

## **More on the Binding of Isaac**

(Most of this is adapted from the <http://www.hebrew4christians.com> web site, with further input from the book *"The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice"* by Shalom Spiegel)

God was angry at Abraham for making this covenant since He had promised to give all the land of Canaan to his descendants. Now Abraham's children would be unable to conquer the land until Abimelech's grandson would die. In effect, Abraham's decision to covenant with the Philistines resulted in the exile to Egypt, and the test of the Akedah was meant to refine Abraham's faith and obedience...

A midrash states that after Isaac had become a wealthy man, his older brother Ishmael visited him and taunted him regarding the virtue of circumcision. "I was thirteen years old when God commanded my father to circumcise us. I willingly submitted to this painful operation in obedience to my father and to God. But you, on the other hand, were a mere baby, before you had the intelligence to protest." Isaac replied, "You praise yourself because of one organ of your body, but I swear that if God commanded my father to sacrifice my entire body, I would do so joyfully." God heard Isaac's remark and took note of it. He would one day test Abraham with just such a command...

### **A Test like Job's**

Another midrash (quoting from Sanhedrin 89b) says that the sacrifice of Isaac was similar to God's test of Job. One day the angels came to minister before God and Satan was among them. The LORD said to Satan, "From where have you come?" Satan answered the LORD and said, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it."

And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Abraham, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Abraham fear God for no reason? He had no sons for a long

time and he built altars to please you, but after his request for a child was granted, he has long forgotten you. He sacrificed many cattle for a feast for Isaac, but he did not offer you a gift of thanks. Now many years have passed since then and he has yet to offer you a single sacrifice!" God answered that Abraham had made the feast in honor of his son, yet if He asked him to kill his son for the sake of God, he would gladly do so. That is what the words, "After these things God tested Abraham" mean: after Satan's words of challenge were uttered, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Rashi suggests that God prefaced the test with the word "please" (i.e., "Please take your son, your only son, whom you love, even Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering.") God modified His request with "please" because the sacrifice of Isaac was not a command, and therefore Abraham was in a position to refuse.

### **The Journey to Moriah**

Immediately after Abraham agreed to fulfill God's will, Satan began scheming of ways to defeat him. He placed numerous obstacles in Abraham's way to prevent him from fulfilling God's request, such as causing a surging river to appear directly on the path. He whispered into Isaac's ears that Abraham had gone insane. He tried to make Abraham question whether he had actually heard the voice of God. He disguised himself as an old man to Abraham who insinuated that Abraham had listened to a devil rather than God. Satan later disguised himself as a distressed Isaac and appeared to torment Sarah, hoping that she would somehow intervene and divert Abraham's mission. Throughout the journey to Moriah, Satan tried his best to dissuade Abraham, but God gave Abraham grace to prevail

Abraham's test was also Sarah's test. Abraham realized he would have to gain Sarah's assent to let Isaac go off to Moriah, so he convinced her that sending Isaac to Shem's school would be the best thing for him. Sarah was apprehensive and clothed her son with special garments. She followed the men as far as Hebron, where Abraham finally told her to turn back. "Who knows if I shall ever look upon you again?" she said in parting to her son. It is a provocative thought that Sarah - not Isaac - was the real victim of the

Akedah. She, not Isaac, is the one who died, after all.

Jewish tradition has associated the cries of Sarah with the blasts of the shofar during Rosh Hashanah. The broken notes of the shofar are thought to recall her crying for her son.

Rabbinical wordplay often links the idea of a "test" (Heb. "nissayon") with that of a "banner" or "miracle ("nes" in Hebrew). The sages note that God tests someone to enable him or her to become aware of their own capabilities (or limitations). Testing is therefore inherently "soul-building." In addition, God tests people in order to demonstrate their capabilities to others. In the case of Abraham, the test of the Akedah functioned as a "banner" of his righteousness and faithful obedience. Thus he is rightly regarded as the "father of faith" to all who believe (Romans 4:11, 16)

On the third day, Abraham saw a mountain bathed in a light that extended from earth to heaven, with the Shekinah Glory resting above it. He then asked Isaac, "What do you see?" Isaac answered, "I see a lovely hill with a beautiful cloud rising over it." Abraham then asked his two servants what they saw, and they answered they saw nothing. Abraham then told his two servants, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and we will return to you."

Rashi states this was a prophecy of Isaac's resurrection, though other sages say that it meant that Abraham would return with his ashes. The New Testament comments that this was evidence that Abraham believed that God would resurrect Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Isaac carried the wood and Abraham carried the fire and knife. According to Jewish tradition, Isaac was a 37 year old man who suspected that he was indeed going to be offered up as a sacrifice (Seder Olam Rabbah). Nevertheless, he did not flee from his father but continued to trust in him... They ascended the mountain together...

### **Isaac's willingness**

But Isaac needed to make sure of what was really happening. He needed to understand what was being asked of him. "And Isaac said to his father

Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

This is the first word of dialogue recorded over the three-day journey... It is hard to imagine Isaac's pathos during this exchange. The grammar of the dialog is somewhat odd. Why does the Torah say that Isaac said "to his father" Abraham? And why does Isaac call out to Abraham as "my father"?

The Hebrew could be read: "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering -- my son!" making it plain that Isaac was himself to be offered upon the altar. According to midrash, upon hearing this, Isaac put his face between his hands and wept. "Is this the Torah about which you spoke to mother?" he sobbed. When Abraham heard this, he wept also. But Isaac controlled himself and sought to comfort his father: "Do not feel distressed, my father. Fulfill your Creator's will through me! May my blood be an atonement for the future Jewish people" (Bereshit Rabbah).

The Torah then repeats the phrase, "and they both walked on together," indicating that Isaac had accepted his sacrificial death. Isaac had yielded his strength in perfect surrender and trust to his father, while Abraham held his beloved son's hand, afraid that he might lose courage and run away.

Compare the similarity of Jesus' words in Gethsemane:

**Luke 22:42-44** - "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground."

Could Christ have been recalling this story as he faced the Cross?

### **The Binding of Isaac**

Abraham built the altar on Moriah and "arranged the wood in order." According to tradition, this altar was in the very same place as the one built by Adam and later destroyed by the flood. It was rebuilt by Noah but later destroyed by Nimrod after the Dispersion of Babel. Now it was rebuilt by

Abraham.

According to the Talmud, Isaac asked his father to make the knots on his hands and feet tighter - not out of fear that he would change his mind and begin to resist - but in order to encourage his father to offer the sacrifice properly (Bereshit Rabbah 56:8). Since kosher slaughtering required the sacrificial victim's throat to be cut quickly, Isaac wanted to ensure that he did not flinch and thereby invalidate the sacrifice... Like the Suffering Servant who would come after him, Isaac "set his face like a flint" to fulfill God's will"

Compare **Isaiah 50:5-7** - "The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed."

Genesis Rabbah 56:3 comments on **Gen. 22:6**, "And Abraham took the wood and put it on his son Isaac, like one bearing his own cross."

### **Sacrifice halted**

According to various midrashim, when Abraham put his knife to his son's neck, Isaac's soul departed from him, but it returned when the Angel of the LORD said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

Rabbi Judah says: "When the sword touched Isaac's throat, his soul flew clean out from him. And when He [God] let His voice be heard from between the two cherubim, 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad,' the lad's soul returned to his body. Then his father unbound him, and Isaac rose, knowing that in this way the dead would come back to life in the future; whereupon he began to recite, 'Blessed art thou, oh Lord, who quickens the dead.'"

Some say that Isaac beheld the Shekinah Glory at that moment, others add that he saw the Holy One, blessed be He, and the chariot chambers and

the angels. Still others suggest God used the “vivifying dew from heaven in which is the light of the life of the soul” to revive him.

Some midrashim go much further, saying, “When Father Isaac was bound on the altar *and reduced to ashes and his sacrificial dust was cast upon Mount Moriah*, the Holy One, blessed be He, immediately brought him dew and revived him.” (referring to dew of Mt. Hermon in Psalm 133:3)

Why add this idea that Isaac actually died and was resurrected, which contradicts what the passage plainly states?

### **The Ram**

Imbedded in these commentaries is an early tradition that Isaac actually somehow exchanged identities with the ram, his substitute, and thus, mysteriously, died. In several different ways, the rabbis tried to merge them into one picture of what looks like substitutionary atonement.

Isaac was spared, the ram died, but both were involved in what they saw as one single sacrificial act.

The ram, they say, was the beloved bellweather of the flock, and Abraham had named him Isaac. So the Holy One, blessed be He, said “Let Isaac for Isaac come.” Another tradition (Rabbi Joshua) says that an angel fetched the ram from the Garden of Eden, where it had been grazing under the Tree of Life and drinking from the waters that course by.” (from Yalkut # 101) Or that it grew up “inside the firmament.”

Remember that Christ is called the "lamb (ram) slain from the foundation of the world"

(1 Pet. 1:20; Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8)

Abraham refused to put down the knife until the Holy One, blessed be He, swore to him that before Him the ashes of the ram would be regarded *as though they were Isaac's ashes*, and He swore it to him. (Sefer ha-Yashar, p. 81)

Finally, “At the time of the Akedah, Isaac’s soul quit him and went over to

the ram, which had been created on the first Sabbath eve twilight. And this is the meaning of “the sheep for his burnt offering, my son,” i.e. that the sheep is my son, actually.” (From Yalkut Reubeni)

The Targum on 1 Chronicles 21:15 says the reason God instructed the destroying angel, “It is enough, now stay thy hand” was because “He beheld the ashes of the Akedah of Isaac in the foundation of the altar,” which would later be built on that very spot.

Similarly, tradition says that when the exiles returned from Babylon and began to build the Second Temple, “they beheld Isaac’s ashes, that these lay on that spot” where the altar should be built.

### **The ‘Blood of the Akedah’**

Besides the “ashes” there are many references to the blood of Isaac, although none of Isaac’s blood was shed. Clearly the tradition merges the blood of the sacrificed ram with Isaac himself.

In one tradition, Isaac says to Abraham, “Come now and carry out the will of your Father in heaven: may it be His will that a quarter of my blood serve as an atonement for Israel.” (A quarter log of blood was what was required or life, being the amount assumed to reside in a newborn baby.)

The willingness of Isaac to be bound is seen as an atonement for Israel.

“The Holy One, blessed be He, will in the future revive the dead by merit of Isaac who offered himself on top of the altar, as it is said (Psalm 102:21), “To hear the groaning of the one in fetters, to open up release for the offspring appointed to death.”

The Akedah was supposed to have occurred on either Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.

"The Holy One, blessed be He, said, 'Sound before Me the ram's horn so that I may remember on your behalf the binding of Isaac and account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before Me'" (Rosh Hashanah, 16a)

But there is an interesting passage connecting the Akedah to Passover, too.

Discussing the meaning of the blood on the doorposts on Passover, “And when he seeth the blood” : He sees the blood of Isaac’s Akedah, as it is said (Gen. 22:14), “And Abraham called the name of the place ‘The Lord Seeth.’

### **‘In place of’**

The Hebrew word for “in place of” is “tahat.” This can be translated either as “in place of” or “after.” The rabbis asked why this phrase was included, when the meaning was already plain.

“Said the Holy One, blessed be He, By your life! First your son was the one sacrificed, but now this ram, too, after that.” (Tanhuma, Shelah, 14)

An effort was being made to, as closely as possible, link Isaac with the death of the ram.

In expanding on the meaning of “in place of,” the Genesis Rabbah explains:

“Abraham said before him, ‘Master of the Universe, behold, I am slaughtering the ram; do Thou regard this as though my son Isaac is slain before Thee. He took the blood of the ram and said: Do Thou regard this as though the blood of my son were being poured before Thee. As Abraham skinned the ram, he said: Do Thou regard this as though it were the skin of my son Isaac which is being flayed before Thee.

“As he coated the ram with salt, he said; Do Thou regard this as though the salt were being poured on my son Isaac. As he offered the limbs of the ram, he said: Do Thou regard this as though these were the limbs of my son Isaac being offered to Thee. As he burned the ram, he said: Do Thou regard this as though the ashes of my son Isaac were heaped up on top of the altar before Thee.

“So, during each and every step of the sacrificial service, as he did something to the ram, he would say: Do Thou regard this as though it were being done to my son Isaac - quite like the ancient formula: (If one says)

Now, this for that, this in place of that, this in exchange of that, the substitution is valid.”

The Talmud even sees the origin of the name Moriah in the word for “substitution.”

“What is the meaning of Moriah? Temurah, an exchange offering, and exchange, as in the idiom of “One may not exchange or substitute, yamir, for it (Leviticus 27:10)” (From Pesikta Rabbah, 40)

### **Reckon yourselves dead**

When Paul tells us to “Reckon yourselves dead,” (Romans 6:11) we should probably, like Abraham, not shrink from experientially going through what the crucifixion means to every one of our natural faculties - physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and spiritual. Place them each on the altar and make the declaration, trusting that God will “account it to you as if you had bound yourselves before Me.”

Abraham left everything behind, then was asked to give up even his spiritual inheritance, the Promised Seed. Paul may be commenting on this when he says:

**Romans 9:2-4** - “I have deep sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my own flesh and blood, the people of Israel.”