

### The Testing of Abraham

Before I begin our discussion this week on the testing of Abraham some full disclosure on my part is in order. This story used to be my absolute least favorite in the entire Book of Genesis. Part of it stems from my first real encounter with the text when I was an undergraduate in college. We were assigned Soren Kierkegaard's treatment of the story of Genesis in his famous book *Fear and Trembling*, which was dissected, reviewed, critiqued, dissected again, *ad infinitum*. Aside from classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle (and their Christian counterparts St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas) I never seemed to be able to wrap my mind around philosophy. Kierkegaard was no exception. His seemingly interminable discussions left me quite flat.

My discomfort with this story only grew as I began my theological studies. I, like many of you, could not fathom how God, the loving Father of scripture, could ever ask one of His favorites to kill his own son. What made the request on the part of God all the more troubling concerned the facts surrounding the birth of Isaac, the chosen one. Although it took a miracle to bring this little boy into the world, now it seemed that his own father was asked to take him out of it in a sacrificial fire. Coupled with this was the problem it would seemingly cause concerning the promise that Abraham would be the father of a "*great and populous nation*" [Genesis 18:18](#). Clearly, the elimination of the one true progeny of Abraham and Sarah would seem to fly in the face of all that was promised. I could never understand how God could ask such a thing. Three aspects of the story, however, began to radically alter my view of [Genesis 22:1-18](#). I owe this illumination to the Rabbis and St. Augustine.

#### **The Catechism and Genesis**

*Christian hope takes up and fulfills the hope of the chosen people which has its origin and model in the hope of Abraham, who was blessed abundantly by the promises of God fulfilled in Isaac, and who was purified by the test of the sacrifice. "Hoping against hope, he believed, and thus became the father of many nations." Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1819*

In some Rabbinic writings the authors discuss how God, Master and Creator of the Universe, knew exactly what Abraham would do when confronted with the command to kill his only son. As God knows all, he knew the level of Abraham's faith and therefore knew Abraham would carry out this horrific request.

Thus, the test was not really for God to see if Abraham was truly a man of faith but was for Abraham to realize his own level of faith. At the moment when God stays Abraham's upraised hand (Genesis 22:12) Abraham's faith is confirmed in his own mind – he does indeed have the faith that will be required of him.

Yet this is only part of the story. To approach the fullness of this story we have to turn to St. Augustine. Although he was not the first among the Church Fathers to voice the sentiment, nevertheless he voiced it succinctly: *"The New is in the Old concealed, and in the New, the Old revealed."* (*Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet, et in Novo, Vetus patet.*) The only way to approach a full understanding of this text is to start from a Christian perspective. Where does this story fit into the full breadth of salvation history? If you begin to read this story from a Christian perspective (drawing upon what other believing Christians have said about it for millennia) this seemingly horrific request begins to make more sense.

Let's start at the beginning:

*"Then God said: 'Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you.'"*

Genesis 22:2

There is a reason the story is set up this way. We are confronted with a father having to sacrifice his only son, one whom he loves. As readers we are duly horrified at this request. Those of us who are parents and grandparents, especially of small children, cannot even begin to contemplate this. I believe that this is part of the intention of the Divine Author. We are meant to be horrified. We are meant to think that such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of one's only son, is a request no human could ever undertake. We ask, "How could one give up his only child?" Yet, this is precisely what the Lord does approximately two thousand years later. The Lord indeed sacrifices his own Son - gives up *"the one he loves"* for us.

Once we embrace the Christian reading of this text, other echoes of the sacrifice of our Lord come to the fore. The wood on the shoulders of Abraham's son (Genesis 22:6) and the idea that the sacrificial sheep was provided by God (Genesis 22:8) have direct bearing on the sacrifice of Christ for our sins on the cross at Calvary.

#### **The Church Fathers and Genesis**

*Thus the sacrifice was not for the sake of Isaac but for that of Abraham, who was tested by being called upon to make this offering. And, of course, God accepted his intentions, but he prevented him from slaying Isaac. The death of Isaac would not buy freedom for the world. No, that could be accomplished only by the death of our Savior, by whose stripes we are all healed. St. Athanasius, Festal Letter No. 6*

There is a Latin term used in biblical interpretation, *sensus plenior*, which means the full meaning. What we are encountering here is a very full meaning indeed. One cannot stop at the initial level of meaning - the story of a Patriarch from the Book of Genesis - and not go further. Christ abounds in all of Sacred Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. In certain areas the significance for later events, most notably *the* event of the Incarnation, is hard to miss. The Christological significance of this story for later theological ideas, most notably the writings of St. Paul, cannot be overemphasized.

## Sarah's Death and Burial

Before we get to one of the more complicated love stories in the bible, a brief word should be said about the sad passing of the beloved wife of Abraham, Sarah. Her death, or more precisely her burial, ties into the earlier promises made by God to Abraham, specifically the promise concerning the land. You will note that when Abraham returns to Canaan, he has no *legal* title to the land. The Hittites owed no allegiance to Yahweh and probably wouldn't have granted Abraham this small parcel if he simply invoked the promise of the Lord, a God the Hittites in all probability did not know. Instead, there is an important legal transfer of land that secures Abraham's right to this small patch of Canaan, because the Canaanites (here called Hittites) sell it to him. For the Jews (who were probably writing more than a millennium after these events transpired) this little story emphasized that their claim to Canaan was both divinely ordained and legal. Whether a contract agreed upon over a millennium or more prior to the Babylonian captivity (and hence several thousand years from our own time) is still binding on the current occupants of the land is a matter to be decided by international negotiators and, thankfully, not by theologians.