

## Lecture 4: The Sacrifice of Abraham (as), What Is All the Fuss?

There is a traditional approach to the problem of the sacrifice of Abraham of one of his sons. Most commentators agree that the story represents a divine test, whereby Abraham's faithfulness was proven. The idea is that God gave him a command to sacrifice his beloved son, and in showing himself willing to do so, he showed his extraordinary faithfulness and obedience to God. Muslims, Jews and Christians agree on this point.

The traditional point of contention is in that the Bible reports the sacrifice for Isaac (as), whereas the Qur'an reports it for Ishmael. The result has been disagreement between Muslims on one hand, and Christians and Jews on the other, on the question of which son was supposed to be sacrificed as a test of obedience.

There are a few alternative suggestions, but the most novel one I have discovered is that of Rabbi Ben-Yehuda. Rabbi Ben-Yehuda has suggested that Isaac was actually sacrificed according to the story in Genesis 22, and later resurrected to marry Rebecca. In this essay, I examine this theory in detail, and offer an anthropologically based alternative. Ben-Yehuda's evidence is carefully weighed here and found wanting.

The fact that Isaac is called Abraham's only son suggests a different interpretation of the events altogether, one which takes into account the rite of passage as an explanation of redemption ritual for the first-born of every woman.

In *The Institute of Judaic-Christian Researcher*, Volume 1, November 1986, Rabbi E. Ben-Yehuda published an article entitled *The Sacrifice of Isaac*. The author gives only one stated purpose for the examination of this issue. "All Jewish responses have come up short before the Christian claim that the enormity of the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross makes it absolutely necessary for all Jews to accept his Messianic role as well as his divinity.

The following dissertation tries to show that the Jews had an incident in their history long predating the

Passion which had a similar impact upon the Jewish outlook” (page 1). The only stated motive is “coming to grips” with that issue.

The point of departure is the idea that there is a weakness in Jewish faith if there is no sacrifice for sin by which God may grant grace to humankind. “Since sacrifices are no longer offered in Judaism, where do you expect to find God’s grace?” (page 2). The rabbi finds the missing foundation of grace in the binding of Isaac. “In the liturgy, again and again we mention “the binding of Isaac” as a cause for God to automatically forgive the sins of Isaac’s descendants” (page 2).

After this introduction, the rabbi finds the following evidence that Isaac was actually sacrificed as reported in Genesis 22, and then later raised from the dead.

It is questionable that an omniscient God would need to “test” Abraham. The radical N-S instead of N-S-H is the word actually used. Thus, the translation of “test” is a misunderstanding of the text. It should rather be “banner” or “example”, instead of “test” (page 2).

Why should the mere binding of Isaac be such an earth-shattering event as the Jewish liturgy suggests? (page 2).

“Jewish commentary states ‘God Himself commanded the offering of Isaac – but would Abraham allow a mere angel to countermand his Maker?’” “The commentary explains, ‘the angel spoke to Abraham and Abraham refused to stop, saying God commanded, only He can stop me’” (page 2).

The command not to injure Isaac meant that he must be offered whole and uninjured (page 3).

The words can be interpreted as ‘another ram’ or ‘an after-ram’ (page 3).

Tahat bno means under his son rather than instead of his son (page 3).

“This thing” and “you did not spare your son” in Genesis 22: 15–17 indicate that Isaac was sacrificed (page 3).

The text reports that both Abraham and Isaac went up, but that only Abraham returned (page 3).

Abraham went directly to Be’er Sheva. Genesis 23:2 reports that Sarah died in Kirjath-arba. Therefore Abraham could not face Sarah after sacrificing Isaac, and Sarah died of sorrow upon hearing that Isaac was dead (page 3).

Genesis 23:2 reports that Abraham “came” to mourn for Sarah, but no mention is made of Isaac (page 3).

Genesis 24 describes obtaining a wife “for Isaac”, that is, Abraham would raise up seed in Isaac’s name. There is no input of Isaac, but Rebecca is asked if she would agree. Rebecca was shocked to find Isaac alive, so she fell off her camel and covered her face (page 3).

Isaac came from the way of the well lahay roi', the well of Life of Him who sees me, which is a reference to his having been resurrected (page 4).

The reference of resurrection in Jewish prayers is in the present (page 4).

Isaac was comforted after his mother's death upon his marriage to Rebecca three years after the event, showing that he had just learned of it when he was resurrected (page 4).

The Jewish practice of Kidush Hashem is based on the death and resurrection of Isaac (page 4).

I shall examine each of these arguments in order.

It is questionable that an omniscient God would need to "test" Abraham. The radical N-S instead of N-S-H is the word actually used. Thus, the translation of "test" is a misunderstanding of the text. It should rather be "banner" or "example", instead of "test" (page 2).

The radical N-S-H is used 36 times in the Hebrew Scriptures almost always with the clear sense of "putting to the test". Examples are Exodus 15:25; 1Samuel 17:39 and 1Kings 10:1. Genesis 22:1 does not appear to depart from this clear usage. However, if the text does in fact mean that God "made an example" of Abraham, rather than "putting him to the test", the result does not appreciably foster any particular interpretation of the sacrifice of Isaac. It does not indicate that Isaac was therefore actually sacrificed rather than merely bound to the altar.

Why should the mere binding of Isaac be such an earth-shattering event as the Jewish liturgy suggests? (page 2).

If there is a continual reference to the binding of Isaac in Jewish literature, this does support the rabbi's contention that the experience of Isaac had a great impact on Jewish faith. It does not follow that Isaac was actually sacrificed. It does not even thereby follow that the belief that Isaac was sacrificed was ever widespread in Judaism. The liturgical reference quoted notes "binding", not actual sacrifice. As such, it speaks against the rabbi's premise.

"Jewish commentary states 'God Himself commanded the offering of Isaac – but would Abraham allow a mere angel to countermand his Maker?'" "The commentary explains, 'the angel spoke to Abraham and Abraham refused to stop, saying God commanded, only He can stop me.'" (page 2).

This argument is based on the conflict between the messages of Elohim God in Genesis 22:1-2 and of the angel of the Lord in Genesis 22:11-12. The implication is that Abraham perceived these as two conflicting commands, originating in two different sources, and chose to obey Elohim God as having greater authority than the angel of the Lord.

The problem with this interpretation is that there is no other precedent in the Hebrew Scriptures for the angel of the Lord contradicting God. In fact, the angel of the Lord so closely represents YHVH that he

sometimes speaks in the first person I as YHVH, note Genesis 16: 10, and even me at the end of Genesis 22: 12.

The linguistic confusion between the angel of the Lord and YHVH Himself is compounded in Genesis 18 where the celestial figures are never called angels, but only men and YHVH, who behaves and acts like a man. A case could be made, at least in Genesis 18 and Genesis 22: 12, for YHVH being an elliptical expression for angel of the Lord (YHVH). In Genesis 19 the same figures are consistently called angels.

Genesis 22: 12 maintains agreement between Elohim God and the angel of the Lord. It states for I know that thou fearest God. In sum, the text gives no support for a conflict between God and the angel of the Lord.

The command not to injure Isaac meant that he must be offered whole and uninjured (page 3).

This argument accepts agreement between the angel of the Lord and God. The words of the angel by this interpretation do not prohibit the sacrifice of Isaac, but rather prohibit injuring Isaac before the sacrifice. The import of the words would thus be that Isaac must be in perfect condition at the moment of the sacrifice.

Since this argument is in conflict with the third argument, one or the other interpretation must be chosen. Both are not acceptable. If we accept two possible interpretations of the first half of verse 12, the second half will clarify which of them is valid. According to argument four, the meaning of the text would read thus: "Do not injure Isaac, because the sacrifice must be unblemished: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me."

There is no sense connection between the first and second half of the verse. According to the traditional interpretation the sense of the text would read thus: "Do not injure Isaac or carry out the sacrifice to completion: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." In this case, the text is coherent. The first half interrupts the sacrifice, and the second half indicates that the test is finished, since Abraham did not withhold his son.

The words can be interpreted as "another ram" or "an after-ram" (page 3). The implication is that the ram is an additional sacrifice to the sacrifice of Isaac, since it is "another" or "after". The KJV translates "ahar/other/after" as "behind him" with the pronoun in italics, indicating that it is added. The NIV leaves out the word altogether, saying "there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns."

In this point the rabbi is right. The most linguistically logical understanding of the words is another ram. It is also correct that Isaac is the only figure which could be the first ram, since it has been made plain that no other animal was provided in Genesis 22:7. It does not follow, however, that Isaac was therefore sacrificed. It only follows that he was a ram to be offered up. The ram caught in the bushes was another sacrificial animal.

Tahat bno means “under” his son rather than “instead of” his son (page 3).

It is true that the word tahat means under. It is used as such in Genesis 1:7. However, the word also means instead of, and is used as such in Genesis 2:21 “and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof”. It would be nonsense to translate under in this case. The word is used as instead of in Genesis 4:25; 30: 15; Leviticus 14:42; 2Samuel 19:14. It is used as under in Genesis 7: 19; Exodus 32: 19; and possibly 1Chronicles 29:34. It is used in the sense of for the sake of in Exodus 21:26. It is used as by means of in Psalm 66: 17. It is used as whereas in Isaiah 60: 15.

Finally it is combined with other particles for other meanings in the book of Jeremiah. The great variety of meanings for the word, and the fact that it is used in the sense of under in a minority of the biblical cases, speaks against the rabbi’s proposal. Finally, the sense of under makes no sense at all. If the ram is sacrificed under Isaac, how was it placed, since Isaac was already bound to the altar? If the ram is sacrificed under Isaac, then it seems that the ram is not ahar/another/a second but the first. The translation of instead of is the only translation that makes any linguistic sense at all.

“This thing” and “you did not spare your son” in Genesis 22: 15–17 indicate that Isaac was sacrificed (page 3).

The rabbi refers to the expression in Genesis 22: 16 hast not withheld thy son to show that Isaac was sacrificed. The same expression, loo chasakhtaa eth binkhaa, is found in Genesis 22: 12. In Genesis 22: 12 Abraham had clearly not yet sacrificed Isaac, and yet he had already fulfilled whatever it meant not to have withheld him. Since the expression clearly does not refer to having carried out a burnt offering in Genesis 22: 12, there is no reason to suppose that it refers to having carried out a burnt offering in Genesis 22: 16.

The text reports that both Abraham and Isaac went up in Genesis 22:8, but that only Abraham returned in Genesis 22: 19 (page 3).

The rabbi’s report of the text is exact. The fact, however, that both are mentioned on the trip up, and only one on the trip down, does not mean that Isaac did not return. In Genesis 12: 14 it says that Abram was come into Egypt. It does not say that Sarai went with him. In fact, the preceding verses show that Abram was afraid to take her with him to Egypt. Using the rabbi’s method of interpretation, we might infer from this that at the last moment they decided she should not go, rather than lie about their relationship.

Yet, despite the fact that the text states only that Abram went down to Egypt, lo and behold, the same verse continues “the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair”. If it were not for verse seventeen, where Sarai’s name is mentioned, we might even conclude, using the rabbi’s method of interpretation, that Abram had a different and temporary wife for the trip to Egypt.

Genesis 22: 19 concludes that they went together to Be’er Sheba. Although the young men are also mentioned, we have as much right to conclude that Isaac went along as we do to conclude that Sarai

went down into Egypt in Genesis 12.

Abraham went directly to Be'er Sheva. Genesis 23:2 reports that Sarah died in Kirjath-arba. Therefore Abraham could not face Sarah after sacrificing Isaac, and Sarah died of sorrow upon hearing that Isaac was dead (page 3).

The rabbi suggests that Abraham went to Be'er Sheva instead of returning to Sarah. But Genesis 21:33, only two verses before that command to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham is living in Be'er Sheva. Although the text does not say so, it might not be too much to assume that his wife Sarah was living there with him. Genesis 21:34 indicates that Abraham lived in Be'er Sheva for a long time.

The expression many days does not have the connotation it does in English of only a few weeks. It is similar to the expression in Psalm 23:6, translated by both the KJV and NIV as for ever. There is a break in the narrative with Genesis 22: 1, so it is possible to suggest that Abraham was living at that time in parts unknown.

But the fact that Genesis 22: 19 says that he went to Be'er Sheva suggests strongly that he started out from there, and that Sarah was waiting for him there, unless indeed she was waiting with the young men. The text just does not mention Sarah at all, and by the rabbi's reasoning, as we shall see, that could very well mean she was dead, and resurrected to die again in Genesis 23.

The best way to understand the text is to assume that Abraham and Sarah were living at Be'er Sheva at least until the close of Genesis 22: 19. There is another break in the narrative at Genesis 22:20, which continues into the beginning of Genesis 23. There is therefore no textual reason to assume that Abraham was avoiding Sarah.

Genesis 23:2 reports that Abraham "came" to mourn for Sarah, but no mention is made of Isaac (page 3).

The rabbi suggests that Isaac must have been dead because he is not mentioned to have been present at the funeral of his mother Sarah. Again, such a conclusion from what the text does not say is unwarranted, as we have already seen. It is clear that Sarah went down into Egypt, even though the text only said that it was Abraham who went down.

It is clear that Sarah was alive during the time of Genesis 22, even though it does not state that she was present at so important a rite of passage as the sacrifice of her son Isaac. It is also clear from the text that Isaac is alive at the death of his mother. He was still alive in Genesis 22: 12 and in Genesis 24:6.

Genesis 24 describes obtaining a wife "for Isaac", that is, Abraham would raise up seed in Isaac's name. There is no input of Isaac, but Rebecca is asked if she would agree. Rebecca was shocked to find Isaac alive, so she fell off her camel and covered her face (page 3).

The rabbi's first point is that Abraham should redeem Isaac, who was dead, by raising up seed with a

wife for Isaac. This argument is destroyed by the fact that in Genesis 24:6 Abraham commands the servant not to take his son Isaac back to the land of his kindred. The implication is clearly that Isaac was alive and that the wife was for him personally.

The rabbi's second point is that there is no input from Isaac, while Rebecca's opinion is closely investigated. Therefore, Isaac is dead. However, there is no need to mention Isaac's input, since we can safely assume that at the ripe age of forty he was very willing to marry. His input need be mentioned only in the contrary case. The close investigation of Rebecca's opinion is not in conflict with the practice of arranged marriages or with Middle Eastern marriage standards. To think the contrary is merely a Western prejudice.

The rabbi's third point is that Rebecca's behaviour in falling off the camel and veiling herself indicates surprise at Isaac's resurrection. Genesis 24:64 says that she alighted from the camel. The root is N-P-L which indeed is commonly used in the sense of falling. It is one of the two general words used for getting down from a mount or vehicle, however. It is used as such in 2Kings 5:21 as well as Genesis 24:64.

The rabbi's interpretation is neither linguistically natural nor necessary.

The experience of a woman falling from the height of a camel, which is much higher than a horse, would necessitate much more than merely adjusting her veil. In the country areas of the Middle East today it is still the practice for a woman to get down from a mount if she meets a man coming toward her on the road. There is nothing in Rebecca's behaviour to show surprise. On the contrary, her behaviour is normal, which speaks against any surprise resurrection.

Isaac came from the way of the well lahay roi', the well of Life of Him who sees me, which is a reference to his having been resurrected (page 4).

The rabbi interprets Isaac coming from the way of the well lahay roi' as evidence of his having been resurrected. However, the words do not have this symbolic meaning in the text. They refer to a literal well of water so named by Hagar in Genesis 16:13-14. The meaning of God seeing is attached to the experience of Hagar, not to Isaac. It is not in the least an evidence of Isaac's having been resurrected.

The reference of resurrection in Jewish prayers is in the present (page 4).

The rabbi concludes that the reference in Jewish prayers to God raising the dead, since it is couched in the present tense, whatever he means by that, since there is no present tense in Hebrew, implies that God is already now a raiser of the dead. Since God is already now a raiser of the dead, He must have resurrected Isaac.

If we accept the rabbi's premise that God is already now a raiser of the dead, it does not imply that Isaac is one of those raised. There are biblical references to other people who were raised from the dead, namely the widow's son at the time of Elijah (1Kings 17:17 ff), and the Shunamite woman's son at the

time of Elisha (2Kings 4:8 ff).

If the argument turns on the time, based on the fact that there is no resurrection mentioned in Genesis before Isaac, it also raises a theological issue of even greater moment. If God is supposed to become a raiser of the dead at a certain moment, rather than be a raiser of the dead essentially, then there is an implication of change in God as well as God being subservient to time.

The Rabbi's presupposition is precisely that of secularism, which is in fact a form of Christianity. It presupposes time and space to be absolute and in effect a deity, so that even God is controlled thereby.

Although Jewish prayers may indicate something of importance in Jewish life, which was the purpose of the Rabbi's study in the first place, they cannot provide evidence on whether or not the text of Genesis actually reports a real sacrifice and resurrection or not.

Isaac was comforted after his mother's death upon his marriage to Rebecca three years after the event, showing that he had just learned of it when he was resurrected (page 4).

It does not follow. It is certainly possible that Isaac might have mourned his mother for as long as three years, to the extent that his marriage was a comfort to him. There is no evidence for Isaac's death and resurrection in this.

The Jewish practice of Kidush Hashem is based on the death and resurrection of Isaac (page 4).

Although a belief in the death and resurrection of Isaac may have had an impact on some Jews to inspire them to be faithful in martyrdom, that belief is hardly essential to such faithfulness. Such faithfulness is not evidence either for belief in the death and resurrection of Isaac, nor for the factuality of the event.

At this point it is possible to make a general evaluation of the study. The first problem is the Rabbi's motive and premise. His motive is skewed, so his results cannot help but be skewed. The only proper motive for studying the text is to find truth, the truth about what was originally meant by the text and how that might apply to one's own faith and experience. The Rabbi is not interested in finding the truth but, by his own words, he is motivated by the desire to find Christian motifs in Judaism.

He wants to find a functional replacement for the death of Jesus on the cross as a channel of divine grace. With this purpose in mind, he latches on to the sacrifice of Isaac.

The premise also remains undemonstrated. The premise is that faith in the martyred and resurrected one will automatically make it possible for God to forgive sin. Although this premise is accepted by Christianity, a Jewish scholar has the duty of demonstrating its validity. The Rabbi makes no attempt to do so. He merely accepts this Christian viewpoint and begins from there. This is a serious methodological flaw.

There are several types of weaknesses in the rabbi's argumentation. First of all, there are several linguistic errors. It is as though the computer mindset has deprived researchers of basic linguistic intelligence.

To choose one meaning of a word and apply it across the board constitutes a mechanical superficiality and lack of analytical integrity that would have been unthinkable before the age of mechanical translators. Such methodology is found in the rabbi's way of handling the words *tahat* (instead of) and *tippol* (she got down). His use of these words is outright error of translation.

There are other linguistic problems as well. Symbolic interpretation is unacceptable when the text clearly has a literal meaning. The rabbi makes this mistake in dealing with the expression *well of lahay roi*'. Another linguistic error is to give the same expression in the same context two different meanings, unless the context requires it.

The rabbi does this with the expression *hast not withheld thy son*, which occurs twice in the passage in question.

Finally, the rabbi presents linguistic arguments that are not relevant to the question as though they were, as in his treatment of the radical N-S-H.

There are errors of logic as well. The rabbi presents conflicting interpretations of the meaning of Genesis 22:12 as evidence for the same interpretation of Isaac's sacrifice. This is logically impossible and greatly weakens his argument. The rabbi draws unwarranted conclusions from things left unstated in the text: that Isaac did not return with Abraham after the sacrifice, that Isaac did not attend his mother's funeral, and that Isaac was not involved in plans for his marriage.

Argument based on nothing cannot be worth more than zero. Finally, the rabbi makes mistakes in logic by drawing unwarranted conclusions from statements in the text. He draws the conclusion that Sarah was in Kirjath-arba when Abraham was in Be'er-Sheva on the basis of the fact that she died there. The data in the text are insufficient to draw that conclusion.

The rabbi draws conclusions on mistaken cultural and psychological assumptions. He errs in finding investigation of a woman's feelings incongruous with arranged marriage. He errs in thinking that Isaac would not mourn for his mother for up to three years.

There are at least two more fatal flaws in the rabbi's study. The first is the dependence on a conflict between Elohim God and the angel of the Lord. There is no precedent for this in Scripture, the text does not require it, and it raises problematic theological issues for which the rabbi makes no account. The idea of a conflict between Elohim God and the angel of the Lord is totally unacceptable on the basis of the biblical text.

The second fatal flaw is the rabbi's failure to consider texts which clearly speak against the death and

resurrection of Isaac. Among these is Genesis 24:6, which states Isaac to be alive at a point when according to the theory he had not yet been resurrected.

The study is also flawed by the failure to consider texts in the passage which actually do present problems. The most obvious of these are Genesis 22:2 and Genesis 22:16, where Isaac is called the only son of Abraham. There was never a time when Isaac was Abraham's only son. This is the one feature of the story which most obviously demands attention, and we may thank Rabbi Ben-Yehuda for raising the issue.

The rest of this study will re-examine the biblical text, but with the motive of explaining what appear to be inconsistencies in it. The basic assumption is that the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible, at least insofar as Genesis 22 is concerned, is consistent and can be successfully harmonised with itself.

In Genesis 22:2 (and in Genesis 22:16), Isaac is called the only son of Abraham. This is inconsistent with the report in the Masoretic Text of Genesis 16:15 which states that Hagar bore Abram a son called Ishmael. In Genesis 17:17-19, it is apparent that Ishmael was alive before the birth of Isaac. Genesis 21:2-3 reports the birth of Isaac after the circumcision of Ishmael at the age of thirteen (Genesis 17:25).

Finally, Genesis 25:9 reports Ishmael to be alive after the events in Genesis 22. Isaac was not, therefore, according to the text the only son of Abraham at the time of the events in Genesis 22 or at any time previous to them.

There are other problems with the story besides the textual one. Judaism generally interprets the story as a revelation to Abraham that God does not accept human sacrifice. The Christian interpretation of the story generally emphasises the lesson of obedience. The Christian is thus faced with a theological conflict in the command to offer the son as a burnt offering. Such a command conflicts with the commandment in Exodus 20:13, Thou shalt not kill.

Although theologians may well resolve the issue somehow in their own minds, most Christians are left in a quandary. They cannot understand how God could command anyone actually to kill his own child.

If we understand the story as it generally is – that God actually commanded Abraham to kill his own child – then there are some narrative problems with the story as it appears in the Bible. The conversation in Genesis 22:7-8 does not fit into the course of events in which Abraham intended actually to kill Isaac. Isaac asks where the lamb is, as though a lamb were going to be offered and not himself.

Abraham answers as though a lamb were going to be offered and not Isaac. Furthermore, there is no evidence to follow that Abraham informed Isaac later of the true character of the sacrifice, yet Isaac is a willing and knowing participant throughout.

What the Bible actually describes is an event in which a father takes his son, goes to a secluded place in a totally male group which is left to guard, further secludes himself with his son, performs a mock

sacrifice of the son, then sacrifices an animal as a burnt offering, and returns apparently without the son.

Throughout the process, Isaac is called the only son. He is so called nowhere else in the Genesis recital. This factor is unique to this event. The event consists of sacrificial actions and a series of statements or questions and responses. The text presents itself as consistent, despite the incongruity of some of the speeches. The text ignores the theological problems of divine temptation and human sacrifice, as though these were not issues.

At this point we have exhausted the biblical information. It is necessary to look for explanatory material outside the text itself. There are several factors to look for. If possible, we should find examples of mock sacrifices of young men by their fathers or other authorities followed by a replacement sacrifice of an animal. These sacrificial events should include a series of speeches which might ignore the factual situation.

In 1909, A. van Gennep identified precisely this type of situation in his book *Les rites de passage*. The rite of passage of this type is performed on boys of a certain age, although there are similar rites in some societies dealing with girls as well. The rite always includes set speeches in what is called an initiatory structure. There is a mock killing of the youth, a replacement animal sacrifice, and a mock resurrection of the youth.

There is often a period of seclusion for the youth or especially seclusion from the opposite sex. At the end of the rite, the youth has passed from childhood to adulthood, and may marry and carry out other adult behaviour; or he passes from one status to another in his adult life.

Although the liturgy or ritual of the rite of passage is usually found in non-literate societies, there are examples of texts with an initiatory structure in the various classical religious texts of the world. One of these is the first section of the *Kathopanishad*, one of the Vedic Upanishads known in classical Hindu Scriptures.

There are certainly more precedents for initiatory structure in ancient religious texts from around the world, and there is no reason at all why we should not expect to find one in the Bible. It is clear that the story of the sacrifice of Isaac contains all the essentials of such a sacrificial ritual.

If the story is reporting a rite of passage liturgy, the speeches are set speeches relating to the ritual. They are certainly presented as having occurred on a particular time in a particular place with specific individuals involved, but they must be understood to have occurred in the case of every young man in the given culture when appropriate.

The rite begins with the instigation of God, who calls Abraham in Genesis 22: 1. The response of God in verse 2 is also couched in the traditional phrases of the ritual. This explains why Isaac is consistently called the only son here. It is a part of the ritual. It is possible that the ritual is in reference to the first-born of every woman. The marking of the first-born is a consistent feature through much of the Bible.

The consecration of the first-born of every woman is described first in Exodus 13 and in later passages.

The expression would generally hold true, and would only fail in the situation of polygamy, as in the case of Abraham. Yet even in the case of polygamy, the same ritual words would be attached to the sacrificial event, since the same traditional liturgy or appropriate words for the sacrifice would always be used.

The common traits of a rite of passage fit into the Genesis story like this. The all-male group leaves on a three-day trek (Gen. 22:3,4). Those not actively participating are left to wait and guard (Gen. 22:5). Most rites of passage include such ritual paraphernalia as wood for an offering, fire, and a weapon (Gen. 22:6). Most rites of passage include a standardised text of speeches and responses between the officiant and the initiate (Gen. 22:7,8).

Most rites of passage include sacrificial preparations and a mock sacrifice of the initiate in which he is bound or locked in a dark enclosure (Gen. 22:9–10). Most rites of passage include a substitution sacrifice which is found in a series of speeches, substituted for the initiate, and sacrificed (Gen. 22:11–13). Many rites of passage include the naming of the place or the renaming of the initiate or, more rarely, the officiant (Gen. 22:14).

Most initiatory rites of passage end with a blessing on the initiate, an instatement into adulthood or the appropriate status (Gen. 22:15–18). Some rites of passage end with the youth being required to find his own way home, to demonstrate his newly gained status (Gen. 22:19).

The text of Genesis 22 has been examined from the point of view of an initiatory structure as a rite of passage. No inconsistencies with this theory of interpretation were found in the biblical text.

The reinterpretation of the text as a rite of passage provides a means of accounting for most of the potential inconsistencies of Genesis 22. The incongruities of the speeches, with the glaring inconsistency of calling Isaac Abraham's only son, are seen to be completely consistent with a rite of passage. The theological inconsistency of commanding a human sacrifice disappears. The temptation of God is reduced to the requirement of redeeming the first-born of every woman, or expressing that Abraham is a model for future generations.

The question may be raised whether we have the right to interpret the text as an initiatory structure since there is nothing in the text which says it is such. One might raise a stronger case against another interpretation. To interpret the text otherwise would leave us with the problems mentioned above, some of which are crucial and some of which are glaringly apparent. We are justified in accepting an initiatory explanation for more reasons than that it is so wide-spread throughout the world in many cultures in Australia, Asia, Africa and America.

The fact that initiatory structures are found in other religious texts, such as the Kathopanishad, although certainly suggestive, does not impel us to accept it in the case of a biblical text. We are justified in accepting the initiatory interpretation because the redemption of the first-born is commanded in Exodus

13 and described and alluded to many times. Anything that is commanded and alluded to must also have a practice. It is the practice that is described in Genesis 22.

It must be mentioned that this text, the Sacrifice of Isaac, has had a great impact on religious experience. The misconception that God might tell someone to engage in human sacrifice has opened the way for criticism of religion altogether on one hand, and to extreme cases of unstable practice on the other.

Within Judaism, it appears that the moral of the story is that God taught Abraham in a graphic way that He did not accept human sacrifice. It was so graphic because the practice of human sacrifice in Canaan might otherwise have influenced Abraham and his descendants.

Christianity has seen the moral of the story to be that Abraham's obedience is an example for all to follow. Both Judaism and Christianity have used the story as a source of criticism of Islam. The Qur'an (37:103–106) reports the same events for Ishmael instead of for Isaac.

The Muslim commentator might refer to the "only son" in Genesis 22:2 as a remnant of the true text referring to Ishmael, who was the only one who was ever the only son of Abraham in real life. Such a commentator would suggest that the text was corrupted by the Jews to tell about Isaac instead.

In an initiatory scenario, the facts would have been different. Both Ishmael and Isaac, both being first-born of their mothers, would have had to be redeemed. The initiatory redemption, the substitutionary sacrifice was performed for both of them. In the end, the biblical text is coherent, and the Bible and the Qur'an are both right. Everyone is disarmed and we are all faced with living together in peace. Can we rise to that challenge?

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