

The background of the cover is an aerial photograph of a dry, hilly landscape. The terrain is characterized by brown, eroded hills and valleys, with a prominent dirt road winding through the lower portion of the scene. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights, creating a sense of depth and texture. The overall color palette is dominated by earthy browns and tans.

The Aqedah

Theology and a Chiasm

Abraham the Man who Bridged
the Terror of God and Humanity with Faith

Phillip Michael Garner

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(Theology and a Chiasm)

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Abraham is Tested / Isaac is Bound

Genesis 22:1-19

I've lived with this story most of my life. It's been immortalized in my mind since the day of a Sunday School lesson. I was five years old or less when my dear Sunday school teacher placed on the blue flannel board, for my young eyes to see, sketches of Abraham with his knife, and Isaac bound laying on a stone altar. She said Abraham was a man of faith because he was willing to sacrifice his son to the Lord. I thought she must be mad. I refused to believe she knew what she was talking about because this didn't (in my young mind) have anything to do with the Jesus who loves children of all nations and all shades of flesh.

I will be honoring a canonical reading aligned with the understanding of the writer of Hebrews in my interpretation of the Aqedah (Genesis 22). The author of Hebrews considered Abraham's obedience to the call to sacrifice his son to be a testament to Abraham's belief in God's power to resurrect Isaac in order for God to fulfill his promises. Nevertheless, the issues surrounding God's call for Abraham to sacrifice his son are complex and troubling.

"After these things ..." is a reoccurring signal to the reader to consider the accumulative experiences of Abraham and how these reflect the growing nature of his relationship with God.

The unit of scripture begins with a single line of introduction from the narrator, "After these things God tested Abraham". This opening sentence requires the reader to consider the relationship of God and Abraham from Genesis 11:26 to the moment this first line of Abraham's testing is read. Abraham's test cannot be disconnected from the carefully crafted stories that prepared Abraham to be tested. The covenants in chapters 12, 15, and 17, along with each appearance of the messenger of Yahweh (the theophanies), and the relational dynamic between God and Abraham, are essential for any attempt to grasp the existential reality of Abraham's relationship with the Yahweh. An intimate knowledge of these stories must precede before any reader will begin to grasp or understand the grandeur of this frightening story

God calls Abraham's name, once, and immediately Abraham responds with a Hebrew exclamative translated as "I am here". Without explanation or warning God speaks and Abraham hears. To dissent or contest God's intentions would be consistent with Abraham's practice. Does Abraham sense something greater than his

understanding or imagination is entering the world? God calls Abraham to do the unimaginable, it is not what a reader of the story to this point would expect.

Some have proposed the story is primarily a polemic against child sacrifice. The thought being that Elohim calling Abraham to sacrifice his son is only a voice representative of an alleged cultural expectation of the times and is not Yahweh. This conflicts with a canonical reading and presents a real problem with Abraham's knowing the voice of God. This also conflicts with the events that precede the narrator's initial line "After these things God tested Abraham". Likewise, in verses 16,17, and 18, Abraham is commended by Yahweh for his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the promises he has been given are reaffirmed by Yahweh with an oath. Also, Yahweh affirms that Abrahams' obedience was received as an affirmation that Abraham feared God (Genesis 22:12).

Use of the name Yahweh is reflective of intimacy, whereas use of the word Elohim offers the story a distancing of human and divine. It is suggestive of the transcendence of God that is beyond imagination. We are instructed to remember that God is always more than we can articulate. Yet, in this story it invites the reader to think deeper about the existential reality and uniqueness of Abraham, of his relationship with God, the revelation of monotheism, and what value the story offers the attentive reader.

My objective in this essay is to demonstrate the value of Genesis 22 as a piece of scripture that makes us shudder in the presence of the grandeur that it holds, a grandeur that is concealed from the unimaginative. Those unwilling to wrestle with God to seek the meaning in this text will miss the experience of reaching for the text's boundaries that touch the numinous. Note the crafting of the story for conciseness in the chiasm below.

***The full chiasm is on the next page. It is important to view a chiasm on a single page.

A Corollary / Analogous Literary Chiasm of Genesis 22:1-19

Vs. 1a God tests Abraham

Vs. 1b and c God's voice calls Abraham

Vs. 2-4 God's voice commands Abraham to offer up the son through whom the promise is to come. Abraham prepares to lose the son through which the promise is to come.

Vs. 5- 6 Isaac bearing not promise but the wood for the burnt offering of himself

Vs. 7 Isaac asks where; without Isaac where is the promise?

Vs. 8 Abraham declares God will provide the sacrifice

Vs. 9 Isaac bound upon the altar

Vs. 10 Then Abraham put forth

his hand and took the

knife to slay his son.

Vs. 11-12 Isaac delivered from the altar.

Vs. 13-14 The ram is provided and Abraham names the place,

“The LORD will provide.”

Vs. 15- 16 a-c The angel of the LORD calls a 2nd time - the promise is confirmed with an oath.

Vs. 16 d,e, and f Because you have not withheld your son

Vs. 17 The promise is reaffirmed that Abraham's descendants will be as the stars of heaven.

Vs. 18 Abraham obeyed the voice of God

Vs. 19 Abraham's test is completed

I often approach these rich stories of scripture with the thought that those who recorded these stories for us did so in an ultimately liberating way. They anticipated our questions and crafted stories in a way that required our questions be subject to the genius in the story's literary presentation, structure and limits. The stories also must be entered into in an experiential way, a way that ignites the pathos of the soul to live the story through a careful, insightful, and spiritual reading.

Abraham's Life with God

In this story, relationship is the keyword for understanding the dynamics of the interaction taking place between God and Abraham. It is a relationship between an omnific God, and a man who has experienced God as a friend. Abraham is chosen, like the prophets who come after him, chosen to be one with their message; the messenger and the message are one. Abraham is called a prophet *navi* (Genesis 20:7) yet he is more than a prophet. He is incorporated into the revelation of God to humanity, he is both recipient and participant; the story is greater than Abraham, and I think Abraham has learned this prior to 'take now'.

The revelation of monotheism given to Abraham of a self-sustaining omnific being, creator of all, desiring to be known, is the essence of Abraham's life and experience. The proof of a revelation is always in the conviction that is revealed over a lifetime of immovable faith. The *Aqedah* is the defining moment of Abraham's faith and conviction. Abraham had an unequivocal relationship with God; his trust in God was built through his life and established by the revelation he received that was born of his experiences and confirmed in the *Aqedah*.

Why doesn't Abraham resist or question the call of God to sacrifice Isaac? There seems to be only one immediate answer to this question. Abraham knew God's voice so well that even a call to sacrifice Isaac had to have some purpose or meaning beyond Abraham's immediate understanding. Yet, Abraham had questioned God over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, this call to sacrifice Isaac is of another nature, it defies reason and conflicts with God's promises and mercy. Did Abraham sense some grandeur, some purpose, some challenge to his soul that defied the ethics of his moral and religious conscience. Who is this man who like Enoch walks with God?

We receive a carefully crafted piece of literature. Abraham had lived a life based on faith and promises in relationship with the infinite one. Surely, Abraham contemplated on life, meaning, and his encounters with the deity. We judge the *Aqedah* from a distance. Abraham lived through it with faith, in a unity of spirit unknown to anyone else. His role in humanity is uniquely positioned to prepare the world for the nearness of God when the barrier of a theophany, of a messenger, would

be broken, and lift the veil of death and expose its impotency before the Lord; this is the faith of Abraham.

We know that Abraham had experienced in his own body, and witnessed in the body of his wife, a foreshadowing of resurrection. Sarah's post-menopausal condition was reversed, and even her breasts perked up ready to nourish the son of promise. Apparently, Abraham's age had given way to impotence for his condition was described as already dead by Paul in his epistle to the Romans.

It is notable that Paul in Romans 4 pairs Abraham's faith to overcome the death in his and Sarah's bodies with the faith of those who would believe that God resurrected Jesus from the dead.

For Isaac there was deliverance, but not resurrection. The *aqedah* was Abraham's test, it is of a different nature, Abraham's unique role and closeness to God was to pale in the revelation of God yet to come. Abraham needed to be reminded that the deity, the infinite one, is always more than the promises for they can die and be resurrected in another. Fear and trembling is shielded behind a son yet to come (Jesus), a promise yet unimagined by humanity who is only receiving the revelation of monotheism through Abraham. There is another revelation of God yet to come, and God knows he will see his son slain by humanity in the process.

The revelation of God to Abraham is that God enters history, works in history, and fulfills his will in history regardless of those who oppose him. The revelation of God to Abraham includes that God's promises are not subject to the power of either death or time. Further, God affirms in the symbolism of his covenant ceremony, that his promises are both irrevocable and linked to God's very nature as part of who God is.

Continuing Reflection

During the course of his life, Abraham learns when he meets Melchizedek, that God is honored by, and honors those, who pursue righteousness and peace. In the story of Lot, Abraham learns that God is merciful, but humanity is so corrupted that the creation itself turns upon humanity unless God intervenes. Abraham builds altars that are swept away by time as though they had never been built and learns that God is more interested in relationships built on promises and kept by faith; these are more important than grand works of architecture by the will of the powerful. Abraham learns a theology of exile long before his descendants experience exile from their land. Abraham has visionary symbolic experiences (Genesis 15), and God's covenant is cut in his own flesh.

Abraham knows the voice of God and understands that friendship with the omnific one cannot be constrained by death, or time, or the limits of the human capacity to understand. So, Abraham obeys the voice of God and begins his journey to Mt. Moriah. He is silent, there is nothing Abraham can say to those who travel with him and Isaac; the son of promise. Perhaps Abraham thought for a moment that his act of sacrifice might usher in the power of resurrection that he and Sarah had already experienced?

Yet, Abraham carries with him a blade to be used and preparations for a fire to consume. The horror of it all, this silent journey to end in the death of the son of promise. A numinous moment is surely ensuing, there is no simple answer, only the question; Why?

Three days of silence and now Abraham dares to birth into the world a faith relationship with God that requires God to resurrect Isaac and heal every contrary memory that would lessen the faithful obedience of Abraham. Isn't this the goal of God for humanity? Isn't the goal of God resurrection, redemption, reconciliation, healing and rest that enters the history of both God and humanity?

Who alone can identify with God giving his son to the world but Abraham? If not stopped, Abraham would have given his son in faith to God, knowing he would keep his promises to the man who would be a father to many nations. Abraham is a friend of God and this is his greatest treasure. Abraham alone can discuss with God the feelings of surrendering up his son. In Abraham's case it was to affirm a faith that transcended reality, a faith being birthed into reality, a faith that knows God as the Lord of resurrection.

How intertwined were the soul of Abraham and the Spirit of God?

Without explanation, God has requested *qa-na* 'take now', *na* is a particle of entreaty and not an imperative command. So, God's 'take now' has the nuance of 'take please' when Abraham is called to offer Isaac. All voices carry a discernible sense by those who know the speaker. Although I've focused on Abraham's belief that God would resurrect Isaac, there is also in the text a relational dynamic that enables Abraham to hear more than words.

What is it in Abraham's thoughts that cause him to respond in obedience to God's unseemly request and call?

Is the concept of resurrection being birthed into the one who is understood by Paul to be, in relation to faith, the father of us all (Romans 4)?

Abraham has experienced the reversal of death in his body and witnessed the reversal of death in Sarah's body. Abraham has matured in faith and walked in relationship with Yahweh. The story of the Aqedah is told to us by a narrator and we are not privy to Abraham's personal thoughts. However, Abraham has effectively demonstrated to God that human beings could grow in faith and relationship to a point where all the limits and boundaries of human experience are suspended, and life is lived with an inscrutable faith in resurrection, a faith formed in relationship.

Paul sought to know him (Jesus) and the power of his resurrection (Philippians 3:10). Paul links knowing Christ Jesus as affirming of knowing the power that resurrected Jesus. I think the impact of witnessing the stoning of Stephen prepared Saul for the moment when Jesus would appear to him and he would experience a revelation of the gospel in his soul. Stephen's vision of the Lord standing at the right hand of God and his Christ-like prayer for his murderers to be forgiven demonstrated a faith and a grace that Paul could not ignore. Paul communicates a knowing that one day will be consummated in an upward calling. Until then we live betwixt and between, not of this world yet in the world, seated in heavenly places but living below.

I think the corollary analogous chiasmic structure of the Aqedah that centers vs. 10 as the key for interpreting the piece makes us aware that Abraham's faith to obey God was inscrutable for it was bursting into another reality where death is overcome in a redeeming, reconciling, healing resurrection. Abraham's religion was one of promises and faith, of altars and holy moments that perish into the landscape, of a graveyard, and a God who reaches through the generations in faithfulness to save the world.

God does not require sacrifice; this is the work of human beings. Sacrifice is abolished by God's refusal to accept it; it can only end in resurrection, there is no loss when resurrection speaks. So, humanity murders the son of God and the object of our faith is the Lord who is resurrected (John 3:16). The exposure of our sin is declared by our sacrificing Jesus to the needs and demands of the political, the religious, and the populous crowd. The love of God and desire of God to demonstrate God's love for us is that God exposed our violence and we lifted up the son of man on a cross to discover he was the son of God. God is not the God of sacrifice, but the God of resurrection.

The Aqedah offers no resolution for the reader in relation to some expressive emotions by Abraham at the release of his son from impending death. The story is brief, and it is like a three day walk through a dry desert of silence. The reader is only relieved that Isaac is spared. God is like a cruel deity who mocks Abraham, it was only a test so God could know if Abraham truly feared God. Was Abraham in a contest of wits to see who surrendered first? Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide

a lamb for the sacrifice. He told the two young men who traveled with him to wait and that he and the boy would return. There is no all-knowing narrator to let us in on Abraham's thoughts. The silence is as haunting for the reader as crafted literature can provide. Was Abraham like a man captured between two worlds and neither will release him?

Upon his return from Mr. Moriah, Abraham's story continues with the death of Sarah and the purchase of the only land Abraham will ever own in the land of promise. Abraham learns that land ownership always ends in a graveyard and so the inheritance of God is greater than the inheritance of land. Certain of his ever-impending death that his mortality is sure to bring Abraham seeks a wife for Isaac and secures a will to ensure Isaac is his sole inheritor. However, Abraham goes on to live numerous decades after the death of Sarah. Abraham's story concludes in quiet and silent years of continuing to father children with his second wife Keturah. Salvation history moves along, and Abraham lives quietly while history shifts to his son Isaac. The pinnacle of Abraham's life with God still haunts the world as a story that challenges the imagination and leaves us living in two worlds.