

The chilling story of the binding of Isaac has horrified Jews and Christians for centuries. A Yiddish folktale says something like this: Why did God not send an angel to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Because God knew that no angel would take on such a task. Instead, the angels said, "If you want to command death, do it yourself." It's less horrific for Muslims, I think, because they have a very robust sense of the sovereignty of God, and they take it as a given that when you obey God things *will* happen as they *should* happen. Muslims see Abraham as the exemplar of submission to God, which is what the word *Islam* means. But of course they also are fully cognizant of the extreme nature of the sacrifice Abraham is asked to make; that's why his obedience is so exemplary.

I'll just say at the outset that the anthropological reading of this is that it marks the moment when the Hebrew people decided that human sacrifice was *not* what God wanted, and limited themselves to animal sacrifice. Human sacrifice was pretty commonly accepted in the Ancient Near East, and there are traces of it in the Old Testament, like the story of Japheth's daughter. But it's equally clear that at some point they decided that wasn't right, and they stopped doing it; and this is probably their story about how it happened.

Nevertheless, the story has horrified and puzzled people through the ages, and because of that, people have come up with a lot of interpretations, trying to figure out what is redemptive or useful in this. They suggest, with Muslims, that utter obedience to God is required, even when it goes against everything you believe in. They suggest that God tests us for our own good. These arguments raise more problems: how do you know when you're obeying God, and when you've become

delusional or psychotic? Why would God test us; what does God not know already? How does being tested make us better? Richard Dawkins, in fact, the famous New Atheist, uses the binding of Isaac as a prime example of how evil and destructive religion is. In his book *The God Delusion*, he writes: "this disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defence: ' I was only obeying orders ' Yet the legend is one of the great foundational myths of all three monotheistic religions."

What Richard Dawkins fails to appreciate is that religious people are also repelled by this story. It has its apologists, but nobody has ever been so convinced that the matter was settled and we all went on to other things. It's a problem for us too.

I remind you that the story of Abraham is the story of God's promise and its fulfillment. God said to Abram, If you will go far from home and settle where I show you, I will make of you a great nation. And Abram and Sarai did that, and then they waited for God to give them children so that they would become a great nation. And nothing happened, and nothing happened, and finally Abraham slept with Sarah's maid Hagar just to get things going, and had his first son Ishmael. But then finally in her nineties Sarah conceived and had Isaac, and it became really plausible that God would make of Abraham a great nation.

But Sarah was jealous of Hagar, and insisted that Abraham throw them out of the home and strand them in the desert. So Abraham did that. Was he indifferent, or did it break his heart to see his first-born son expelled from his home? We don't

know—but we know that he had already lost his first son when the command came from God to sacrifice Isaac on Mt. Moriah. The theological problem remains, how will God make of me a great nation? And if we are to take this story as instructive for us, what is the lesson? The 19th-century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard imagined four different scenarios for this narrative.

<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20140623JJ.shtml>

In version 1, Abraham "protects" God by blaming himself for the atrocious command. Isaac lunges at Abraham's legs and begs for his life. When he looks at Abraham's face, his "gaze was wild, his whole being was sheer terror." Abraham rebukes Isaac, "Do you think it is God's command?! No, it is my desire." Abraham then prays softly, "Lord God in heaven, I thank you; it is better that he believes me a monster than that he should lose faith in you." Abraham pretends to Isaac that *he* wants to kill him, so that Isaac will not die having lost trust in God.

In version 2, Abraham and Isaac journey in total silence. At Moriah, Abraham builds the altar and wields the knife, then at the last minute God provides a ram in Isaac's place. In fact, this is how the Genesis narrative unfolds. But Kierkegaard adds a twist by imagining the consequences.

Abraham obeyed and Isaac was saved, but Abraham was deeply traumatized for the rest of his life. "He could not forget that God had ordered him to do this... His eyes were darkened and he saw joy no more." He passed the test, but at what cost? In his act of faith did he lose his faith?

Version 3 imagines Abraham's agony at having committed child sacrifice. What could he have been thinking? Abraham "threw himself down on his face, he

prayed to God to forgive him his sin, that he had been willing to sacrifice Isaac, that the father had forgotten his duty to his son." Surely it's the universal ethical duty for parents to love their children and not to murder them! Kierkegaard imagines Abraham concluding that he was mistaken to believe that God had told him to sacrifice Isaac. How could he live with himself, and how could we possibly see him as our spiritual father?

Finally, an entirely different scenario. Abraham suffers a failure of nerve, an explicit act of disobedience, or conversely, he returns to his senses. In this scenario, Abraham believes the command of God but he fails to act. He can't bring himself to slay Isaac, and as a consequence Isaac loses his faith. "Not a word of this is ever said in the world, and Isaac never talked to anyone about what he had seen, and Abraham did not suspect that anyone had seen." But there would have been effects, and life could never have been as it should be for a father and son again.

Kierkegaard's conclusion, in case you were wondering, is roughly that God requires the "teleological suspension of the ethical": in response to a command by the Almighty, the individual must still the ethical voice of their conscience. We do the word of God not because it is good, but rather because it is from God. But that still raises the question of how we know it's from God and not from our own delusions.

The most interesting interpretation to me is one that takes no account of how Isaac may have suffered in this experience. So it's not completely satisfying, I'll admit. But it's provocative. That explanation points to the Bible's frequent association between receiving a gift and being put to the test. Any gift is in itself a

test: will the person who receives it cling to the gift in itself or look beyond it to discover the person offering it?

Abraham had received the gift—he thought—of becoming the father of nations. Then God asked him to give it all up. God saw in truth the faith of Abraham, who continued to search for the will of his God in the midst of a dark night. “God sees” is the etymology of the name of the mountain on which the father and son are standing: “Moriah”. http://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2011-03-01

Abraham obeyed, and God intervened so that Isaac was spared. Although he did not sacrifice his son, Abraham sacrificed his fatherhood, in the sense of possessing the son of the Promise. Abraham no longer possessed his son. He gave up being the father of a great nation, upon which he’d gambled his life. Any gift from God is not an end in itself but an invitation to discover more about the giver, to “see God,” as it were. If you just cling to the gift, you cut off the possibility of growth, or light, or some kind of “more”. The Buddha, let’s recall, was a brilliant and accomplished meditator, but it was not until he gave up the practices that reinforced his sense of excellence that he received enlightenment.

Remember Matthew 10:37–39:

37 “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.”

What has been helpful to us in the past may need to be let go in the present.

What we think makes us important or worthwhile will almost surely need to be let go—if not earlier, then in our extreme old age when we lose our vigor. This story may be telling us that letting go of what is precious is sometimes necessary, so as to have empty hands to receive a greater gift.

God of promise,

You stayed the hand of Abraham and fulfilled the promise you made to him, that he would father a great nation. Help us both to hold fast to your promises *and* to know when to let go so that in your own mysterious ways you may bring about greater things. Amen.