



God, Abraham, and the Abuse of Isaac

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THIS IS A CLASSIC TEXT.¹ IT HAS CAPTIVATED THE IMAGINATION OF MANY INTERPRETERS, drawn both by its literary artistry and its religious depths. This is also a problem text. It has occasioned deep concern in this time when the abuse of children has screamed its way into the modern consciousness: Is God (and by virtue of his response, Abraham) guilty of child abuse in this text? There is no escaping the question, and it raises the issue as to the continuing value of this text.

I. MODERN READINGS

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller claims² that Genesis 22 may have contributed to an atmosphere that makes it possible to justify the abuse of children. She grounds her reflections on some thirty artistic representations of this story. In two of Rembrandt's paintings, for example, Abraham faces the heavens rather than Isaac, as if in blind obedience to God and oblivious to what he is about to do to his son. His hands cover Isaac's face, preventing him from seeing or crying out. Not only is Isaac silenced, she says (not actually true), one sees only his torso; his personal features are obscured. Isaac "has been turned into an *object*. He has been dehumanized by being made a sacrifice; he no longer has a right to ask questions and will

¹This article is a reworking of sections of my commentary on Genesis 22 in the *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 494-501.

²Alice Miller, *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1990). A student, Diane Gummesson, called my attention to this book.

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scarcely even be able to articulate them to himself, for there is no room in him for anything besides fear."³

It will not do simply to dismiss the (possible) negative impact of this text; it would not be the first time the Bible has been used knowingly or unknowingly in distorted ways. The text does in fact contribute to such an understanding, for God asks and then twice commends Abraham for not withholding his son. Abraham asks no questions and God offers no qualifications. The child seems to be a pawn in the hands of two "adults" who need to work out an issue between them. Modern adults have little room to criticize either God or Abraham here, given the extent to which we remain silent about child abuse among us, not least the increasing numbers of children who are victims of poverty and violence.⁴ But that must not stop us from rendering a judgment.

Modern readings, especially since the 1965 treatment of Erich Auerbach,⁵ have been particularly interested in delineating the text's literary artistry. Significant gains have resulted, but this approach may have over-dramatized the story and read too much between the lines, especially the feelings of Abraham and Isaac. Likewise, religious interpretations, especially since Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*,⁶ often intensify the contradictoriness of the story, perhaps in the interests of heightening the mystery of God's ways. While the reader ought not discount the unusual, frightening character of God's command, it ought not be exaggerated either.

II. THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

This story stands within the circle of the family, suggesting an original pre-Israel setting, but the theological force of the story takes on new contours as it is transmitted through the generations. The fall of Jerusalem may provide the context for a renewed look, when the issue of God's remaining true to past promises arises with special rigor. Exilic Israel may see itself in both Abraham and Isaac. God has put Israel to the test in the fires of judgment in which many children died, has called forth its continuing faith, has delivered it from the abyss, and renewed the promises.

The exilic setting, with its renewed interest in Abraham, may also help explain the sacrificial motif in the story. The issue of the redemption of the firstborn informs this text at some stage, but, given the absence of an etiology, not the present form of the text. But the ancient reader had a context within which to

³Ibid., 139.

⁴A related theme is present in twentieth-century war literature, e.g., the poem of Wilfrid Owen who died fighting for England in 1917, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young." Appended to a posthumous edition was this line: "The willingness of the older generation to sacrifice the younger." See also Danny Siegel's 1969 look at this text in poetic form: "Father Abraham Genesis 22—Slightly Changed." For these texts, see Jo Milgrom, *The Binding of Isaac: The Akedah—A Primary Symbol in Jewish Thought and Art* (Berkeley: BIBAL, 1988) 276-78.

⁵E. Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar," in *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1965) 1-22.

⁶S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (1843).

understand this divine move. Several other questions should be kept in mind. Why was the narrator not satisfied with saying: this was a test, Abraham passed, now they can go home? Why the need for a sacrifice, offered “instead of” Isaac? The story may function as a metaphor of Israel as God’s firstborn. Abraham’s reference to a lamb in vv. 7-8 may link up with Isaiah 53, recognizing that Israel’s redemption would not be without cost.

This text must be related to the larger sweep of Abraham’s life.

1. The overarching structure provided by parallels with Abraham’s call in 12:1-4. They are similar in vocabulary (“take, go” to a “place that I shall show you”) and in Abraham’s silent response. Both are ventures in faith; Abraham begins and ends his journey by heeding the divine command. The former cuts Abraham off from his past, the latter threatens to cut him off from his future.

2. The relationship between God and Abraham has had its ups and downs, in which each has affected the other. Abraham has exhibited a deep faith and engaged God in no little conversation. Yet, his response has been less than fully exemplary (cf. 17:17); Abraham’s life has raised an issue of knowledge for God (v. 12). Generally, though, this text presupposes familiar mutual trust built over considerable experience together. For Abraham, the God who commands has filled his life with promises. He has seen that God has his best interests at heart. He has no reason to mistrust the God from whom this word comes, however harsh it may seem to be.

3. The parallels in vocabulary with the story of Ishmael make the test even more poignant. Abraham has just lost his son, Ishmael; will he now lose the “only son” he has left?

III. RHETORICAL FEATURES

1. *Abraham’s initial silence.* Why does Abraham raise no objection? Why would Abraham raise questions about the fate of Sodom but not that of his own son? The narrator has succeeded in raising these “whys” in generations of readers. To some extent the narrator resolves these questions in the telling: Abraham obeyed because he trusted God would provide a way through this moment without giving up on the promise. It may be that Abraham responds as he does because he learned from his encounter with God over the fate of Sodom that God is indeed just, and that he need only trust on this occasion. The narrator may intend that the *reader*, having learned from Abraham in chapter 18 how to question God, is the one who is to ask the questions here.

2. *Seeing.* Twice, Abraham lifts up his eyes (vv. 4, 13), and five times the verb ראה is used, both of Abraham (vv. 4, 13) and of God (vv. 8, 14, 14). From a distance, Abraham sees the place where God told him to sacrifice Isaac and then, close up, he sees the ram provided there. This is witness to a progressively clearer seeing. It is *God’s seeing* in which Abraham places his trust (v. 8) and that trust finally enables Abraham to see the sacrifice that God has seen to. Seeing saves the son (cf. 21:19).

3. *The mountain*, that I will show you (v. 2). This is stressed early on (vv. 3, 4, 9, cf. v. 5) and returned to in v. 14, where it is named: “God will provide.” Perhaps

God has prepared the scene ahead of time, ram and all, and hence Abraham must be precisely directed to it. Why not just sacrifice Isaac in any suitable place? It may be hidden in “Moriah,” an unknown place to us but not to Abraham (perhaps Jerusalem). This detail gives the command a special character; Abraham is to sacrifice in a God-chosen place. Might this have given Abraham some clue as to what God was about?

4. *Structure.* As many have seen, Abraham’s faith that God will provide centers the text (v. 8); of his three “Here am I” responses (vv. 1, 7, 11), only here does Abraham respond more fully; only here does Isaac speak, and the exchange is enclosed by the repeated phrase, “the two of them walked on together.” Abraham does not tell Isaac everything, but he does tell him what he believes is the truth about his future: God will provide (cf. v. 14).

This straightforward, unhesitating trust in God is precisely what God is testing. As God puts it in v. 12, it has to do with Abraham’s fear of God – a faithfulness that accords with God’s purposes and works itself out in daily life as truth and justice. Abraham obeys because he trusts God; it is trust out of which obedience flows. Disobedience would reveal a lack of trust. Abraham could have obeyed because he was ordered to do so; God is God. But at least by v. 8, Abraham’s obedience is informed and undergirded by a trust that God will find a way through this moment that is in the best interests of the promise. This trust that God will provide may already be present in v. 5. Abraham says that both will return; the servants function as witnesses of this conviction. The reference to worship anticipates v. 8. Suggestions that Abraham is equivocating, deceptive, or whistling in the dark seem strange for a narrative designed to demonstrate Abraham’s trusting obedience.

5. *Tensions in the narrative, centered on Isaac, Abraham, and God.*

a. *Isaac.* This is important in view of issues related to children. The readers’ sympathies are initially directed toward Isaac as a child. This is a child whom, in God’s judgment, Abraham loves (v. 2); this is not an abusive relationship. Isaac is ignorant of the purpose of the journey, but he is not entirely passive. He breaks the silence with a question of his father (v. 7); it is the only recorded exchange between them. He senses that something is not right. Yet, Isaac does not focus on himself (his emotions are often overplayed). Isaac addresses Abraham as a loving father, mirroring Abraham’s trust in God. Abraham responds in like manner.

As noted, Isaac’s question occurs in the center of the story, signaled by Abraham’s response, “Here I am.” In the other cases of “Here I am,” Abraham responds to God; here he centers on what his child has to say. He attends to Isaac as he has attended to God; he is at his child’s disposal. He does not dismiss Isaac’s question or consider it inappropriate. Isaac’s question is important also in that it elicits a public statement of trust, enabling Abraham’s trusting action to be joined with trusting words. While not telling Isaac everything, Abraham answers his question directly and conveys what he believes will happen. Isaac’s response is conveyed indirectly in the notice that the two of them walk on together. There is no record that he resists, even later when his father prepares him for the sacrificial

moment (some descriptions of the knife poised to fall go beyond the text). Abraham's trust in God apparently has become Isaac's trust: God will provide.

While moderns may, indeed should, think about the psychological abuse Isaac endures in all of this, he is given a questioning voice and his father attentively responds to him. These elements should be stressed for the sake of our children's hearing of this text, perhaps even more for a parental hearing. Yet, the text does not finally enable one to sit comfortably with the obvious abuse that Isaac undergoes. One cannot help but wonder whether this is the reason Isaac does not return with Abraham (v. 19), and that his only further contact with his father is at his funeral (25:9).

b. *Abraham's* trusting departure does not settle the issue for God, or the journey could have ended early. The question becomes: will Abraham stay with the journey? Perhaps the reason for its length is to give Abraham time to have second thoughts. Abraham shows his continuing trust by staying on course. Hence, the stress on the journey, "the two of them walked on together," following expressions of trust. Only at the end can God say, "Now I know."

c. *God*. The usual way into this story is through the eyes of Abraham. But: What is at stake in this for God? I offer five suggestions.

IV. WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR GOD?

1. *The test*. God and reader know this is a test; Abraham does not. We know that God's intention is not to kill Isaac, but to test Abraham. With most commentators, Abraham probably observed the contradictory character of the command: God, having just fulfilled the promise of a son, asks him to sacrifice that son and presumably the promised future that goes with him. That Abraham goes anyway, it seems, shows his response was grounded in a trust that God would find a way of being true to promises. When faced with the seemingly impossible issue of Sarah's barrenness, God had found a way to be true to the promise of a son; given this experience, Abraham trusts that this comparably impossible situation would not be beyond God's ability to resolve. Abraham trusts that God's promise and command are not finally contradictory; but, it is up to God to resolve it.

If Abraham had known in advance this was a test, it would have been no real test, for he (or anyone) would respond differently to a test as test. The test would not work simply at the verbal level, as if God could have just asked Abraham whether he would obey the command. Words might not lead to action. May Abraham recognize this by responding in deed rather than word? In Deut 8:2-3, God tests Israel to discern whether they will do justice to the relationship. Discerning a response to a divine command is one such way: Is Abraham's loyalty to God undivided? God initiates the test to gain divine certainty.

We are challenged to take the test at its face value. This is not a ploy on God's part; it is a genuine command (albeit qualified by \mathfrak{N} , a particle of entreaty or urgency, rarely used with a divine command [cf. Isa 7:3; Judg 13:4; Isa 1:18], often used to soften a command, or to make a request in a more courteous form). God may thereby signal the unusual character of the moment. At the same time, it is a

test. The command is not of the same type as, say, the commandments. This is a command for a particular moment; it is not universally valid. Moreover, God does not desire that the command be fully obeyed; God's intent is to test Abraham, not kill Isaac. Hence, God revokes the command when the results of the test are clear and God speaks a second command that overrides the first.

Testing must be understood relationally, not legalistically. Life in relationship inevitably brings tests of loyalty. What constitutes testing will be shaped by the nature of the relationship and the expectations the parties have for it. As a relationship matures and trust levels are built up, faithful responses to the testing of the relational bond will tend to become second nature. And yet, even in such a relationship, sharp moments of testing may present themselves. Abraham may have faced such a moment. The reader might learn from this story that receiving promises does not entail being protected from moments where those promises are called into question. Will God still be trusted?

2. *Divine knowledge.* On the basis of v. 12, Brueggemann notes correctly that this test "is not a game with God; God genuinely does not know....The flow of the narrative accomplishes something in the awareness of God. He did not know. Now he knows."⁷ The test is as real for God as it is for Abraham.

Contrary to many commentators, the test is not designed to teach Abraham something (e.g., that he is too attached to Isaac). Experience always teaches, of course, and Abraham certainly learns. But the text does not say that Abraham now trusts in God in some new way, or that Abraham has learned a lesson of some sort. Rather, the test *establishes a fact*: Abraham trusts that God has his best interests at heart such that he will follow where God's command leads (a point repeated in vv. 12 and 16). The only one said to learn anything from the test is God. The climactic v. 12 states this: "Now I know." The issue is not what God teaches, but what God learns. The issue, for the sake of the future, was God's knowledge of Abraham's faithfulness in relationship.

While God knew what was likely to happen given the intimate knowledge of Abraham, God in fact gains new knowledge with respect to Abraham (as does the reader). This is a hard, even offensive word about God, and readers are advised not to seek to interpret their way out of it. The point seems to be that God does not have absolute certainty with respect to how Abraham would respond. This is the working out of an issue that God has, but the larger divine purpose must be kept in mind. This is not just a matter of divine curiosity, or an internal divine need; at issue is a future toward which God is moving that encompasses all the families of the earth. The question for God is: Is Abraham the faithful one who can carry that purpose along? Or, does God need to take some other course of action, perhaps even look for another?

3. *Divine vulnerability.* Some read this story as if God were a detached observer, a heavenly homeroom teacher watching from afar to see if Abraham passes the test. But God puts much at risk in this ordeal. God has chosen Isaac to continue

⁷W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 187.

the line of promise. This is God's ballgame, if you will. Though God does not intend that Isaac be killed, the test places God's own promised future at risk. The command has the potential of taking back what God has taken so many pains to put in place.

To put it more sharply: Does God in effect make the promise, or at least this shape of the promise, dependent on what *Abraham* does? Is this not only a test of Abraham's faith in God, but also of God's faith in Abraham? God places the shape of God's own future in Abraham's hands, in the sense that Abraham's response will affect the moves that God makes. Given Abraham's somewhat mixed responses to God up to this point, God took something of a risk to put so much on the line with this man. One cannot project what God might have done had Abraham failed, or had Abraham actually killed Isaac, but God would have had to find another way into the future, perhaps another way with Abraham. Something is at stake for God in this matter.

The text to this point, however, makes one wonder why this should be so. Isaac, the child of promise, has been born. The line of promise is now assured of continuity into the next generation, and so why test *Abraham*? Why not just get on with it, or wait to put Isaac to the test? Couldn't Abraham now just pass out of the picture, as he now does for all practical purposes? But it is not enough for the history of the promise that Isaac be born. Other promises remain to be fulfilled. God waits upon Abraham before getting on with them. Having seen Abraham's faithfulness, God "swears" *by himself* for the first time in the narrative (v. 16).

4. *Divine trustworthiness.* God's command to Abraham raises this question: Can this God be trusted? This God promises, proceeds to fulfill that promise, and then seems to take it back. Is this like trusting abusive parents? Can we trust this God only because we know this is a test, that God does not intend to kill Isaac? Abraham trusted without this knowledge. But this raises the issue of God's response to Abraham's trust.

Abraham trusts that God will find a way to fulfill the promises. At least by v. 8, his trust has taken the form that God will provide. His public confession of trust to Isaac constitutes a new situation with which God must work. This ups the ante for God. This has now become a test for God; it no longer involves simply Abraham's trust, it is a matter of God's providing as well. As Westermann puts it, "He throws the ball back into God's court."⁸ Will Abraham's trust in God be in vain? Is God free to ignore Abraham's trust? If God does not provide, that would constitute another kind of test for Abraham, a test at a much deeper level than the one that initiated this journey. If God tests within relationship to determine loyalty, then can God ignore the expression of such loyalty and remain faithful? Given God's previous commitments (especially in chap. 15), God has bound himself to stay with a trusting Abraham. Now, in *swearing by himself*, God lays the divine life on the line, putting the very divine self behind the promise.

5. *Divine providing.* Why stress God's providing, if this is a test? Why should

⁸C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 359.

God be praised for following through on God's own test? Perhaps God is deemed worthy of praise because *God* has passed the test; God has kept the divine commitment to Abraham. Perhaps God is praised for passing through this valley of endangered promises.

Was the ram necessary? Upon discerning Abraham's faithfulness, God stopped him before the ram was spotted. So the provision of the ram was not necessary to save Isaac. Yet, a sacrifice of some kind is important, even if not expressly commanded. If not Isaac, then it must be another. If this story is a metaphor for Israel in exile, it participates in a perspective that bespeaks Israel's redemption from final destruction, but not without cost to God, who groans like a mother in labor bringing forth a newborn Israel.

V. GOD'S PROMISE AND ABRAHAM'S RESPONSE

Finally, we turn to vv. 15-19, and the twice repeated word from God: because you have obeyed my voice and have not withheld your son, I reiterate the promises. The promises are not new; they came to Abraham independently of his response. Indeed, God's word of promise created his faith and made trust possible. This reality is not reversed here so that now his faith creates the promises. The promises are reiterated in an emphatic way to a trusting Abraham: God swears *by himself*.

But the question might arise: If Abraham had said no to God, would he have forfeited the promise? Let's review the text's place in the Abraham cycle. This text is virtually the final word on Abraham; it is the last exchange between Abraham and God. It follows closely on the heels of the birth of Isaac and precedes Sarah's death (23:2). This suggests a concern about an unprecedented turning of the generations.⁹ The promise of a son has been fulfilled. What status do the other divine promises have now? Are they to be fulfilled irrespective of Abraham's faithfulness? Are God's promises now to be carried by genetics, by a natural succession, by dynastic control? Even if Abraham is unfaithful? At times we speak of the unconditionality of the promises to Abraham in such a way that Abraham's (or anyone else's) faithfulness becomes irrelevant.

Genesis 26:3-5,24 shows that God reiterates the other promises to Isaac because of *Abraham's* faithful response. The other promises do not naturally carry on into the next generation; they cannot be secured by having children. God will never invalidate the promise, but Abraham's faithfulness is not an optional matter. Abraham could have said no to God, and complicated God's moves into the future. The word of God is resistible; if that were not the case, then God's command would have been no test at all; the outcome would have been settled in advance. God is not so in control of the situation or Abraham that it ceases to be a test. We do not know what would have happened if Abraham had failed, but we do know that the promises would always be there for Abraham to cling to.

⁹H. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991) 187-203.

At the same time, the text does not imply only a spiritual succession across the centuries, for the promises take shape in the actual lives of people, whose own words and deeds are centrally involved in their transmission. This means that, not only is genetic transmission impossible, it is also insufficient to say that the promises of God provide the only continuity across the generations. Faithful people transmit the promises, and their ongoing faithful witness ought not be considered of no account.

VI. IS GOD A CHILD ABUSER?

Does this text present God as a child abuser? At the least, the text has not insulated its readers from drawing this conclusion. Certainly many children, upon hearing this story, have pondered whether their parents would be willing to slaughter them at God's command, and a few parents have claimed to have heard such a word. Retellings of this story must be sensitive to such possible hearings. Children must be allowed to ask their questions about this text, to which adults should be highly alert and to which they ought not have canned answers. A few responses may help, such as being attentive to the voice the narrator gives Isaac. But, even then, there is no escaping the trauma that Isaac certainly endured. The text raises questions about this matter for which there is no answer; indeed, at this point I think we must say that the text fails us, and we have to look for other texts for any assurance that God is not a child abuser. Certain claims about God in this text give us a start: God both makes and keeps promises, tests and graciously provides, and through it all is deeply and vulnerably engaged in seeing to the divine purposes in the world.

It may be true to say that God does not expect of Abraham something that God did not take upon himself (an issue that raises similar questions, though Jesus goes to the cross as an adult, and people kill him). God puts Jesus through times of testing, from the wilderness to Gethsemane, to see if he would be obedient, in order to be a vehicle for God's redemptive purposes. God risked that Jesus would be found faithful (see Phil 2:8; Heb 5:8). Jesus trusts that God would find a way to be faithful to his promises, if not from death, then through death in the resurrection. On this are based certain New Testament promises to the faithful (Heb 2:18; 4:15; 1 Cor 10:13). These promises do not make our faithfulness an option, but we can count on the faithfulness of God, who in the midst of the worst of testings will provide a way through the fire. But, in such moments, it may be crucial that we hear the voice from heaven or see the ram in the bush.