# THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS

# GENESIS CHAPTER 22

# VERSES TAKEN FROM THE TANAKH, THE JEWISH BIBLE

# THE ULTIMATE TEST OF ABRAHAM

***22:1…Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test.***

(In one unconventional but provocative interpretation of this story—that this served as a lesson in empathy to Sarah for her treatment of Hagar and Ishmael.)

In this verse, God is rendered ***Ha-Elohim, "the God."*** In the great majority of cases, God is referred to as Elohim but, in more than a few instances, God is referred to as Ha-Elohim, "the" Elohim.

What is more important to note is the very first sentence of the Binding of Isaac story— "the God put Abraham to the test"—lets the reader know that God did not want Isaac sacrificed; He was only putting Abraham to a test. And, of course, this is shown at the end of the story when God stopped Abraham from going through with the sacrifice.

While this episode is known in Hebrew as ***Akedat Yitzchak, "the binding of Isaac,"*** in Western literature it is usually referred to as "the sacrifice of Isaac," a misnomer that distorts the essence of the event, as God soon makes it clear that He never wants human beings to be sacrificed.

***22:1 (Cont.) …He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am."***

Abraham's response, the Hebrew word ***Hineni, ("Here I am")*** has become resonating among Jews as a statement of readiness to fulfill a calling, comparable to an enthusiastically offered ***"Yes, sir!"***

# GOD SAYS "PLEASE."

***22:2…And He said, "Take your son, your favorite one, whom you love,***

Though the translation does not note it, there is a Hebrew word—***na***—in the text following the word "Take." ***"Na,"*** which occurs more than sixty times in Genesis, is used only five times in the rest of the entire Old Testament when God speaks to a person. Each time God asks the individual to do something staggering, something that defies rational explanation or understanding. Here then is an inkling at least that God is fully aware of the magnitude of His test for Abraham.

## WHY DIDN'T GOD JUST SAY, "TAKE ISAAC"?

Why does God use these descriptions— "your favorite, (or 'only') whom you love"—and not just say "Isaac"? Perhaps the purpose was to make the request/command all the more difficult for Abraham to obey.

***22:2 (Cont.) …and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."***

The Hebrew words used here for "go" ***(lech-lecha)*** were also the first words God said to Abraham when He told him to leave his father and go to another land. (Genesis 12:1) Now God tells Abraham to take his son, leave his home, and go to another land with the same words. This presumably made God's order all the more compelling.

## WHY DID ABRAHAM AWAKEN EARLY TO GO AND SACRIFICE HIS SON?

***22:3…So early next morning,***

Presumably, God appeared to Abraham at night, likely in a dream.

Why are we told Abraham awakened early? Some Rabbi's cite this as the Torah's way of communicating Abraham was eager to perform God's commandments. Given that this command was to kill his beloved son, which is hard to imagine.

Perhaps Abraham could not sleep well that night.

Perhaps Abraham wished to get up before Sarah did.

And maybe there is a simpler reason: In the ancient world, one who sets out on a long journey leaves at the break of dawn. Leaving later than that is a waste of daylight.

## WHY DIDN'T ABRAHAM ARGUE WITH GOD?

Abraham did not argue with God as he did in the case of Sodom. Why? Perhaps because Sodom seemed to be an affront to justice—God seemed ready to kill innocent people. But the command to sacrifice his son probably did not strike Abraham as unjust (even though Isaac was an innocent) because in the ancient world, child sacrifice was universally considered acceptable, even admirable, (insofar as it showed devotion to one's god) and because children were regarded as possessions of the parents. So, Abraham understandably may not have perceived the command to sacrifice Isaac as morally wrong but rather as a command from the God he believed in.

What might have puzzled Abraham, therefore, was not his being told to sacrifice his child but being told to sacrifice the child whom God had promised would be the father of a nation. How could the commandment to sacrifice Isaac be reconciled with God's promise of a future nation emanating from Isaac? In not fully understanding God's ways, Abraham represented every believer who came after him.

The ultimate reason Abraham did not argue with God is most likely this: His argument with God over destroying Sodom convinced him God is just and God knows what is best. Thus, after Sodom, Abraham never again argued with God.

## WHY GOD TESTED ABRAHAM THIS WAY: THE UNIVERSALITY OF HUMAN SACRIFICE.

Virtually every ancient society about which we have data had human sacrifice—the killing of human beings to propitiate their society's god's.

Only if one understands this can one understand why God would test Abraham in this way: "Are you, Abraham, willing to do for Me what all other human beings are prepared to do for their (false) gods?"

And only by understanding how universal human sacrifice was can one begin to appreciate how radically different the Torah was from every other society. And then, one must ask the most important question: Why did only one book, one culture, one faith on earth abolish an evil practiced by every other society and faith in the world?

Once again, one has two choices: this abolition came from uniquely moral—indeed superior—human beings, or it came from God. Given human behavior throughout history, we can be convinced it came from a Moral Creator God.

The Torah repeatedly speaks of human, specifically child, sacrifice among the Canaanites. And archaeologists have "uncovered evidence of ritual human sacrifice in many ancient societies, including the ancient Greeks, the Vikings, the ancient Mayans, the Aztecs and the Incas, as well as ancient China.

The practice has not only been documented in ancient Africa but in contemporary Africa as well.

## GOOD PEOPLE MUST BE AS WILLING TO SACRIFICE AS BAD PEOPLE ARE.

From God's perspective, the command to sacrifice Isaac was, as the Torah notes at the beginning of the chapter, a test. And what exactly was this test? As noted above, God was asking Abraham: "Will you, Abraham, be as obedient to me, the one God—the only God—of the world, as others are to their man-made local and multiple gods?"

That is a question innumerable people have had to answer throughout history. Will the good be as committed to what is good and true as the bad are to what is bad and false? History reveals the answer often in the negative. All too frequently, the decent have not fought the indecent until it was almost too late—and sometimes it was too late. Most good people are not fighters.

On the other hand, throughout history, innumerable people have indeed been prepared to make Abraham's sacrifice. Vast numbers of parents have willingly sent their children to fight and die for their beliefs. When the cause is moral, these people are doing God's will. The question, therefore, is not whether parents, even

in our time, are prepared to sacrifice their children, it is whether they are doing so for a good and true cause or an evil and false one. (As was the case with millions of German and Japanese parents during World War II, and the case with parents who celebrate their child's death when the child engaged in an Islamist suicide terror attack.)

All the preceding notwithstanding, the ultimate message of this story is that human sacrifice is morally unacceptable to God. The good God introduced to the world by the Torah abhors child sacrifice.

***22:3 (Cont.) … Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac.***

The Torah heightens the drama by continuing to emphasize the relationship between Abraham and Isaac ***("his son")*** throughout this experience.***22:3 (Cont.) …He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him.***

***22:4…On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar.***

Rabbi's and Scholars have noted that Abraham is not recorded as having said a word during this three-day journey. "He seems to move about his grim task with silent resignation, as if he were an automaton."

Did they literally travel three days? Rabbis have comments on the expression, "On the third day":

"The third day" is often used in the Torah to refer to some ominous event, such as the execution of Hamor and the Shechemites, (Genesis 34:25) the execution of Pharoah's baker, (Genesis 40:20) and Joseph testing his brothers. (Genesis 42:18) It may be that one should take 'On the third day' in a similar way here. The expression is used not primarily for exact chronological purposes, but as an idiom to underscore the drama in the narrative."

Another take on this event deals with the length of the trip. "Why so long?" is a question we could ask, as God could have found a nearer place at which Abraham could have sacrificed Isaac. Most likely, God chose such a place to underscore the magnitude of the test. "In a moment of religious enthusiasm, Abraham might readily fulfill the divine command." People often say "yes" and, as time passes,

regret having said so. But Abraham is forced to journey with Isaac a full seventy-two hours.

Further, as Abraham proceeds towards the mountain, he must be suffering additional trepidation, imagining what he will tell Sarah when he returns from the trip alone.

***22:5…Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."***

Abraham's use of the word "we" is puzzling: Didn't he assume that only he would return? Most likely, he wanted to spare Isaac the pain of knowing what was about to happen. It is also possible he was concerned Isaac might resist, or he suspected/hoped that is was all a test. Or all three possibilities might have been true.

***22:6…And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife;***

Though we do not know Isaac's age at this point, this verse indicates he was old enough to carry the load of firewood up the mountain. The Torah here uses a very uncommon word for knife, "ma'achelet," which literally means "feeder." It is a slaughtering knife—it "feeds" people—which underscores the reality of what of what is about to take place.

***22:6 (Cont.) …and the two walked off together.***

***22:7…Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!"***

This dialogue is the only one between Abraham and Isaac recorded in the Torah. While the Torah does not explicitly state Isaac's age at the time of the "akedah," this conversation, along with the previous verse, suggests he is a lad. Perhaps approaching adolescence or early teens—rather than a young child, since he not only was able to carry the load of firewood but understood a sacrifice was about to be offered.

***22:7 (Cont.) …And he answered, "Yes, my son,"***

Abraham spoke gently and affectionately to Isaac, believing these were their final moments together. Abraham probably wanted to convey to Isaac how much he loved him, given what he (Abraham) was about to do.

***22:7 (Cont.) …And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"***

***22:8…And Abraham said, "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.***

***22:9…They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.***

This verse uses five verbs to describe the steps taken by Abraham: (Translating directly from the Hebrew) "came," "built," "spread," "bound," and "put." One gets the sense that he methodically went through the necessary steps, in no rush, no doubt with a tremendous sense of dread. He must have been relived that Isaac apparently, and remarkably, put up no resistance. With the brief exception of his questioning his father about the lack of a sacrificial animal, Isaac remained passive throughout the story, as he did at other times. On the other hand, if Abraham is to be honored for his obedience to God, Isaac must also be honored for his obedience to God—and to his father. After all, his father was an old man; if Isaac wished to resist him, it would have been very easy to do so. Yet he did not struggle, run away, or even verbally protest.

***22:10…And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son.***

This verb, "shachat," ("to slaughter") is the same word that the Torah uses to refer to the slaughtering of animals for meat. The Torah does not use the euphemistic term "sacrifice" (korban) to describe what Abraham was prepared to do. The Torah's language is literal and explicit so as to impress upon the reader the terrible reality of what human sacrifice is really about: slaughter.

***22:11…Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am."***

In the beginning of the story, it took the commanding authority of God Himself to get Abraham to go along with a plan to kill his son. But an angel—not God—is

all that was needed to stop him from carrying out the plan. The angel called out to him twice because the matter was so very urgent: Abraham was about to plunge a knife into his son.

"This is nearly identical with the calling out to Hagar in 21:17. In fact, a whole configuration of parallels between the two stories is invoked. Each of Abraham's sons is threatened with death in the wilderness, one in the presence of his mother, the other in the presence (and by the hand) of his father. In each case the angel intervenes at the critical moment, referring to the son fondly as "na'ar, or "lad." At the center of the story, Abraham's hand holds the knife; Hagar is enjoined to "hold her hand" (the literal meaning of the Hebrew) on the lad. In the end, each of the sons is promised to become progenitor of a great people, the threats to Abraham's continuity having been averted.

***22:12…And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him.***

Now we reach the ultimate message of this story: human sacrifice is morally unacceptable to God. The good God introduced to the world by the Torah abhors child sacrifice. This was another unique Torah contribution to human moral development. God had no interest in the sacrifice of Isaac—and has no interest in the sacrifice of any other human being. God has two interests here: to see if Abraham would pass the ultimate test of faith and to teach Abraham (and the rest of humanity) that the one true God prohibits human sacrifice. That is the essence of ethical monotheism: the one true God demands adherence to the one true morality.

This is the first (and most dramatic) example of this lesson but, not the only. The Torah repeatedly prohibits child sacrifice (another indication of how widespread human sacrifice was)—see Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-3, Deuteronomy 12:29-31, 18:9-10.

If God had required Abraham to go through with the sacrifice of Isaac, Biblical religion/Judaism would have been just another pagan religion, differing from other religions only by having one god rather than many. But the difference between polytheism and the Torah's monotheism is not primarily the number of god's; it is the moral nature of the Torah's God versus all other gods.

Prohibiting Abraham from sacrificing his son exemplified the triumph of ethical monotheism over paganism.

## FAITH DEMAND SACRIFICE

***22:12 (Cont.) …For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favorite one, from Me."***

An obvious question is whether God meant this literally? Did the omniscient God not know whether Abraham would pass the test? No matter what you may believe, that the God of the Bible does not know what choices humans will make, since the human being, unlike everything else in the universe, has free will, or that God, existing outside of time, does know what humans will do before they do it. It is clear this test was not performed for God's benefit. Indeed, it may not have even been performed for Abraham's benefit. It does not seem to have benefitted him—and may well have cost him his marriage, as we shall see, and perhaps his son's trust.

Rather, the test was performed to teach the rest of us about the nature of faith—that it requires something of us, and to teach us that God does not want human sacrifice. But short of that, true religion does demand some sacrifice.

When any religious person says, "I am depriving myself of something because of a demand from God"—and that demand conforms with the Will of God and His notions of the good and the just—that individual is demonstrating the nature of serious faith.

***22:13…When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So, Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.***

***22:14…And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, hence the present saying, "In the mount of the Lord there is vision."***

***22:15…The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven,***

***22:16…and said, "By Myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored son,***

As noted, every parent who has sent a child off to war was also "not withholding" their son or daughter. In effect, the child sacrifice test is one, unfortunately, that reoccurs in every age. The question, therefore, is not whether parents—and society as a whole—should ever be prepared to sacrifice a child; the question is whether the sacrifice is morally necessary. God's behavior at the story's end makes it clear that not all sacrifices are morally required or morally just.

"Sacrifice" is like "idealism." In and of itself, it is a morally positive term. If somebody is an idealist for a good cause, idealism will lead to good. But there is plenty of idealism for evil causes.

***22:17…I will bestow my blessing upon you, and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes.***

Until now, Abraham was promised that his seed would be as numerous as the stars; now he is also told that they will be as numerous as the sands on the seashore. Since people see far more grains of sand than stars in the sky, this verse greatly expands the magnitude of God's promise.

To ancients, this verse had to seem incredible—they could not believe the number of stars was comparable to the number of grains of sand. When they looked up, they saw far fewer stars in the sky than grains of sand on any seashore. But scientists now believe there are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on the earth.

Nevertheless, while the equation of sand and stars is remarkable, both claims are meant to be dramatic, not mathematically precise.

***22:18…All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command."***

Yet again, God emphasizes that Jewish choseness is for the benefit of mankind. (See Genesis 12:3) This is another reason the lessons of the Torah must be relevant to all people and should be taught to all people.

***22:19…Abraham then returned to his servants, and they departed together for Beer-sheba; and Abraham stayed in Beer-sheba.***

The word “stayed” in this context means “settled,” which makes it clear that Abraham did not merely visit Beersheba; he made it his new home. This is highly significant in that it would mean that Abraham did not return to live with Sarah in Kiryat. (Hebron) In fact, the next time the Torah mentions Sarah, (Genesis 23:1) it is to chronicle her death in Kiryat Arba and to note that Abraham came from elsewhere (presumably Beersheba) to mourn her. (Genesis 23:2)

***22:20…Some time later, Abraham was told, “Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor:***

***22:21…Uz the first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram;***

***22:22…and Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel”—***

***22:23…Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother.***

Only one female name is listed here—Rebecca. Immediately after learning Isaac will not be sacrificed, we learn about the birth of his future wife, for it is through this couple that the line of God’s people will continue.

***22:24…And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.***

Abraham’s brother, Nahor, like Jacob later, had twelve sons.

**NEXT: GENESIS CHAPTER 23. THE DEATH OF SARAH.**