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## Akedah: How Jews and Christians Explained Abraham's Faith

God promised Abraham that Isaac would be his heir, yet God asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. What did Abraham believe that allowed him to reconcile this divine contradiction?

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'This is the sacrifice of Isaac on the altar and the ram caught by its horns'. From The Northern French Miscellany, 13 century.

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### The Contradictory Command

**I**n the story of the banishment of Ishmael, God tells Abraham that his son Isaac will be the progenitor of his future line (Genesis 21:12), but in the *Akedah* (Genesis 22:2), God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. At the end of the *Akedah* story (Genesis 22:12), there is another internal contradiction in the Divine command when God tells Abraham not to kill his son.

The challenge of contradiction posed by this text occurs on two levels:

1. God's apparent self-contradiction presents a theological problem.
2. Abraham's lack of confrontation with God, or not calling out this contradiction—is also problematic.

## Jewish Interpretations

### *Genesis Rabbah*: Interpreting God's Words Midrashically

Some *midrashim* address these problems. For instance, the mid 1st millennium C.E.

compilation, *Genesis Rabbah* (56:8), deals with the seeming contradiction in divine commands by creating an imagined conversation between God and Abraham. Rashi quotes this midrash on Genesis 22:12 as follows:

<p>כי עתה ידעתי. אמר רבי אבא: אמר לו אברהם: אפרש לפניך את שיחתי. אתמול אמרת לי: כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע. וחזרת ואמרת: קח נא את בניך. עכשיו אתה אומר לי, אל תשלך ירך אל הנער.</p>	<p>“Now I know” (Gen 22:12) – Rabbi Abba said: Abraham said to him [God]: I will set my words before you. Yesterday you said to me: “In Isaac will be called your seed” (Gen 21:12). Then you went back and said, “Take your son” (22:1). Now you say to me, “Do not send forth your hand against the boy” (22:12).</p>
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<p>אמר לו הקב"ה: לא אחלל בריתי ומוצא שפתי לא אשנה. כשאמרתי לך קח, מוצא שפתי לא אשנה. לא אמרתי שחטהו ולא העלהו. אסקתיה, אחתיה.</p>	<p>God [the Holy Blessed One] said to him: “I will not profane my covenant and the utterance of my lips will not change” (Ps 89:35). When I said to you, “take,” the utterance of my lips will not change. I did not say “slaughter him” but rather “bring him up.” You brought him up, now bring him down.</p>
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This conversation turns Abraham into a rabbinic interlocutor, pointing out contradictions and asking questions about them. God, through the words of Psalm 89:35, affirms that despite appearances, God's words never contradict, although some people may misunderstand God's words and think so. God's instruction in Genesis 22:2, *שָׁם לְעֹלָה* means only “bring him up [the mountain]” or “bring him up [on the altar].”

A literal interpreter would have been forced to concede the noun *עֹלָה* always refers to a burnt offering. But the midrash is not so constrained. Once Abraham brought his son “up”, he may bring him down again, unharmed.

### Ibn Ezra: God's Changing Command

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–c. 1167), a famous medieval exponent of *peshat*, explicitly rejects the midrash and other various attempts to reconcile the contradiction. He explains (22:1):

והוצרכו אלה הגאונים לפי האלה, כי אמרו לא יתכן אחר שיצוה השם מצוה שיאמר אח"כ לא תעשינה. והנה לא שמו על לב הבכורים שהחליפם בלויים אחר שנה. ואחר שהכתוב אומר בתחלה והאלהים נסה את אברהם סרו כל הטענות. והשם נסוהו כדי שיקבל שכר.

And these great scholars required these interpretations because they said, “it is not possible for God to command something and then say not to do it.” But they did not note that the firstborn were replaced by the Levites after a year. Since the text says at the start “And God tested Abraham,” it removes any doubt. God tested him in order for him to receive a reward.

Ibn Ezra believes that God’s word sometimes changes. For example, Numbers 3 states that the firstborn originally had a priestly role before they were replaced by the Levites. Likewise, God first tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and then tells him not to.

For Ibn Ezra, then, the faithful person may believe that God’s mind will sometimes change.

### Rashbam: Abraham’s Interpretive Mistake

Another prominent *peshat* commentator, Rashbam (Samuel ben Meir, c. 1085–c. 1158), explained the text as follows:

ויהי אחר הדברים האלה. כל מקום שנא' אחר הדברים האלה מחובר על הפרשה שלמעלה. ... אף כאן אחר הדברים שכרת אברהם ברית לאבימלך לו ולנינו ולנכדו של אברהם ונתן לו שבע כבשות הצאן וחרה אפו של הק' על זאת שהרי ארץ פלישתים בכלל גבול ישראל והק' ציוה עליהם לא תחיה כל נשמה...

**And it came to pass, after these events.** Every place where it says “after these events,” [the text] is connected to the preceding section... So too, here, “after these events” [refers to the previous section where] Abraham made a covenant with Avimelech [king of the Philistines], on behalf of himself and his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and he gave him the seven ewes. God was angry about this, for the land of the Philistines was within the borders of Israel, and God had commanded regarding them “do not let anyone live” ...

לכן והאלהים נסה את אברהם ... כלומר נתגאיתו בן שנתתיך לכרות ברית ביניכם ובין בניהם, ועתה לך והעליהו לעולה ויראה מה הועילה כריתות ברית שלך.

Therefore, “And God tested Abraham” ... that is to say, “You were boastful with the the son that I gave you to establish a covenant between your children and their children. Now, go and offer him as a burnt offering, and we will see what good the covenant you made was.”

Rashbam reads “And it came to pass at this time” (אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, Gen 22:1), which might be seen as a simple transition between units,<sup>[1]</sup> as indicating a causal relationship between the story of the binding of Isaac and the narrative that preceded it, which described a treaty that Abraham made with Avimelech. In making this treaty, Abraham was arrogant to think that he could make a covenant with Avimelech’s people on behalf of his descendants, when God actually plans to have Abraham’s

descendants annihilate them in the future. Thus, Abraham here is punished for misreading God's intention in granting him land and progeny.

To Rashbam, then, the work of being a faithful reader of divine command is difficult and challenging — so challenging that even Abraham can get it wrong.

## Radak: Abraham as Example to the Nations

For another *peshat* scholar, Radak (R. David Kimhi, 1160–1235), Abraham, far from being mistaken, serves as an example of faith:

<p>והאמת כי הנסיון הזה כדי להראות לבני העולם אהבת אברהם השלמה לאל ולא נעשה לאותם הדורות אלא לדורות הבאים המאמינים בתורה שכתב משה רבינו ע"ה מפי האל וספוריה שיראו עד היכן הגיעה אהבת אברהם לאל וילמדו ממנו לאהבה את ה' בכל לבבם ובכל נפשם.</p>	<p><b>But the truth is that this test was in order to show the nations of the world Abraham's complete love of God.</b> And this was not done for those generations, but rather for the later generations that believe in the Torah that Moses, peace be upon him, wrote by God's word, and in its stories, so that they would know how far Abraham's love of God extended and would learn from it to love God with their whole hearts and their whole souls.</p>
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Radak explains that the entire *Akedah* was designed to show future generations a model of faithfulness, part of which is that Abraham does not point out contradictions in God's command but simply trusts and obeys:

<p>ולא שאל ולא נסה הלא אמרת לי כי ביצחק יקרא לך זרע (לעיל כא יב).</p>	<p>He did not ask and he did not argue, "Did you not say to me, 'for through Isaac will your seed be called?'"</p>
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Radak goes on to note the success of Abraham as an example of faith:

<p>והיום כמה שנים מיום שבטלה עבודת הצלמים והאלילים מאמינים רוב העולם בתורת משה ובסיפוריה ... אלא שחלקים עלינו על המצוות שאומרים כי דרך משל נאמרו</p>	<p>Today, some years after the worship of idols and statues has been abolished, most of the world believes in the Torah of Moses our teacher and in its stories. They only disagree with us about the commandments, in that they say that they were given to us by way of parable.</p>
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Abraham's display of love, expressed by not pointing out contradictions in the divine word, was for the benefit of "everyone in the world" both Jews and Christians.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Christian Interpretations

Christian responses differed from those of Jews for two reasons: within Christianity, the *Akedah* was seen as prefiguring the death and resurrection of Jesus, so Isaac in a sense could die, and a particular

New Testament text that pointed toward a particular line of interpretation, i.e., resurrection, became foundational.

## Hebrews: Abraham's Faith in Resurrection

The Epistle to the Hebrews, a New Testament book of unknown authorship (c. 100 C.E.),<sup>[3]</sup> cites Abraham's offering of Isaac as an example of faith:

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, "It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you." He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Hebrews 11:17–19)

According to this passage, Abraham reconciled the ideas that he would be the father of many nations even though he must kill Isaac, by having faith in resurrection. On the basis of this faith, Abraham could sacrifice Isaac and still believe that he would be resurrected and become the father of Abraham's descendants.

## The *Glossa Ordinaria*: Abraham's Faith in Spite of Contradiction

The *Glossa Ordinaria* (or: The Gloss), compiled by Gilbert of Auxerre,<sup>[4]</sup> was one of the most influential Christian commentaries of the High Middle Ages. In the twelfth century, it was more widely copied than any other book. It was a standard text for Bible study for at least two centuries after its composition and it remained in use through the Reformation.<sup>[5]</sup>

One of the authors quoted in the gloss, Alcuin of York (735-804), sees Abraham's confidence and faith as stemming from his ability to draw correct theological conclusions from an apparent contradiction in God's word:

5.3m Alcuin. The boy and I: He was willing to sacrifice his son with an undoubting soul, praiseworthy in the constancy of offering and in his trust in resurrection. For he knew with greatest certainty that God could not fail, and although the boy might be sacrificed, God's saving promise would yet endure. Whence the Apostle (Hebrews 11:17-19): "Abraham did not hesitate in his faith, when offering his only son in whom he received the promise, believing that God was able to revive him even from death".

Alcuin understands Abraham to have derived the doctrine of resurrection from the contradiction between God's promise that Isaac will be his heir and the command to sacrifice him.

The interlinear gloss also includes the approach of Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636)<sup>[6]</sup>, who understands the story of Abraham as a sign of what will happen in the future, namely that God will offer his own son, Jesus, as a sacrifice.

Thus, in interpreting God's command to Abraham to take his only begotten son, the Gloss quotes John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." Abraham is keenly aware that the command to sacrifice Isaac contradicts God's previous promise:

2.2i By the reminder of love and the mention of the name the test is piled high, and the fatherly emotion is moved by the memory of the promise: because it was said that in Isaac your seed will be called (Genesis 21:12, Romans 11:18), so if he would be killed, all the hope of the promise would be frustrated.

The Gloss solves the problem in its interpretation of the command to "go to the land of Vision":

2.3i where it will be revealed to you what I will foretell with this sacrifice.

For the interlinear gloss, Abraham will only understand God's intention on the mountain, when God reveals that the sacrifice was not meant to be carried out in fact, but only as a "sign" for the future of what God will do with his own son.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, despite the possibility of resurrection, Abraham has no need to sacrifice Isaac, since the true sacrifice will be the sacrifice of Christ that was to come. The purpose of Abraham's act was simply to foretell this sacrifice.

## Martin Luther: Belief in Resurrection and Acceptance of Contradiction

Possibly the most famous interpreter of the literal sense among either Jews or Christians was Martin Luther (1483–1546). One of his guiding principles was *sola scriptura*, or "scripture alone," namely that no text outside of the Bible (which for him, of course, included the New Testament) could be used to interpret the Bible. In particular, he meant to exclude by this the body of patristic and medieval interpretation that had become central to medieval Christian exegesis, and which, like midrash, was very effective in resolving contradictions. As a literal interpreter, Luther shared the dilemma of the Jewish *peshat* commentators: do you accept contradictions, or do you find some other way to reconcile them?

Luther's lengthy commentary on the near-sacrifice of Isaac extends for over ninety pages in translation.<sup>[8]</sup> In this commentary, he attempts to explain the technical details of the story, resolve contradictions, show how Abraham can function as an example of faith, and he uses the Abraham story to discuss what faith means for him.

To Luther, the contradiction in God's words to Abraham is the essence of Abraham's test. He writes:

I have stated what Abraham's trial was, namely, the contradiction of the promise...Human reason would simply conclude either that the promise is lying or that the command is not God's but the devil's. For there is a plain contradiction. If Isaac must be killed, the promise is void; but if the promise is sure, it is impossible that this is a command of God.<sup>[9]</sup>

The contradiction in God's word has, for Luther, disturbing theological implications:

This trial cannot be overcome and is far too great to be understood by us. For there is a contradiction with which God contradicts himself. It is impossible for flesh to understand this; for it inevitably concludes either that God is lying — and this is blasphemy — or that God hates me — and this leads to despair.<sup>[10]</sup>

Either God's word is internally self-contradictory or God is capricious and senselessly cruel. Both of these are, for Luther, untenable positions. The only possible way for Abraham to resolve this contradiction, for Luther, is to derive from it the concept of resurrection:

Even though there is a clear contradiction here — for there is nothing between death and life — Abraham nevertheless does not turn away from the promise but believes that his son will have descendants even if he dies... Thus Abraham relies on the promise and attributes to the Divine Majesty this power, that He will restore his dead son to life; for just as he saw that Isaac was born of a worn-out womb and of a sterile mother, so he also believed that he was to be raised after having been buried and reduced to ashes, in order that he might have descendants, as the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:19) states: "God is able to give life even to the dead."<sup>[11]</sup>

Abraham is here a model interpreter of the Bible. Because he fully accepts both parts of the contradiction, he is able to, on his own, come up with the concept of resurrection which would later be stated in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Abraham also teaches his interpretation to his son Isaac, in a reconstructed dialogue reminiscent of midrash. As Luther writes:

Now that the altar was built, the knife ready, and the fire kindled, some conversation between the father and son must have occurred — a conversation through which Isaac was appraised of the will and command of God. The father said: "You, my dearly beloved son, whom God has given me, have been destined for the burnt offering." Then the son was undoubtedly struck with amazement and in turn reminded his father of the promise: "Consider, father, that I am the offspring to whom descendants, kings, peoples, etc., have been promised. God gave me to my mother Sarah through a great miracle. How, then, will it be possible for the promise to be fulfilled if I am killed? Nevertheless, let us first confer about this matter and talk it over.

All this should have been recorded here. I do not know why Moses omitted it. But I have no doubt that the father's command to the son was extraordinary, and I think its main topic was the command of God and the resurrection of the dead. He probably said: "God has given a command: therefore we must obey Him, and since He is almighty, He can keep his promise even when you are dead and have been reduced to ashes."...Thus it was the father's address to his son which reconciled these two contradictory propositions: Isaac will be the seed and father of kings and of peoples; Isaac will die and will not be the father of peoples.<sup>[12]</sup>

Luther here presents Abraham as an interpreter of God's word based on a belief that God cannot actually be contradicting his promise. Abraham is able to sacrifice Isaac since "he knows that his son will have descendants, even after a thousand years."<sup>[13]</sup> Abraham's faith was reflected in his ability to

reconcile contradictory divine commands and to derive from them the concept of resurrection, and even to communicate this doctrine to his son.

Like his Christian predecessors, Luther ultimately interprets Genesis 21–22 through the lens of the New Testament, specifically Hebrews 11. And like Radak, he locates Abraham's faith in his acceptance of divine contradiction. This (unwitting) agreement with a Jewish source is notable, given that Luther's work contains lengthy and harsh anti-Jewish polemic.

## Resolving and/or Sanctifying Contradictions

Medieval Jewish and Christian interpreters of the Hebrew Bible, despite their different canons and theological assumptions, often asked similar questions and sometimes came to similar conclusions. Jewish commentators offered many different answers such as, God only said to bring him up (Genesis Rabbah), God does contradict himself at times (ibn Ezra), the *Akedah* was a punishment for making a treaty with Avimelech (Rashbam), or that it was all just to show future generations a true model of faithfulness (Radak).

Christian interpreters also offered a range of answers, but all of them following the basic approach outlined in Hebrews, that the answer to the contradiction was that Abraham assumed God would resurrect Isaac.

Although it would seem that such an avenue would be closed to Jewish interpreters as too Christological in nature—and for the most part it was—the idea that Isaac was resurrected actually appears in some Jewish sources, such as the ca. 8<sup>th</sup> cent. C.E. midrashic work, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 31):

רבי יהודה אומר בין שהגיע החרב על צוארו פרחו ויצאה נשמתו של יצחק. בין שהשמיע קולו מבין שני הכרובים ואמר אל תשלח ידך אל הנער [בראשית כב, יב], חזרה הנפש לגופו, והתירו ועמד על רגליו. Rabbi Judah says: “Once the sword reached his throat, Isaac’s soul left his body. Once [God/the angel] made his voice heard between the two cherubs, and said (Gen 22:12): “Do not lift your hand against the boy” his soul returned to his body. [Abraham] untied him and he stood on his feet.

וראה [נ"א: וידע] יצחק תחית המתים מן התורה, שכל המתים עתידין להתחיות. באותה שעה פתח ואמר ברוך אתה ה' מחיה המתים: Isaac thus came to see [or “know”] that resurrection is a Torah principle, that all of the dead are destined to rise. At that moment, [Isaac] opened his mouth and said: “Blessed are you, O God, who resurrects the dead.”

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## Footnotes

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[1] See, e.g., the NJPS translation,” some time afterward.”

[2] Radak had some familiarity with Christian doctrine, as shown by his arguments against it elsewhere in his Bible commentary. Mordechai Cohen, “The Qimhi Family,” *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* vol. 1, Pt 2, From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages (until 1300) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 396. David Kimhi’s father Joseph Kimhi wrote *Sefer ha-berit*, [The Book of the Covenant] one of the first comprehensive and systematic Jewish anti-Christian polemical works.

[3] Unlike most of the New Testament epistle, this letter is anonymous. Though some in the early Church attributed it to Paul, the scholarly consensus is that it is not Pauline.

[4] This is the consensus of contemporary scholarship. The Gloss is a composite commentary that drew heavily on earlier Christian exegesis, often quoting it directly. In its interpretations of Genesis 22, it draws primarily on Augustine, Jerome, Alcuin, and Isidore of Seville, each of whom had their own interpretations of the nature of Abraham’s test and how Abraham (correctly or incorrectly) interpreted it. The format of the Gloss was a dual commentary, one around the margins of the Biblical text and the other written between its lines. The marginal commentary is composed of direct quotes from earlier writers, usually citing them by name, and making no attempt to reconcile them when they contradict. For a comprehensive study of the *Glossa Ordinaria*, see Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: The Making of a Medieval Bible Commentary* (Leiden:Brill, 2009).

[5] The Gloss was the foundation of twelfth- and thirteenth-century monastic and cathedral education and the basis for supercommentaries (commentaries on the Gloss itself) through the end of the Middle Ages and into the modern period.

[6] The marginal gloss, at least in its later versions, quotes in full Isidore’s commentary in his *Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum*. The interlinear gloss includes an abbreviated form of these comments.

[7] For a critical edition and translation of the Glossa Ordinaria on Genesis 22, see my book *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars: Polemic and Exegesis in Rashi and the Glossa Ordinaria* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

[8] *Luther’s Works vol. 4: Lectures on Genesis Chapters 21-25* (Jaroslav Pelikan, ed.; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1964), p. 91-186.

[9] *Luther’s Works* p. 95.

[10] *Luther’s Works* p. 93.

[11] *Luther’s Works* p. 96.

[12] *Luther’s Works* p. 113.

[13] *Luther's Works* p. 96.

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