

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## The Binding of Isaac

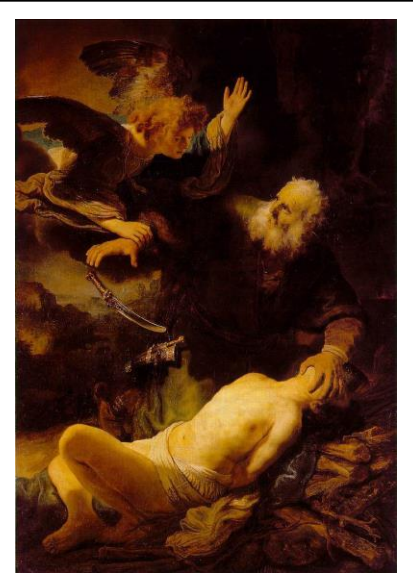
PHILIP D. STERN

Genesis 22 is a spectacular chapter in the Bible that has a long tradition of Jewish and Christian interpretation.<sup>1</sup> It is known in Hebrew as the *Akedah*, short for the “binding of Isaac.” In the [Akedah](#), the Hebrew prose level, which in the preceding chapters of Genesis was already at an extremely high level, reaches its highest. It is a model of concision and economy, and as usual in Hebrew prose, leaves the actors’ emotions experienced in the story largely a mystery. Yet the outlines of the story leave no doubt that the emotions of the protagonists must have run very high indeed.

The chapter begins with the stipulation that God is testing [Abraham](#). This serves to set this text apart from everything that precedes and follows it in Genesis. The reader is forewarned that this is “only” a test, for the continuation is still, after the passage of millennia, astonishing. God calls Abraham who responds with the Hebrew word, *hinēni*, which literally means, “Here I am.” I translate this as “at your service” because, as Jon Levenson says, “the term indicates readiness, alertness, attentiveness, receptivity, and responsiveness to instructions.”<sup>2</sup>

Next, God issues a command: Abraham is to take his son Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah, at the place God will indicate to him. This is indeed a test! The story unfolds in a relative handful of verses. After the dread command is issued, Abraham’s reaction is not given. Presumably, he recoiled in horror. Yet he does not protest. That much is clear.

The next thing we learn is that “Abraham got up early in the morning.” I would guess that he had a sleepless night in which he tossed and turned, as he thought about the



The Sacrifice of Isaac  
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<sup>1</sup> See Devorah Schoenfeld, “Akedah: How Jews and Christians Explained Abraham’s Faith,” TheTorah.com. Published 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Jon D. Levenson, “Genesis” in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. The Jewish Study Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 45.

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deity's gruesome demand. I cannot trace the exact train of thought that went through his mind. Yet it is possible to see from Abraham's actions something of what he must have thought.

Though this is a story with three characters—God, Abraham, and Isaac—it is a primarily a story about God and Abraham. We see this in two ways. First, the story begins, “God put Abraham to the test.” The narrator chooses his or her words carefully; he or she does not say, “God put Abraham and Isaac to the test.” No, from the outset the story is about God and Abraham. Will he or won't he pass the test? Second, the story ends, “Abraham dwelt in Beersheba.” The episode begins and ends with Abraham; again, there is no mention of Isaac!

The place of Isaac in the story is clearly defined. God says, “Take your son, your one and only, whom you love,” and from then on Isaac is always described as Abraham's son. It is fair to say that Isaac is not depicted as a character in his own right; he is there only as Abraham's son. Only once is he quoted. “Isaac spoke to Abraham his father, saying. ‘My father’ and he said, ‘At your service, my son.’ [Isaac] said, “Here are the firestone and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” One thing is plain: Abraham has not informed his son of God's plan for Isaac. Abraham replies, “God will see to the sheep for the burnt offering.” Abraham is not fibbing to his son to spare his feelings, as some have thought. The sleepless night I have alluded to has borne fruit. Abraham has thought of God's promise to him that Isaac's would be the line that would bear him seed, and he has intuited that God is putting him to the test. Isaac is blameless; Abraham is sure God will not require Isaac's life in the end. So Abraham can be sure that God will supply the sacrificial sheep.

Moreover, not only does Abraham figure out that God is testing him, but he in turn is testing God, by obeying God to the letter and waiting for God to spare his son. First, he erects the altar, then he binds his son (who could but does not attempt to overpower his aged father). Not content with that, he lifts the sacrificial knife to slaughter his son. This was a supreme test of God. At that point, God passes the test Abraham is posing by having an “angel from heaven” call out, “Abraham, Abraham.” Isaac is spared. Abraham was put to the test and passes; Abraham's putting God to the test was the ultimate sign of Abraham's faith in God, which was presumably what God was testing all along.

God supplies a ram for the sacrifice in Isaac's stead. The drama concluded, the narrator makes it clear that the place of the sacrifice, ostensibly Mt. Moriah, is actually the [Temple Mount](#) (22:14). The power and symbolism of this sacrifice must have wowed the first audience of the passage, together with the raw power of the narrowly averted human sacrifice. It has been widely noted that God tested Abraham, but it has not been

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previously observed, as far as I know, that Abraham, in return, tested God by obeying God to the letter in hopes that God in the end would spare his son.

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