

Did God really want to bind a child?

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[Genesis 22:1-14](#), Psalm 13, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

Years later, even after he had become a father himself, Isaac still had nightmares about it. And sometimes, when he was awakened suddenly by some noise in the night, he would lie in his tent, and it was as if he was back there again – back at the night when he was merely a child and he heard his father in the nearby tent.

A Strange Conversation

It was in the darkest time of the night when he suddenly heard Abraham cry out, **“Here I am.”** What followed after that was a strange discourse, as if Abraham were having a conversation with someone but Isaac could only hear one side of it – only what his father said in response to unheard words.

“But, my Lord, which son do you mean? I have two.” <Silence> “But what do you mean, ‘my only son,’ I said, there are two?” <Silence> “Isaac? What do you want with Isaac?” <Silence> “Well, I do love Isaac, but of course I love Ishmael too!”

And then, after a longer pause, Isaac could hear the cold fear and dread in his father’s voice as he said “Yes, Lord, to Moriah. We will go if you show us the way.”

Isaac didn’t know what any of that meant at the time, but it did not seem good. Every time he remembered it, or even if someone spoke in a tone that reminded him of how his father spoke that night, he would begin to tremble and would sometimes be physically ill. Even when he was a strong patriarch and respected man, it always made him feel so powerless, as if he were a small child all over again.

Departure

The next morning, Abraham rose early and saddled his donkey, taking two servant boys with him. When he called Isaac over to join the group, Isaac didn’t want to come. He was filled with an unaccountable dread. But he was in no position to refuse.

As they set out, Isaac noticed that his father wouldn’t look at him – wouldn’t even meet his eyes when he glanced his way. And that he offered no explanation of where they were going or why.

After they had walked a short way, they came upon a fallen tree and Abraham stopped and split several pieces of wood with his axe and fastened them onto the back of the donkey. That, together with the pot containing a small smoldering fire that was carried by one of the boys and the special ceremonial stone knife in his father’s belt, led Isaac to assume that the purpose of this journey was to perform a sacrifice. He had so many questions about that, of course, but did not dare to speak.

The small group traveled for three days before Isaac finally looked up and saw a mountain looming in the distance.



Abraham and Isaac go on alone

At this point, Abraham told the boys to stay behind with the donkey and that he and Isaac would go on alone. He took the wood from the donkey's back and tied it onto Isaac's before himself taking the pot of fire, which had been carefully fed all this time so as not to go out, and carried it himself. And so it was that father and son moved on together.

When the servant boys had fallen into the distance and the two of them were completely alone, Isaac finally found the courage to ask the question that had been burning in his mind for three days. **"Father!"** he said. **"Here I am, my son,"** Abraham immediately replied. And the phrase took Isaac right back to when he had heard his father speak in the tent a few nights previous. He had a deep feeling that something was very wrong. But he still felt he needed an answer to his question. He pointed to the fire pot. **"The fire is here. And so is the wood,"** he added, pointing to the load on his back.

His gaze then paused for a moment on the handle of the blade that protruded from his father's waist, but something prevented him from mentioning that. Possibly it was the same thing that, ever since, had made him shudder whenever he caught sight of such a ceremonial knife.

The pause was going on too long and Abraham automatically looked at his son. For a few agonizing seconds, their gazes met, and Isaac managed to stammer out, **"b-b-but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"** Abraham looked away and when he spoke, it was as if he were speaking to someone else, someone not present, "Godself will see to the lamb for a burnt offering, my son, don't you worry about that."

Dangerous Memory

Isaac had done his best to never remember what had happened when they finally arrived at the top of that mountain. Whenever his conscious mind seemed to drift in the general direction of the events, he forced himself to think of something else.

But it never seemed to work. The memory would come back to him when he least expected it, triggered by the oddest things. He often found himself flying off the handle, especially with his son Jacob, at the least offense because the boy looked so much like his grandfather.

And how often had he become unaccountably enraged at Rebecca, who had only been kind to him? Sometimes these days, she treated him more like an adversary than a husband and he knew it was all because, no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't let go of what had happened to him on that damned mountain. It made him so angry, and she often bore the brunt of it.

On the Mountain

When they reached the top of that mountain, Isaac watched warily as Abraham gathered stones and built a makeshift altar. He then took the wood and carefully laid it out before turning towards his son.

Isaac had successfully managed to block out the next few seconds from his memory, it only came back in his nightmares. So, as he recalled it, when he dared, he suddenly found himself lying on the altar, his legs and arms trussed up just like you might do to an animal sacrifice before the slaughter. And he saw his father, holding the knife over his throat with a wild look in his eyes.

Saved!

And then, Abraham's face changed. It went blank for a moment and then he turned and uttered for a third time the same words still haunted Isaac. **"Here I am!"** he said. And then Isaac heard something too – the sound of rustling in a nearby bush.

Abraham immediately dropped the knife and ran to the spot. He yelped with pleasure and surprise as he pulled back the undergrowth to reveal a young ram struggling there, caught by the horns.

"You see, Isaac," he cried, "I was right. God did see to it. He is Yahweh who sees *my* need!"

Left Unresolved

Abraham was long dead now. Never once, before he passed, had he spoken to Isaac about what had happened on that day. Perhaps that was why Isaac never felt as if it had been resolved. It was like some horrible doom that still hung over him. And now his own children were grown, and he had never been able to talk to them about these things. Sometimes he couldn't help but feel as if that was why Esau was so wild and why it seemed as if he had driven Jacob away. That is how it goes sometimes and perhaps that's what it means when it says that the sins of the fathers are passed down to the sons.

Despite it all, however, Isaac still held on to faith in Yahweh, the God of his father, the God who saw. He just wasn't convinced that it was God's fault, all that his father had put him through. Yes, perhaps Abraham had been trying to do what he thought his God wanted, but that doesn't mean that he was right, does it?

A Troubling Story

The story of the binding of Isaac, as it is often called, is definitely one of the most difficult in the Bible. However you understand it, it is very difficult not to see it as reflecting very negatively on God. If God really did want Abraham to literally sacrifice his son on an altar, only to change his mind at the last minute, that leaves us with an image of a God who not only demands the unacceptable but is also changeable and perhaps unreliable.

The only other option seems to be that God never really intended for Abraham to go through with it at all, that it was only a test. But I fail to see how that could be much better. To put a father and, oh, how much more, a child through such a test would not merely be cruel, it would be unquestionably immoral. Can you imagine the scars, the lifelong trauma, that such an experience would have created?

I realize, of course, that ancient people did not have the same understanding and appreciation of the potential life-long effects of post-traumatic stress that modern people do, but surely, you would think God might be able to understand the effects his stunt would have on Isaac!

What do we do with it?

So what can we do with this story? I tend to approach these questions from a somewhat different angle than most. I assume that the Bible is the record of human experience of God. As such, it is a human product, even if the overall process of its creation is inspired. Thus, it reflects a growing and changing understanding of God over time. This would naturally include understandings that were wrong or incomplete and that were corrected by new experience.

So, were there people – even early Israelite ancestors – who thought that God might want human sacrifice? Possibly. Were they right about that? Of course not!

Were there ancient Israelites who believed that God wanted them to go through cruel tests that would leave permanent scars on their children. I have no doubt that there were. But they were wrong, and I believe that their subsequent experience showed them that they were wrong. The Bible is an incredibly valuable record of that journey of discovery.

For me, this story of Abraham and Isaac is a story of Abraham discovering that God didn't want him to behave like he thought God did.

The Dangers in Such Religion

But, because we do not always take the right approach to the Bible, a danger still persists. What happens when people take stories like this one as the end of the journey of discovery and not just a step along the way? What happens when they discover, for example, that their children are expressing themselves in ways that they do not approve of? They might react by "binding" their child – by forcing their child to conform to their understanding of what God wants, suppressing the child's God-given self-understanding.

And that kind of thing continues to happen. Psychologist and counsellors are seeing that people who grow up in or spend extended lengths of time in high control religious environments, can indeed suffer from long-term post-traumatic stress.

I'm talking about the kind of religious environment (Christian or other) where the members of the community are under constant surveillance. Their speech, their thoughts and dress and appearance are ever liable to be judged and found lacking either by their family or by their church community. Living under these kinds of circumstances, being bound in this way by not being able to express yourself, can leave lasting scars on the psyche. Many have undergone extensive therapy trying to find healing.

Stems from Fear

And why do people do this to the people that they love and to the members of their spiritual communities? Because they are afraid. They are afraid of people who are different. They are afraid of divergence. And they are likely carrying around an image of a very angry God of whom they are afraid.

That's why I don't think we should be afraid to say that Abraham was wrong about what he thought God wanted and demanded. By the end of this horrible episode with his son, he knew better. And, yes, it would have been preferable if he had not had to put himself and his son through such a terrible ordeal to get there, but the truth of the matter is that we human beings can have the hardest time with some of the most important lessons.

High control religion can absolutely be dangerous. It causes trauma. I am certain that it is not what pleases God. In the end, this story in Genesis is a story about a God who sees. That is what the name, *Yahweh Yireh* that Abraham gives to God at the end means. It is about a God who sees the damage that is done, who sees to what we need to survive it. The real question though, is what do we see and what are we going to do about it?