

Abraham and Isaac



Genesis 22:1 "God tested Abraham. (God) said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' (God) said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.'"

In today's first Reading, Abraham feels called by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. You will surely all remember this remarkable story from Sunday School, although with its PG rating it probably wasn't until you were a teenager or older that you really began to grapple with this tale.

And there are hints in the story that we often miss. For instance, Abraham, we are told, got up very early in the morning and left camp with two of his servants and his son Isaac,

apparently without talking to Sarah first, without telling her what he was about to do. So how confident was Abraham in this righteous call from God? Abraham took Isaac and the servants to the mountain to which God directed him, days away from home. Then Abraham left the servants at the bottom of the mountain, so they could not interfere, and he and Isaac climbed to mountain to make the called for sacrifice to God. On the way up the mountain, Isaac, carrying the wood, asked his father where the animal was for the sacrifice, and Abraham answered his son that God would provide the lamb for himself. And God, as we all remember from Sunday School, intervened at the last moment and spared Isaac, and rewarded Abraham once again for his great faith and trust in God, for his willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac, whom he loved. This story too is often viewed a sign of Abraham's great faith in God, but the consequences of this event lingered for the remainder of Abraham's life.

And the mysteries of this event remain unanswered, like why Abraham and Isaac were tested in this seemingly cruel way by a merciful and just God, why they both consented to this action without apparent protest, and why was Isaac's life spared at the last moment? Why did Abraham, the would-be slaughterer here, become in the prayers of the world's three great Abrahamic religions, a symbol of grace, compassion and love?

For many biblical commentators, the central point of the drama in Genesis 22 is that God abhors human sacrifice, which was a cultic practice that was indeed engaged in by some Canaanites at the time of the patriarchs. The ram which Abraham finds caught in the thicket after Isaac is spared (v. 13), serves as the transitional symbol marking the irreversible shift from human to animal sacrifice in the days ahead.

But the Sunday Reading ends too quickly for us to appreciate what really happened afterwards as a result of this story. For if you read the verses that follow carefully, you will see how Abraham never went home again after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham did not return to Hebron, where his wife Sarah was, where they lived, where they settled when they first arrived in Canaan. We are specifically told instead that Abraham settled in Beersheba. In fact, Abraham is never recorded as ever returning to Hebron again, except for one time, to mourn and weep at Sarah's death and to bury her in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites as a burial place for her. There is a ring of authenticity in lots of the details of this story to suggest that the story of the Patriarch Abraham is not some stylized fable of a man, but the struggle of an ordinary person to be faithful to God.

It is not surprise that Abraham's and Sarah's relationship was strained after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac, and I am not amazed we never see Abraham and Sarah together again, but I also wonder about the relation between Abraham and his son Isaac. In next week's Reading, Abraham will sent his chief servant to go and find a suitable wife for Isaac back in the old country, back in Haran, and that story next week will draw to a close Abraham's story and begin the transition to the story of the Patriarch Isaac. The servant of Abraham will take lots of gold and silver and camels and ornate garments to present to Rebekah's father Laban. Then the servant brings Rebekah home to Isaac, but pay particular attention next week to where Isaac appears in that story. He is not with his father Abraham in Beersheba. Though his father is organizing a wife for his son, Abraham and Isaac are never mentioned together again after today's Reading.

Listen carefully as the servant is returning home with Rebecca, his mission of finding a wife for Isaac successful, we encounter this odd statement: "And Isaac had come from **Be'er LaChai Ro'i**, and was settled in the Negev," **Be'er LaChai Ro'i** that's the Hebrew name of the well that Hagar discovered in last week's Reading, when she and Ishmael were cast out into the wilderness by Abraham and Sarah. Why should the text insert this geographical reference before describing Isaac's reception of

Rebecca and his taking her as his wife? Why is Isaac identified there? What does this suggest? Why is Isaac living there in the Negev, and not in Hebron, where his mother Sarah lived, and died? The last verse of next week's Reading is "Then Isaac brought (Rebekah) into his mother Sarah's tent. He took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." Clearly Isaac was mourning his mother Sarah's death, that he remained close to her after today's Reading. But where is Sarah's tent in this story? It would appear to be there in the Negev, and not in Hebron, where she and Abraham had settled?

I think it is fair to imagine that Hagar and Ishmael might have settled in the place where Hagar found the miraculous well that saved them both, and where God blessed Ishmael. But why is Isaac there, and why is Sarah's tent there? Clearly Isaac was closer to his mother, than to his father, who had tried to sacrifice him in today's Reading. In next week's Reading, Isaac is still apparently living in his mother's tent, even after her death. But why are they there at the well of Hagar? Did Isaac and Sarah go and seek out Hagar and Ishmael at some later time? Might it not be reasonable to assume that they went and reunited with the "lost" side of their family, after Abraham has almost killed Isaac?

So I am not at all surprised that Isaac and his new bride are found next week in his mother Sarah's tent, and not with Abraham back in Beersheba. For after today's Reading, Isaac is never mentioned as with his father Abraham again! Meanwhile we are told that Abraham then took a new wife, Keturah, in his old age, living alone as he was, without his wife Sarah and his son Isaac, and that Abraham had six more sons with his new wife Keturah.

So at the end of his life, Abraham is living without his son Ishmael whom we were told again and again that he loved, a child he cast out into his desert to please his wife Sarah, and that Abraham is without his beloved Sarah, his wife for so many, many years, for whom he wept and mourned at her death, and he is now also after today's Reading without his son, Isaac, whom he loved. The end of Abraham's life must have been very hard indeed, and even though Abraham had six more sons with Keturah, he left everything, we are told, to Isaac, whom he loved.

The Biblical story of the Patriarch Abraham is one that is both inspiring and disconcerting. The faith of Abraham and Sarah that God would lead them to a distant land from their home in the Ur of the Chaldees and give that land to their ancestors forever, even though they were both old and without children at the time, is inspiring. But Abraham's further willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac when God so asked is disconcerting,

and although Isaac was spared by God in the end, Abraham suffered the consequences of that action. Abraham was separated from his beloved wife Sarah and estranged from his son Isaac, whom he loved, and also estranged from his other son, Ishmael, and his mother Hagar, whom he cast out into the wilderness with inadequate supplies.

So the last action of the Patriarch Abraham was to secure a wife for his son Isaac, who took Rebekah, and he loved her, and lived somewhere else, somewhere away from Abraham his father. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death, but alas, was there any comfort for poor Abraham. When Abraham died, his sons Isaac and Ishmael, we are told, came together to bury him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites as a burial site, there Abraham is buried next to his beloved wife Sarah, from whom he had been separated for so many years, buried by his two sons from whom he had been estranged for so long, and from whom he appeared to have lived apart for the rest of his life. God's promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation was indeed fulfilled, but that promise cost Abraham everything. AMEN.