

Abraham and Isaac

The process of hermeneutics can be illustrated by looking at one of the most extensively interpreted of all Biblical stories: that of Abraham's binding of Isaac (also known by the Hebrew name *Akedah*, which means "binding")¹

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.

Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.

And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.

And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

*And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.

*And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

¹ Berman, L. A., (1997) *The Akedah: the binding of Isaac*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.

And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.

*And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.²

The story describes the absolute faith in God required by the three main monotheistic religions that derive from Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. *Jehovahjireh* (where God can be seen) is located by Jews on Temple Mount, by Christians on Calvary and by Muslims in Mecca. The story of the *Akedah* resists easy interpretation. It suggests that divine authority takes precedence over human morality. Its main effect is terror.

In Judaism, Abraham's faith is rewarded as God blesses his descendants: "And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice."³

Islamic exegesis often considers the son to be Ishmael, Abraham's first son by his servant Hagar.⁴ Indeed, even in Genesis, God requests that Abraham bring his "only son," and this could therefore have been before the birth of Isaac. Ishmael is the father of the Arab people just as Isaac is the father of the Jewish people. According to the Qur'an, Ishmael and Abraham together built the Kaaba in Mecca.⁵

Christian commentary usually considers the sacrifice of Isaac as a prefigurement of God's sacrifice of his son Jesus to save the world. Our horror that Abraham might have sacrificed his son for God transforms into wonder that God actually did sacrifice his son for us.⁶

Greek literature has a parallel in the story of Iphigenia, daughter of Agammemnon, who was sacrificed to the gods at Aulis to ensure fair winds for the Achaean fleet. As retold by Lucretius:

² Genesis 22:1-14

³ Genesis 22:18

⁴ Ali, A. Y. (2008). *The Holy Qur'an: Text, translation and commentary*. Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an (Sura 37: 100-113, pp 1204-1205).

⁵ Qur'an, 2:127.

⁶ Origen (3rd century CE, translated by Heine, R. E., 1982). *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press (Homily VIII On the fact that Abraham offered his son Isaac).

An innocent girl betrayed to a sort of incest
To be struck down by the piety of her father
Who hoped in that way to get a good start for his fleet.
That is the sort of horror religion produces.⁷

The story of the *Akedah* is told austere. We know not why God made this request to test Abraham; we know not what Abraham thought before deciding to obey; we know not the location of Moriah other than the journey there took three days; we know not Isaac's state of mind beyond his question about the lamb for the sacrifice. Erich Auerbach contrasted the *Akedah* to Homer's story of the return of Odysseus to Ithaca. Though both were written down at about the same time, the styles are completely different. Homer puts everything in the foreground, describing the details of an event, recounting what led up to the present, telling us what all the protagonists, divine or mortal, are thinking. He even tells us the story behind the scar on Odysseus' thigh which led to his being recognized by his old nurse Euryclea. The story of the *Akedah* contains no such detail, but is fraught with unexplained background.⁸

In his commentary on Genesis, the medieval scholar Shlomo Itzhaki (Rashi) suggested that Abraham misunderstood God's command.

He did not say to him, "Slaughter him," because the Holy One, blessed be He, did not wish him to slaughter him but to bring him up to the mountain, to prepare him for a burnt offering, and as soon as he brought him up to the mountain, He said to him, "Take him down."⁹

However, this does not easily fit with the rest of the story. Why did God let the misunderstanding continue until the very moment before Isaac was to be killed?

A troubling point in the Genesis text is that Abraham and Isaac went up to Moriah together, but only Abraham came down. Perhaps God kept Isaac with him in paradise for a while in recompense for his suffering, before letting him later return to marry Rebecca so that God's blessing could be fulfilled. In some Jewish legends, Isaac was indeed sacrificed and the ashes of Isaac serve as a

⁷ Lucretius, C. T. (1st century BCE, translated by Sisson, C. H., 1976). *De rerum natura: The poem on nature*. Manchester: Carcanet New Press (Book I, p 17).

⁸ Auerbach, E. (1953, translated by W. R. Trask, 2003). *Mimesis: the representation of reality in Western literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (pp. 3-23).

⁹ Rashi commentary on Genesis 22:2 (http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8217/showrashi>true)

symbol of atonement for Israel.¹⁰ Indeed Rashi comments on the name *Jehovajireh* (which he considers as “The Lord will see”):

The Lord will see this binding to forgive Israel every year and to save them from retribution, in order that it will be said “on this day” in all future generations: “On the mountain of the Lord, Isaac’s ashes shall be seen, heaped up and standing for atonement.”¹¹

Any modern Jewish interpretation of the *Akedah* is soaked in the blood of the *Shoah* (catastrophe) The Gentile word for the *Shoah* is Holocaust, from the Greek meaning a “burnt sacrificial offering.” Leivick Halpern, the Yiddish poet and playwright who wrote *The Golem*, said in a speech in 1957

But most of all I am pursued by Isaac’s lying bound upon the altar, his looking at the raised knife till the angel of God announced that it was but a trial; and like a decree as well as a refrain my childish question still pursues me: “What would have happened had the angel come one moment too late?” It pursues me because I have seen – we all have seen – six million Isaacs lying under knives, under axes, in fires, and in gas chambers; and they were slaughtered. The angel of God did come too late.¹²

Much of modern Jewry rebels against the idea that a Jew should be a willing sacrifice for a greater good. The poet Yehuda Amichai writes:

We are all children of Abraham
but also grandchildren of Terah, Abraham’s father.
And maybe it’s high time the grandchildren
did unto their father as he did unto his
when he shattered his idols and images, his religion, his faith.
That too would be the beginning of a new religion.¹³

¹⁰ Spiegel, S. (1950, translated Goldin, J., 1993). *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: the Akedah*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

¹¹ Rashi commentary on Genesis 22:14

¹² Quoted in the introduction to his translation of *The Golem*. In Landis, J. C. (1972). *The great Jewish plays*. New York: Horizon Press

¹³ Amichai, Y., (1985, translated by Bloch, C., & Kronfeld, C. 2000). *Open closed open: Poems*. New York: Harcourt (part 19 of the poem *Gods change, prayers are here to stay*). This poem is referred to in: Boehm, O. (2007). *The binding of Isaac: A religious model of disobedience*. New York: T & T Clark International (p. 131).

In Jewish and Islamic tradition, Terah was a maker of idols. His son Abraham had rebelled against the beliefs of his father, destroyed the idols in his father's shop, and left the land of Ur to travel to Canaan.¹⁴

Variations provide a powerful way to interpret scripture. This is similar to the use of variations in music. The essence of a musical theme can be determined by hearing it transformed in different ways. The true meaning may be that which survives the changes. Or the meaning may be more fully understood when seen from different viewpoints. Hearing something repeated is pleasing to our memory but hearing it repeated in a different way is pleasing to our mind. The theme is presented, and then reconsidered in many different forms. At the end, we return to the original theme, knowing much more about it than we did before, happy to be home, happy to have traveled.

In *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard retells the story of the *Akedah* using four variations. The first of these begins like the story in Genesis:

It was early in the morning, Abraham arose betimes, he had the asses saddled, left his tent, and Isaac with him, but Sarah looked out of the window after them until they had passed down the valley and she could see them no more. They rode in silence for three days. On the morning of the fourth day Abraham said never a word, but he lifted up his eyes and saw Mount Moriah afar off. He left the young men behind and went on alone with Isaac beside him up to the mountain. But Abraham said to himself, "I will not conceal from Isaac whither this course leads him." He stood still, he laid his hand upon the head of Isaac in benediction, and Isaac bowed to receive the blessing. And Abraham's face was fatherliness, his look was mild, his speech encouraging. But Isaac was unable to understand him, his soul could not be exalted; he embraced Abraham's knees, he fell at his feet imploringly, he begged for his young life, for the fair hope of his future, he called to mind the joy in Abraham's house, he called to mind the sorrow and loneliness. Then Abraham lifted up the boy, he walked with him by his side, and his talk was full of comfort and exhortation. But Isaac could not understand him. He climbed Mount Moriah, but Isaac understood him not. Then for an instant he turned away from him, and when Isaac again saw Abraham's face it was changed, his glance was wild, his form was horror. He seized Isaac by the throat, threw him to the ground, and said, "Stupid boy, dost thou then suppose that I am thy father? I am an idolater. Dost thou

¹⁴ Qur'an 21:51-75.

suppose that this is God's bidding? No, it is my desire." Then Isaac trembled and cried out in his terror, "O God in heaven, have compassion upon me. God of Abraham, have compassion upon me. If I have no father upon earth, be Thou my father!" But Abraham in a low voice said to himself, "O Lord in heaven, I thank Thee. After all it is better for him to believe that I am a monster, rather than that he should lose faith in Thee."¹⁵

Kierkegaard goes on to propose that God needs no excuse, that faith is primary, and that there can be a "teleological suspension of the ethical."

The episode can also be interpreted as showing how we are incapable of understanding the "other," as considered in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.¹⁶ The other is any one not one's self. This concept derives from the uniqueness of the individual or, to use a term from cosmology, the singularity of the person. The other can be another person or it can be God, the absolute other. We have difficulty understanding the other, and communication with the other is tentative at best. Jacques Derrida expressed the idea of the other using a sentence in French that plays with meaning and grammar: *tout autre est tout autre* (every other is wholly other).¹⁷ *Tout* can be an adjective (every) or an adverb (wholly, completely); *autre* can be a pronoun (the other) or an adjective (other, different). These are verbal games but the underlying meaning is important. We must endeavor to understand the other, to try to see the world from the point of view of another person.

Both Kierkegaard and Derrida remark on Abraham's secrecy. According to Genesis, Abraham told neither his wife Sarah nor his son Isaac about his intentions. In the Hebrew commentaries, Isaac is sometimes described as aware of what will happen and acquiescent to the will of God. If so, Abraham's comment that "God will provide" is ironical both as made by Abraham and as accepted by Isaac. In the Qur'an version of the story the son (Ishmael) willingly agrees when asked by his father to be a sacrifice. If, as in Genesis, Abraham kept his intentions secret to himself and God, he forsook a

¹⁵ Kierkegaard, S., (1843, translated by Lowrie, W., 1941, reprinted 1994). *Fear and trembling. The Book on Adler*. New York: Everyman's Library (Knopf) (p 7)

¹⁶ Levinas, E. (1995, translated M. B. Smith, 1999). *Alterity and transcendence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁷ Derrida, J. (translated by Wills, D., 2008). *The gift of death: & Literature in secret*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press



Figure I.6. Rembrandt, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Etching and drypoint, 1655 (Wikimedia Commons).

basic principle of humanity: that we ask others if what we propose to do is right. The event that follows immediately upon the *Akedah* is the death of Sarah. Commentators have wondered whether she may have died of grief after realizing that her husband had been willing to slay her son.

The eyes of Abraham in Rembrandt's etching (Figure I.6) stare into space.¹⁸ He sees neither Isaac nor the angel. He knows no other. He understands neither the rights of his son nor the will of his God.

¹⁸ Shankman, S. (2010). *Other others*. New York: SUNY Press. (Introduction: Rembrandt's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, the suspended knife, and the face of the other).

A textual examination of the story in Genesis suggests that some of the verses (indicated by the asterisk) were interpolated by a later author. The main rationale is that this writer of these verses often uses the tetragrammaton (four letters), YHWH, *Jahveh* or *Jehovah* for God. The rest of the narrative generally uses, *Elohim*. Our present text of Genesis may therefore come from two writers, often call **J** and **E** (from the initials of their names for God). Other stylistic attributes also distinguish the two writers, but nothing is certain since **J** sometimes uses *Elohim* as well as *Jehovah*.¹⁹

The interpolated verses describe how the angel of the Lord stopped the sacrifice and blessed Abraham for his obedience. If these verses were indeed added by a later author, two possibilities exist for the original narrative. One is

that Abraham did indeed sacrifice his son. **J** might have removed that part of the story and substituted the verses about the angel. Another possibility proposed by Omri Boehm is that the original story went directly from the moment when Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac to the sacrifice of the ram. Abraham thus disobeyed God, refused to slaughter his son, and decided by himself to sacrifice the ram instead.²⁰ If so, **J**'s interpolation was not to remove the sacrifice but to hide the fact that Abraham had disobeyed God.

Boehm's interpretation fits with earlier stories of Abraham, particularly his argument with God about whether Sodom and Gomorrah should be destroyed: "Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?" God then agreed that Sodom should be spared if there were fifty righteous within the city. Abraham negotiated the number down to ten. Since even so few righteous were not found, Sodom was destroyed. Nevertheless, Abraham had made his point: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Indeed, God "remembered" and removed Lot and his family from the city before its destruction.²¹

The stories of Sodom and the *Akedah* suggest that both Abraham and God are learning what is right. In a way, we make our own God, or at least form our own understanding of God. We then attribute to him the best of our thoughts

¹⁹ See also the different creation stories in Eden (pp. 33-36)

²⁰ Boehm, O. (2007). *The binding of Isaac: A religious model of disobedience*. New York: T & T Clark International; Boehm, O. (2002). The binding of Isaac: an inner-biblical polemic on the question of "disobeying" a manifestly illegal order. *Vetus Testamentum*, 52, 1-12.

²¹ Genesis 18:20-33; 19:29.

and intentions: God of righteousness, God of justice. To quote again from Yehuda Amichai:

God created human beings,
human beings create prayers
that create the God that creates human beings.²²

Which of the many interpretations of the *Akedah* is true remains for us to decide. In this way scripture gives insight into what we think is right, what we can convince our fellows ought to be done, and what we understand as God's revelation to us. Scripture teaches us how to think about important things. Scripture does not tell us what to do, but makes us consider whether what we do is right.

²² Amichai, Y., (1985, translated by Bloch, C., & Kronfeld, C., 2000). *Open closed open: Poems*. New York: Harcourt (from *Gods change, prayers are here to stay*).