

A CLOSE READING OF GENESIS 22:1-19
(USING THE ESV)

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Observations from the Text

1. God is testing Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac (vv. 1-2).
2. God refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only son" and the son whom Abraham loves (v. 2).
3. Abraham waits until the next morning to begin carrying out God's command, and he rises "early in the morning" and immediately begins his obedient response (v. 3).
4. God tells Abraham that he will indicate to him on which mountain the offering of his son Isaac is to take place (v. 2).
5. Abraham takes Isaac and two other "young men" on the journey with him (v.3).
6. The journey to the place God tells Abraham to carry out the sacrifice takes about three days, or at least until "the third day" (v. 4).
7. When Abraham takes Isaac and leaves the other men, he tells them that both he and "the boy" will separate and then return to them (v. 5).
8. When the two set off, Abraham places the wood on Isaac's back while he carries "the fire and the knife" (v. 6).
9. Isaac notices the supplies for the burnt offering and notices that they have not brought a lamb, or any other animal, with them (v. 7).
10. Abraham answers that "God will provide" a lamb for himself, not "has provided" or "has already selected" (v. 8).
11. Abraham is the one who builds the alter and arranges the wood before binding Isaac and placing him on the alter (v. 9). It is not mentioned that Isaac participated.
12. Abraham gets to the point of raising the knife to slay his bound son upon the alter before he is stopped by the Angel (vv. 10-11).
13. The voice of "the angel of the LORD" resounds from heaven and calls Abraham's name twice (v. 11).
14. "The angel of the LORD" seems to be the LORD himself because he refers to God in the third person (v. 12).
15. God expresses that he now knows that Abraham fears him because Abraham has not withheld Isaac from him (v. 12). This seems to be the purpose of the test mentioned in verse 1.
16. God again refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only son" (v. 12).
17. God expresses that when Abraham was offering his son as a burnt offering, he was offering Isaac to God (v. 12).
18. Immediately after God speaks is when Abraham notices the "ram caught in a thicket" (v. 13).
19. Abraham seems to take the initiative and offer the ram on the alter instead of Isaac (v. 13). He does not seem to have received instructions from God to do so.
20. Abraham names or changes the name of that place to "the LORD will provide" (v. 14).
21. The narrator adds that a common saying known to his readers, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided," originated from this incident and Abraham's naming of the place (v. 14).
22. "The angel of the LORD" speaks again to Abraham, "a second time from heaven" during this episode (v. 15). This seems to take place after Abraham sacrifices the ram and names the place.

23. The LORD begins speaking by swearing an oath by himself (v. 16; cf. Hebrews 6:13; Is. In 45:23 the LORD also uses this self-oath language, although there is no direct connection in the context to this event, but to the calling of the nations to repentance with several references to both the calling of Israel and the creation of the cosmos).
24. The LORD bases his oath to bless and multiply Abraham on the act of obedience which Abraham has just committed by not withholding Isaac from God (v. 16).
25. God's blessing to Abraham seems to be tied to the multiplying of his offspring into a numerous and powerful nation (v. 17).
26. God promises to bring a blessing to "all the nations of the earth" through Abraham's offspring (v. 18). Abraham's blessing extends through his offspring to the whole earth.
27. At the end of his declaration, God echoes that the blessing to Abraham, his descendants, and the whole earth is based on Abraham act of obedience (v. 18).
28. The text mentions that Abraham returned to the men he and Isaac had earlier left (v. 19). It does not mention Isaac.
29. The group travels from there to Beersheba (v. 19).
30. Abraham returns to Beersheba, which is the place he settled at the end of chapter 21 and where his journey originated (v. 19).

Outline of the Text

Genesis 22:1-29

- I. Abraham's faithful response (1-8)
 - A. God commands the sacrifice of Isaac (1-2)
 1. In the land of Moriah (2)
 2. On a mountain God will show Abraham (2)
 - B. Journey to the place of sacrifice (3-8)
 1. Abraham and Isaac set out (3)
 - a. Early in the morning (3a)
 - b. Accompanied by two young men (3b)
 - c. Departed after cutting wood (3c)
 - d. Traveled to the place God told Abraham (3d)
 2. Abraham and Isaac continue alone (4-6)
 - a. Abraham sees the place in the distance (4)
 - b. Abraham tells his men to stay behind (5)
 - i. He will continue with Isaac
 - ii. He will return to them
 - c. Abraham and Isaac continue with necessary supplies (6)
 - i. Abraham places the wood on Isaac's back
 - ii. Abraham carries the fire and the knife
 3. Dialogue between Abraham and Isaac (7-8)
 - a. Isaac asks Abraham about the missing lamb (7)
 - i. Isaac addresses his father, who answers (7a)
 - ii. Isaac notices the wood and the fire (7b)
 - iii. Isaac asks where is the lamb (7c)

- b. Abraham answers that God will provide a lamb for himself (8)
- II. Abraham's act of obedience (9-14)
 - A. Upon arrival, Abraham prepares the sacrifice Isaac (9)
 - 1. The two arrive at the place God told Abraham (9a)
 - 2. He builds an alter (9b)
 - 3. He arranges the wood on the alter (9c)
 - 4. He binds Isaac and lays him on the alter (9d)
 - 5. He takes the knife to kill Isaac (10)
 - B. The LORD saves Isaac (11-13)
 - 1. God stills Abraham's hand just as he is about to kill Isaac (11)
 - A. The angel of the LORD calls out from heaven (11a)
 - B. Abraham responds to the LORD's voice (11b)
 - 2. God orders Abraham not to harm Isaac (12a)
 - 3. God tells Abraham he has passed the test (12b-c)
 - A. Abraham has demonstrated his fear of God (12b)
 - B. Abraham has not withheld his son from God (12c)
 - 4. Abraham offers a sacrifice in place of Isaac (13)
 - A. He finds a ram caught in a thicket (13a)
 - B. He offers the ram in Isaac's place (13b)
 - C. Abraham renames the place where this event took place (14)
 - 1. He calls the place, "the LORD will provide." (14a)
 - 2. The name change later leads to a common saying (14b)
- III. The Result of Abraham's obedience (15-19)
 - A. The angel of the LORD vows to bless Abraham (15-18)
 - 1. He swears by himself (16)
 - 2. He will bless Abraham (17a)
 - 3. He makes promises concerning Abraham's offspring (17-18)
 - a. Abraham's offspring will be numerous (17b)
 - i. As the stars in the heavens (17b)
 - ii. As the sand on the seashore (17b)
 - b. Abraham's offspring will be a mighty nation (17c)
 - c. Abraham's descendants will be a priestly nation (18)
 - i. They will bring a blessing to all nations (18a)
 - ii. Because of Abraham's obedience (18b)
 - B. Abraham departs (19)
 - 1. He rejoins his young men (19a)
 - 2. They all return to Beersheba (19b)

Discussion of the Text

In Genesis 22:1-19, God commands Abraham to offer Isaac, the child of promise, to him as a burnt offering. This is a passage is often difficult for bible-believers to understand as well as explain. It is also difficult for skeptics because it is one that Christians are confronted with from time to time in an attempt to demonstrate some inconsistency in the Bible. The big question surrounding the difficulty for believers and skeptics alike is, why is God demanding a human sacrifice, especially in light of the later prohibitions in Leviticus 18:21 and Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10? Some even suggest that God requests a child sacrifice. However, Isaac is clearly at least a teenager as he is able to carry the firewood for the offering (Gen. 22:6). In the story, the fact is that God does not accept a human sacrifice. Isaac lives to a ripe old age (Gen. 35:28). What then is God's purpose in asking Abraham to sacrifice his son?

The passage refers to this as a test (Gen. 22:1). God is testing Abraham, and God makes it clear that Abraham passes the test by not withholding his son Isaac from God (vv. 12; 16-18). What role does Isaac play in the unfolding of this story, or how does this experience benefit Isaac? Isaac benefits from the experience by personally encountering the God of his father and gaining a tangible experience in the passing of the covenant promise. Since we know from the passage itself that it was not God's desire to receive a human sacrifice, what was God's intention in testing Abraham's faith in this particular way? Why did he ask Abraham for such an outrageous and difficult display of faithfulness?

In ascertaining the heart of God in this passage, it is helpful to remember that Abraham is not merely a random person whom God is asking to do this. Abraham is God's friend (James 2:23), and he has been walking with God for many years at this point. In almost every chapter from the beginning of the Abraham story in chapter 12 to now in chapter 22, God has spoken to and made covenant promises to Abraham. God progressively adds details to those covenant promises, and here after Abraham attempts to obey God by sacrificing Isaac is no different. After Abraham's act of obedience, the LORD adds, "And in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (v. 18). In chapter 18, Abraham even pleads with God on behalf of any righteous people that might dwell in Sodom (vv. 22-33). So it is clear, even prior to this episode, that Abraham is increasingly recognizing the priestly role to which he and his offspring have been appointed. Abraham probably understands God's extremely difficult request in the light of his and Isaac's special status with God and special role among humanity.

Surprisingly, the text offers readers no account of Abraham's inner struggle as he receives the command to sacrifice his son Isaac and as he attempts to carry out the task. Why is this, and can this observation offer any clues in determining the purpose of the event described therein? The absence of a description of Abraham's struggle with God's request does not mean there was not one. Description of Abraham's inner turmoil could have been omitted because of his firm, unwavering faith and full confidence in God at this point in his life, but it could also have been omitted because it was too intense to describe in any concise yet meaningful way. We cannot answer this question on this side of

eternity, but what we can know for certain is that it is relevant to the author's purpose for telling the story. The author presents a serious transaction between God and Abraham using a just-the-details approach. This literary technique creates an ambiance of formality and sacredness, revealing to the reader what Abraham knows, that a significant priestly event is taking place in human history. God was continuing to establish the covenant which will in turn bless all nations. In a similar situation some 2,000 years later, God would allow his Son to be sacrificed on a cross of wood to purchase forgiveness for the sins of the whole world.

As mentioned previously, the reason given in the text for God's unique demand in Genesis 22 is as a test for Abraham, presumably of his faithfulness to God. God is the examiner, and the examiner is always silent during a test. So, God is silent during the unfolding events of this episode, from the time the command is given to the time the Lord prevents Abraham from slaying his son. The examinee is often filled with an overwhelming number of simultaneous thoughts and feelings, depending on the situation, but is generally always in deep concentration. Abraham was probably highly focused on the difficult situation in which God had placed him.

The heart of God and significance of this event.

1. It shows Abraham's priestly role.
2. It highlights the blessing coming through Abraham to all nations.
3. It implicitly assumes the promise of offspring through Sarah, which God made to Abraham.
4. It provides a prophetic picture of what that great future blessing will look like.