

'Here-I-am': The entrusting of Abraham (Genesis 22.1-19) Neil Millar

This reading is surely one of the most confronting in all of Scripture. Its Jewish title is 'the Akedah' (the binding of Isaac), and I spent a year studying this text at St Mark's. It fascinates and baffles me, and over the years, philosophers, poets, preachers, painters, singers and actors have all struggled with its meaning... Questions abound, and so too interpretations. Why did God test Abraham? The *Book of Jubilees*, written two centuries before the birth of Jesus, connects this testing to the testing of Job. *Jubilees* contends that a dark angel called Mastema questioned God as to whether Abraham's faith was as strong as it seemed. This instigated a testing, just as Satan's question about Job led to his ordeal. According to *Jubilees*, Mastema and the angel Gabriel accompany Abraham and Isaac up the mountain, and eventually Gabriel intervened to save the boy. What did Abraham think of God's request? Some rabbis writing in the Talmud and Midrash hold that Abraham is stoic and obedient. Others contend he was wracked with guilt and washed over with distress. How does Isaac understand what's happening? Does he resist or does he too have faith? Some rabbis submit that he actually asked to be bound so as not to flinch and ruin the sacrifice. Wow!

The narrative itself is lean and finely crafted. It conveys so much, and tantalisingly, so much is left unsaid – not a word about motives and feelings, for example. These gaps invite reflection, they draw us in, and maybe that's the point. So, what to make of it?

In the opening verse we're told (though Abraham wasn't) that this is a test. That's important – it signifies that what's happening here is part of a bigger story with Abraham. From six previous encounters we know that he's been on a learning journey concerning his trust in God. In this, their seventh interaction, God homes in on his Achilles' heel – anxiety about his name (his future). There have been many lessons, ups and downs in his faltering growth. Is he ready for his final examination? This test (shocking as it seems) needs to be interpreted in light of his continuing faith formation.

'Abraham!' (1). For the first time, God calls him by his new name: *'Avraham*, meaning literally, *'Father of Multitudes'*. This is a test of Abraham's name (identity). Remembering the covenant through which his name was given, can Abraham trust the God of promise (that he will be the father of multitudes) if it means ceasing to be Father of (giving up) Isaac? Abraham responds initially, without hesitation (1) – *'hineni'*, which means: *here-I-am wholeheartedly at your disposal; as you named me!*

And then, the bombshell: *'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering...'* There is no question about the significance of the request that is being made here – your son, your only son *Isaac*, whom you love... But how could God ask this? It seems so cruel and contradictory. One point often missed in English translations, is that the Hebrew actually says, *'Take, please [na'], your son...'* I.e. God asks – 'please'. For sure, the request is horrible, but it is a request, not a command.

Well, there are many who simply cut off at this point, refusing to engage further – 'It's irrational and unreasonable', they say 'if that's God, that's it for me.' But properly understood, the request is not as illogical as it sounds, claims Genesis scholar Leon Kass (2003.337). *Au contraire*, it makes sense if we see it not as an isolated incident but in the fuller context. When God first addressed Abram, it was with a command *and a promise* – to make a great nation and bless and make his name great (Gen 12.1-3). Did Abraham obey because he was God-honouring or just ambitious – greedy for fame, wealth and a future? Despite ensuing interactions this question remains unanswered. But what about when this vital piece of the promise has eventually come to pass, when he finally has his son and heir?

Only now can Abraham be tested to demonstrate in deed what he holds first in his soul: ambitious desire for the promised blessings or humble reverence for the One who calls and promises. If it was his ambition that initially drew Abra(ha)m to answer God's call, has it been educated and subsumed in awe? (Kass 2003.337, my emphasis)

So, here is an intelligible way of framing what implicitly is being asked of him: Abraham, will you walk reverently and wholeheartedly before me even if it means

sacrificing the most significant thing you've received for displaying such faithfulness – your long-awaited son? Will you stand with me and for me without the blessing? As the story imagines this event of radical testing, it cuts to the heart of Abraham's motivation and lays bare the character of his faith. And, understood like this, it does have resonances with the Job story, including that God is placing a lot of trust in Abraham (as with Job) – that he *will* 'keep faith'.

Reading on, it seems that God's trust in Abraham will be vindicated. In the morning, quietly and methodically, Abraham makes preparation and departs (3-4). It's a three-day journey, there's plenty of time for reflection, and I imagine him recalling God's earlier reassurance: *'it is through Isaac that offspring shall be called for you'* (21.12). But, how does this fit with what's being asked now? Is it really God's voice he's hearing? This is surely a crisis, and yet, these narratives rarely speak about the inner life. Not because it doesn't matter, Kass suggests, but *'because true character is best displayed in action'*. Whatever is going on within, Abraham proceeds quietly, and that is telling!!

As they draw near the place, Abraham directs the helpers to wait while he and the boy go ahead: *'we will go over there; we will worship, and then we will return'*, he says to them (5). We will return. Hmmm, is this a sign of his faith? Father and son walk on, Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham the fire and knife. *Umm, Dad*, Isaac says (a little nervously?). [*Hineni*], *'Here-I-am, my son'*. *The fire and the wood we have, but where is the lamb for the offering?? 'God himself will provide [lit. will see-for-himself] the lamb... my son.'* Is this just fatherly shielding; pious whistling in the dark, or another sign of his faith?

They continue up the mountain – *'walking together'* (I am always moved by this image – their shared vulnerability; father and son entrusting themselves to each other, and God). And so, the story moves to its climax. With slow dignity, Abraham *builds* the altar, *laid* the wood, *bound* Isaac (how is beyond me), *laid* him upon the wood, *stretched forth* his hand, took the knife (think of the time it all took)... and, at the last moment, *'Abraham! Abraham!'* *'Here-I-am [Henini]'*. *'Don't lay your hand on*

the boy... *for now I know that you fear God, since you've not withheld your son, your only son, from me'* (11-2).

At that moment of dramatic relief, release, and realisation, Abraham looks up and *behold*, behind him, a ram caught in a thicket (there's a lot of *looking* and in this story –observing and *perceiving*). The ram is sacrificed 'instead of his son'. Interestingly, it's a ram (i.e. a *father* sheep) not a lamb that's provided. What do you make of that? Abraham names the place, '*The Lord will provide*' [lit. the Lord **sees** or sees to it]. It's a name that reflects what Abraham had hoped and has now seen confirmed (God's faithful *seeing* to the promise).

Read psychologically, this whole event could seem to be a needlessly traumatising drama precipitated by an insecure deity, who required an heroic display of faith to prop up his own sense of significance. But read theologically, as a narrative of faith formation, this story insists on the significance of Abraham's unconditional trust in God and God's trust in Abraham too. In a sense this has been a shared ordeal that strengthens rather than destroys their relationship.

And it's at this point that the covenant promise is reaffirmed – 'offspring as numerous as the stars...' (17). After which, '*Abraham returned to his young men ...*' Abraham? What about Isaac? This story continues to mystify to the very end. For me, a father anguishing about a struggling son, I take this as a reminder that, while seeking to exercise all care, I must entrust him to the God-who-sees. In the end, isn't this what we can do with children, and indeed, our own lives – relinquish them in faith?

References: Kass, Leon R (2013) *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis*, University of Chicago Press.