

278.1: Abrahamic Texts and Tests (OT Gospel Doctrine Lesson 9 Updated)
"God Will Provide Himself a Lamb"

Productive Sunday School

1. Feeling the power of the story/getting people's sincere responses
2. How do we know when we are being inspired by God, especially if a prompting is confusing or difficult?
3. How do we develop the courage to align ourselves with God's will?
4. What if Abraham was wrong?
5. How are we guilty of sacrificing our children and loved ones to ideas?
6. Conclusion: People are more sacred than sacred texts.

Productive Sunday School

- 1. Feeling the power of the story/getting people's sincere responses (not just conditioned reaction)**

In LDS Churches across the world, we use the story of God telling a prophet to kill his son as an OBEDIENCE LESSON. This is NOT ok.

And in doing so, we are correctly understanding the text.... As the most intense of the challenges to the covenant and God's promise (after Abraham and Sarah not bearing a child until old age, then Ishmael challenging Isaac), God himself seems to make a command that invalidates his promise that Abraham will have a numerous and impactful posterity.

Even so, let's dig in. If we simplify this story to the lesson "Obey God no matter what, even if it is hard and even if it doesn't make sense" we aren't showing adequate respect to anyone... we aren't respecting God, aren't respecting the scriptures, and aren't respecting ourselves. Ask yourselves the hard questions: Do you believe in a God who would ask you something terrible, then say "just kidding, good job!" at the last moment?

More importantly, if you felt inspired to do something that was not just difficult, but went against your deepest values, would you? (Commentators have noted that Abraham debated valiantly with God for the fate of Sodom, but doesn't make a peep of protest when God asks him to sacrifice his beloved son) As I have mentioned before, I am so baffled at how willing people are to throw God under the bus in order to preserve a certain conception of scripture. I personally think it is because we often prefer to avoid the hard questions and the work that confronting them requires.

This distinction is VITAL. Yes, life asks us to accept and make the best of terrible tragedies and injustice. But that is fundamentally different than believing that God asks us to perpetuate those tragedies and injustice.

This story is poignant and powerfully told. Even more haunting in Hebrew. But as we apply the scriptures to ourselves, this has to clearly be an example of how NOT to act.

2. How do we know when we are being inspired by God, especially if a prompting is confusing or difficult?

3. How do we develop the courage to align ourselves with God's will?

(One of the most powerful prayers I have been practicing is for God to use me, to make the most use of my own trials and difficulties, to do as much good in the world as I can, to be better every day. There is plenty in my life I would prefer to be different. I believe in a God who puts us in a fallen, confusing world where we mostly mess things up, and then gives us the power and commandment to become saints through consistent or at least increasing love)

What if Abraham was wrong? (Need to ask all the questions to apply it constructively to our own lives)

It is true that life will ask us to accept the loss of much of what is precious to us. We all will need to adjust to and accept hardships and challenges we would prefer not to go through. But all those are different than believing that God is asking us to proactively harm those we love.

4. How are we guilty of sacrificing our children and loved ones to ideas?

A powerful point often overlooked in this story is ISAAC's response. He is quite an active character in this tale, but after the sacrifice, he never talks again. He does not interact with his family again.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unfundamentalistparenting/2016/07/the-binding-of-isaac-as-cautionary-tale/#>

Ryan Stollar

I am interested in looking at this passage from the vantage point of Isaac. And I seek to discover what this passage can tell us today—in our contemporary contexts—about children. How can we consider this passage in a way that better protects children today? How can we think about the ramifications of Isaac's experience such that we can better liberate children in our faith communities?

The first question we must consider is the age of Isaac. Some scholars consider Isaac to be an adult during this time, around the age of 32. Others place him at the age of a toddler or as a late teenager. I tend to agree with Terence E. Fretheim, who argues Isaac was likely 12 or 13.

Fretheim says, “On the one hand, he was old enough to carry wood and ask questions that assume a capacity to analyze a situation and potential problems relating to it (Gen. 22:6-7). On the other hand, God refers to him as a ‘boy’ (22:12), and he calls out ‘Father’ to Abraham (22:27)” (*The Child in the Bible*, p. 14). Isaac certainly does seem old enough to recognize that Abraham is making a trek to offer a sacrifice without the needed animal. However, Isaac also seems completely trusting in his father, despite the ominous foreboding of the story—so he seems young enough to have a childlike faith in his father’s deceitful words.

I think this childlike faith of Isaac’s—which is met by the betraying deceit of his father—is an entry point into the story. Isaac trusts that his father has his best interests in mind and is telling the truth that God will provide an animal to sacrifice. Isaac does not hesitate when tasked with carrying the firewood. When Isaac asks Abraham where the animal will come from, he accepts his father’s answer without question. What is notable here is that Isaac is vocal at this point—he does not hesitate to speak up with his doubts. This is notable because later, when Abraham binds Isaac to the wood, Isaac’s voice is no longer heard.

I think the disappearance of Isaac’s voice is telling. It signifies that Isaac knows he has been betrayed. Note that Isaac openly asked Abraham where the animal will come from—but Abraham *lies* to his child. Abraham knew full well what God said, and that God was asking him to sacrifice his son. Whether or not Abraham trusted God would provide an alternative, or whether or not “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead” (Hebrews 11:19), is irrelevant at this point. If Abraham thought either of those thoughts, he did not involve Isaac in that process. Instead, he kept Isaac at arm’s distance and was not forthright with him. In his fervent commitment to God, Abraham missed a chance to walk alongside his child as a partner in faith.

The actual binding moment appears brutal in the text. We are not told whether Isaac struggled or fought back against his father, but the blunt force of the narrative comes across. One moment Isaac is a

talkative, trusting, and inquisitive child; the next moment he is silent, unmoving, and restrained. One moment Isaac is a subject, a human being pursuing knowledge about God's ways; the next moment he is reduced to an object, a *thing* to be sacrificed in order for an adult to better himself with God.

While I wish I could explain away the whole event, what is made clear in the text is that God commends Abraham's faith. This is why many people make parallels between Abraham sacrificing Isaac and Yahweh sacrificing Jesus. But I think that the Binding of Isaac is a cautionary tale, despite God's commendation of Abraham's faith. I think it is a cautionary tale because it actually is the *very opposite* of Jesus' sacrifice.

Jesus came willingly to our world. Despite John 3:16 saying God "gave Their only begotten son," Jesus' own words indicate that it was his own choice to enter our world and be in relationship with us.

Jesus *chose* his path. He *chose* to be a Child and walk among us, as Yahweh once walked in the Garden with Adam and Eve. As a human child and later an adult, Jesus was always a subject, always an active agent in his spirituality and how he engaged with the God Parent Yahweh. As God Child, Jesus assumes the power in his relationship to Yahweh, as ultimately it is Jesus the God Child who "return with the sword" and judge humankind.

In contrast, Isaac did not go willingly to the slaughter. Isaac made no choice to be a sacrifice. And Abraham not only gave Isaac no choice in the matter, Abraham also erased his child's agency. He treated his child as an object, a means to an end, instead of treating his child as a subject with his own thoughts, relationship to God, and rights to determine his own life. So while God commends Abraham's faithfulness, note that God never commends any other aspect of how Abraham put his faith into practice. In fact, we are later told by the prophet Jeremiah that God considers child sacrifice "a detestable thing" (Jeremiah 32:35).

If God finds child sacrifice detestable, but Abraham's faith commendable, it seems reasonable to separate Abraham's faith from how he let his faith make him act. This is not an uncommon event in

the Bible. For example, in Judges 11, Jephthah the Gileadite “made a vow to the Lord: ‘If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord’s, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering.’” But “when Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child.” Jephthah’s faith caused him to act in a stupid, rash way.

Applying this idea that faith does not necessarily result in moral acts to Genesis would suggest that the text might condemn how Abraham as a parent valued his own spirituality over and against his child. Note that when Abraham and Isaac ascend the mountain, “the *two* of them went on *together*” (emphasis added). But when the descent is made, “*Abraham* returned to his servants” (emphasis added). Isaac does not return alongside his father.

Not only does Isaac not return alongside his father, Isaac also is never again seen in a relationship with his parents. Fretheim notes that, “Abraham and Isaac never again converse in the narrative that follows, not even in connection with the search for a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24). While Isaac attends Abraham’s funeral (25:9), he does not attend Sarah’s or even return to her death bed (Gen. 23). Moreover, why would God, but not Abraham, bless Isaac (23:11)?”

Fretheim then asks, “Might these textual details, even if in subtle ways, recognize that a child has been abused?” I think the answer is yes—though I do not think the details are subtle in that regard. The answer is unequivocally *yes*, a child *has* been abused. A child was restrained *without his consent*, tied to firewood, and then had to watch his own parent lift a knife to kill him. Full stop, that *is* child abuse. Whereas Jesus chose to sacrifice himself, Isaac was abused. Whereas Jesus was respected as a subject, Isaac was reduced to an object.

This is why I read the Binding of Isaac is a cautionary tale about parents who value their own faiths over and against their children’s lives. Yes, Abraham showed immense faith. But that faith came with a cost: the silence and alienation of his beloved child. God

commends Abraham's faith but God never commends how Abraham lied to his child and gave his child no choice in the matter.

If Abraham's descent from the mountain and later distance from Isaac indicates anything, it is that faith without love and relationship is dead. It kills people, sometimes quite literally. I cannot help but think of parents who believe fidelity to God mean they must throw their own LGBTQ children out on the streets. Or parents who allow their children to die because of their commitment to faith healing. Or parents who beat their children because of their myopic interpretation of the Proverbs. Surely their fervor is astounding, but they entirely miss the point of the Gospel.

The Gospel is found in relationship, in loving one's neighbor and seeing one's neighbor as a fellow subject before God, not as an object to sacrifice in the name of purity. When one sacrifices one's neighbor in the name of faith, one loses the very heart of the Gospel.

5. Conclusion: People are more sacred than sacred texts.

Putting ideals ahead of humans is idolatry

278.2: Abrahamic Texts and Tests (OT Gospel Doctrine Lesson 9, Sunday School)

"God Will Provide Himself a Lamb"

- Model how to engage with and challenge this story in a Sunday School context
- how the biblical story builds up the tension and terror of this account
- what we can learn and gain from the narrative
- whether Abraham pass or failed the test
- how the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jesus/Atonement are similar and different
- the relationship between God and goodness
- how we can use this narrative in a constructive way

278.3: Abrahamic Texts and Tests (OT Gospel Doctrine Lesson 9, Study Notes)

[“God Will Provide Himself a Lamb”](#)

In Part 2 we touch on the place of Isaac in history and then delve into the terrible but widespread practice of human sacrifice in the Ancient Near East.

In Part 3 we wrestle further with the issues of God’s goodness and healthy approaches to obedience. The importance of context is discussed, including that of Mormonism’s own history which also has dark moments. We conclude with some reflections on the relationship of this story to Jesus’ death.