

## Introduction

The story of the binding of Isaac<sup>1</sup>, the *Akedah*, is a multi layered, sharply paradoxical story with many meanings and symbols. On one level we might deduce that the meaning of the story is about the development of ethical and religious thought. For example Abraham might say to Isaac at the end of the episode ‘our religion is different from the pagan religions around us, because we don’t kill our first born’. Or, on another level we can infer that because Abraham chose to obey God unconditionally, he was rewarded with the life of his son, his faith, and the title of Father of Faith. Abraham transcended ethics and leaped into faith.

The *Akedah*, or the story of the binding of Isaac is not a story that is central to Christian thought. Neither Jesus nor his chosen twelve refer to the *Akedah* in their parables and discussions although many parables and discussions are easily identified as having roots in the Torah and the books of Prophets, however the Binding of Isaac provides arguments for and informs Christian ethical thinking.

First generation Christians used the *Akedah* to commentate their trials and tribulations. James, concerned with the breakdown of love, charity and unity in a church undergoing a number of trials, uses the *Akedah* to encourage the church to overcome the present hardship and to use these tests of faith as an encouragement. The significance of the *Akedah* for James and the early Christians, was that faith and works are inseparable.

The writer of Hebrews sees Abraham as an obedient man of God, and Abraham's interrupted attempt to offer up Isaac is seen as a supreme act of perfect faith in God. ‘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 after you.’ He considered the fact that God is able even to raise

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<sup>2</sup>Genesis 22:1–24

someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.’ (Hebrews 11:17-19) The imagery of a father sacrificing his son is seen as a type of God the Father offering his Son on Golgatha.

Josephus, the Jewish historian who wrote at the beginning of the common era, the early church fathers, the rabbis and Greek philosophers such as Philo and pseudo Philo, all added their commentaries to the common knowledge. More recently philosophers such as Derrida and Kierkegaard have analyzed and deconstructed the story. In a monograph entitled *Fear and Trembling* Søren Kierkegaard discussed whether faith could ever overcome ethics.

### **1. The Abraham story up to the *Akedah***

We first hear about Abram and Sarai at the end of chapter eleven of Genesis when we learn that Abram is the son of Terah, and Sarai, Abram’s wife, is barren. They are called by the Lord to leave Haran, where these nomadic people have settled. Abram, aged seventy-five, and Sarai strike out together with Abram’s nephew Lot, for Canaan. They stay at the oak of Moreh in Shechem, where because the Lord has promised that land to their ‘offspring’ (12:7) they build an altar before moving onto the Negeb. A severe famine causes Abram and Sarai to go to Egypt, where Sarai, disguised as Abram’s sister, becomes part of the Pharaoh’s harem. Their disguise is discovered and they leave Egypt ‘very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold’ (13:2). They return to the altar at the oak of Moreh.

At this point Abram and Lot, who is as wealthy as Abram, part. Lot takes his herd and goes to live in Sodom on the plain of the Jordan and Abram eventually settles at the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron.

The Lord makes a covenant with Abram and Sarai that they will have heirs. Abram asks, seeing he and Sarai are childless, if his heir will be ‘a slave born in my house’ (15:3). The Lord replies ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them...so shall your descendents be.’ (15:5). And Abram believes the Lord.

However, Sarai convinces Abram that their slave Hagar should bear their children. After Hagar conceives she becomes contemptuous of Sarai, who in turn treats her harshly. This causes Hagar to run away. While Hagar is sitting by the spring on the way to Shur, an angel tells her that her offspring will be so multiplied that ‘they cannot be counted for the multitude’. (16:10)

Hagar gives birth to a son, Ishamel when Abram is eighty-six years old. (16:15)

When Abram was ninety-nine and Ishmael thirteen, they, and all the men and slaves of the household are circumcised<sup>2</sup>. (17:27)

As Abraham rests in his tent by the oaks at Mamre, three strangers pass by on their way to Sodom. Sarah prepares a meal for them. During the meal they ask after Sarah and observe that she will have ‘in due season’ (18:10) a son, an observation that makes Sarah laugh. After some discussion with Abraham, the strangers, variously angels or ‘the Lord’ depart for Sodom.

Following the destruction of Sodom, the death of Lot’s wife and the impregnation of his daughters, Abraham moves toward the Negeb, settling as an alien in Gerar. In a story, which parallels the Egyptian Pharaoh story, Sarah again poses as Abraham’s sister. This story though emphasizes the ethical nature of the deceit.

In due course, Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac, who is circumcised when he is eight days old. Ishmael and Isaac play together, but Sarah is concerned that Ishmael will inherit what seems rightfully Isaac’s. Sarah convinces Abraham to send Hagar away. God sends Hagar into the desert where she is rescued from certain death.

After another move to Beer–sheba, Abraham has a dispute about a well with Abimelech, which is resolved by Abraham swearing an oath of loyalty to Abimelech.

At this point the Lord tested Abraham

## 2. The Akedah, Genesis 22:1–24

<sup>1</sup>After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ <sup>2</sup>He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt-offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.’ <sup>3</sup>So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. <sup>4</sup>On the third day

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<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, 1982 p154 says that the origin of circumcision is not known, and passages in Exodus (4:24–26) and Joshua (5:2-9) are older accounts of the practise. Circumcision gained theological importance after 587 BCE when the usual institutional supports disappeared., and helped discern between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’.

Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup>Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.' <sup>6</sup>Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup>Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'Father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?' <sup>8</sup>Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. <sup>11</sup>But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' <sup>12</sup>He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' <sup>13</sup>And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup>So Abraham called that place 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'

<sup>15</sup> The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, <sup>16</sup>and said, 'By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, <sup>18</sup>and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.' <sup>19</sup>So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

### **3. Commentary**

The first two verses of the text set the scene. God desires Abraham to take Isaac and sacrifice him by burning him on an altar. Two things stand out immediately. Firstly Isaac is recognized by God as 'Abraham's only son' even though just a chapter or two previously we were reading about Ishmael, Abraham's son borne by the slave, Hagar. Secondly, Isaac is immediately recognized as 'the one whom you love'. Does this mean that Abraham did not love Ishmael? Or Abraham loved Isaac more? Perhaps it does not matter

for the focus of this passage is Abraham, not his child or children. *Jubilees* lists this test as the last and most severe of a series of divine tests of Abraham<sup>3</sup>.

Early interpreters were anxious to answer critics who thought Jews were portraying a God who desired human sacrifice. Josephus says that God does not require human blood, does not take away what God has given and set out only to test Abraham<sup>4</sup>.

Philo's opponents contend that child sacrifices are carried out by others and Abraham's actions are therefore not special, however Philo responded by saying that child sacrifices were carried out for far less reason in order to appease the gods and so on. However, Abraham was driven by his obedience to God<sup>5</sup>. Isaac was thirty-three years old, so not perhaps the child that Philo took him to be.

The Palestinian rabbis addressed the question of the (first) son Ishmael and the (other first son), Isaac. They wrote that a disagreement arose between Isaac and Ishmael as to whom their father loved more. Ishmael appeared to win the argument because he was circumcised at thirteen years, whereas Isaac's circumcision took place when he was eight days. At the moment of Ishmael's conquest Isaac, who was either twenty six, thirty six or thirty seven depending on interpretation, cried that he would give up his life if God demanded it.

The Palestinian rabbis paid a great deal of attention to the preceding story of Abraham. They suggest (by the use of textual criticism) that Isaac was to be sacrificed because Abraham neglected to offer thanks at his birth. However both the rabbis and the church fathers agreed that Isaac was the more beloved and this made the test more severe.

In Christian thought we can see that the reference to 'your only son Isaac, whom you love,' is reminiscent of the title 'Beloved Son' conferred on Jesus at his baptism<sup>6</sup>, however so are the words of Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 3:25 and so

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<sup>3</sup> See discussion in Kessler 2004 p38.

<sup>4</sup> Josephus Ant.1.233

<sup>5</sup> Philo De Ab. 191

<sup>6</sup> Mark 1:11

on. The early Gospel writers were familiar with these texts so any association between Isaac and Jesus as 'beloved sons' remains to be proven<sup>7</sup>

The church fathers, no doubt influenced by New Testament accounts depict Abraham as a faithful model for Christians to follow.

The next two verses tell of the three-day journey to the mountain that God has chosen. With two men servants, Abraham and this son travel to Moriah. Abraham's purpose to make a sacrifice is clear. The donkey carries the wood ready for the purpose, but the text does not record the proposed sacrifice being discussed with either Isaac or Sarah. Kierkegaard<sup>8</sup> writes that the journey was carried out in a heavy silence.

On the third day, the party arrives and the servants are asked to wait with the donkey. Abraham and Isaac walk further 'to worship'. Abraham's words, 'we will come back to you' tell us that either he intends to return with his son or he wants his son and the servants to think he intends to return with the son. The worship, of necessity, includes burnt sacrifice. Isaac carries the wood, and Abraham the knife and fire. They walk together.

Josephus<sup>9</sup> portrayed Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac as a great example of faith in God.

Isaac, in words reminiscent of the young Samuel's call in the presence of the older Eli, calls to his father 'Father'. Abraham answers 'Here I am, my son' to which Isaac observes that everything is available for the sacrifice, the wood, the knife and the fire, but there is no lamb. Abraham answers that 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son.' And the two walk on.

When they had reached the spot, traditionally on the top of Mount Moriah, Abraham laid the fire, then bound his son and laid him on top of the wood. There is no discussion of a struggle, indeed, the son seems compliant, an attitude Isaac takes in the rest of the stories about him.

Abraham picks up his knife, raises his arm and just in time the Lord calls to him. The motif again reminds us of the young Samuel's call in the presence of the older Levi 'Abraham, Abraham!' and Abraham replies 'here I am'. The angel tells Abraham not to lay a hand upon the son, 'your son, your only son', not to do anything to him because it had been proved that Abraham was afraid of the Lord. In other words, Abraham had passed the test.

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<sup>7</sup> See Kessler 2004 p40,41 for discussion of this.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard 1835 p1

<sup>9</sup> Josephus Ant. 1.125.

Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. He took the ram and used it as the required burnt offering. Abraham called the mountain ‘the Lord will provide’. The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time and blessed him with promises that Abraham’s offspring would be as numerous as the stars in heaven which is a repetition of the promise made in 15:5 and then added that Abraham’s offspring ‘would possess the gate of their enemies and would be blessed’ because Abraham obeyed the Lord.

Abraham and the servants returned to Beer–sheba, where Abraham lived. There is no further reference to Isaac in this passage (Did he leave by another route?) The next reference to Sarah, which follows this passage immediately, is to her death at Hebron. We might assume from the text that Abraham and Sarah did not live together after the incident of the ‘Binding of Isaac’.

### 3. Hebrews and James

‘Who wrote Hebrews?’ Origen replied ‘God knows’. This undated,<sup>10</sup> unplaced, anonymous sermon,<sup>11</sup> ‘elegant and sophisticated, enigmatic<sup>12</sup>’ is unlike any other part of the Christian canon. The book of Hebrews focuses on the divine nature of the Son and his role in creation

The recipients of the sermon are unclear. The community might be a Jewish Christian community in danger of slipping back to Judaism, or a gentile community who are being persecuted or who have tired of waiting for the

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<sup>10</sup> While the lack of any reference to the Temple, circumcision or any other particular, 70CE dating, it is a universal, as opposed to local, work. Chilton and Neusner 1996 p160ff describe Hebrews as the ‘transformation of Judaism: from salvation to sanctification’, and reflecting Gager 1983 p181 says, ‘the general preoccupation of Christian writers in the late first century with demonstrating the superiority of Christianity over Judaism’.

<sup>11</sup> Gager 1983 p180 says it is ‘neither Pauline nor epistolary’. The ‘sermon’ is an idea expressed by Chilton and Neusner (1995 p.177), amongst others, but is more like a discourse, on the other hand the writer suggests a written text, ie a letter. See 13:22 ‘*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my Word (logos) of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly*’, but there is no opening salutation appropriate to an epistle.

<sup>12</sup> Attridge 1989 p1

parousia, or who have become indifferent or a mixed Jewish gentile community encountering any or all of those experiences<sup>13</sup>. However mysterious the community and the writer are, it is clear that the author based his arguments on the proclaimed faith of the community he addressed whom we might assume were first or early second century Christians.

The major discussion on the faith of Abraham takes place in Chapter eleven in a list extolling the virtues of faith. Faith, for the author of Hebrews, particularly Abraham's faith, is the most perfect of virtues. Alongside Abraham's exemplar faith, the Hebrews' author places his obedience. This is an intimate association for the author of Hebrews, where faith learns obedience through suffering. So the example of Abraham the father who is called to sacrifice his son, is an example of both faith and suffering, a perfect example, which the recipients of this sermon are called to.

The letter of James is dated somewhere at the end of the first century and thought to have been written by a Christian, perhaps a church official, familiar with both Hellenism and Judaism<sup>14</sup>. The style of the letter can be compared with the Jewish wisdom materials and seeks to encourage the wealthy to have regard for the poor of the community. It appears that the poor have been pushed aside to favour the wealthy.

The main theme of the letter is that if faith is to be authentic, it should be accompanied by works and James uses the example of Abraham's faith and works (2:21–26), as one example of how faith and works should be partnered. However, the apparent contradiction of Paul's teaching of justification of faith by works, led Luther to wish that James might be excluded from the canon<sup>15</sup>. James says that Abraham's obedience to God's difficult words indicates his active faith. The example of Abraham's faith shows that faith was active along with his works and his works brought completion to his faith.

James and Hebrews are both use the example of Abraham as a model their listeners might follow. In neither case is Abraham the only model and the use of the Akedah is different in each case. Hebrews looks to Abraham's examples of faith, obedience and suffering whereas James uses the Akedah as an example of faith with works.

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<sup>13</sup> Attridge 1989 p8ff

<sup>14</sup> Leahy in Brown Fitzmyer and Murphy 1990 p909

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* p912

## 4. Kierkegaard: The teleological suspension of ethics

As a way of introducing first year university students to thinking about various ethical propositions, a lecturer tells them this story and asks the students to think about the various arguments:

*Treasury employed a group of graduates from a southern university to think of ways to cut the road toll focusing on private cars. The trial could take place over Easter when it was expected that many private journeys would be made.*

*The graduates came up with the proposition that the road toll would be decreased if everyone who drove a private car was required to tie a baby to the bumper of their car. This, they thought, would have a number of positive effects:*

- *People would drive more slowly and carefully if there was a baby tied to the bumper. As a result there would be less accidents.*
- *The use of fossil fuels would be minimized, carbon outputs would be less. This would have a beneficial effect on our overseas debt and our carbon credits.*
- *Many more people would take public transport which would also minimize fossil fuel use and be more efficient. As a result public transport would be improved and become more efficient.*
- *A number of small industries would be beneficially affected. For example strong ties would be needed to tie babies onto the cars, thus stimulating the strong tie industry and strong wicker baskets would be needed and the wicker basket industry would get a much needed boost.*

*One of the graduates suggested it wouldn't be fair because not everyone has access to a baby. From this it was deduced that further market advantages could be derived for:*

- *Solo parents who could either rent out their babies by the hour to people who didn't have babies.*
- *Some solo parents might want to have a child for others who didn't have a baby. This too could be source of income and therefore cut benefits.*

The lecturer, who is a gifted and thoughtful philosopher, kept the students at this exercise for quite some time as he demonstrated the various kinds of philosophical and ethical thinking from the answers to their questions.

At the end of the discussion he asked them:

‘What is wrong with the proposition of tying babies to the bumpers of cars?’

The answer, of course, is that we don’t tie babies to bumpers for two main reasons: life is sacred and the end, that is the reduction in road deaths, does not justify the means, that is tying babies to the bumpers of cars.

This is also a way into considering Kierkegaard’s ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’ outlined in *Fear and Trembling*<sup>16</sup>. Kierkegaard begins with a meditation on faith, retelling the Akedah in four different ways.

Kierkegaard admires Abraham’s faith, but is incapable of understanding it. Abraham also had hope and this combination of faith and hope allowed him to take the unresisting Isaac and bind him, ready to be sacrificed. Further Kierkegaard says, Abraham loved God, ...’so ardently that he was willing to sacrifice his most precious possession’<sup>17</sup>.

However, Kierkegaard believes that we forget the fear and anxiety with which Abraham approached the altar. Abraham’s hope and faith caused him to overcome the fear and anxiety and caused or allowed him to commit to an action which would have been, had it been executed appalling in every sense.

Kierkegaard finishes by observing that in the telling and preaching of this story we forget the time involved in the actions, the time to collect the firewood, to sharpen the knife, to travel three days ‘and a goodly part of the fourth’<sup>18</sup>, to the mountain, to bind Isaac and all the time in dread at what he must, for God has asked it of him, do.

Kierkegaard proposes three specific philosophical questions raised by the story of Abraham's sacrifice.

1. Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical? (That is, can Abraham's intent to sacrifice Isaac be considered ‘good’ even though, ethically, human sacrifice is unacceptable?)
2. Is there an absolute duty to God? (In other words, beyond that which is ethical)

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<sup>16</sup> *Fear and Trembling (Rygt og Bæven)* was published in 1843 under the pseudonym *Johannes de silentio (John the Silent)*.

<sup>17</sup> Kierkegaard p8

<sup>18</sup> *ibid* p15

3. Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to have concealed his purpose from Sarah, Eleazar, and Isaac?

A number of philosophers propose answers to these questions. For example, Caputo<sup>19</sup> in an essay discussing Kierkegaard and Derrida discusses the secrecy of the event. The secret God keeps from Abraham and the secret Abraham keeps from Sarah, Isaac and the servants.

The answers to the questions that Kierkegaard poses inform some of our ethical thinking and our thought about the nature of God. In the end Kierkegaard's discussions of the Akedah does not answer any questions, but proposes more questions which in themselves bring about more questions.

## 5. Summary

At the end of the story of Sarah and Abraham, Abraham does the unthinkable and takes Isaac to be sacrificed. He does this without discussing it with either Sarah or Isaac or even the servants who accompany him. At the very last moment as Abraham rises his knife to sacrifice Isaac, the Lord calls to him and shows him a replacement sacrifice, a ram.

There are many ways in which the Akedah can be interpreted. Although it does not occur in any of the teachings of Jesus to his disciples and followers, and so is not central to the Christian message, the Akedah was used as a story of faith by the authors of James and Hebrews. The author of Hebrew emphasized Abraham's faith, obedience and suffering and the author of James emphasized the idea of faith being qualified by the works that a Christian accomplishes.

Contemporary philosophers and Christian thinkers use the Akedah to examine the ethical practices of the Christian. Kierkegaard proposes an idea that Abraham's faith in God was so profound that he disregarded his love for Isaac and his ethical concern for the other and proposed to obey God. In this Kierkegaard sets up a model of absolute faith and obedience, which transcends ethics.

## 6. Conclusion

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<sup>19</sup> Matustik and Westphal 1995 p220

While the Akedah is not a story upon which Jesus and his disciples based their teachings, it has become an important story in the formation and thought of Christian philosophy and ethics. The Akedah, a story of many layers and paradoxes tests our faith and proposes many questions which while they may not have easily accessed answers in themselves propose more questions. These questions form the basis of how it is that the life of Christ might be lived.

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All biblical references came from the New Revised Standard version.

## **Questions for discussion**

1. Discuss the feelings the women, Hagar and Sarah might have in the various situations that are described in this paper.
2. What might Sarah's response to Abraham be when he returns and tells her the tale of the Akedah?
3. Is there ever a circumstance in our lives, when faith alone might be sufficient, or, when the ethics that govern our daily responses might not be referred to?