

# WISDOM FROM THE BEGINNING – PART V – SECTION I

## ABRAHAM AND ISAAC – GIFT AND SACRIFICE

I. Chapters 21 through 23 of Genesis describe the beginning of the transfer of the Covenant from Abraham to Isaac, as God's promises now go beyond the individual Abraham to his people.

A. The section begins with both joy and conflict as Isaac is finally born to receive the promises, but his birth leads to the exile of Hagar and Ishmael.

B. After a seemingly conciliatory scene with Abraham's neighbor, the text describes the final and terrible test for Abraham as God calls for him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham shows his great faith in this, among the most poignant and mysterious passages in all of Sacred Scripture. Isaac also seems to become more independent, taking the message that he is to follow God before Abraham.

C. The era of Abraham and Sarah then begins to wind down as Sarah dies and Abraham purchases a portion of the Holy Land as her burial place, thus staking a claim in the land God has promised.

II. Chapter 21 describes both joy and sorrow as the first eight verses present the newborn Isaac as a gift from God, but the text then switches to the resulting exile Hagar and Ishmael.

A. Twenty-five years after the call of Abraham, and about seventeen years after God's first clear promise of a great people descending from Abraham, Isaac is born to Sarah.

1. Abraham names him Isaac, which means "he laughs." The name is fitting on several levels. First, it is a reminder of Abraham's and Sarah's initial laughter at God's promise of a son; God wants to remind them of the call to believe him. Second, as verse 6 indicates, it is a sign of the joy he brings to Sarah and to all people who will celebrate his birth and the

promise he carries on. Third, however, there is a poignant contrast with the sacrifices that will have to be offered; the laughter will be balanced by tears.

2. In accordance with God's command, Abraham circumcises him on the eighth day. That ritual would be renewed under the Mosaic law, apparently after lapsing during Egypt, as a sign of consecration. See Lev. 12:3. St. Paul will later argue that it was a symbol of the faith Abraham already had and then became a symbol of the cutting away from sin and earthly attachments that Christ would win. See Rom. 2:28-29, 4:9-11; Col. 2:11.
3. Abraham then gives a great feast when Isaac is weaned, at about the age of three, which would also be a time when survival from childhood diseases seemed more secure. At this point, all things seem to be going well.

B. But then, either at the feast or later, Sarah senses that Ishmael is a threat to Isaac and wants him and his mother driven away.

1. The text says she saw Ishmael playing with Isaac, or possibly mocking or making fun of Isaac. If he was playing with Isaac, her worry is that they are acting as equals, which she does not want. Even more, if he was making fun of Isaac, she may be worried that he, as the stronger one, will displace Isaac. It would appear that Abraham loves both of them.

2. And so, Sarah, not even using the name of Hagar and Ishmael, demands that Abraham send them away.

B. Abraham, not wishing to send them away, but not wanting to offend Sarah, asks the Lord what to do.

1. God tells Abraham that he can allow what Sarah wants (although there is no indication that it is really what God wanted), and promises to bless and guide Ishmael so that he becomes a great nation. Abraham's blessings would flow through Isaac, but are not limited to him.

2. Abraham has learned to consult God in difficult circumstances, unlike his episodes in Egypt and Gerar, when he

acted on his own.

C. The text then describes Hagar, and by extension Ishmael, who is now about 17 or 18, very sympathetically.

1. Although about 17, Ishmael is still very dependant upon Hagar. He is, at least metaphorically, carried by Hagar and is described as a child.
2. They have not been in direct contact with God as Abraham has been. And, even if he told them about the promise God had made, they would not have that certainty of a personal promise.
3. They travel southeast to Beer-sheba, where Abraham will soon be, and it seems that they have no hope left in the desert. But God hears both of them and now gives Hagar a gift He did not give Sarah, that of a promise made directly to her. Of Ishmael, He will make a great nation. He then shows here a well, which not only gives current assistance, but also is a promise of future Providence.
4. The text then portrays Ishmael very favorably, describing God as being with him and Ishmael as able to provide for himself by hunting. Later, Genesis will make it clear that he had twelve children, from whom nations arose, albeit nations that would fight among themselves. See Gen. 25:12-16. The Islamic people to this day trace their heritage back to Ishmael.
  - When Abraham dies, Ishmael returns to help bury him. See Gen. 25:9. There is a strong natural virtue to Ishmael. Here as elsewhere, the Bible does not neatly describe the Chosen People as good, and others as lesser. God's blessings are bestowed without our merit, although we seek to merit them.
5. St. Paul will later compare the Old Law and those under it to Hagar and Ishmael, and the New Law and disciples

of Christ to Sarah. See Gal. 4:21-31. The implication is that the Old Law was good, expressing natural virtues, but that it does not lead to final salvation.

III. Chapter 21 then concludes on a seemingly peaceful note, with Abimelech and his people confirming an agreement with Abraham and his people.

A. The scene begins with Abraham still in the region of Gerar, possibly a little to the south near Beer-sheba, where Hagar and Ishmael were. Abimelech, seeing the birth of Isaac, as well as the likely prosperity of Abraham, easily concludes that Abraham is favored by God (or perhaps he believes the gods) and thus that good relations would be important. He thus asks Abraham to deal loyally with him, possibly fearing that he would take over. Given the deceit over Sarah, he understandably wants a promise of honest dealing.

B. Abraham quickly agrees to the good relations, although apparently does not include his descendants. He also brings up the issue of a disputed well.

- In itself the well is a minor issue, but the issue is more than that. Abraham wants to have rights to the land, and by establishing his rights to the well, he is setting that precedent.

C. They travel to Beer-sheba about 30 miles away in order to seal the pact. There is apparently a holiness about the place that both parties understand.

1. Abraham offers cattle and sheep, including seven special ewes, in order to seal the understanding that the well is his. The place becomes known as Beer-sheba (the well of an oath, or the well of seven) because of the pact and the offering.

2. The offering is apparently meant to indicate that the bargain is sealed, and not simply a favor on Abimelech's part that could be revoked. Abraham is portraying the arrangement as contract-like. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, covenants with foreigners are sealed with a gift, although the arrangements are not generally portrayed in a favorable light. See 1 Kings 15:19; Is. 30:6; Hos. 12:1-2.

D. There will be more arguments over land with Abraham and Isaac, on the one hand, and the people of Abimelech on the other. See Gen. 23, 26. Like this one, they will be resolved amicably, but with increased tension. Hints at future land disputes are arising. But for now there is peace, as Abraham continues residing in what will be the land of the Philistines in the southern and western part of the Promised Land.

E. The text says that Abraham called upon God by name, indicating a continuing prayerful and personal relationship.

IV. In Chapter 22, the situation dramatically changes as Abraham is given his final, and most shocking test, that of offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice.

A. The text introduces a new section some time later as a test God will put to Abraham. This event is the first called expressly described as a test.

- Nowhere else in the Pentateuch does God test individuals. He does test His Chosen People, who generally fail. See Ex. 15:25, 16:4; Duet. 8:2, 16, 13:4. This test is most analogous to that of Job. In fact, on non-canonical Jewish commentary presents Satan as challenging God to see how much Abraham will offer. See Leon Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 338 f.n. 43.

B. God suddenly calls upon Abraham, who is apparently at peace. Abraham immediately answers, "Here I am." He will give that response two more times, when Isaac asks him about the sacrifice, and when God tells him to refrain from it. That response of Abraham frames the entire episode, testing Abraham's love of God when it seems to conflict with the love of his son.

- The response "here I am" is a classic one of a readiness to deliver God's judgment. See 1 Sam. 3:16; Is. 6:8.

C. With no explanation, God calls upon Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah.

1. He describes Isaac several times, by name, as Abraham's only son (Ishmael has been sent away), and as the one Abraham loves. Some commentators have speculated that God kept clarifying that it was Isaac to be sacrificed because Abraham offered Ishmael and others in his place.
2. Uniquely for God's calling, He adds the Hebrew word *na'*, which signifies a request, not a command. Abraham is free to refuse and probably not forfeit the blessings; because he obeys, he is given greater blessings. The question is whether he will bring the relationship to a higher level.
3. Mount Moriah would later be called Mount Zion, upon which Jerusalem (formerly Salem) was built. See 2 Chron. 3:1. Thus the mount is already consecrated ground, the land of Melchizedek, and the future site of the Temple and then Calvary.
4. The call is both for complete trust in God and to subordinate all human loves to Him. God has promised that the covenant, and Abraham's line, will be carried on through Isaac, but here the action would seem to be in contradiction of it.
5. The Letter to the Hebrews would later say that Abraham believed God would raise Isaac from the dead, thus restoring what was lost. Heb. 11:17-19. But God had not said exactly what He would do; Abraham simply had to trust Him.
6. It is not clear how old Isaac is. But it would appear that he is in his late teens. On the one hand, the text still refers

to him as a boy in verse 12. On the other hand, he is able to carry a fair amount of wood up the hill and to ask about the sacrifice, indicating that he has apparently participated in other animal sacrifices. In addition, verse 19 could indicate that he did not go back with Abraham, instead fending for himself.

D. Abraham sets out at once on what was about a 50 miles journey that lasted about three or four days.

1. Abraham does not try to argue with God about the request. Unlike the situation with Sodom and Gomorrah, the issue is one of faith, not justice.

2. The test is so terrible that Abraham apparently wants to get it over with quickly.

E. When they get to the mountain, the drama rises quickly.

1. Abraham leaves his two servants behind, apparently because they will be shocked or perhaps try to stop the sacrifice.

2. Isaac asks, with puzzlement and perhaps fear, where Abraham will get the sacrifice.

- Abraham says to his son, like he said to God, "Here I am." The two poles are tugging on him.

- Isaac mentions the fire and wood, but not the knife, a fact that may indicate his anxiety.

- Abraham cannot bear to tell his son the truth yet. And so he couches his answer in words that may be technically true, but are deceptive. He calls the sacrifice the "sheep," anticipating the Passover Lamb slaughtered to free the Chosen People from Egypt and the man of whom Isaiah speaks who will save His people by being led like a lamb to the slaughter. See Ex. 12:21-28; Is. 53:7. Abraham may also have been trying to propose a solution to God.

- Abraham is calling for his son to trust in God, which is exactly what Abraham is struggling with.

F. The text then arrives at the climax as it details the sacrifice with building the altar, arranging the wood, binding Isaac and

reaching out for a knife. Isaac apparently does not resist as we (and perhaps Abraham) would expect.

G. The terrible consequences are then suddenly averted as an angel tells Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac, indicating that Abraham had passed the test.

- Once again, Abraham says, "Here I am," the response that begins and ends the terrifying challenge.

- The angel speaks of Isaac as "the boy," indicating a universality to his image.

- The angel commends Abraham as a "God-fearing man." The idea here is of one who recognizes the awesomeness and wonder of God before which we sense a vast otherness above us. See Leon Kaas, The Beginning of Wisdom 344-45. Later the Bible would describe this fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom, and paradoxically the delight and strength of the soul. See Ps. 111:10. Prov. 1:7, 9:10; Sir. 1:9-12. In his classic, The Idea of the Holy, Rudolf Otto uses a similar idea of the numinous, a sense of a complete and overwhelming otherness that is above us and all our thing, as at the essence of every religion. See also Lewis, The Problem of Pain 5-8.

- The angel is described simply as a messenger. But it is clear that no one else could deliver this message. In Greek, the term *aggelos* is used to mean both messenger and angel.

H. Abraham then finds a ram to sacrifice in Isaac's place.

1. It is not clear whether God called for this sacrifice; it certainly seemed natural to Abraham to conclude the test with a thanksgiving sacrifice. Beginning with the Exodus, the Chosen People were to sacrifice a sheep or two doves for each of their first-born. See Ex. 13:14-16; Luke 2:22-24.

2. The ram may also have symbolized strength, or the father rather than the son. Abraham is in a sense, willing to sacrifice his strength and fatherhood to God.

I. In response to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the angel announces the renewal and increase of the blessings

given to Abraham. This announcement is the seventh and final blessing given to Abraham.

1. First, the angel renews the promises of the covenant, promising vast descendants with images from the earth (as many as the sands on a seashore) and the heavens (as numerous as the stars.)
2. There is an additional promise of victory over enemies, taking their gates. This promise also implies that there will be enemies arrayed against Israel. There will be future sacrifices of sons in war.
3. The promise that all communities on earth will be blessed through Abraham is extended now to say that all nations will be blessed through him. Compare with Gen. 12:3.

J. There does seem to have been a cost to this episode, for Isaac does not seem as close to his father as before.

1. When they went up the mountain, the text stressed the fact that Abraham and Isaac ascended together.
2. When Abraham returns, he meets the young men who travelled with him and goes back with them. However, there is no mention of Isaac. It is possible that he stayed behind now, his own man. He may also have gone back with Abraham, but the relationship does not now seem to be as close.
3. This greater distancing may be a good, although difficult, development. For Isaac must learn to depend upon God more than his father. All parents must eventually accept that their children are no longer dependant upon them, but now must choose their own faith.
4. As with Abraham, the text does not describe what Isaac was thinking, especially as his father bound him. The actions are meant to speak for themselves.
  - The text also does not say what either Abraham or Isaac thought after the event. We are meant to put ourselves in their place.

K. The question continues forever: why did God ask Abraham to do what would be seem to be an abominable act.

1. At one level, it is true that God is the author of life and can take it. And, if Abraham did believe God would raise Isaac from the dead, we can understand more of what he was thinking. But the action was still a terrible one, especially because God does not expressly tell Abraham that He will raise Isaac.

2. On a basic level, it is an image of the willingness to subordinate all loves to God. Jesus will later speak of a love of God must be so much greater than love of family that it will seem like hatred of family to many. See Matt 10:37; Luke 14:25.

3. At another level, God is actually using the event to forbid child sacrifice forever, making it clear that he does not wish for such a thing. Over and again, the Old Testament figures would denounce that pagan practice. See, e.g., Lev. 18:21; Duet. 12:31; 2 Kings 16:3, 21:6; Jer. 7:31.

- That practice may seem like only a bad memory. But today, child sacrifice takes place in abortions, and in a more metaphorical but very real way when people offer their children to the gods of the world by encouraging, almost forcing them to pursue wealth, position, popularity and the like above all things. See Leon Kaas, *The Beginning of Wisdom* 349.

- There is also the notion that all parents should offer their children to God, not in death, but in vocations, willing that they follow God's call no matter how difficult for them or the family.

4. On a related point, there is the notion that the sacrifices of faith are not violent as those of paganism or the world are, but they are as difficult. Abraham is not called physically to sacrifice his son, but all people of faith are warned that equally difficult sacrifices may be called for. The Letter to the Hebrews thus presents Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac as a model of all faith.

5. Isaac also becomes an image for Jesus Christ. For He was also the only-begotten Son of a Father, through whom the great and final covenant was to be fulfilled. And the Father sent Him to be sacrificed at about the same place where Isaac was to be sacrificed. Like Isaac, he carried the wood of His sacrifice up the Mount and, like Isaac consented in the sacrifice. But this time, the sacrifice took place. When we wonder what it was like for Abraham and Isaac, we get a first hint of what it was like at Calvary. See Scott Hahn, [A Father Who Keeps His Promises](#) 109.

