

## Abraham and Isaac – Session 6

A major theme in the Abraham cycle concerns the question of an heir who should inherit the promise. At first, Abraham worries that "the heir to my house is Eliezer of Damascus" (Gen 15:2). Then he has a child, Ishmael, by Hagar, Sarah's slave girl. Here again there is an ethnographic aspect to the story: Ishmael becomes the ancestor of a desert tribe. Like the story of Jacob and Esau, the account of Ishmael explains how Israel was defined over against its neighbors by divine choices that seem quite arbitrary. But this story also raises moral questions, not only for modern sensibilities.

The story is told twice, with variations, in Genesis 16 (J) and 21 (E). In the J account, the conflict between Hagar and Sarai arises when Hagar becomes pregnant and looks on Sarai with contempt. Abram makes no attempt to defend her, but allows Sarai to do as she pleases, so that Hagar has to flee. The angel of the Lord intervenes, and persuades Hagar to return, by promising that her son will have plentiful offspring, even though he will be "a wild ass of a man" and will live "at odds with his kin." But Hagar is also told to submit to her mistress. We are left in no doubt about Sarai's greater importance in the eyes of the Lord. Abram does not come off well in this story, as he makes no attempt to defend his offspring; but, typically, he is not censured in the text.

The E account locates the conflict later, after Isaac is born and weaned. In this case Sarah's harshness to Hagar has less justification: she cannot abide the thought that the son of a slave woman would be on a par with her son. This time Abraham is distressed, but God tells him that Sarah is right, and that through Isaac the promise will be transmitted. He then sends Hagar and

her child off into the wilderness. The plight of mother and child in the desert anticipates the later wandering of Israel and that of the prophet Elijah. In each case God comes to the rescue. This time there is no reason for Hagar or Ishmael to return to Abraham, but God causes the boy to prosper in the wilderness. Here again the idea of divine election seems to take priority over human compassion. The story seems to champion ethnocentrism, by suggesting that those who do not belong to the chosen people can be sent away. We meet a chilling application of the same principle much later in the Bible in the book of Ezra, where Ezra makes the Judean men who have married foreign women send them away with their children. The Elohist softens the story by assuring us that God looked after Hagar and Ishmael. There is no such assurance in the book of Ezra. Once again, the story raises a profound issue, one that will come up many times in the Bible, but it hardly points to a satisfactory solution.

### *The sacrifice of Isaac*

The crowning episode in the narratives about Abraham's heirs is the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. The basic story, 22:1-14, 19, is generally ascribed to the E source, like the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21. Verses 15-18 ("The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time . . .") are generally recognized as a secondary addition, which integrates the story into the Yahwistic theme of the promise. There are some problems with the source-critical division, since "the angel of the Lord" is mentioned in v. 11 and v. 14 explains the name Moriah by the phrase "YHWH will see." Evidently, the story has been reworked by different hands, and this helps explain why several different emphases can be detected in it. Nonetheless, the spare artistry of the story has been widely and rightly praised.

The opening verse is exceptional among the stories of Genesis in offering an explicit key to interpretation: "God tested Abraham." The test is eventually aborted, but there is no doubt that Abraham passes. Abraham is commended in v. 12 and again in the redactional addition in vv. 16-18. This is not just any test, however. Abraham is told to take his only son, Isaac, whom he loves, and offer him up as a burnt offering. While the reader is told in advance that this is a test, Abraham is not. To appreciate the force of the story, the awfulness of the command must be taken fully seriously.

Another key to the story is provided by the theme of providence. Abraham tells Isaac that "God himself will provide a lamb for the burnt offering" (v. 8). At this point in the story, this is an understandable attempt to dodge the awful truth, but it is more prophetic than Abraham knows. When the angel of the Lord intervenes, Abraham names the place "the Lord will provide."

Yet another key to the story lies in the repetition of the promise to Abraham in vv. 15-18. While this passage is an editorial addition, it integrates the story into the main theme that now binds the patriarchal stories together.

The fascination of the story, however, lies in the specific content of the command to Abraham to sacrifice his only legitimate son. We do not know how widely human (child) sacrifice was practiced in ancient Israel, but there can be no doubt that it was practiced, down close to the time of the Babylonian exile. Kings of Judah (Ahaz in the eighth century BCE, 2 Kgs 16:3; Manasseh in the seventh century BCE, 2 Kgs 21:6) made their sons "pass through fire," that is, offered them as burnt offerings. There was an installation called the Topheth in Ge (valley) Hinnom outside Jerusalem, where children were burned as victims (hence the name Gehenna for hell in

New Testament times). King Josiah destroyed the Topheth in the reform of 621 BCE, allegedly so that "no one would make a son or a daughter pass through fire as an offering to Molech" (2 Kgs 23:10). Molech is usually taken to be a Canaanite god, and some interpreters are quick to conclude that child sacrifice was a Canaanite custom. But there is evidence that it was also practiced in the name of YHWH, God of Israel. The eighth-century prophet Micah addresses a Yahwistic worshiper who wonders: "with what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? . . . Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mic 6:6-8). Micah replies that God requires only justice and kindness, but the question shows that a worshiper of YHWH could contemplate child sacrifice in the eighth century BCE.

Child sacrifice actually appears to be commanded in Exod 22:28-29: "The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth you shall give it to me" (Hebrew verse 28, English verse 29). This commandment is modified in Exod 34:19-20, which likewise says that "all that first opens the womb is mine," but adds, "all the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem." (Similarly, the firstborn of a donkey could be redeemed by substituting a lamb, but if it was not redeemed it had to be killed.) Underlying this commandment is the conviction that all life is from God, and that God's right to the firstborn must be acknowledged, in order to ensure future fertility. We should expect that human firstborn sons were normally redeemed, as commanded in Exodus 34, but it is remarkable that the stark commandment in Exodus 22 is left on the books.

YHWH is also said to have commanded human sacrifice in Ezek 20:25-26: "Moreover, I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through all their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the Lord." Ezekiel does not attribute child sacrifice to Canaanite influence. He may have had Exodus 22 in mind. In any case, he provides further testimony that child sacrifice was practiced in Judah, down to the time of the exile. The polemic against child sacrifice in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah would not have been necessary if this had not been the case.

Unlike Deuteronomy and Jeremiah, Genesis 22 does not condemn child sacrifice or polemicize against it. On the contrary, Abraham is praised for his willingness to carry it out. He does not have to go through with it, but that may be an exceptional case, because of Abraham's exceptional standing. There is a counterpoint to this story in Judges 11, in the story of Jephthah. Jephthah makes a vow to the Lord that if he is victorious in battle he will sacrifice "whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me." The language clearly implies human sacrifice. Unfortunately for Jephthah, he is greeted by his only daughter. He expresses more grief than Abraham, and is no less steadfast in fulfilling his vow. Modern commentators often fault Jephthah, since, unlike Abraham, he brought his misfortune on himself by a rash vow. But the Bible does not pronounce his vow rash, or pass judgment on him at all. (The New Testament proclaims him, like Abraham, a hero of faith, in Heb 11:32-34). Moreover, he seems to make his vow under the influence of the spirit of the Lord (Judg 11:20-21). In this case there is no ram in the bushes. The Lord does not always provide a substitute.

While child sacrifice is not repudiated in Genesis 22, it was emphatically rejected by the later tradition. The tradition continued to praise the

obedience of Abraham, but there is evident discomfort both with the idea that God gave such a command and with Abraham's willingness to carry it out. On the one hand, it was suggested that the idea of the sacrifice came from Satan, just as Satan incited God to test Job. So the book of *Jubilees*, in the second century BCE, has the idea originate with Mastema, leader of the host of demons (*Jub.* 17:16). On the other hand, Targum Neofiti (an Aramaic paraphrase of the Bible from the early Christian period) has Abraham tell Isaac openly that he is to be sacrificed. Isaac responds by asking Abraham to bind him properly, so that he may not kick and make the sacrifice unfit. (In Jewish tradition, the sacrifice of Isaac is known as the Akedah, or Binding.) Other Jewish sources from the early Christian era also emphasize that Isaac was a willing victim and that his willingness was meritorious. This interpretation of the story may already be found in a fragmentary text from the Dead Sea Scrolls from the pre-Christian era (4Q225).

The story continues to fascinate philosophers and theologians down to modern times. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard reasoned that Abraham could only be justified by "the teleological suspension of the ethical"—the idea that ethical standards do not apply to a divine command. Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher of the Enlightenment, offered a more penetrating critique. For Kant, the problem was how one can know whether such a command comes from God in the first place: "There are certain cases in which man can be convinced that it cannot be God whose voice he thinks he hears; when the voice commands him to do what is opposed to the moral law, though the phenomenon seem to him ever so majestic and surpassing the whole of nature, he must count it a deception." (See Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* [Trans. M. J. Gregor; New York:

Abaris, 1979] 115). He went on to cite the story of Abraham as a case in point. This is of course a modern critique, which arises in a world where God is not thought to speak to people on a daily basis, and claims of divine revelation are regarded as problematic. We shall find, however, that such a critique is not as foreign to the Bible as we might suppose. Increasingly, as the biblical history unfolds, the authenticity of revelation becomes a problem. We shall find this especially in the debates over true and false prophecy. In the matter of revelation, as in the matter of child sacrifice, we must acknowledge development in the biblical corpus, although that development does not necessarily proceed in a straight line.

The story of the (near) sacrifice of Isaac is a troubling one for modern interpreters, because of the extravagant divine approval for Abraham's willingness to do something that is not only regarded as criminal in the modern world but that was also widely condemned in the Bible itself. The problem cannot be resolved by the fact that he was acting in obedience to a divine command. The problem with divine commands is the difficulty of recognizing what is authentically divine. In the 1990's a man who had converted to a conservative Christian sect was put on trial in California for killing his daughter, whom he apparently loved, because he thought God was telling him to do so. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity, although he showed no other signs of insanity. (See Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial* (Princeton, 1998). Jews and Christians will say that Abraham was different, and it is often argued that we should not judge Abraham by modern criteria. But if Abraham is not judged by modern criteria, is he at all relevant to modern readers?

Scripture teaches in many ways, not always by positive example. It contains lessons on the dangers of fanatical faith as well as calls for social justice and moral behavior.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. What are the moral implications of a God who even requests the sacrifice of a child, even if the act is eventually unfulfilled?
2. How does the story of the sacrifice of Isaac speak to modern-day religious fundamentalism?
3. How do we reckon with, integrate, or reject those parts of our biblical tradition that we find ethically or morally problematic from a modern perspective?

**Reading:**

Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 154–65.

**Further Reading:**

John J. Collins, “Faith Without Works: Biblical Ethics and the Sacrifice of Isaac,” in idem, *Encounters with Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 47-58.