

Abraham And Isaac -- A Reflection
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At Our Lady of Fatima Church In Scarborough

After these things God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He 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 upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; and he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place afar off. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My Father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad 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." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of the place the LORD will provide; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

MIDRASHIC & TALMUDIC STORY/INTERPRETATION:
(Read from "The Midrash Says")

Reflections: The Targumim: (paraphrase, translation) were composed in pre-Christian era to make the text easier to understand in the synagogue, when Aramaic became the language of the people. First they were transmitted orally, then they were written down.

Introduction: The Targums "re-write" this biblical story. They indicate that Abraham had told Isaac that he was to be sacrificed: in short, he was to be the sacrificial lamb. Next, that Isaac willingly consented to be bound. Isaac is favoured with a heavenly vision when he is lying bound on the altar. When Isaac is spared, the Targums put into Abraham's mouth a prayer of thanksgiving, in which he asks God that his own obedience and Isaac's meritorious willingness to be bound might be remembered for future generations of Isaac's children, and that in times of distress their prayer may be answered and their sins forgiven. Such is the general "re-writing" of the biblical story.

1. The Place of the Aqedah

All Targums agree that Isaac was bound on the mountain in Jerusalem where the Temple was to be built. It is the site of God's presence. There the Shekhina was revealed. So, the Rabbis mark the place of the Aqedah with the appearance of God's Glory: "Abraham's eyes were gazing on Isaac's eyes, and Isaac's eyes were gazing on the angels of the height. Isaac saw them, Abraham did not see them. At that hour the angels of the height went forth and said to each other: Come, see two Unique righteous ones..."

2. The Spiritual meaning of the Aqedah

In the Bible, Isaac's question "Where is the lamb for sacrifice?" leads to Abraham's reply: "God will see for Himself a lamb for sacrifice, my son. And the two of them went together." Another Targum States: "From before the Lord a lamb has been prepared for Him for the sacrifice; and if not, you are the lamb of the sacrifice. And the two of them went together with a perfect heart." this Targum has understood the Hebrew to mean: "God will see for Himself: the lamb for the sacrifice (is) my son." Two vital points emerge from this verse. First, Isaac knew that he was the victim, and willingly accepted the role. Second, he is identified as a sacrificial lamb. Thus, at the critical moment, Isaac said to Abraham: "Tie my hands well, lest in the hour of my distress I kick and confuse you, and your sacrifice be found polluted, and I be knocked into the pit of destruction for the world to come."

Just as Israel assembled at Sinai with a perfect heart to receive the Torah and to do God's will, so Abraham and Isaac proceeded to the Aqedah. Thus they carried out the command of the Shema' to love the Lord with their whole heart. Isaac is to be the perfect sacrifice, with his mind, body and soul utterly given over and consecrated to God. The Lord accepted this perfect offering. A heavenly voice proclaimed: Come, see two Unique Ones in My world. One slays and the other is being slain: the one who slays does not refuse, and the one who is being slain stretches out his neck.

Isaac is the lamb of sacrifice, and all future lamb offerings were held to be a "memorial" of his Aqedah = Passover lamb = "Poem of the Four Nights": "The heavens were bowed and descended, and Isaac saw their perfections, and his eyes were dimmed because of their perfection. And he called it the Second Night." Isaac, the lamb of the burnt offering, is thus placed on the same spiritual level as the Passover lamb. By a lamb was Isaac redeemed; by a lamb Israel was redeemed, by a LAMB was humanity redeemed: JESUS.

3. Abraham's Prayer

"And Abraham worshipped and prayed, saying: You, O Lord, are He who sees and is not seen. I beseech mercy from before you, O Lord - all is revealed and known before you - that there was no division in my heart at the time when you ordered me to sacrifice Isaac my son, and to make him dust and ashes before you. But at once I arose in the morning and performed your command with joy, and established your command. And now I ask mercy from before you, O Lord Elohim; when Isaac's sons shall come to the hour of distress, do you remember for them the Binding of Isaac their father, and loose and forgive their sins, and redeem them from distress, so that the generations who are to arise after him may say: On the mountain of the house of the sanctuary of the Lord, Abraham offered Isaac his son, and on this mountain - it is the house of the sanctuary - the Glory of the Shekhina of the Lord was revealed to him."

4. The Time of the Aqedah = Passover/Rosh ha-Shanah (New Year) = Shophar.

The Aqedah was originally recalled at Passover. Thus the prayer on Rosh ha-Shannah: "Remember unto us, O Lord our God the covenant ... which thou swearest unto Abraham our Father on Mount Moriah: and may the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar appear before Thee, and how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will with a perfect heart."

Conclusion

The Targums, when speaking of the Aqedah, convey the idea that Isaac, a grown man, in total agreement with Abraham, willingly consented to be bound in sacrifice upon an altar on the Temple mount. They presented Isaac as a perfect victim, and strongly emphasize that he is a martyr. He is the lamb of sacrifice, who, although not killed, is fully and completely offered. He has a vision of heaven, and his action has expiatory value. All future lamb sacrifices recall the Aqedah.

From the New Testament:

Galatians 3.6-10, 13-14:

Thus Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who has faith. For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" -- that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith ...

Hebrews 11.17-19:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promise was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence he did receive him back, and this was a symbol.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Do you find it difficult to discern God's will for you?
- What do you think could help you to discern His will for you?
- In your opinion, how can anyone know what God is planning for him day by day?
- Do you find it difficult to obey? Why?
- Do you find it difficult to obey God? Why?
- What is faith? Do you have the faith of Abraham? If yes, why? If not, why?
- Do you find it difficult to sacrifice some things to do God's will? Why?