

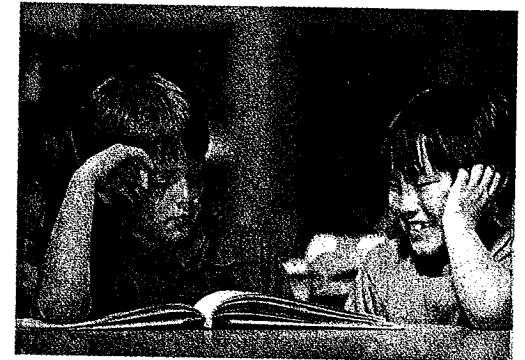
## The Testing of Abraham

**T**ake your son, your only son . . . whom you love, and . . . offer him . . . as a burnt offering.”

Imagine an audience of children, dressed in their Sunday best and crowded around little tables in the classroom. It's church school and they are eager, as young children are, to please their teacher, who is you. And your assignment this morning is to tell them the Genesis 22 story. You aren't even sure what to call it: The testing of Abraham? The sacrifice of Isaac? The strange demands of God? Your task is daunting.

Perhaps you can get this over with quickly, without too many questions, and fill up the rest of the Sunday school hour with snack time, maybe some indoor games. Perhaps the children will *not* be so attentive today. It has happened before. So you launch right in with an eye on the clock. You clear your throat, and begin . . .

Abraham took his son Isaac where he was told, as God commanded. When they got to the mountaintop, Abraham built an altar, which was used back then as a place for worshiping God with animal sacrifices (we don't do this today). At the last minute an angel stopped him. He sacrificed a ram, which is a boy sheep, on the altar. God was happy and they all got to go back home.



The children sit quiet, puzzled. One little boy raises his hand and asks, "How old was Isaac?" You aren't sure—the text doesn't say—but you know that for these children the boy Isaac is exactly their age. Another hand comes up: "Why did God want the father to kill anyone, especially his own son?" You glance at the laminated poster of the Ten Commandments on the wall and clear your throat again. "Well, Abraham didn't kill Isaac now, did he? God didn't want that."

And then the new girl, the shy one who observes everything but says little, murmurs: "I wonder what Isaac was thinking." It's so quiet the class overhears her. They wonder now, too, because what if that wasn't Isaac long ago, but them today? What if God told Daddy or Mama to kill them? What if Daddy or Mama actually would?

"Throughout human history, children have been used, against their will, in adults' attempts to satisfy or placate their gods."—Donald Capps, *The Child's Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 78.

Next year, you vow, if there is a next year, you will skip this lesson in Sunday school.

### A Disturbing Passage

Because the passage is so difficult and so many interpretive decisions must be made, we will limit ourselves to two tasks. First we will look closely at the structure of the text itself, allowing the text to say what it has to say to us. Second we will look to other voices in the biblical canon. Genesis 22, while it is a unique text, does not stand alone. We can bring in other passages to stand next to it, speak to it, and speak to us in our perplexity.

The passage is structured with symmetry and artistry. An emphatic summons is issued three times: "Abraham!" (v. 1); "Father!" (v. 7); "Abraham, Abraham!" (v. 11). The response to each call is the same: "Here I am." Throughout the episode Abraham is grounded in his reply and ready to act.

The first call is from God, who gives the chilling command (v. 2). It is not simply Isaac, but "your only son, whom you love" who is the object of the command. It is a careful and excruciating description: Not that one, not the one you don't like, but this one, Isaac, who is yours

The Hebrew word for "burnt sacrifice" (v. 2, NRSV) connotes a sacrifice consumed by fire, which is the definition of our English word "holocaust."

alone. Isaac is to be offered up to God at a faraway place, three days' journey from Beersheba. The land of Moriah is unknown; in 2 Chronicles 3:1 the mountain is identified with Jerusalem. The place is known only to God, who will show Abraham where to make the sacrifice.

The events of verse 3 are told with no emotional content whatsoever. We are given no insight as to Abraham's state of mind. Instead we have a terse picture of father Abraham simply performing the necessary tasks: rising early, saddling the donkey, cutting the wood, taking Isaac and two servants with him. The wooden description matches his automatic movements. He speaks to no one. The dark command is dumbfounding.

The journey is reported without commentary. All we know is there are three days, but days of what? Grim resignation? Reflection? Silence? Tears? Idle chatter? In such a crisis, what does one say to one's son? To God? The hiatus is a mystery. Yet we know that, when the third day arrives, Abraham is able to speak with authority. He leaves his servants behind with instructions and an agenda.

### God Will Provide

While the servants are to wait, he and Isaac will go off to worship and then they, father and son, will return: "We will come back to you" (v. 5). Given verse 2, this assurance is extraordinary. On one hand Abraham does not want the servants to witness the sacrifice; on the other hand he witnesses to them of his son's safekeeping and homecoming. There is no hint of duplicity in his language either here or elsewhere in the passage. He is able with confidence to speak of the future.

They trudge along, Isaac carrying the wood while Abraham carries the fire and the knife. Isaac's age is not given, but he is old enough to tote wood to make an altar, and to know what their mission is. He calls "Father!" and asks the whereabouts of the lamb, given all the other implements for a burnt offering. It is the second time Abraham has been summoned. It is the only time he answers both with action and with speech.

He stops and says to his son, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering" (v. 8). This is the key verse of the narrative. It is

"... in our present text, unexpected things happen. Only now do we see how serious faith is. This narrative shows that we do not have a tale of origins, but a story of anguished faith."—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 185.

simple and direct. There is God, there is to be a burnt offering, and there will be a lamb. The verb “provide” is the indispensable action.

“Provide” is an unusual translation of the Hebrew “to see.” The sense is best rendered as the Latin *pro-vidéo*: to see before, to see to, to see about. In spite of the dark demand, God himself will see to it. Providence means just this. Abraham trusts that the inscrutable test (v. 1) is not the last word. God will see to that. Isaac looks to his father, and Abraham looks to God.

Abraham’s response, given in this decisive verse 8, comes from deep inside the mystery of faith. His words are the only appropriate words to give to his son, because they are true. He is not a man of blind obedience or passivity. He is a person who trusts. As his son trusts in him, so Abraham trusts in God. The assurance of the son is paralleled in the assurance of the father. “So the two of them walked on together.” Abraham’s actions mirror his speech. Together they will go and see how God will provide.

### The Sacrifice Is Prepared

Because we are heartened by Abraham’s words in verses 5 and 8, we are not prepared for the ominous undertaking on the mountaintop. Father and son arrive at the place God has shown. With verse 9, the terse narration of automatic action resumes. Grimly Abraham assembles the altar. Carefully he stacks the wood for the pyre. Silently Isaac is bound for slaughter and laid on the wood. He will soon become the burnt offering. The horror of the scene peaks as Abraham reaches out to take the knife (v. 10).

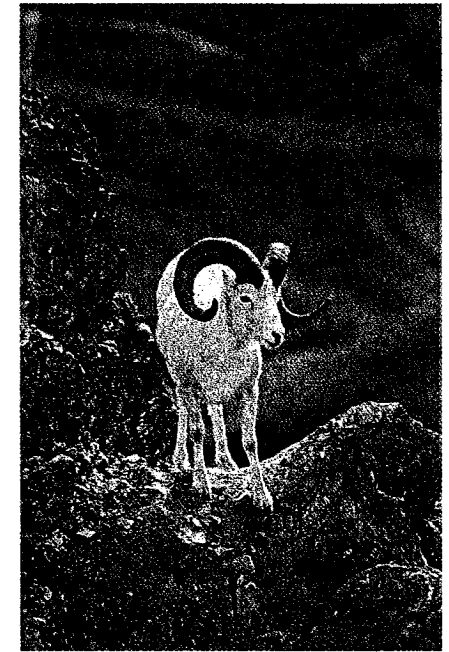
Is he to drive a knife through his own son, the child of the promise and his old age? Is he to kill another human being? Is he to slaughter the boy with a bloody

knife, like an animal? Can there be anything more terrible?

The angel, which is the voice of God, calls him at this perilous moment. It is a wonder that Abraham can hear at all, with the blood pounding through his ears and the thought of his son’s blood pouring over the pyre. For the third time he answers, “Here I am.” He is told to stop; this second command overrides the first. “Don’t touch

him!” Looking up, he sees that a ram is caught in a thicket. This is the creature provided him by God.

The ram is sacrificed and burned. The narrator makes it clear that it was to be either the child of God’s promise or the ram of God’s providing. Abraham “offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son” (v. 13). He is still to worship, as commanded in verse 2. But his sacrifice was made just before. As the voice says, “You have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” In the response to God’s inscrutable demand, Abraham has withheld nothing, not even the son he loves. Gladly would he have given his own life instead. But this was not commanded.



“The LORD will provide . . .”

### Put to the Test

Does Abraham fear God? The test, as in the book of Job, is a real one. No one knows for sure. The future is open-ended and the results cannot be determined beforehand. Between the command of verse 2 (“Take your son and go”) and the second command of verse 12 (“Do not do anything to him”), real awareness happens and real movement occurs. God did not know what Abraham would do; God says, “Now I know.” And with this knowledge comes action. God swears an oath (v. 16) binding God to the promise.

Abraham will become a mighty nation, his offspring will possess the land, and through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed (vv. 17, 18). The threefold promise stands, with Isaac still its heir (see 21:12). The drama is over and the crisis is resolved.

In a very important sense, this text is unique in the biblical canon. Only in the book of Job do we find such testing of an individual by God, testing of such momentous and terrible proportions.

“To assert that God *provides* requires a faith as intense as does the conviction that God *tests*.”—Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 191.

“This is Hebrew story-telling at its masterly best. It is not the kind of story-telling we are used to from modern writers, but even across the centuries and in English translation it can grip us so that the knuckles of our clenched hands show white, and move us to the most intense of emotions.”—John C. L. Gibson, *Genesis*, vol. 2, Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 112.

Like Abraham, Job is a friend of God. He too is prepared to trust the God who gives and the God who takes away (Job 1:21). Job's poetry asks about faith: the tension between the cost and the joy of faithfulness. He feels the cost acutely in both the presence of his friends and the absence of God. But his test differs from Abraham's. Job's children are taken from him but not by his own hand. Nowhere is Job commanded to slaughter his own.

While God permits the testing of Job, the torment is inflicted by Satan. In a sense the testing is indirect; this was Satan's idea. What does the canon say about the direct testing of God's people?

First off, nowhere is child sacrifice condoned in the Bible. Pagan worshippers made human sacrifices to propitiate the gods, especially the god Molech in Moabite rites. In contrast to their pagan neighbors, such sacrifice was abhorrent to Israel (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5). Israel was certainly guilty of mimicking the surrounding nations, and of offering human sacrifice in dire straits (cf. Jer 7:31; 32:35). For this they were condemned. God does not test in this way, with the important exception of Abraham.

"The story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac may rest upon a rather common and widespread motif in which a hero, often at the command of a deity, is forced to sacrifice his own son or daughter."—John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 261.

One might argue that Abraham, of course, did not know the Levitical law. He was of pagan stock; his was a world littered with pagan gods who must be appeased. He might have thought at first, with dismay but not surprise, that his God was similar to his neighbors' with respect to child sacrifice.

The difference is that his God initiated the action, not Abraham. And more importantly, both the narrator and the reader know the horror of the command. Indeed the absurdity is the very point. This God was bound to Abraham in promise; now the child of promise is to be bound and slain. Who is this strange God? The biblical record affirms that this is a God who tests.

### Testing and Providing

The testing of God is known in the wilderness wanderings. "[God] fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good"

(Deut. 8:16). There are important parallels between the teaching in Deuteronomy and the testing of Abraham. Both Abraham and the Israelite nation are "new" to God. In both cases God wants to "know" their hearts (cf. Deut. 8:2). God provides for Abraham with the ram, and for the Israelites with the manna. Genuine movement occurs in each narrative. God moves the promise into the future with Isaac. God moves the Israelites into the promised land. The same God who tests is the one who does good in the end.

The testing/tempting of God is also known in the Lord's Prayer. "Lead us not into temptation," Jesus instructs us to ask (Matt. 6:13; Luke 11:4). We are praying that God spare us tests we cannot bear: the test of Abraham on Mount Moriah, or of forty years wandering in the desert. Few of us could respond as Abraham did. Even fewer are asked to obey the dark command, for it would drive us to despair. But the Lord's Prayer likewise links the God who tests with the God who provides. We can ask with assurance for bread, the daily ration of manna, trusting that God will see to it. The same God who makes inscrutable tests is known in gracious providing. The Lord's Prayer holds this tension together, whether we are fully aware of it or not as we pray.

### Faith, the Assurance of Things Hoped For

The human tendency is to break this tension. Either God tests or God provides, but not both. In bitterness and despair, those without hope see only the God who tests. In complacency and self-satisfaction, those who feel blessed see only the God who provides. This God is a great cosmic vending machine who spits out the good life in exchange for our tokens. It is a level-headed, businesslike, rational approach to religion which makes God a player in a market economy.



#### Want to Know More?

**About providence?** See Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, revised ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 166-91; Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 80-90.

**About child sacrifices in ancient times?** See George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. R-Z (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 153-54.

**About suffering and the Jewish faith?** See Stephen R. Haynes, *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

But faith is not a business deal. It is not a means to an end. The hard work of faith is to embrace the tension. And this is what Abraham does at Moriah. This is what Jesus does at Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

Finally, Genesis 22 cannot be separated from an earlier narrative, the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. In the movement from providing to testing and back again, the two episodes stand as brackets around a long, eventful life. Abraham's faithfulness works itself out in a variety of ways. Elsewhere he raises questions and objections to God's plan (18:22-33). In the bracketing episodes, Abraham is silent.

The Abraham cycle begins and ends with the threefold promise. The oath of 22:17, 18 echoes what God promised in 12:2, 3. God's promise to Abraham does not change; instead it is renewed and emphasized. Genesis 22 brings the narrative to a dramatic and perplexing resolution. This marks the last time God speaks to Abraham. We might wish it to end differently, but it does not.

The connections between Genesis 22 and Genesis 12 are many. In a Hebrew construction unique in the Old Testament, God says in effect: "Get going" (12:2; 22:2). God calls Abraham to take leave of the most important thing: the land of his father (12:1), the child of his old age (22:2, compare 21:2). In both cases God's command is mysterious, enigmatic, impenetrable. The ultimate destination is withheld. Nevertheless, although he is silent, Abraham's re-

sponse is full and immediate (12:4; 22:3). Both episodes show the great courage of Abraham, which is based purely on his faith.

As you pass out the juice and cookies, you overhear three of the children talking. "Hey. Didn't God have a son? Didn't God give up Jesus on the cross?"

"Yeah, but you know how *that* ended. He got raised from the dead!"

"Yeah! I can't wait till Easter! Hey, you want that cookie?" You grin and ruffle his hair. And you decide you just might make it as a Sunday school teacher, after all.



## Questions for Reflection

1. This may be the most troubling passage in scripture. Yet it remains, and Abraham is applauded as a shining example of faith. What would you have done if you were in Abraham's predicament? Why has this troubling story remained a part of our religious tradition?
2. What do we mean when we talk about the providence of God? Does God know or cause everything that happens? Why or why not?
3. If you had to present this story to a children's Sunday school class, how would you tell it? How would you answer their questions?
4. Some see this story as support for the belief that sometimes God calls individuals (or whole nations) to be a witness, and that being a witness may include suffering or sacrifice. How do you respond to that belief?

