

GENESIS 22

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A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

DR CHARLES VOGAN

TESTING ABRAHAM'S FAITH: THE BLESSING (*GENESIS 22*)

Scholars usually consider Abraham to be a child of his times; in other words, what he knew about God was a combination of the things he learned from his neighbors, surrounding cultures, and upbringing in Mesopotamia as well as a few things that God revealed specifically to him.

But that can't be true. Abraham dealt with a God from outside of this world; the inheritance he received was nothing like what this world gives, nor do idolatrous gods promise such things. Abraham learned about, and received, eternal realities that form the essence of our present Christian faith. He first received them, and now we inherit them from him.

Faith, Abraham learned, reaches beyond this physical world to touch God himself. If it didn't it wouldn't be true faith. Faith gets hold of eternal realities that change the soul, something completely different from the religions of this world and their currency.

Abraham is now at the point in his journey where he's ready to learn about the most astonishing promise of the Covenant. But this will indeed require *true* faith to get hold of; a superficial faith, or a lack of faith, will never see it. So God tested Abraham's faith to see if it was based on this world or the next. Abraham passed the test, his faith was of the true kind, and he inherited something that all the rest of us can have if we also have his kind of faith.

Testing Abraham – The text says that God “tested” Abraham. The Hebrew word means to *test the worth of*, or *try* something to determine its nature. At this point Abraham has learned a great deal about his God and the Covenant Promises. He has left his former life behind, he has seen Canaan from north to south and understood what God has in mind to do there, he has plundered the Egyptians and experienced the hand of God blessing him wherever he turns.

So, one way to look at this “testing” is that God is trying out the character of the cornerstone of the Family of God, the Patriarch from whom the rest of us will inherit the Promises. The work that God has done in Abraham's life – is it enough at this point to sustain the greatest test of all? Does Abraham see yet that God is

his “all in all,” the sufficient God, the faithful God? Is Abraham ready to learn the real heart of the Gospel, the act that condemns and destroys this world and rebuilds it on a “more firm foundation?” The staggering truth, in other words, of the death and Resurrection of the Son? For this Abraham will need a faith born of God.

This is a pertinent question because God doesn't waste his time or words with anybody. They're supposed to be *learning* from him, putting these truths they get from him into practice, building a foundation to build their lives upon him – especially the Heir who will be passing this Inheritance on to his innumerable descendants. They should be ready to face death itself with a hope

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that looks beyond the grave. Jesus said the same of us who follow him.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. (Matthew 7:24)

Later in their history the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham, failed *their* test even after going through the same kind of training period designed to prepare for *their* greatest step of faith. Even though God had given them ample time and abundant proofs of his intentions and faithfulness, they failed to learn – and therefore were in no way ready for the grand finale of their journey.

For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, ‘They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.’ So I declared on oath in my anger, ‘They shall never enter my rest.’ (Psalm 95:10-11)

God’s command – Of course this command looks so contrary to what God had promised: God gave Isaac to Abraham to be his heir, and now God was requiring Abraham to put Isaac to death. But there’s a clue in the command which gave away the ending: “Offer him there as a *burnt offering*.” This looks horrible on the surface,¹ yet it’s not simply getting rid of his son. The point is that *the firstborn son must*

¹ And though scholars would argue the point, Abraham would *not* have identified with the false worship of the Canaanite gods – to plead for better weather or increased crops. Notice here that the Lord called Isaac “your only son Isaac, whom you love.” This was not a false religion to manipulate God, but true religion that tested Abraham. He was learning about the Trinity: the sacrifice of his Firstborn Son for sin.

die as a sacrifice for sin. There’s a theological goal behind the command. We learned already that God requires blood to cover over our sins (see Genesis 4). A sacrifice is not to appease God, or to manipulate him to get something out of him by obligation to us; rather it is God’s way of taking care of a problem in us and making us acceptable to him, ready in fact to receive the spiritual treasures he has for us. It’s through the Promised Son that the Family will be cleansed of its sin, the root problem of humanity. So here on Mt. Moriah, God is setting up the system that Abraham and all his descendants will use to atone for their sins, and become acceptable to their God, so that they can live in the presence of the holy God. The death of the *firstborn* is going to save them.

We know the end of the story, of course, but Abraham didn’t. Death is death, after all. He was learning about God through all these situations. But what he saw (as events proved) was that faith in God’s promise plus obedience to his command *cannot* end in disaster. There has to be a reason for this sacrifice, resulting in an act greater than anything that God has done so far – in fact, destroying the physical to attain the spiritual and eternal.

Mt. Moriah – God told Abraham to take Isaac to “the land of Moriah” and sacrifice him “on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.” Moriah was a mountain region in central Canaan; Abraham started out from Beersheba and traveled nearly north into the mountains and arrived by the third day.

What is so significant about this spot – the “mountain” which God chose for the sacrifice – is that this would be the future site of David’s capital city,

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Jerusalem; and the spot upon which Abraham offered his son would be the future site of the Temple.

Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. (2 Chronicles 3:1)

This means we now have an unbroken link between Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, the location of David's city Jerusalem, the site of the Temple and its altar of sacrifice – and Jesus' own sacrifice in the same immediate area. For the next 2000 years this is where God will have his House, his altar, his sacrifice that forgives and cleanses his people.



Father and Son – It's interesting to note that Abraham told his two servants to wait while he and his son Isaac went on to Mt. Moriah alone for the sacrifice. Perhaps it was because he was afraid they would try to keep him from killing his own son. That may have been one reason, but there's something deeper going on here from which they were excluded: this was a matter between Abraham and Isaac only. It was a father/son issue, very private, and nobody else had the right to be involved.

The two of them were about to perform a solemn ceremony that would lay the foundation for the salvation of Abraham's entire Family – not only for the Jews but also for Christians.

The controlling passage that we must use to understand this situation is Hebrews 11. "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Hebrews 11:19) This passage tells us two things:

- **First**, what Abraham *knew* – that God could raise the dead. When an Apostle speaks, we listen. He's telling us what actually went through Abraham's mind. Nobody could know such a thing except by the Spirit's revelation. Therefore, because the Spirit *did* reveal this to the Apostle, we are to accept the fact that this man of ancient times knew exactly the same truths about God's world that we do. God is giving him insights that he's going to pass on to the rest of the Family.
- **Second**, what Abraham received – his son back from the dead, alive and well. Abraham is learning the three-step procedure in dealing with the son:

1. **The Son must die.** Man, as he is, cannot go on living in this world. His character as a sinner, his inability to know the true God and unfitted to live with his Father, all disqualify him as God's true son. The penalty must be death because such a son cannot continue to work against God in his Kingdom.

2. The Father must put his Son to death. Only the Father has the legal right, and only he has the cause, to kill his own son. Nobody else would dare take on this role. And the son has to understand that his death comes at the hand of his Father, who finds him unacceptable to himself. It couldn't be Ishmael who would die, and it couldn't be Abraham himself – it has to be the Son.

3. The Son must come back to life. The Father has no intention of leaving his son in the grave. The whole point of having a son is to have an Heir who will inherit the fullness of the Family Treasures. And so the Father finds a substitute in Isaac's case, and a substitute in mankind's case, who will die in our place so that we can be brought back from the dead and reinstated in the Father's Family.

This three-step procedure is the inheritance that the Heir will give to the entire Family, both to Israel and to the Church. It's the *son's death*, and the *son's new life*, that is the Promise. So at no point do we read in the story that Abraham hesitated during this process; he was learning the whole truth of the fourth Promise of the Covenant. The sudden intervention of the angel was not what Abraham was hoping for – as Hebrews tells us. He learned the true lesson in spite of the angel's hand.

The primary level of this lesson is as a shadow of the eternal reality of the Father and Son in the Trinity. The Son

born by the power of the Spirit (Isaac) shadows Jesus Christ, born as a man, yet was the very Son of God. The Father put him to death – inflicted the penalty of sin upon him – as he stood as a substitute for all the created sons of God. He himself knew no sin, but with our sins upon him drew the wrath of God away from us and onto himself. Thus death was necessary. And only the Father in Heaven had the right to take his own Son's life, because man's judgment and understanding of Jesus Christ was totally false and off the mark (the Jews and Romans had no idea what they were doing by crucifying him). God alone knew what the death of his Son would mean for the entire world, and why it was necessary. And as Peter quoted David, "For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption." (Acts 2:27) The whole point of this exercise was to rescue the children of God from both sin and the grave. But the only door to life with God must be death.

There would have been no point to any of this if God weren't teaching Abraham the answer to mankind's moral and spiritual dilemma. The death of his son Isaac was not the point; it was the death of mankind, and of Jesus Christ in particular, that is in view here.

So where are we at the end of this story? What did Abraham learn? That the Son must die at the hand of the Father, and though it doesn't look as though this death was deserved, in God's eyes death is always the penalty for sin. So the death was to atone for the sins of God's sons. But death is not the end of the story – the Heir must come back to life, back to his Father, renewed and able to inherit the Promises of the Covenant.

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He was chosen to be the Heir, and death will not prevent it.

God will provide – Abraham wasn't putting off his son with this response, nor was he expressing his own confusion about what might happen. This was a profound understanding of the ways of the LORD and was the result of years of living by faith with his God.

The Hebrew original reads literally, "God will reveal² [to or for] himself the lamb for a sacrifice." In other words, there's a mystery here that Abraham didn't understand yet. He had two irreconcilable ideas before him: the Promise of the son, and now he has to put his son to death. Yet there was a deeper mystery than he could have imagined – which we now know about. The Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, will be a substitute sacrifice for Abraham's Family, and put to death for their sin. The Son will die – but it would be another Son. In due time that sacrifice will be revealed to them.

The Fear of Isaac – Isaac himself went through a near-death experience in this story. It evidently terrified him: his own father suddenly (without warning) binding his hands, laying him on the wood on the altar, taking out his knife and getting ready to draw the blade across his throat. He certainly would have been obedient to his father, but he didn't (as the saying goes) necessarily sign up for something like this!

His son Jacob later uses a unique name for God that he learned from his father: God was "The Fear of Isaac." (Genesis 31:42, 53) This sacrifice was nothing less than Isaac's death sentence. God is,

in other words, *ruthless* when it comes to sin and its solution. He will (as we learned in the story of the Flood) put anyone and everyone to death if necessary.

The angel stops Abraham – There is only one thing that could stop this death sentence from being carried out, which was the Word of God itself. God pronounced sentence, and only God could give the reprieve. Abraham was following God 100% every step of the way and nothing but God's Word would have moved him to stop the execution.

But why did God take Abraham through this exercise in obedience? The text tells us: "Now I know that you fear God." God has gotten down to the root of Abraham's faith, which is that the fear of God, the passion for his Kingdom, the readiness to obey him, the willingness to bring him glory, is stronger than all other passions and desires. Humanly speaking there is no stronger tie than for one's own children; we would give up our lives for them. But when God becomes the center – which happens only with true faith – then family moves to second place. Often that is the test that God will make to try anybody's heart.

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:37)

To faith, God is the source of all good, the goal of all our actions, the prime mover of Creation, the only glory. We can lose everything in this world, and yet have everything we need in him.

That phrase "Now I know ..." points to an amazing and unexpected aspect of the relationship between God and man.

² ESV, NIV: "provide"

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Instead of creating us like rocks and trees and animals which were forced by their design to meet God's specifications, God made man "in his image" with his own will, as a son, to be treated as family not a slave. Which means that man really does need to make a decision here, and God acts accordingly. Abraham could have failed God at this point, as Adam did; there was nothing preventing it. God was truly pleased that Abraham did the right thing. Which means we are truly responsible before God for our actions.

Just as an aside, the text says that "an *angel* of the LORD" called to Abraham – and then the text says later, "Now *I* know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from *me*." The seeming confusion of pronouns only means that God spoke through angels when he dealt with men. The voice of God itself would have destroyed Abraham. There is an *exact identity* between the words of the angel and the Word of God.³

Genuine faith – God used an extreme test to try Abraham's obedience, but it was necessary to show the genuineness of his faith. It's all too easy to "believe" in God or "believe" in his Word, when times are good and we aren't in the middle of a crisis. But when things start falling apart, or we are about to lose what we love or what we are convinced we can't do without, then the usual reaction is to forget about faith and either accuse God of not taking care of us or turning away from him. It's only then when we find out whether we really believed in his Word.

³ Do we have that same faith in God's Word – the Bible?

Faith has two characteristics: *first*, it's based completely on God's Word. God told us what he's going to do, and he never changes his promises. Of course it looks impossible because such things don't happen naturally in our world; but if God told us he would do it, then it is necessary and it will be totally new, founded on a power and will that is not part of this world. God can't be stopped or resisted. God's bare Word, just by the fact that it exists and that it reveals plainly God's will, is reason enough for complete confidence, and there's no reason for any fear. If you can see that his Word has a power in and of itself, and that it can't be denied, then you will hang on to this single reality like a lifeline and know that you are safe and blessed.

Second, faith is ***not*** based on anything in this world. We don't believe in God *because* we are blessed; we don't believe in him *because* he gives us what we want. And conversely, we don't give up on him when we are suffering or in want or in danger. In fact, nothing in this world, whatever it is, good or bad, will turn us away from what God told us in his Word. We consider his Word to be eternal, final, sure and certain – even if the sun itself doesn't come up tomorrow. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Matthew 24:35) Paul put it plainly.

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him

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who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)

The world with all of its problems can't oppose God. There is simply not strength here to oppose him; all the forces of nature can't stop God from doing his will. Poverty doesn't prevent him from enriching his people, disease and disaster and ruin don't stop him from protecting his people, even death doesn't stop him from giving them life. In the very teeth of death, this God claims that –

I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this? (John 11:25-26)

Abraham's faith passed the test on both counts. He really did believe God's Promise that Isaac would be the Heir of the estate. He knew, because he could see his God, that God would work this situation out somehow, through a miracle if necessary. Abraham didn't let even a crisis like death interfere with his faith. Hebrews tells us that he "considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead." (Hebrews 11:19)

So true faith has a hold on God's Word alone and is not based on anything else, either positively or negatively. *Sola Scriptura*. We need nothing other than God's Word, and nothing that happens can turn us away from God's Word. If there's any other good at all that we are hoping in besides God, it's not true faith; if terrible things happen, or we have to endure hardship, and this makes us think that what God said is not going to

happen – even the least doubt – then we do not have true faith.

And that's what makes testing our faith necessary. God has to knock the props out from under us, all of them, to see if we are in fact standing on his Word alone. If God takes away what we love in this world and we go down, then we weren't standing on his Word.

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, immediately he falls away. (Matthew 13:20-21)

God gets *glory* when we trust him so completely that neither good times nor bad turn us away from being fully focused on him alone. Only testing brings this out, and so testing becomes an important tool in God's hand to get glory from us.

For a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

A substitute – Isaac wasn't killed after all. They found a ram caught in the thicket and sacrificed that instead. We have to understand that this ram being at the right place at the right time was by God's hand; he had this whole thing planned out long before Abraham got to Mt. Moriah.

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But there are two more points to notice. *First*, Abraham was not allowed to consider the possibility of a substitute until God gave the reprieve of Isaac's sentence of death. Abraham had to come to grips with the miracle of the resurrection. His faith in the promise of the Son had to be shown to be unshakeable.

Second, this idea of a **substitute** was like part two of the lesson. In order to understand what God was teaching Abraham (and the rest of us) we have to put the two ideas together: the son must be put to death, and offered as a sacrifice for punishment of sin. But God intends to give a reprieve for the son from destruction by providing a substitute in his place, another victim who will die for the punishment of sins so that the son can live.

In the New Testament the two ideas *come together* in one person.

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. (Romans 6:8-10)

Jesus was both the *son who was put to death* for sin, and the *substitute* who was the reprieve for the rest of us. As a son of man, Jesus was killed in punishment for the sins of mankind; thus the curse from Genesis 3 is fully carried out. Man as he is now can never be allowed into God's eternal presence. But to put all of us under this curse would be tantamount to eliminating us all from the possibility

of life – thus Jesus the Son of God was offered as a substitute for us that we might escape the condemnation of the Law and be resurrected from the dead into newness of life.

So in essence there are two sons in this story: Abraham's son who must die, and God's Son who will save Abraham's son from the grave.

But the real lesson that Abraham learned was the fact of the **resurrection**. This substitute brought his son back from the curse of the Law, from the death sentence. He didn't just look at it as a providential "accident" that a ram was available for the sacrifice; he was seeing the fourth Promise of the Covenant, and he knew what it was.

God could raise the dead – this is what steadied his hand when he held the knife to kill his son. To him, there could be no other explanation for this otherwise terrible command he received from God. It was the only possible thing that made sense of the situation. So when Abraham went back home, he was gripped with this new revelation of God and what God had promised to give him and his descendants in the Covenant.

The Mountain of the LORD – What happened here at Mt. Moriah was the keystone of the religion of the Israelites, all through their subsequent history. This scene of the *required death of the sinner*, and a *substitute provided as a reprieve*, would be enacted over and over for the next 2000 years. When Moses and the Israelites came out of Egypt they made the Tabernacle and started the required sacrifices; while the Israelites were living in Canaan, the Ark and the sacrifices were carried around the country under different high priests;

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but finally the system found a home when David and Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem – *right here* where Abraham and Isaac first carried out their sacrifice.

The heart of the work of the Temple was the forgiveness of sin, based on a substitute sacrifice. Over and over they saw the victim dying for the penalty of sin, and they could see by this how serious the matter of sin is to God. But they also could see the amazing mercy of God in accepting another's death instead of their own. No other people on earth had this privilege of escaping the wrath of God against sinners. That's why the Prophets often spoke of the nations of the earth coming to Mt. Zion (which is another name for Mt. Moriah) for the one thing that they needed, the thing that only the Israelites had – salvation from sin and death.

But even then the full lesson isn't apparent in the Israelite system of Temple and sacrifice, simply because the Israelites themselves *did* die just as everyone else dies. They may have been forgiven, but that old curse from Genesis 3 hasn't gone away yet. There is something in the lesson of Mt. Moriah that still has to be fulfilled: the actual escape from death in the end. *Does* God intend to deliver us from death? The lesson is there, but where is the Promise fulfilled?

And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11:39-40)

We now know that the Resurrection of Christ is the key to understanding the Temple and its sacrifices. In his death, we who are the children of Abraham receive eternal life and truly escape death forever.

For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:52-53)

Repeating the Covenant – God once again speaks to Abraham (through the angel) and repeats his promise to fulfill the Covenant to him and to his descendants. But this time there's a new level of passion in what God is saying: "By myself I have sworn ..." God is so impressed that Abraham passed the test that he is more determined than ever to *richly* bless him with the Promises.

- *I will surely bless you.*
- *I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore.*
- *Your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies.*
- *In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.*

There is a great future here for the Family of Abraham, and they owe it in a large part to their forefather's faith.

But God's obvious zeal can be accounted for by another concept: he is really resonating with what Abraham did with his son Isaac. "Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, *your only son* ..." Abraham perfectly played out on the physical level

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what God intends to do later with his eternal Son Jesus Christ on a higher level. In other words, Abraham was following the original Pattern found in the Trinity of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Saving sinners from death is what's on God's heart, whatever it takes – even the sacrifice of his own Son. Here was Abraham following through on the same Mission. So, because Abraham is fully in step with the Father, his descendants are going to experience a royal life with God on earth, the same destiny marked out for God's children later in eternity. Israel will experience the fullness of God, a corresponding life on earth of what it's like for the Son to live with the Father in Heaven. This is the fullness of the Inheritance that Abraham passed down to the rest of us.

The Point – It's no wonder that Jesus said of Abraham, "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." (John 8:56) In

offering his own son, and then seeing his son brought back to life (figuratively, but the reprieve from death was nonetheless real), Abraham was learning about the Father and Son who would once again re-enact this same sacrifice and resurrection at this very place, 2000 years later. And Abraham also knew, by personal experience, who the participants would be: God is the Father, and Jesus is the Son; and we who are saved from death and raised to life with Jesus' resurrection will also be sons of God, loved by the Father, and welcomed back passionately from sin and death.

For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence. (Acts 2:27-28)

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