



## **THE AKEDAH: THE BINDING OF ISAAC WHEN GOD ALONE IS SUFFICIENT**

**Genesis 22:1-19**

[Excerpt from the forthcoming article: The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac]

### **Introduction**

Genesis 22:1-19 is among the best known and theologically most demanding episodes in the Abrahamic Narrative. It poses acute questions about the nature of faith and God's dealings with those who trust in Him. In many ways, this episode brings the Abrahamic Narrative to its dramatic resolution.

The narrative forms a unmistakable counterpart to Abram's call to faith at the beginning of the Abrahamic Narrative (Gen. 12:1-9). To be sure, there are other episodes yet to follow. But after this one, the dramatic intensity of the Abrahamic Narrative is noticeably relaxed. Thus, our present episode serves as a way to bring together the main affirmations of the Abrahamic Narrative.

The greatest test in Abraham's life came after he had finally received the promised son, Isaac. However, he was to give his firstborn son back to God through sacrifice. It was one thing to trust the LORD while waiting for the promise; but it was quite another thing to continue to trust the Word of the LORD when it called for the patriarch to do that which seemed unreasonable and contradictory. Would Abraham cling to the child that God had given him (the child upon which the future was based), or would he continue to obey? The LORD's test was designed to see to what extent he would obey.

With some vacillation regarding Sarah and Pharaoh and Abimelech (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18), Abraham has been a man of faith, trusting in God's enablement to bring forth an heir. "And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God" (Rom. 4:19-20). This is most directly evident in his response to the LORD's promise in Genesis 15:6, and his embrace of circumcision in Genesis 17:22-27. All of that has come to fruition in Genesis 21:1-8 in the birth of Isaac. After that birth, what could come next to extend the dramatic development of the Abrahamic Narrative is not readily apparent. If the story of Abraham had ended with the birth of Isaac, we would then have only a story of origins.

However, in our present episode, an unexpected thing happens. Only now do we see how serious faith is. This episode underscores an individual's faith in God which is tested to the extreme. This passage of Scripture is clearly about a test (Gen. 22:1), but not the kind of tests that we frequently find in Scripture that introduce some adversity so that the believer must respond in faith. This is a test of obedience to a clear commandment of the LORD. Those who believe in the LORD claim to obey God's Word, or at least agree to obey God's Word. However, to what extent will they obey? When the LORD commands His people to make some costly sacrifice, to do some task that seems unreasonable or impossible, how willing to obey are they?

In this episode, the reader is alerted at the very outset that it was a test for Abraham. The LORD instructed him to do something that he would have never imagined. Not only was he asking him to make a child sacrifice, but he was asking for the child who would be the heir to the promises. Thus, the primary emphasis seems to fall on the depiction of Abraham's faith in his God. When God's promise seems to fail, is God alone sufficient? From Abraham's advantage point, the answer is in the affirmative. From the beginning of the episode, there is not the slightest hint that he wavered in his faith or doubted. As a result, the passage of Scripture provides a fitting climax to the Abrahamic Narrative, demonstrating the unparalleled faith of the patriarch in demonstrating that he feared God, the undergirding salient point of the text.

### **Structure**

The account of the sacrifice of Isaac constitutes the aesthetic and theological summit of the entire Abrahamic Narrative. It has long been admired for the brilliance of its narrative technique and for the profundity of its theology, which has inspired so much reflection both by Jews and Christians alike.

From a literary standpoint, it is thoroughly integrated with the preceding episodes about Abraham, which are clearly presupposed at every turn. Most obviously, the reaffirmation of the promises (vv. 17-18) of blessing, numerous descendants, inheritance, and blessing to the nations combines the refrains of the earlier episodes (Gen. 12:2, 3; 17:16, 20; 18:18; 16:10; 17:2, 20; 15:4-5) while introducing another superlative, "like the sand on the seashore" (v. 17), into the promises. The phrases "your son, your only child" (vv. 2, 12, 16) presuppose particularly Genesis 21 with its account of Isaac's birth and Ishmael's expulsion.

## THE LITERARY UNITY OF GENESIS 22:1-19

Introduction: "Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham" (1a)

A The command of God: Abraham is to sacrifice his only son (1b-2)

B Abraham takes deliberate actions in preparation to sacrifice his son (3-6b)

C Abraham and Isaac walk together (6c)

a Isaac said to Abraham, his father—

b And he [Isaac] said: "Father?"

**DIALOGUE BETWEEN  
X ABRAHAM AND ISAAC  
(22:7-8a)**

**x [Abraham] said: "Here I am, my son!"**

b' [Isaac] said: "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for offering?"

a' Abraham said to Isaac: "God will see to/for Himself the lamb for offering, my son!"

C' Abraham and Isaac walk together (8b)

B' Abraham takes deliberate actions to sacrifice Isaac (9-10)

A' The command of the LORD: Abraham is not to sacrifice his only son (11-19a)

Epilogue: Return to Beersheba (19b)

### Figure 1

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#### Analysis of the Chiasmic Structure

We may begin our study by observing the intricate and symmetrical construction of the episode. It is clear from the inverted parallel structure in Figure 1 that Abraham and Isaac's dialogue (**X**, vv. 7-8) is the apex of the episode, and perhaps, that of the Abrahamic Narrative. The remaining episode has corresponding panels: **A** (vv. 1b-2) with **A'** (vv. 11-19); **B** (vv. 3-6b) with **B'** (vv. 9-10); and **C** (v. 6c) with **C'** (v. 8b). This literary parallelism is clearly a well defined chiasmic structure.

#### Genesis 22:1-19 as the Structural Thematic Peak

There are three primary evidences pointing to Genesis 22:1-19 as the thematic peak within the Abrahamic Narrative. First, and most significant, in this episode of the Narrative, the thematically central character, Abraham, occurs as the subject of an episodic framework verb more times than any other. Thirty times throughout these nineteen verses Abraham functions in this manner, twelve more than in any other episode. It is a patent fact that an author of a text will employ the key character most significantly at the most crucial portion of the story.

Furthermore, the combined number of occasions in which either Abraham or God served as narrative framework verb subjects (40x) also exceeds that of any other portion

of the Abrahamic Narrative. The closest is Genesis 18:16-33, which has a total of twenty-five such occurrences. The operative assumption behind this criterion is that the author of an Old Testament narrative will normally have God on stage during the portion of the Narrative reckoned by the author as most important. As the subject, "God" occurs ten times (in some instances identified as the theophanic "Angel of the LORD") mark Him as particularly significant in this episode, especially when it is noted that in six of the twenty-one episodic divisions in the Abrahamic Narrative, He never has a subject role (Gen. 11:27-32; 14:1-24; 19:31-38; 21:22-34; 22:20-24; 23:1-20), and in four others He is so used no more than two times (Gen. 12:10-20; 13:1-8; 24:1-66; 25:1-11).

**A The command of God: Abraham is to sacrifice his only son (1b-2)**

**A' The command of the LORD: Abraham is not to sacrifice his only son (11-19)**

Notably, the dialogue between God/Angel of the LORD and Abraham in verses 1b-2 (A) and verses 11-19 (A') uses four common themes in a parallel way and in language which makes them echo each other:

- God's/Angel of the LORD's call to Abraham
- Abraham's response, "Here I am" (ymlh)
- God's/Angel of the LORD's command concerning the son
- God's/Angel of the LORD's command concerning Abraham

These four themes pattern in the following manner:

1. **God's/Angel of the LORD's call to Abraham** is described in A and A' with the common terms "and He said to him, "Abraham" (Mhrb) wyl ) rm) yw). However, whereas in **A** it is God (Myhl ) ) speaking, in **A'** it is the Angel of the LORD (K) l m hwhy) who addresses Abraham, "But the Angel of the LORD called (hrqyw) to him"--a double call-- "Abraham, Abraham".

Both **A** and **A'** are essentially divine monologues, beginning with a summons of Abraham by name (vv. 1, 11), followed by Abraham responding "Here I am" and ending with God/Angel of the LORD speaking. These two speeches represent the last recorded words of God to Abraham, and it is noticeable how they echo very closely his first self-disclosure in Genesis 12:1-3 (see below #4).

2. **Abraham's response** is the same in **A** as in A': "and he said, "Here I am" (ymlh).
3. **The order concerning the son** is also described with similar language, but here it is the language that brings out a strong contrast. In both **A** and **A'** the command relates to the sacrifice and contains two steps. In **A** the order given is to take and to sacrifice, and in **A'** it is not to lay the hand on the stipulated sacrifice (Isaac) and to do nothing. Thus, while **A** the order is positive, in **A'** the order is negative. Moreover, in both **A** and **A'** the victim is designated as "your

only son"; but while in **A** the victim is specifically called "Isaac whom you love", in **A'** the victim is identified only as "the lad" (r (nh). And still further, in both **A** and **A'** the place of the sacrifice is described as a mountain; but whereas in **A** the mountain has not yet come into view and is not even named (v. 2), in **A'** the mountain is seen (v. 13), and is also named (v. 14).

4. In the order concerning Abraham the contrast is also striking. In **A** "Go-yourself" (Kl -Kl w; v. 2) is tragic: Abraham receives the order to go, and this departure bears in itself a sacrificing of his hopes, anticipation, and prospects for the future, for it would lead (as far as he could see at that time) to the death of his sole heir, Isaac. In **A'** on the other hand, the corresponding part of "Go-yourself" has shifted into a blessing which is heard as a promise of a glorious future. Thus the command in **A** is put in parallel with the second statement made by the Angel of the LORD and which concerns Abraham's blessing. The reason for this connection is not immediately obvious since it is indirect. It depends, in fact, on a common allusion to the blessing set forth in Genesis 12:1-3, and deserves, therefore special treatment.

The expression "Go-yourself" (Kl -Kl w) in **A** points directly back to Genesis 12:1, not just because this is the only other biblical text which uses the same expression, but also because in both passages the expression introduces a parallel three-step sequence: (1) the order to leave the place (the common word is Cr), "earth") followed by (2) the instruction to go to a place indicated by God (the common words are l ) r#), and (3) the order to sacrifice the family heir ("your son" in Genesis 22, "the house of your father" in Genesis 12).

Likewise, the blessing of **A'** echoes the text of Genesis 12:1-3 through the same association of three common motifs: (1) the promise to make of Abraham a great people (hbr, "great" in Gen. 22:17; l dg, "great" in Genesis 12:2; (rz, "seed" in Gen. 22:17, and ywg, "people" in Gen. 12:2; also in both places the same second person pronominal suffix Kl referring to Abraham), followed by (2) the blessing of Abraham (the common word is Kkrb), "I will bless you"), and (3) the blessing of all the peoples in him (a common term is Krb [Niphal in Gen. 12:3 and Hitpael in Gen. 22:18]).

## **B Abraham takes decisive actions in preparation to sacrifice his son (3-6b)** **B' Abraham takes decisive actions to sacrifice Isaac (9-10)**

In **B** (vv. 3-6b) and **B'** (vv. 9-10) of the chiasmus, Abraham's decisive actions is described in similar terms and follows an identical three-step progression. Once again, however, we find a contrast between the two scenarios. The three sequential steps are as follows: (1) movement to the "place" indicated by God (in **B** there is departure, in **B'** there is arrival), (2) connection between the wood and Isaac (in **B** the wood is placed on

Isaac, in **B'** Isaac is placed on the wood), and (3) the knife is held in Abraham's hand (in **B** there is fire, in **B'** there is no fire).

In both B and B' there is a sequence of *waw*-consecutives which implies that Abraham deliberately did one thing after another:

- B (1) <sup>3</sup>"So Abraham rose early in the morning  
(2) and he saddled his donkey,  
(3) and took two of his young men and Isaac his son;  
(4) and he split wood for the burnt offering,  
(5) and arose  
(6) and went to the place of which God had told him."
- B' (1) <sup>9</sup>"Abraham built the altar there,  
(2) and arranged the wood,  
(3) and bound his son Isaac,  
(4) and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.  
(5) And Abraham stretched out his hand,  
(6) and took the knife to slay his son."

However, and strikingly so, it is surprising that Abraham cut the word **after** saddling his donkey and gathering together his servants and Isaac. It would have been more sensible to cut the wood first. This seemingly illogical order hints we examine the verb "to saddle" (#bx).

The root #bx in the Semitic languages has the fundamental meaning "bind up." It can refer to the fastening of a saddle girth around the body of an animal, and thus becomes a technical term for the saddling of donkeys, as here in Genesis 22:3 (Num. 22:21; Jdgs. 19:10; 2 Sam. 16:1; 17:23). Also, the verb can be used for "tie around" a turban as a headdress (Ezk. 16:10). Finally, in medical terminology, #bx refers to the binding up of fractures, in order to its being healed or restored (Ezk. 30:21; 34:4, 16). Thus, literally, the verb #bx is perhaps proleptically placed in order to underscore and prefigure what Abraham will do to Isaac in **B'** when he "binds" (dq()) him (v. 19): Abraham will bind Isaac with a view of restoration (resurrection; Heb. 11:19).

### **C Abraham and Isaac walk together (6c)**

### **C' Abraham and Isaac walk together (8b)**

These identical sentences function as a refrain to **B** and **B'** (in C this occurs at the conclusion of the actions in **B**, and in **C'** it appears as an introduction to **B'**). However, in order to accentuate their literary function, they frame the apex the episode in an inclusio manner, thus confirming without doubt that Abraham and Isaac's dialogue (**X**, vv. 7-8a) is indeed the heart of our text.

## X DIALOGUE BETWEEN ABRAHAM AND ISAAC (7-8a)

Strikingly, the only recorded dialogue between Abraham and Isaac is found in verses 7-8, and constitutes the central point of the chiasmic arrangement by our author. This is underscored first of all by the distribution of the Hebrew verb "and he said" (רמ) יו. Out of its seventeen occurrences of the verb, five are found here. The rest are equally distributed, six times before verses 7-8a (vv. 1<sup>2</sup>, 2, 3, 5, 6) and six times after verses 7-8a (vv. 9, 11<sup>2</sup>, 12, 14, 16). This distribution of רמ) יו ("and he said") is significant in that it reinforces the conclusion that the dialogue reaches its highest intensity at its climax. As such, these dialogues take on added significance as pinpointing the paramount emphasis and message of the episode.

These occurrences, moreover, pattern in a structure of a chiasmic type which may be designated a/b/c/b'/a' (see Figure 2). The correspondences may be summarized as follows: Both **a** and **a'** carry a silence. In **a** the first "And he said" of Isaac is, so to speak, aborted. The text says, "And he said", but nothing comes out. It is a pure silence. The last "And he said" of Abraham can also be seen as a silence since it has this sort of effect in relationship to the specific question asked by Isaac, "Here (ינח) are fire and the wood, but where is the lamb?" One expects that in Abraham's response there would be an echo to Isaac's question by use of another "here-I", which would introduce the victim to be sacrificed. To say that God will see to the lamb Himself evades the choice, at least for a time. Moreover, to all the questions which are directed to Abraham, whether they come from God (vv. 1, 11) or from Isaac (v. 7), Abraham always answers "here-I", except in this instance! Here, instead of "here-I", Abraham puts "God" (v. 8).

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### CHIASMIC ARRANGEMENT OF GENESIS 22:7-8

- a Issac said to Abraham, his father--
- b And he [Isaac] said: "father?"
- x And he [Abraham] said: "here I am, my son!"
- b' And he [Isaac] said: "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for offering?"
- a' And Abraham said: "God will see to/for Himself the lamb for offering, my son!"

Figure 2.

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The syntactical construction of verse 8 further substantiates this observation. The subject, "God" comes before the verb "will see", contrary to the general tendency which places the subject after the verb, especially if the verb is in the imperfect form (see Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax [Winona Lake, IN:

Eisenbrauns, 1990], p. 129). The reason for this irregularity is, of course, the intention to emphasize "God", but it evidences also a stylistic concern to relate Abraham's response in **a'** to Isaac's question in **b'**:

- "Isaac said" (b') corresponds to "Abraham said" (a')
- "Here the fire and the wood (b') corresponds to "God" (a')
- "Where is the lamb for offering" (b') corresponds to "He will see for Himself the lamb for offering" (a').

There is correspondence between **b** and **b'** in that both are questions asked by Isaac. The question in **b** is implicit in the word "Father?" It not only serves to introduce a call to the father, but also a reminder of the son-father relationship. Essentially, Isaac's word is a question that is not as yet spelled out nor can be comfortably articulated. The question in **b'**, on the other hand, is explicit: "Where is the lamb . . .?"

Finally, **x** contains Abraham's only response that is really a response: "Here I am".

Secondly, and notably, this dialogue is inserted between the identical stylistic expression "So the two of them walked on together" ; **C** [6c] and **C'** [8b]). This expression encloses **X** in an envelope or inclusio structure.

This structural analysis of the text of Genesis 22:1-19 indicates indeed that the central idea of the episode concerns the tragic dialogue between Abraham and Isaac. Thus the emphasis of the text is primarily on the human questions and silences at the center. More important than the response or solution would in this case be the question without response and the open silence of the human being experiencing the event.

In conclusion, the chiasmic structure may be summarily analyzed as follows in Figure 3. For further comments concerning the Introduction (v. 1a) and the Epilogue (v. 19), see the expository notes (forthcoming).

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Great indeed was Abraham's love for Isaac, yet it pales when compared with God's love for His own Son. Abraham's love had grown from a close, intimate fellowship throughout the child's life, but the fellowship of the Father and the Son existed from eternity! Abraham's love was temporal, but the Father's love for Jesus, His Son, is eternal.

God did not ask Abraham what He would ultimately demand from Himself. He did not allow Abraham to slay His son, yet He did not spare His own Son. Abraham's love for Isaac and his willingness to sacrifice his son are only the dimmest foreshadowing of God's own sacrifice on behalf of the world.

### OVERVIEW OF THE LITERARY PATTERNS IN GENESIS 22:1-19

- A The command of God: "Abraham:, "here I am", "your only son", "bring him up for offering" (vv. 1b-2).
- B Abraham's actions: "and he took", "he split the wood", "the place which I will tell you", and he laid", "the knife", "took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son" (vv. 3-6b).
  - C Abraham and Isaac walk alone together (v. 6c).
  - X DIALOGUE BETWEEN ABRAHAM AND ISAAC (vv. 7-8a)
  - C' Abraham and Isaac walk alone together (8b).
- B Abraham's actions: "and he took", "he placed the wood", "the place which He had told him", "and he laid him [Isaac] on the altar on top of the wood", "the knife" (vv. 9-10).
- A' The command of the LORD: "Abraham, Abraham", "here I am", "your only son", "and he brought it up for offering" (vv. 11-18).

Figure 3.

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