. A BRIEF EXEGESIS OF GENESIS 22:1-19

a. The Testing of Abraham

The Akedah, or Binding of Isaac, raises several questions about the relationship between humankind and God, particularly the notion that Genesis 22 illustrates a foundation for the acceptance that God tests His followers.¹ The Hebrew verb 'to test' (נסה) appears exclusively in Genesis in this context and is consistently used throughout the Torah to signify a divine test intended for the benefit of those being tested, rather than God². Kuruvilla underscores the gravity of this test by noting that the command to 'take' (לקח) in Genesis 22:2 is only utilised in divine speech five times (Gen 13:14; 15:5; 22:2; Ex 11:2; Isa 7:3)³ and always in a context when

¹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998) p. 392

² Brian Peterson, *Genesis: A Pentecostal Commentary* (Liden: Brill, 2022) p. 196

³ Abraham Kuruvilla, 'The Akedah (Genesis 22): what is the author doing with what he is saying?', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 55. 3 (2012) p. 490

something beyond human rationality is required.⁴ Thus, it can be concluded that God deliberately tested Abraham, fully aware of the magnitude of His request.

Accepting that Abraham was intentionally tested by divine right prompts the question: to what end or outcome? Ska proposes a comparison of three Deuteronomistic texts (Deut. 8:2, 13:3, Judg. 3:4) to conclude that the purpose of a divine test is to bring those being tested to a place of 'knowing'.⁵ Uniquely, this is a two-way occurrence in Genesis 22. The angel of the Lord declares a new knowledge of Abraham as a God-fearing individual because of his willingness to conclude this test initially as instructed⁶. However, Kidner also argues that this encounter is the pinnacle of Abraham's 'lifelong walk with God' and the event with which he is allowed a glimpse of the yet-to-come resurrection⁷.

Contrarily, Morschauser posits that Isaac was never in real jeopardy, suggesting that God's commands were not meant to be taken literally. Instead, he suggests that the goal was to honour Abraham's commitment to this point in time and that the Akedah represents theatrical 'deep play' where the status of 'obedient servant' and 'gracious overlord' is reinforced.⁸ However, such an approach makes light of the genuine requests, promises and positive responses that have been made between God and Abraham prior to Genesis 22. Likewise, while readers are aware of the outcome and the role of the test, nothing in the text nor the relationship between God and Abraham to this point suggests that the call to sacrifice Isaac should not be taken literally and Abraham appears to climb Mount Moriah with that understanding⁹.

Ultimately, the Akedah is a God-ordained test designed to mutually deepen the knowledge between God and Abraham, built on their prior interactions. Abraham's

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapter 18-50* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995) p. 101

⁵ Jean Louis Ska, 'Genesis 22: What questions should we ask the text?', in *Biblica*, 94. 2 (2013) p. 260

⁶ Allen P. Ross, p. 400

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2008) p.153

⁸ Scott Morschauser, "Seeing You Have Not Withheld Your Son": An Overlooked Motif in Genesis 22?', in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 45. 3 (2021) p. 403

⁹ Stephen D. Campbell, 'The Surety of God's Promises: A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 22', in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 49. 3 (2019) p. 125.

willingness to respond to this test, regardless of its difficulty, demonstrates his genuine obedience to God's will.

b. The Foreshadowing of Christ

Kant highlights the difference in the understanding of the Akedah throughout various religious traditions. Notably, he presents how Muslim traditions replace Isaac with Ishmael and position the episode before his birth, while Christians interpret the account as a 'blueprint' for the crucifixion.¹⁰ Balserak emphasises how a range of Patristic, Mediaeval and Reformation interpreters supported this perspective, conflating Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac with God's sacrifice of Jesus and drawing parallels between the role and response of Isaac and Christ.¹¹

Comparative evaluations of the Akedah and the Crucifixion accounts in the synoptic Gospels highlight imagery between Christ carrying his cross and Isaac being laden with the wood for the altar he will lay on. This extends to the concept of both Christ and Isaac, as individuals apparently about to be consigned to death, being tied or bound, to an association between the locations of Mount Moriah and the site of the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 3:1),¹² and the two servants of Abraham as comparative spectators to the thieves on the cross.¹³

Moberly also points to a longstanding tradition linking Romans 8:32, in reference to God 'not sparing his own son', being utilised as another link between Jesus and Isaac¹⁴. This is supported by the willingness of Abraham to follow through with the act as instructed by God but also his apparent lack of appeal on behalf of his son,

¹⁰ Laurence Kant, 'Restorative thoughts on an agonizing text: Abraham's binding of Isaac and the horror of Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22) part 1', in *Lexington Theological Quarterly*, 38. 2 (2003) p. 78

¹¹ Jon Balserak, 'Luther, Calvin and Musculus on Abraham's trial: Exegetical History and the Transformation of Genesis 22', in *Reformation and Renaissance Review*, 6. 3 (2004) p. 364.

¹² Michael Lefebvre, 'Confessing Christ with the Aqedah', in *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology*, 8. 2 (2021) p. 30

¹³ Pablo T. Gadenz, 'The Akedah and the Crucifixion: Isaac Typology in Luke's Gospel?', in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 31. 4 (2021) p. 483

¹⁴ R.W.L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) p. 180

unlike his intercession for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who faced impending judgement (Gen. 18:16-33).

c. The Role of Isaac

One of the most challenging aspects of the Akedah is the passivity and role portrayed by Isaac throughout the entire encounter. The only recorded dialogue in Christian tradition from the perspective of Isaac is when he questions the apparent lack of a sacrifice for the altar they will build (22:7). No response is given when he is bound by his father nor when the ram is provided in his place. In English narratives, silence is used to convey neutrality, in comparison to Hebrew tradition that utilises silence to communicate consent.¹⁵ This raises the question as to what extent Isaac was an unaware victim or consenting participant in the unfolding narrative of Genesis 22.

Rosenberg presents Isaac as the 'prototype of the suffering servant' in Isaiah 52-53. He draws on the description of Isaac in the midrash as the first to experience the 'chastisements' of God and the wording of 4 Macc. 13, where the text suggests Isaac explicitly offered himself for sacrifice, to conclude that the suffering servant of Isaiah is therefore a 'new Isaac', i.e. someone who is willing to die that others might live¹⁶. This points to Isaac being a willing victim, something that Garcia Martinez takes further. Unlike Biblical text, where Isaac speaks only once, Garcia Martinez suggests that Targumic tradition and the Genesis Rabbah present a second portion of dialogue where Isaac is not only willing to be sacrificed but responds to the request with a sense of duty and therefore requests to be tied so that the sacrifice might not be rendered invalid.¹⁷

¹⁵ Michael Lefebvre, p. 38

¹⁶ Roy A. Rosenberg, 'Jesus, Isaac and the 'Suffering Servant'', in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 84. 4 (1965) p. 385.

¹⁷ Florentino Garcia Martinez, 'The Sacrifice of Isaac in 4Q225', in *The Sacrifice of Isaac: The Akedah (Genesis 22) and Its Interpretations*, ed. by Ed Noort and Eibert Tigchelaar. (Leiden: Brill, 2002) p. 53.

If accepted, these interpretations indicate a significant divergence between Christian and Jewish Understandings of Isaac's role. Christian depiction portrays Isaac as unaware and potentially vulnerable in the hands of his father in comparison to Jewish reading that presents Isaac as cognisant to the events that will unfold and the role he is being asked to play. This potentially reframes how Abraham can or should be viewed throughout the narrative. Rather than someone able to kill his son in a premeditated fashion at the command of his God, but with greater empathy, as someone who joins with his son to cooperatively carry out the will of their God as an act of worship and sacrifice in line with his will.

3. RECEPTION OF THE AKEDAH THROUGH THE WORK OF CHAGALL (1960-1966)



fig. 1 – c. 1960



fig. 2 – c. 1964



fig. 3 – c. 1964



fig. 4 – c. 1964



fig. 5 – c. 1964

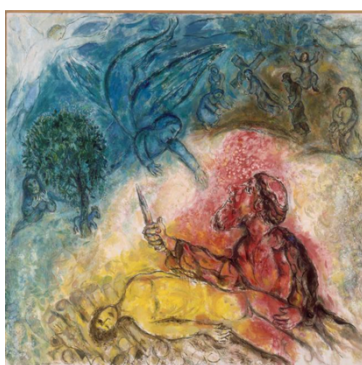


fig. 6 – c. 1966

a. The lifeless state of Isaac

One of the most striking characteristics of Chagall's work on the subject of Isaac is how he is often portrayed in a lifeless state that ranges from an individual who is docile to

one who has been sacrificed and murdered by his father. In one of his first depictions of Isaac, *Pietà Rouge* in 1956, Isaac is depicted with a lopsided head with closed eyes and being supported by a female figure.¹⁸ This stands in contrast to the substitutionary ram which is alert, upright and wide-eyed indicating its vitality and status as being alive.

Despite the many etchings Chagall produced from 1960 (fig. 1) until a final version in 1966 (fig. 6), one consistent feature that remains is this portrayal of Isaac. The 1966 iteration goes further than those before it to convey the actual death of Isaac. In addition to his posture and lack of emotion, Isaac is cast in yellow highlighting his prominence and place in the story, but also, according to Czekanowska-Gutman et al, that he is also now dead¹⁹. In a previous sketch c. 1964 (fig. 5), it is a cross-bearing Christ who is depicted in yellow while Isaac is white. Since Christ is alive, but on route to death, the conclusion should be that yellow is used to depict prominence and sacrifice rather than exclusively death.

One partially exclusive aspect of the final 1966 version of Isaac is the inclusion of the colour red within his body. The colour is seen prominently on his legs as a continuation of the shading of Abraham but also crucially on several occasions within his upper body. This adds to the interpretation that Chagall portrays Isaac as having shed his blood, which is consistent with certain Jewish traditions and interpretations²⁰. Meyer takes this further by suggesting that the tradition of Isaac being pierced and shedding blood provides the foundation for all sacrifices that will follow²¹, including the crucifixion of Christ, and an argument could be made that this forms part of Chagall's rationale for the inclusion of Christ within his painting.

Lastly, Chagall does not attempt to portray Isaac as having been bound but rather consistently depicts his arms down by his side in a restful and relaxed state. This is

¹⁸ Monika Czekanowska-Gutman et al, 'Akedah as an Actual Sacrifice: Midrash Tanḥuma and Jewish Exegesis, Marc Chagall and Abel Pann', in *Religion and the Arts*, 26. 5 (Liden: Brill, 2022) p. 661

¹⁹ Monika Czekanowska-Gutman et al, p. 661

²⁰ Philip R. Davies and Bruce D. Chilton, The Aqedah: A Revised Tradition History, in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 40. 4 (1978) p. 515.

²¹ James Meyer, 'Atonement Anticipated: Paul's Use of Genesis 22 in Romans 8', in *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 32. 4 (2022) p. 362

unusual considering Jewish and Christian traditions largely maintain the viewpoint that Isaac was indeed bound. An argument could be made that this is an artistic interpretation designed to visually represent the willingness of Isaac to partake in his sacrifice which correlates to Chagall's symbolic, rather than literal, style.

b. The Reception of Abraham

i. A Raised Knife

A prominent motif of Chagall's work concerning Abraham is his depiction of the Patriarch wielding a knife raised heavenward. This is used to convey a sense of willingness from Abraham to carry out the act required of him but in doing so also expresses a sense of the patriarch as a man of clear obedience who responds faithfully to commands and the will of God. There is little doubt in the artwork presented that Abraham has either carried out the task or is about to do so before divine intervention alters the course of direction.

ii. The Trauma of Red

Chagall became known for his complex blend of cubism, surrealism and expressionism throughout his work, yet none of that is referenced in his engagement here at the Sacrifice of Isaac²². Rather, his chosen methodology is the use of bold colours primarily in the form of red, blue and yellow.²³ In the case of Abraham, the viewer is instantaneously drawn to the figure awash in the colour red. One interpretation of such colour is that it is indicative of the blood that Isaac has just spilt. This complements the previous assertion that Chagall aims to present Abraham as already having sacrificed Issac. However, other explanations can be derived successfully.

A previous etching before this final version shows the colour red used to draw attention to the angels who intervene and communicate with Abraham (fig. 5). If the blood motif

²² Charlotte Lichtblau, 'Chagall and the Bible', in *Religion and Intellectual life*, 5. 2 (1988) p. 98

²³ David Lyle Jeffrey, 'The Christ of Marc Chagall', in *First Things*, 242. April (2014) p. 29

were to be continued to this version, then the suggestion would be that in that Chagall depicts God and his messengers as having blood on their hands. This could be supported by the troubling relationship between Genesis 22 and Child Sacrifice²⁴. However, Czekanowska-Gutman et al support a dual approach where the red does indeed represent blood but also holds an additional meaning pertaining to trauma²⁵.

Crawford claims that the red is representative of anger.²⁶ This is based on the suggestion that Chagall is using colour in this context to convey emotion rather than facial expression. As such, the inference is that Chagall wants to portray Abraham as angry at Isaac, making it easier for him to follow through with the commands of God. However, this seems considerably unlikely. Chagall held the image of Abraham in the highest regard throughout his entire work. On several occasions, there are striking comparisons between how God the Father and Abraham are mutually represented in a similar light.²⁷ To depict Abraham as a man of anger in the Akedah would demonstrate a shift in Chagall's view of Abraham and a departure from his Jewish roots and understanding of the text.²⁸

The deployment of red is therefore used to draw a viewer to the emotional turmoil and trauma that is being experienced by Abraham throughout the entire episode. In doing so, there is an invitation to receive Abraham in a more empathetic light as a father caught between his precious son and his desire to be obedient to God. This counters certain scholarly approaches that interpret Abraham's immediate response to the call of God to sacrifice his son as callous with the wording of Genesis Rabbah 56:8 which depicts streams of tears flowing from the patriarch as he draws his knife towards his son²⁹. The anguished and strained look on Abraham's face appears to also support the

²⁴ Raleigh Heth, 'Isaac and Iphigenia: The Portrayals of Child Sacrifice in Israelite and Greek Literature', in *Biblica*, 102. 4 (2021) p. 482

²⁵ Monika Czekanowska-Gutman et al, p. 662

²⁶ Chawna Crawford, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (2014)

https://www.academia.edu/9351708/The_Sacrifice_of_Isaac [accessed 15 July 2024].

²⁷ Charlotte Lichtblau, p. 98

²⁸ Lawrence Cunningham, 'Marc Chagall's Religious Vision', in *The Christian Century*, 96. 8 (1979) p. 253

²⁹ Moshe Yeres, 'The Meaning of Abraham's Test: A Re-examination of The Akedah', in *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 19. 1 (1990) p. 9

understanding that the artist wishes for him to be viewed in this sympathetic light.

iii. Divine Encounter

By his own admission, Chagall attested that his version of 'paradise' contained a lot of blue colours.³⁰ We should therefore not be surprised that the heavenly realm of his final work in 1966 (fig. 6) is awash with the colour. In doing so, Chagall brings our attention to the relationship between Abraham and God. Interestingly, unlike any of his previous sketches, this final work (fig. 6) contains two angelic figures rather than one. This can only be seen as an intentional inclusion but for what purpose?

One of the angelic figures appears contained further back and more isolated from the ongoing events. This is in comparison to the angel who is almost within touching distance of Abraham with a posture that can be interpreted as inviting, empathetic and even open to physical embrace with wide arms. An attempt appears to be made by Chagall to represent the heavenly realm as observant and aware of proceedings but equally at the forefront of the entire episode through the angel who audibly commands Abraham to stop.

The embracing pose of the foremost angel demonstrates not only the intervention of God through his messengers but also his genuine affection for Abraham at this moment as someone who was willing to follow through with the commands put to him. This is a moment of comfort and potential embrace on the back of trauma that conveys a deep sense of emotion but also the pleasure that the Father has towards Abraham. In capturing this moment in the way that he does, Chagall supports an understanding of the text that this was a real test and Isaac was genuinely in trouble but ultimately that the test had a purpose that resulted in new knowledge between Abraham and God.

³⁰ Marc Chagall, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, <https://www.chagallpaintings.com/sacrifice-of-isaac/> [accessed 15 July 2024].

4. CONCLUSION

Chagall's work leans heavily on his Jewish tradition and understanding of the Akedah and yet, he does not shy away from Christian imagery, such as the inclusion of Christ, to bring a blended approach that draws viewers to the relationship between Abraham and God the Father.

The trauma and severity in his painting (fig. 6) demonstrate an understanding that Abraham was willing to carry out the task asked of him concerning Isaac and should therefore be seen as a figure of profound faith and obedience. Additionally, there is a significant effort made by Chagall, primarily through the use of colour, to invite a viewer of the work to place themselves in the shoes of Abraham and interpret the proceedings with a sense of compassion, sympathy and understanding.

Finally, the emphasis on divine intervention and engagement within the painting through the role of the angelic figures should leave a viewer in no doubt that God is with Abraham in all that he is going through and ultimately that he is pleased with his demonstration of faith. This reiterates an interpretation of Abraham as someone who should be envied, due to his close relationship with God, but also a figure that any individual of faith should try to emulate.

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