

The Command to Sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22: Jewish and Interfaith Perspectives

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A. Literary and Theological Context

Genesis 22 is a narrative from the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Binding (Hebrew: Aqedah) of Isaac. In this biblical narrative, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac, on the land of Moriah. As Abraham takes the knife to slay Isaac, an angel intervenes, and a ram was sacrificed instead. Abraham's response in this event led to the renewal of the promise in relation to progeny (his belief in such a promise can be found in Gen 15:4-6). Thereafter, good omen is displayed (Gen 22:20-24) through the gain of twelve sons by Abraham's brother. This episode takes from the near-death of the only son to a sense of prosperous progeny.

Genesis 22 has evoked many possible hermeneutical approaches throughout history and to this day, due to its controversial debate revolving around the wide-ranging interpretations of the themes on God's promise, Abraham's obedience and Isaac's willingness. It has also raised issues such as the relationship between moral law and divine law, as well as questions such as "whether parental love or human love should come before God?" Aqedah is a huge topic and the discussion of its comprehensive scope is beyond the length of this paper would allow. This paper aims to carry out a textual analysis with an examination towards understanding the theological and other related themes within the text, whilst incorporating an interfaith perspective, namely the Jewish and Christian perspective. All bible references are in accordance with the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) if not otherwise specified.

The predominant literary type of this narrative is of a trial and there are a number of parallels and close links with its preceding chapters in the Genesis. First, the emergence of Isaac is considered a gift from God to Abraham. In Gen 12, Abraham receives the promise from God, and in Gen 21, his heir, Isaac, is finally born. However, immediately in Gen 22, God asks to have Isaac returned by commanding Abraham to sacrifice him. Why did God change his mind or decide to test Abraham? Brodie suggests that the command to sacrifice Isaac is for

ensuring that Abraham is not idolising his only son¹, the one he loves. It almost intends to act as a reminder for Abraham to not solely focus on Isaac and forget the Benefactor. This is the first time “love” is literally used in the Genesis. Previous chapters presented similar emotions such as Sarah’s kindness to Abraham (Gen 20:13) or Hagar’s crying for her son Ishmael (Gen 21:16), but the verb to love is not explicitly used, hence it carries great importance and power. Abraham’s feeling towards Isaac is supposedly stronger than any kind that’s seen in the preceding chapters, so evidently, it is not an ordinary trial for Abraham.

After receiving the command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham rose early the next morning, this also occurred in the situations of Sodom’s destruction (19:27) and the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael (21:14). Clearly, Abraham’s obedience to God’s command without any hesitation is demonstrated in this manner. In addition, the element of angel continues from earlier episodes, especially a parallel between the angel’s saving of Ishmael in the desert (21:14-20) and the angel’s saving of Isaac at Moriah (22:11-19).

Further to the close relationship with preceding chapters, Genesis 22 and Genesis 23 also have elements of complementarity, as the first is related to the promise of descendants and the latter is about the promise of land, constituting and marking the beginning of the Abrahamic Covenant. In Genesis 23, Sarah dies, but Abraham acquires a field for a great price during the search for her burial place, alluding to the gain of land. Both texts involve the encounter of death, but at the same time, through them God’s promise is renewed.

Theologically and psychologically, Aqedah is recognised and interpreted on many different levels in Jewish tradition.² It was a source of instruction and inspiration in times of surviving the traumatic shock of the Exile and keeping faithfulness to Judaism in facing the challenges from Hellenism, as well as an encouragement for maintaining religious identity under hostile circumstances of the Roman Empire after the destruction of the Second Temple, it was also associated with the site of the Jerusalem Temple. Moreover, the composition of Genesis 22 confirms the use of sacrificial animals for burnt offerings in early Judaism. After the attempts to justify for a theology of martyrdom, the Aqedah also became associated with vicarious expiation of sin.

¹ Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary*, Oxford Scholarship Online

² James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, pp.76-78

B. Textual Analysis of Genesis 22: 1-24

Thomas Brodie suggests Genesis 22 in the following division; this textual analysis will proceed in line with this style:

- i. Introduction: God – offer your child (22:1-2)
- ii. Trial: the three-stage journey to an unnamed mountain (22:3–10)
- iii. Trial: the angel—do not touch the boy (22:11–14)
- iv. Blessing: the angel—I will shower blessing (22:15–19)
- v. Conclusion: blessed news; a brother's twelve children (22:20–24)

I. Introduction: God – offer your child (22:1-2)

At the outset of the chapter, the narrator directly indicates that there is a test coming from God (v.1), the nature and purpose of Genesis 22, but unknown to Abraham at the time. When Abraham is called by God, he responded with “Here I am”, this response occurred another two times in the chapter (22:1; cf. 22:7, 11), implying complete willingness.

Verse 2 entails God’s command, seemingly a rather radical test of Abraham’s obedience. The factor of asking to sacrifice Isaac in the command has triggered much misinterpretation, overlooking the intention being merely a trial to probe faithfulness, not the promotion of killing. Thus the focus of this text is mostly on Abraham, not on Isaac. Isaac is the long-awaited promised child gifted by God and God confirmed that ‘for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you’ (21:12). Therefore the disappearance of Isaac would result in the invalidation of God’s promise. Evidently, God is aware of the magnitude of this sacrifice as stated in verse 2 ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,’ the use of “only” and “love” highlight the sharpness in the command. Isaac is unique, at the time Ishmael was already sent away, Abraham has no other children. By demanding to take away the only son, it could most effectively test whether Abraham was idolising his son rather than God.

In IIChron.3.1, “The land of Moriah” is identified with the mountain on which the Temple in Jerusalem stood, but it is described as an unknown place in Genesis, not limiting the geographic location for the purpose of having Abraham follow God’s Seeing (Moriah also

has the meaning of Seeing)³. As Abraham finds the place, he's believed to have reached another level of awareness, closer to God's seeing. Moriah in Hebrew can also be explained as "fear of Yah[weh]" (mora + yh), this coincides with the theme of the chapter, a trial for Abraham's fear of God.⁴

II. Trial: the three-stage journey to an unnamed mountain (22:3–10)

After the encounter with God, Abraham rose early the next morning. He has arisen early twice already in the Genesis after his interaction with God as mentioned earlier. The matter of sending away Ishmael was distressing to him (21:11), one could imagine the enhanced distress Abraham felt upon the request of sacrificing Isaac. However, Abraham seems quite serene; he prepared the donkey and wood in a calm and orderly manner. The text does not deliver much insight into Abraham's thoughts about this command, nor does it display Abraham's immediate emotional response. But his comportment the next morning conveyed his firm obedience without the slightest hesitation or resistance.

The reference to "the third day" implies an extended journey to the arrival at the mountain, and it was on the third day that Abraham looked up and found the unnamed place without God's intentional intervention. Through the identification of the mountain, his seeing was even closer to that of God, as if God was within him. Abraham decides to separate himself and Isaac from the two young men, so he and his son could be alone, for the command needs to be performed without any external disruption. Abraham's faithfulness to God is shown through the process. He did not change his mind during the long journey and assessed the possibilities that could hinder the execution of the sacrifice. What should be noted in verse 5 is that he tells the two accompanying young men that 'we will go over to the mountain and worship and we will return to you.' Abraham's words here indicate that both he and Isaac would return, almost an assurance that God would guarantee Isaac's safety eventually.⁵ In this sense, Abraham may already have an understanding that the command was merely a trial.

Throughout the journey, Abraham shows serenity rather than agony or bitterness. He arranges everything in a methodical manner, attending to the donkey, the cutting of the wood, the fire and the knife; he speaks with gentleness and certainty. A sign for confusion and worry is not present in the language used in the text. Not only does this demonstrate Abraham's obedience

³ Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary*, Oxford Scholarship Online

⁴ James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, p.24

⁵ James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, p.69

to God, but also indicates that having come through questioning and disturbance, Abraham has moved to another realm of seeing.⁶

Abraham's love for his son can be seen from carrying the more dangerous objects himself, the fire and the knife, leaving Isaac only with wood, as if to protect Isaac from harm. Verse 7 presents Isaac's query about the missing object in the arrangement of the burnt offering. "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" asked Isaac. He seems satisfied with his father's response and shows no trace of suspicion about his father's action for he knows his father is following God's command. Isaac then is also faithful to God. So he and his father walked together (22:6, 8) as Abraham follows God's lead to the unknown mountain. There is no particular mention of Isaac's age in Genesis 22, some literature say he was thirty seven, some say he was in his twenties at the time, nevertheless, he was old enough to comprehend the specifics of a sacrifice.

In the Targums, Genesis 22 differs from the original biblical version, especially that Isaac's attitude towards the sacrifice was described to perfection. When Isaac asks about the missing lamb, Abraham says to him, "It will be prepared; otherwise you will be the sacrificial lamb." Here, Isaac is linked to the lamb. Upon hearing this, Isaac does not resist; on the contrary, as Abraham is about to slay him, Isaac requests his father to tie him well so that the sacrifice will not be invalidated by his unwilling reaction,⁷ completely displaying his willing submission to God's command. First century texts such as Josephus' *Antiquities*, *4 Maccabees* and *First Element* all present a willing Isaac.⁸ In light of this, Isaac's consent to endure immolation later became an example for the martyrs and Aqedah began to carry inherent meaning for atoning power. Abraham even asks God to be mindful of Isaac's sacrifice and for that to deliver Isaac's descendants from future tribulation.⁹ However, the author of *4 Maccabees* did not see atoning value in Aqedah as there was no shedding in blood.¹⁰

After the brief conversation, the two seem to have travelled in silence. The narrative shows no further thoughts from Abraham or Isaac until the last moment before Isaac was going to be

⁶ Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary*, Oxford Scholarship Online

⁷ James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, p.58

⁸ Leroy A. Huizenga, Obedience unto Death: The Matthean Gethsemane and Arrest Sequence and the Aqedah, *the Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, 2009, p.511

⁹ James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, p.59

¹⁰ Jame ames Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, p.59s
Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, pp. 47-48

killed. There has been much discussion and curiosity on what they may have said to each other on the way to the appointed mountain. On the one hand, Abraham's serenity continued as he carefully prepares everything for the actual sacrifice, not showing any sign of distraught. Complete obedience is conveyed by the narrator.

III. Trial: the angel – do not touch the boy (22:11-14)

The angel of God calls again from heaven (cf. 21:17), to save Isaac this time. It is difficult to observe the distinction between the angel and God here, as the words in verse 12 seem to be God's own, "since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Notice that "me" is used rather than "the Lord." The angel's calling affirms that "the fear of God" comes before all things in life, with no exception. The "fearing of God" is a significant element in Genesis 22. Von Rad states that the term "religion" is not found in the Old Testament, rather "the fear of God" is used for identification of faith; however, this statement presents almost nothing of special emotional reaction to God, but rather for obedience to the divine commands.¹¹ Job is an example of such obedience to God (Job 1. 1, 8) and he survived the hardest test.

As Abraham demonstrated complete "fear of God", a ram appeared and was sacrificed instead of Isaac. Just as Abraham anticipated earlier in verse 8, God does ultimately provide the lamb for the burning offering. So he names the place "The Lord will provide." Von Rad points out that the naming of the place where God had appeared was very important for the ancients, as future generations could offer sacrifices and prayers to God at the same place.¹²

IV. Blessing: the angel – I will shower blessing (22:15-19)

God's voice comes a second time through the angel, this time relates to the motif of promise for progeny. Abraham's obedience and piety has brought God's blessings; *I Maccabees* states that Abraham's faith at the Aqedah is an act of virtue and is to be rewarded.¹³ Verses 16 to 18 clearly reveal this fact. Brodie identifies this promise to be the climatic statement of the great promises (cf. 12:2–3, 7; 13:14–17; chaps. 15, 17, 18).¹⁴

¹¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p241

¹² *ibid*, p242

¹³ James Swetnam, *Jesus and Isaac: A Study of the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Light of the Aqedah*, p.37

¹⁴ Thomas L. Brodie, *Genesis as Dialogue: A Literary, Historical, and Theological Commentary*, Oxford Scholarship Online

V. Conclusion: blessed news; a brother's twelve children (22:20-24)

Last section (22:20-24) of this chapter brings good news. Nahor, Abraham's brother, has had twelve children, suggesting that the promise of many descendants is being realised. In addition, the name of Isaac's future wife, Rebekah, is also mentioned in verse 23, implying the continuation of prosperous progeny.

C. Interfaith Perspectives on the Command to Sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22: A Jewish and Christian Perspective

Genesis 22 bears lasting and continuing significance for both Jews and Christians. It is often thought of as a typology of the atonement. Parallels exist on the concepts of "sacrifice", "son" and "substitute" between Aqedah and the vicarious expiation of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of Matthew, the allusions to Isaac can be found substantially.¹⁵

The Matthean Jesus and the Isaac in Aqedah have a remarkable resemblance, not only are they the promised children conceived under unusual circumstances, but both also showed complete willingness and obedience towards their sacrifices. Gen 22:2, 12, 16 and Mt 3:17 confirm that they are both the beloved Son to their respective fathers, Isaac to Abraham and Jesus to God.¹⁶ Mk 1:11 alludes to Gen 22:2, 12, 16 with the same voice from heaven.¹⁷

Moreover, Jesus' birth is also believed to be reminiscent of Isaac's.¹⁸ God tells Abraham that his wife shall bear him a son and he shall be named Isaac. God will establish His covenant with Isaac and for his offspring (Gen 17:19). Similarly, the angel of the Lord instructs Joseph to take Mary as his wife, as the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. The new born son will be named Jesus and he will save his people from their sins (Mt 1:20, 21). A significant verbal allusion is demonstrated in the verses; both boys are named by God and their life purposes are foreshadowed before birth.

The willing obedience of Jesus in Gethsemane to withstand his sacrificial death is another aspect that noticeably mirrors Isaac's willing obedience at the Aqedah. Jesus' teachings on obedience pervade the Gospel (cf. 3:13-17; 5:18-20; 7:15-23; 12:33-37, 46-50; 21:28-32, 43;

¹⁵ Leroy A. Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew*, p.263

¹⁶ Leroy A. Huizenga, *Obedience unto Death: The Matthean Gethsemane and Arrest Sequence and the Aqedah*, *the Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, 2009, p.518

¹⁷ Matthew S. Rindge, *Reconfiguring the Aqedah and Recasting God; Lament and Divine Abandonment in Mark*, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, 2012, p. 762

¹⁸ *ibid*, p.516

25:1-30, 31-46; 28:20)¹⁹. Jesus' obedience is not just passive acceptance to his vocation; on the contrary, Jesus actively arranges events to facilitate his sacrificial death to save the people. This recalls Isaac's request to Abraham to tie him well, so his possible involuntary reaction does not invalidate the sacrifice. Moreover, Isaac carried the wood prepared for the burnt offering (Gen 22:6), while Jesus carried the cross by himself (Jn 19:16).

Another event that evokes echoes of the Aqedah is the Matthean Gethsemane and arrest sequence.²⁰ At the Gethsemane scene, in Mt 26:36, Jesus tells his disciples to sit and wait while he goes to pray; in Gen 22:5, Abraham asks his two accompanying young men to stay and wait while he and Isaac go over to the mountain to worship. Furthermore, Genesis 22 is a trial for Abraham's obedience; Mt 26: 41 shows Jesus' recognition of his situation as a trial.

The aforementioned verses and viewpoints related to the birth, obedience and sacrificial death faced by Jesus and Isaac, to some extent, present a rational connection between the two figures. For these reasons, Christians have supported the idea that the Binding of Isaac was a prophecy for the coming of Jesus Christ.

D. Conclusion.

Genesis 22 in the Old Testament focuses on the proceedings of a trial placed upon Abraham by God, with the intention of probing Abraham's obedience and faithfulness; this trial ends happily with the renewal of God's promise for Abraham's thriving progeny; relatively a narrative of cause and effect. The original biblical text of Genesis 22 mostly focuses on Abraham's comportment and reaction to God's command, whereas the later versions provide further insight into Isaac's thoughts about his own sacrifice. The story of the Aqedah has also been a source of inspiration and encouragement for the Jewish people during times of hardship throughout history. Jews and Christians may have adopted the interpretation of the narrative in significantly different ways, but evidence does support claims of certain parallels between the son of Abraham and the Son of God.

¹⁹ Leroy A. Huizenga, *Obedience unto Death: The Matthean Gethsemane and Arrest Sequence and the Aqedah*, *the Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71, 2009, p.516

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 519

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