

Gratz College

*The Akedah*

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Genesis

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To once again place a pen to paper to comment on the Akedah may seem somewhat useless. As with many other authors, I too could say, "what can I possibly offer that has not been previously offered?". Though commentary on the Akedah has been so extensive, there still remains not only disagreement as to its central purpose, but also ~~in reference to~~ the peripheral moral/ethical issues related to it. Rabbi Steven Saltzman says that the reasons that moral/ethical issues go on and on without resolution is that the ground level of the arguments is not from an intellectual/rational standpoint, but rather from an emotive one. The Akedah is, along with many other things, a story with intense moral and ethical ramifications. When it comes right down to it, there may never be agreement on some crucial elements in this story, because they are seen differently by different people who utilize the story to substantiate various positions.

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My purpose here, therefore, is not to arrive necessarily at *the* truth, but to examine the Akedah from various historical and theological perspectives. In this broad analysis, I hope to show how the Akedah has been interpreted by Jewish and Christian scholars, how interpretations have changed over time, and its significance for both Jews and Christians.

# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. Approach -- Methods of Interpretation

Many who have read the account of Abraham offering his son Isaac as a burnt offering have (more often than not) proceeded to make their own offerings -- analyses or interpretations of the meaning and significance of this encounter. These are noted below.

To many, the purpose of the Akedah is seen in reference to its historical context, in that it was "...designed to combat what was in the 9th, 8th, and 7th centuries B.C. an overgrowing evil, the horrible practice of child sacrifice" (REIK, 40). These same people feel there is evidence (archaeological findings) that child sacrifice was being practiced in Palestine at this time by the Canaanites. Reik says that modern researchers feel that the Genesis narrative is "...an etiological myth - as a saga that explains how it came about that the people of Israel did not sacrifice human beings any longer, but used animals instead" (REIK, 77).

Along the same line is the approach that the story not only rejects human sacrifice, but also the sacrifice of a son by a father. The story was interpreted in this manner especially in the 2nd century C.E. by the Jewish community in <sup>an</sup> attempts to combat this central idea of Christianity. W. Gunther Plaut emphasizes the father-son aspects of the narrative, and

interprets it thus: in the spiritual realm, God is the dominant Father and Abraham the trusting and obedient son; in the human realm, Abraham is the dominant father, and Isaac the submissive son. He sees it as a paradigm, and feels the story rejects the tendency for parents to seek to dominate their children and "sacrifice them to their own parental hopes and plans" (PLAUT, 151).

Some have taken this a step further to interpret the Akedah psycho-analytically, viewing the Akedah motif as "...the biblical extension of the Oedipus Complex" (PLAUT, 154 quoting Eric Wellisch). Wellisch was a Viennese psychiatrist who wrote Isaac and Oedipus in 1954. <sup>Wellisch</sup> He focuses mostly on the father-hatred of the son, <sup>yet he also attempts to show</sup> though pointing out that he ~~believes~~ <sup>what he believed to be</sup> Isaac had incestuous wishes. He also comments on Abraham's <sup>Abraham's</sup> fear of being overthrown by his son, and his abandonment of his tendencies to destroy his son after God intervenes (ARIETTI, 138-9 quoting Wellisch).

This psycho-analytic approach is <sup>also</sup> the essence of Theodor Reik's work, The Temptation in which he adopts Freud's view of Christian-Jewish relations, and also applies it to Isaac and Abraham. The Christian "son" seeks to destroy the Jewish "father", as in the Akedah where <sup>the author</sup> he sees the son eventually triumphing over the father. Reik also considers the possibility that the account of Isaac's near sacrifice may have been "...a

disguised and elaborate description of a primitive puberty ritual" (REIK, 114). He compares certain elements in the rabbinic legends with similar *puberty* traditions in many primitive religions, such as Sarah crying when Isaac is taken away (separation from the mother), idea of "death" of adolescence and "resurrection" to manhood, departure to an isolated place, the company of other young men, and the education by a teacher afterwards (REIK, 135). He feels that Abraham was a 'cult hero' for Israel, one who is recorded as having been the first one to initiate the rite, which was then reenacted by subsequent generations.

Another approach to the Akedah has been that of the rabbinic interpretations, or "legends". The tendency of the Midrash Sages, as Liebowitz notes, was to fill out the narrative with "homiletic embellishments" and it seems that they did so because "the Torah deliberately leaves out details and concentrates only on what is essential to the purpose of the narrative" (LIEBOWITZ, 198). She feels that the legends were used as an attempt to explain existing institutions *in Judaism* (circumcision, animal sacrifice...), and were to lend credence not only to Abraham as the Father of the Jews, but also to Jerusalem being the center of Jewish life and Israel being the land of promise.

In medieval times, the Akedah was often interpreted by rabbinic

scholars in a way <sup>which</sup> ~~that~~ directly correlated with the persecution~~7~~ that the Jewish people were undergoing at the time. In approaching the Akedah, the rabbis were, in effect, viewing it as a prophetic work, one that would tell of the sufferings that the Jews <sup>to come</sup> would have to suffer for the Name. Shalom Spiegel's work, The Last Trial is a classic <sup>example of</sup> ~~work dealing with~~ this. He analyses the 12th century poem "Me-Aggadot ha-Akedah" written by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, in which Isaac is portrayed as dying, his ashes remaining on the altar. This seems to be an attempt to reconcile the biblical event with the events of the middle ages. How could the father of the Jews be required to sacrifice *less* than those Jews who were giving their very lives? Spiegel points out how it was impossible <sup>(not)</sup> for the victims of the Crusades <sup>to feel that their sufferings and sacrifices exceeded by far everything endured by the original Akedah father and son</sup> (SPEIGEL, 21). During this time much effort was devoted to discussing what indeed had happened to Isaac after the angel of the Lord intervened. Spiegel says that even the ancients commented on the fact that the narrative says *Abraham returned to Beersheba* and does not mention Isaac. Various suggestions were offered: he was sent home in the night so the Evil Eye wouldn't affect him, he went to study with Shem, God sent him to Eden for three years, he went to Paradise for two years to be healed from the incision,

etc. It is also suggested that the ram was called "Isaac" and its ashes are continually on the altar to atone for all generations. Spiegel, though obviously impressed with the force of the poem, questions the validity of this position, and feels that it is possible that "...these pious generations failed to be affected by the plain meaning of the words of Scripture..." (SPIEGEL, 8). In the introduction to Spiegel's work, Goldin goes one step further:

Rabbi Ephraim's interpretation of the biblical Akedah story is admittedly very far-fetched, and it illustrates clearly what happens when the literal meaning of texts is crowded out by the commentator's conviction that the ancient revealed formulation has anticipated every single detail of later events....[T]ext and personal experience...are reciprocally enlightening: even as the immediate event helps make the age-old sacred text intelligible, so in turn the text reveals the fundamental significance of the recent event or experience. (GOLDIN, XV, XVI--Spiegel)

He is not divorcing, then, the two events, but attempting to see each in their proper perspective. Lastly, we see the most common approach to the Akedah: a devotional, or exemplary interpretation. This is the position of the Rambam:

The sole object of all the trials mentioned in Scripture is to teach man what he ought to do or believe; so that the event which forms the actual trial is not the end desired; it is but an example for our instruction and guidance....The trials mentioned in Scripture in the [six] passages, seem to have been tests and experiments by which God desired to learn the intensity of the faith and the devotion of a man or a nation (NACHMANIDES, III: 112; 113).

In using this approach, there are three basic attitudes in Jewish thought that can be considered. Louis Jacobs, commenting on Kierkegaard's

Fear and Trembling, mentions these (PERKINS (ed.), 1). First, the trial has a happy ending -- it was only a "test"; Abraham's faith is vindicated, and there was no divine intention for Abraham to kill Isaac. Second, the stress is on the original commandment. Here we actually imagine God commanding Abraham to kill his son. This is Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical": "Abraham goes in 'fear and trembling' but the ultimate for him is not the ethical norm but his individual relationship to God" (PERKINS, 2). Third, we dwell on both aspects: it is impossible that God could command a murder (and thus be false to his own nature). But if he could, Abraham would be obligated to obey. Thus, this approach dwells on Abraham's (and Isaac's) relationship with God, and serves as an example to others, and a guide for spiritual growth.

#### B. Historicity and Setting

How the Akedah is interpreted often has a great deal to do with how the story is seen historically. Those who question the historical validity of all pre-Mosaic accounts view the Akedah as a mythological story with Abraham being the cult hero; thus the story is seen, as was mentioned, simply to explain existing institutions. Reik is <sup>of</sup> ~~one from~~ this school. He feels that Abraham <sup>was</sup> ~~and Isaac were~~ <sup>a</sup> not historical figures, but <sup>was</sup> ~~were~~ a

counterfeit portrait, "...a very clever copy of an old master, but...not the original" (REIK, 80). The idea is that there was an anonymous chieftain in archaic times who actually carried this out; the story had come down to Abraham's time, and Abraham was attributed with having done this. Reik notes that there is a similar tendency in the folklore of Australian and African aborigines which "...shows that tribal tradition frequently connects old customs and institutions to legendary figures of a remote past" (REIK, 55). Buber seems to agree with this point of view:

In brief, the nineteenth century excluded the possibility that the man Abram or Abraham could have been a real historical person. We are not given a historical reality, to be sure, but a document of its reflection. What might be behind the biblical story, science, lacking other evidence, will only be able to surmise. But what is contained in it is something we are permitted to deduce from the text itself (BUBER, 23).

Not only has the historicity of the characters in this story been questioned, but also many have questioned the character<sup>and</sup> identity of God in this story. This is due in part to the usage of the two names of God in Genesis 22: Elohim and Adonai. Some feel that the usage of the two names is significant in that the command is initiated by Elohim, the impersonal, mysterious God, and terminated by Adonai, the personal, self-revealing, familiar God (BUBER, 41). This change in usage of God's names during the event on the mountain, therefore, is seen as reflecting the significant change in Abraham. After the ordeal, God is seen not as the mysterious,

far-off God, but as the One of whom it is said that Abraham was His friend. While I agree with Buber that Abraham was growing in his knowledge of God (and his ability to "see" what God was doing) through his various revelations, I don't feel that it is helpful to compare the names of God in an attempt to justify His actions according to His name. He is the same God all along, and is One God, fully exercising His justice as well as His mercy. What is significant is not that a different name of God is used after Abraham has actually obeyed God's command, but rather that Abraham's recognition of this God is different. Various names are used all during the Genesis narratives (chap. 12-22) in which Abraham is familiar with God, <sup>such</sup> as: Elohim, El, El Shaddai, Yhwh (Adonai), El Olam (Everlasting God), and El Elyon (God the Most High). While each name represents an aspect or attribute of God, it does not seem that usage of one name over another strictly implies that God was acting a certain way and not another.

Mention needs to be made of the place of the rabbinic legends in reference to historical interpretation of the Akedah. Various legends are connected with the narrative. One such legend makes an analogy between Abraham and Job: Satan comes before God and accuses Abraham. God tells Satan that Abraham would even sacrifice his promised son if God asked

him to. Satan is seen in the legends as preventing Abraham from sacrificing, telling Sarah of Abraham's intent and then running after them, appearing to Isaac and tempting him to not listen to his father, and as turning into a brook and trying to keep them from their journey. Reik sees this legendary material as quite important for understanding the Akedah, but feels that the traditional explanations have just scratched the surface of this material. <sup>H</sup> He says that because the legendary material has not been fully understood, "...the <sup>a</sup> ~~secret~~ meaning of the myth...has not yet been recognized" (REIK, 16). The legendary material is, to be sure, quite extensive and <sup>needs</sup> to be considered. Just as in Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn's time, the setting of these writings was significant; the authors were serious scholars and devout Jews. While on the surface the legends may seem childish or peripheral, they serve a purpose -- that being that they ask for us the questions <sup>which might</sup> ~~that we would~~ ask ourselves, but might not dare to expose in our "religious environments". They deal with merit, righteousness, diligence, deception, temptation, rebellion, and much more. We need to look beyond the legends to see the basic philosophical or theological point that they were attempting to make.

The setting of the Akedah geographically is basically not problematic. In reference to time, however, various suggestions have been offered for

"*after these things*" (Gen. 22:1). Menahem Kasher in his anthology lists numerous possibilities. First, he says it was perhaps after "...the treaty with Abimelech in which Abraham erred and thus God subjected Abraham to a severe test" (KASHER, 128). Often added to this view is the idea that the angels were amazed that Abraham had made such a covenant, and thus God's test was to see his faithfulness to Him even though he'd covenanted with the nations of the world. So Abraham passed, but still "...in spite of that they persecuted and oppressed his children over 300 years, as a punishment for his having made a covenant with the peoples of the world" (KASHER, 129, SER 7 T.S. 22, 6).

Second, it could have been subsequent to all which had taken place since his circumcision, including his expulsion of Ishmael. Some see the Akedah as a punishment for his treatment of Ishmael (KASHER, 128). Third, R. Jose b. Zimra interpreted "*after these things*" as being after the Satan accused Abraham before God for not sacrificing even a turtle-dove in thanks to God for his son (KASHER, 128). Others in the Midrash held the same view but with a different light:

Abraham had been soliloquizing and came to realize that after Isaac's birth he had rejoiced and made others rejoice, yet had not offered anything...It was then that God tempted Abraham and demanded the sacrifice of his beloved son (REIK, 24).

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Another offering is that of the story of Ishmael and Isaac arguing<sup>over</sup> who

would "inherit the world", and Isaac says that all Ishmael gave was a few drops of blood -- Isaac would sacrifice his whole self -- then God said to the angels: "This is the hour" (KASHER, 128).

Lastly, it seems that the clearest suggestion is made by Arietti. He notes, simply, that "after these things" is after "Everything we know about Abraham: his relations with the imageless God..." (ARIETTI, 148). His reception of the command to leave his country, the promise he received for blessing, his dealings with Lot, his covenant with God, his defense of Sodom and Gomorrah, and his relationships with Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael were all leading up to this time. This seems like the most reasonable explanation for "*after these things*" without assigning more to the setting than seems to be there. What is important is that we gain a sense of the importance of the time factor involved. The Akedah was obviously the culminating point in Abraham's ~~spiritual (and physical)~~ life. Though Abraham had gone through trials up <sup>to</sup> ~~until~~ that point, none of them could compare with what he was required to bear in the Akedah.

## II. HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF COMMENTARIES ON EACH POINT

### A. The First Message

#### 1. Source of...

In dealing with the moral/ethical issues of the Akedah, one of the key questions is in reference to the initiator of the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Various possibilities have been suggested.

Looking at the narrative, the most obvious possibility is that the command came from God: "*Now it came about after these things that God tested Abraham and said to him.*" (Gen. 22: 1). Others have suggested, however, that Abraham did what he did as the result of comparing himself to the Canaanite tribes around him who were offering their children to Moloch (REIK, 40). He could do no less for his God than they were for theirs.

Plaut suggests that a message may have come from God, but Abraham misunderstood the command (PLAUT, 152). He also stresses the idea that Abraham's action was <sup>the result</sup> ~~not~~ of supposed religious duty. The kind of God who would require man to do such a thing, <sup>Plaut held,</sup> would not be the true God.

Some have offered that the source of the command involved neither God nor Abraham. This is often found in rabbinic interpretations. Here we see the possibility that the source of the command involved Satan, who came before God to accuse Abraham (ZOHAR, 372). Here Satan initiates the affair, not God. Another rabbinic interpretation is that the event is the result of the disagreement that Ishmael and Isaac were supposed to have

had (as mentioned above). Rashi mentions both of these, and seems to see the event as the result of provocation rather than by divine initiative (RASHI, 198). We can see in his view a reflection of the times in which Rashi was living. He was trying to provide answers for those around him who were suffering for the Name, as were many of the medieval rabbis.

It seems most reasonable to take scripture at face value and recognize God as the initiator of the command. In consideration of the relationship that Abraham had with God (being the "friend" of God), I think that we can conclude that the voice which had promised the patriarch a son was the voice which commanded him to offer him up.

## 2a. Purpose of the Command

It is interesting to note the different approaches taken by Jewish and Christian commentators when dealing with the purpose of the command. In my analysis, I found that some Christian commentators saw the Akedah as a type of "negative reinforcement" to improve Abraham's character. ~~While~~ <sup>many</sup> Jewish commentators noted the significance of the Akedah in transforming Abraham's character, <sup>yet</sup> it was <sup>viewed</sup> more along the lines of perfecting the good that was already in him.

For example, one of the harshest treatments by a Christian

commentator is John P. Lange, who writes,

Thus must Abraham repent in the history of Isaac, the human guilt which lay in his relation to Ishmael... Abraham was going to have to pay dearly for his sin but instead, God in His mercy presents the Ram (LANGE, 470).

*(also a Christian commentator)*

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H. C. Leupold says that Abraham was in danger of loving his son more than his God. The trial was a working through of that problem (LEUPOLD, 616, v. 2). I think it is safe to say, however, that these two examples are not representative of the Christian view as a whole.

Duty to love God, perfection, transformation of character, reward for good deeds, and the proving of Abraham's faith and spiritual merit are all aspects of the Jewish understanding of the purpose of the Akedah. The deed is not seen only as an isolated event refining ~~one man before God~~ <sup>man's relationships with</sup> God, but as a prototype of what Abraham's descendants would be required to endure.

The Jewish understanding is (ex post facto) to some extent, especially in traditional rabbinic interpretations. The event is seen as substantiating not only Abraham as the father of his people, but also as substantiating Judaism over and above the pagan religions which participated in human sacrifice. Most rabbinic scholars see this as a clear picture of God setting the Jews apart for the purpose of sanctifying the Name in the world. Abraham's actions are also seen as representative of what God would require of those who would call themselves by His Name. As the Ramban

*Italic, No 11*

says, "...the Lord tries the righteous. When he knows that the righteous man will do His will and wishes to show his righteousness, He confronts him with a trial. But he does not try the wicked who will not hearken...(LIEBOWITZ, 191)".

E. A. Speiser comments on this idea in the Anchor Bible. His position is that the purpose of the Akedah was not only in Isaac, but in the vision of future generations. It was not merely to prove Abraham's obedience; he had already proven that when he left Mesopotamia. Rather, the Akedah entailed much more:

...a vision that would have to be tested and validated over an incalculable span of time...pursued only with singlemindedness of purpose and absolute faith - an ideal that could not be perpetuated unless one was ready to die for it or had the strength to see it snuffed out. The object of the ordeal, then, was to discover how firm was the patriarch's faith in the ultimate divine purpose. It was one thing to start out resolutely for the Promised Land, but it was a very different thing to maintain confidence in the promise when all appeared lost. The fact is that short of such unswerving faith, the biblical process could not have survived the many trials that lay ahead (SPEISER, 166).

Another aspect within Jewish thought in reference to this is that God confronted Abraham with the trial to "...translate into action the potentialities of his character, and give him the reward of a good deed, in addition to the reward of a good heart" (LIEBOWITZ, 191). Quoting R. Yosef Albo in Sefer Haikkarim, Liebowitz elaborates on this view:

...the reward for potential good is not the same as that for actual good deeds...(I Kings 20:11)...For this reason the Holy One blessed be He often inflicts suffering on the righteous in order to habituate it to them so that their outward actions conform to their inner character. The

deed will intensify love of God since every action leaves its own indelible mark on the performer (LIEBOWITZ, 190).

## 2b. Nature of the Command

Martin Buber points out that God sends Abraham out with the same command: "Get thee" in both his first command (Gen. 12:1), and in his last (Gen. 22:2). The first time, God's command separates Abraham from his past. In the second instance, from his future (BUBER, 41).

Rabbi Albo says that the Hebrew phrase *kach-na* ("Get thee") is seen as "please take", and "...indicates that Abraham acted freely, and not from compulsion" (PLAUT, 152). The Zohar as well notes that the idea is that God was gently persuading and leading Abraham on to do his will (ZOHAR, 373).

Debate has raged over the nature of the command specifically in reference to the nature of "sacrifice". Most commentators have taken great pains to specify their views as to whether the sacrifice was "spiritual" or "literal". Those who refute the "spiritual" point of view feel that we can only understand the force of Abraham's trial if we see that he was faced with the dilemma of physically, literally slaying his son in response to a command from God (LANGE, 465). In Lange's point of view, the emphasis in the phrase "*offer him there for a burnt offering*" is on the "burnt offering" rather than "offer". H. C. Leupold, who emphasized the

spiritual aspect of sacrifice, believes that the terms that God employed were "...taken from material sacrifices and, apparently, at this stage of the religious development of the race were the only terms available" (LEUPOLD, 617, v. 2). He continues, though, that "...such a sacrifice always demanded the spiritual sacrifice that it typified. Why, then, could not this essential thing stand in the forefront in this case?" (LEUPOLD, 618). Rashi, as well, spiritualized the command somewhat in saying, "[God] did not say to him, ~~slaughter him~~; because...He did not desire to slaughter him, but only to bring him up to the mountain in order to prepare him as a burnt offering" (RASHI, 200).

I think both Jewish and Christian commentators would agree that literal sacrifice is meaningless without spiritual commitment, but I do agree with Lange in that we lose something when we "spiritualize" the entire event. Even the silence of the narrative expresses some of the heaviness that Abraham felt in facing the reality that the God he loved and trusted was indeed requiring from him the son of the promise.

### 3. Justification/Philosophical Considerations

Central to Jewish and Christian commentary on the Akedah is discussion concerning the problem of moral and ethical justification for

such a command. Some have oversimplified the matter by excluding the possibility that a moral difficulty exists. The basic supposition in this view is that the problem does not exist because "...God, who is the giver of life, has a right to require it..." (LANGE, 465). *A demand for moral justification for such a command is thus dismissed.*

Others, however, see the complex ethical and moral implications of the event, and attempt to deal specifically with this problem. Jacob Louis, in an essay dealing with these issues, lists five basic questions that are central to this issue:

1. How could God have ordered a man to murder his son?
2. How could Abraham have been so sure that God had, indeed, commanded him to kill his innocent child?
3. Even if he was convinced that God had so commanded him, was it his duty to obey?
4. Is obedience to God's will so supreme an obligation that it can override man's moral sense, demanding of him that he commit a criminal act of the very worst kind for the greater glory of God?
5. Can or should we worship a being who wishes to be served by an act of murder? (PERKINS, (ed.) pg. 1)

I don't think that anyone has been able to answer all of these questions. If someone has, there is no doubt another man who thinks he has as well, and disagrees. Søren Kierkegaard, however, devoted a great deal of time and energy to this specific aspect of the Akedah. *Kierkegaard* ~~S.R.~~ asks three questions, (somewhat similar to the above), all of which he responds to affirmatively. First, he asks whether there exists a "teleological suspension of the ethical" i.e., is there a way <sup>at times</sup> in which one <sup>may</sup> transcend ~~ethics~~ <sup>to</sup> obeying God? Second, he asks if there is an absolute duty toward

*Kierkegaard*  
 God. Third, ~~S.K.~~ asks if Abraham was ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose before Sarah, ~~before~~ Eliezer, and ~~before~~ Isaac. For ~~S.K.~~, *Kierkegaard* there were a number of implications involved with these questions. First, he believed that man is not justified by the law, but by faith. Thus, Abraham's relationship with God in this instance superseded or "suspended" the ethical demand. Secondly, he believed that in living by faith, man relinquishes his right to self-determination. Abraham's responsibility or duty to obey God, therefore, was more important than his choosing his own way. Kierkegaard's third implication is the most difficult to understand, but basically involves the idea that there is no explanation before the fact by any ethical means for what God would have us to do. It is all muddy, and only clear after the fact. Therefore, man obeys God, trusting and believing in Him, and is only able to see the explanation *consequent to his obedience* ~~after the fact~~. A man who is putting his faith in God does not speak to others about his actions when the actions are being done for reasons of faith. Had Abraham spoken, his society would have stopped him from the act. There were no human justifications for doing what he was going to do. Speaking, and thus exposing himself would have been something other than faith. For Kierkegaard, a man only speaks about doing things when they are being done for *ethical* reasons, not reasons of

faith. Ethical principles are universal, for all men. Religious principles are private, for specific human beings. "A man who has true faith in God may neglect the established principles of ethics and obey the Divine call" (ARIETTI, 135). <sup>Kierkegaard</sup> S.K. makes the following comparison in an attempt to explain the implications involved in his third question:

But he who reached faith...does not remain standing at faith, yea, he would be offended if anyone were to say this of him, just as the lover would be indignant if one said that he remained standing at love, for he would reply, "I do not remain standing by any means, my whole life is in this." Nevertheless he does not get further, does not reach anything different, for if he discovers this, he has a different explanation for it. (KIERKEGAARD, 131)

Silvano Arietti in his <sup>book,</sup> Abraham and the Contemporary Mind, provides an extensive philosophical analysis of the moral and ethical problems related to the Akedah. He analyzes Kierkegaard's position, and compares it to Kant's position as well as to traditional Jewish ethics. Basically, Kant's position is as follows:

"...the whole evolution of the episode is wrong. First, a real moral act must be autonomous, not heteronomous...The person must will to do the moral act. He is also the maker of the law that will lead him to perform the moral act. If Abraham follows the will of God, and not his own will, he is not free..." (ARIETTI, 132)

According to Kant, Abraham becomes unethical. He is violating universal ethical principles (which Kant feels man performs autonomously) in favor of religious principles (which Kant feels man does out as the result of

divine compulsion). Arietti argues this point in answering that "...man is a free agent even in a divine command. He can make a choice to accept or reject to obey" (ARIETTI, 132). Arietti compares Kierkegaard and Kant with what he feels is a traditional Jewish approach to the ethical. He feels that without relation to God, man cannot observe universal ethics, because "...in order to formulate principles of universal validity, man has to search for God's guidance and ask himself what God would want, so that his action could have the value of a universal ethical fact" (ARIETTI, 134). In other words, we cannot accept Kant's idea of a universal ethical system unless we accept a concept of God. According to Arietti, if we accept a concept of God, then we must also accept the fact that God could request exceptions to the imperative (ARIETTI, 135). Thus, he does not feel that we can "...see ethical value in the Akedah if we accept Kant's ethical theory" (ARIETTI, 132) because Kant believes that man is actually able to obey universal ethical principles without a concept of God. For Arietti, the ethical value emerges as we see that Abraham made a free choice to respond to the divine call. For Kierkegaard, the value of the Akedah is that Abraham fulfilled his duty to God, but not as the result of rational analysis that this was a universal principle that all men knew to be proper. Rather, Abraham obeyed God because he knew God, and believed

*that God would fulfill His promise to him regardless of his present situation.*

## B. Isaac, Son of Promise

*"And He said: Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac..."* (Gen. 22:2). This verse seems to reflect the heart of Abraham for his son. It seems as though God is taking great pains to qualify which son Abraham was to offer. In fact, legend has it that God came to Abraham in a dream prior to the actual command to specify which son (REIK, 26). Rashi recounts this discussion and says that the purpose of the clarification was so that Abraham would not be confused suddenly by God's command. God wanted "...to endear upon him the commandment and to give him a reward for each word" (RASHI, 199). Rashi saw the significance of every word in the command: Isaac was not only Abraham's *son*, but his *only* son (because he was the son of Sarah whom Abraham loved). Isaac was loved, because he was the long-awaited son, the son of the promise, the fulfillment of Abraham's desire and trust. And as if there was still any question as to which son, God specifies him by name - Isaac...the one whose name had been foreordained (Gen. 17:19). The Lord left no room for uncertainty.

~~Following the "ex post facto" tendency of Talmudic commentary, the~~

*The states:*  
 Talmud ~~notes~~ *states:*

"It is Isaac that I love, said God, because he is the persecuted" (KASHER, 133: P'sikta M.S. T. S. 22, 29) It seems that the commentator was not only seeing the persecution that Isaac had received from Ishmael (Gen. 21:9), but was also looking around him at the persecution of the Jews of his day, and was attributing to Isaac their present suffering.

*commentators,*  
 While ~~to~~ many, Isaac's age is a subject of great importance and controversy. Arietti makes a good point, *however* *of the* *of those involved* in noting that his literal age is not what was important, but rather *in the fact that* *the importance lies in the fact that the story stresses* that these people were mature; "...it seems obvious that he is meant to be understood as young by comparison to his father, but old enough to grant his consent..." (ARIETTI, 154). He points out that the actions of Isaac show that he is not passive in the Akedah, but is not as active as his father Abraham (ARIETTI, 154).

*Isaac's*  
 His age at the time of the Akedah has been set at 25 by Josephus, 26 or 27 by a Mishnah on Genesis, 13 by Ibn Ezra, and 36 by the Targum Jonah (REIK, 27). The Zohar notes that many rabbis set Isaac's age at 37, because the Akedah and the death of Sarah are directly related. Since Sarah died at 127, Isaac's age would be 37 since he was born when she was 90. Ibn Ezra set his age at 13 because he believed ~~Isaac was taken by force, and bound~~

Isaac was taken by force, and bound against his will. He says if Isaac was older, he would have been fully responsible for his actions, and thus his reward would have been double that of his father's (REIK, 27). The idea of "merit" and "reward" plays a large part in Jewish commentary on the Akedah, and much discussion has arisen as to the merit of both Abraham and Isaac for their part in the Akedah. A problem arises, however, due to the great silence of the narrative. We are not told Isaac's age; we can only speculate as to how much he really understood, and we cannot be absolutely certain of either Abraham or Isaac's actions. It seems that each school of thought which has approached the Akedah has formulated its events according to their own theology, and it is for this reason that many question the possibility of knowing "the" truth about the entire event.

### C. Moriah

Along with the phrase 'Adonai-jireh' later on in the narrative, the word 'Moriah' has been the subject of discussion for many in reference to the significance of the Akedah. The meaning of the word 'Moriah' has been translated in various ways, many of which have been used to support theological positions, or the validity of subsequent institutions or places.

~~While many disagree as to the actual~~ <sup>the word</sup> meaning of 'Moriah', most commentators agree that the *location* of 'Moriah' is most likely what subsequently was the city of Jerusalem. "Then Salomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite" (II Chronicles 3:1). Rashi says that Jerusalem was called 'Moriah' because from there 'instruction' (a similar word in Hebrew) went forth to Israel (by means of the Temple being built there) (RASHI, 200). Other suggestions have come from equating the Hebrew word 'Moriah' with similar Hebrew words. It has been equated with 'the land of the Amorites', 'the land of myrrh'-i.e., 'the land where incense will be offered', 'the land of fear', 'the land of worship', 'the vision of Yahweh', 'the conspicuous land', 'the high or lofty land', and 'the shown of Jehovah'. Plaut suggests that the majority of attempts to equate Moriah with the above are only the result of word plays, and not actual etymologies (PLAUT, 146).

The place of the Akedah does, of course, play a large part in the theologies of both Jews and Christians. The traditional Jewish view has been that the Akedah took place on the mount which would <sup>eventually</sup> be the ~~subsequent abode or place of the Temple~~ <sup>mount on</sup> Jerusalem. Thus, ~~the Akedah~~ <sup>fact that the</sup>

~~But~~, Subsequent generations ~~felt that~~ ~~was the felt that the~~  
~~saw the~~ maintained that because of ~~what~~ Abraham's act  
on Moriah ~~(the traditional that said that)~~ ~~that would be~~ ~~merit~~  
~~merit for~~ merit would be imputed to them. 27.

~~was~~  
~~being on that spot served as merit to subsequent generations.~~

Nachmanides states<sup>d</sup> that God chose Mount Moriah because "...he wanted the merit of the Akeidah...to be in the sacrifices forever..." (NACHMANIDES, 277). Thus in choosing this spot, God's intimation was that the Temple would be there, and He was sanctifying the spot.

Maimonides<sup>saw</sup> sees Abraham as the agent involved in choosing the actual location of the Akedah. He interprets Abraham's actions as having<sup>a</sup> direct connection~~s~~ with the refutation of idolatry. According to the Rambam, Abraham chose, as did the idolaters of his day, the highest mount in that country. Abraham, however, chose the west side of the mount rather than the east, because the west was the most holy. The east was the side which the idolaters used to sacrifice to their gods. In facing the west, Abraham was renouncing idolatry (MAIMONIDES, 217). He quotes Ezekiel 8:16 as an instance of Israel's rebellion in which they worshiped the sun toward the east. According to the scripture, however, God showed the place to Abraham (Gen. 22:2, 3, 9). It seems that the mention of "which God had told him" three times is quite significant. I do not think, therefore, that we can with the Rambam depict Abraham's primary intentions as being the refutation of idolatry.

The location of Moriah being what was subsequently Jerusalem is also

significant in Christian theology for a number of reasons. The binding of Isaac is seen by many Christians to be a type. As Abraham offered up his only son whom he loved, so did God offer up His son. As Isaac submitted to his father's wishes and went willingly, so too did Jesus. Many believe that Jesus was crucified on the same spot that Isaac was offered up, and therefore while Jerusalem is significant to Jews because of the Temple, it is significant to Christians because of the life and work of Jesus there.

#### D. Human Sacrifice

Many have seen the Akedah primarily as a denial of human sacrifice, and in particular, child sacrifice. There is evidence, as was mentioned, that human sacrifice was practiced in some of the surrounding nations existing at the time of Abraham: "...Carthaginians slew children as 'if they were lambs or chickens' on the altar of their god Moloch, and the Egyptian mothers threw their children to the holy crocodiles of the Nile. The children of the Phoenicians were brought as sacrifices to Baal" (REIK, 47). While Abraham may have been surrounded with this upon his arrival in Canaan, Henri Gaubert in Abraham, Loved by God, does not feel that this was an idea which Abraham brought with him from Ur.

It does not appear that the Sumerians of the valley of the Euphrates ever practised the horrible ceremonies during which a human being was put to death in honour of one or other of their deities. On leaving Ur, Abraham took with him a number of Sumerian religious traditions and Akkadian legends but he certainly did not obtain from this Mesopotamian civilization the notion of ritual murder....It was practiced in the polytheistic religion of the land of Canaan... sacrifice of the first born...appears to have been especially common. The Phoenicians of Canaan...[sacrificed] the first born of a family... (GAUBERT, 160)

Parrot, Reik, and Deane attempt to deal with the idea of human sacrifice in the Tenach in order to <sup>account for</sup> ~~reflect on~~ Abraham's actions. This seems irrelevant, however, as the instances <sup>of human sacrifice in the Tenach</sup> which they relate were subsequent to Abraham. Plaut says that "Abraham could have considered the command...legitimate" (PLAUT, 149) because of the instances of human sacrifice in his day. It is difficult to determine what place Abraham's encounters (or lack of encounters) with human sacrifice played in the Akedah. In making trans-historical value judgements, we are faced with the problem of not really knowing the philosophical and ethical elements present in Abraham's time and place in reference to this. This is one of the reasons that the Akedah has received such diverse commentary. Are we faced with the possibility of only being able to understand the Akedah in reference to our personal theological positions? Both Kasher and Arietti present possible ways of dealing with this. Kasher states: "How could Abraham believe that God had given him a command in such flagrant contradiction to His promise...? The answer is that he may have thought

that Isaac had sinned and rendered himself unworthy of that high destiny" (KASHER, 147-8). While this is a possibility (the narrative does not say that it was not so), most scholars would no doubt take this position to task. The traditional view of Isaac in relation to the Akedah is meritorious, not punitive. Arietti, on the other hand, notes that it is not the main purpose of the story to denounce human sacrifice. He sees that the main goal of those who are attempting to understand the Akedah, therefore, is to examine history across time to determine whether or not the act was ethical.

Possibly to Abraham such an offering was not as abhorrent as it became later, and as we have learned to regard it. The command, though terrible and unprecedented, was not, in his eyes, immoral or wrong. It is a mistake to suppose that such sacrifices were coincident only with the lowest type of savagery. The practice of child-sacrifice was anciently diffused among nations, neither barbarous nor retired (DEANE, 138, 139).

I do not think that it is correct to say that Abraham did not see the act as abhorrent. I would like to suggest that man has not changed much since Adam, and that the value for human life that God imparted to Adam was also Abraham's. We see this <sup>value present after</sup> ~~continuing consequent to~~ the flood: God spoke to Noah saying, "*And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it; and at the hand of man, even at the hand of every man's brother, will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of*

*God made He man* " (Gen. 9:5,6). In reading the Genesis 22 narrative, we see Abraham's silence, his immediate action in response to the command, his attention to detail, his affection for his son, and in his trust in the provision of God. It seems that in light of these things we can assume that Abraham fully understood the weight of his task, and that he was going against a universal ethical principle in order to obey a direct command from God...the God whose "friend" he was.

#### E. The Journey, part one

In the first part of Abraham's journey, six elements are to be considered: Abraham's actions in rising early, saddling his ass, taking two young men<sup>with him on the journey</sup>, splitting wood for the offering, and travelling for three days. ~~Also,~~ <sup>And lastly,</sup> the silence of the journey is significant. It seems that the narrative "...deliberately leaves out details and concentrates only on what is essential to the purpose of the narrative, leaving the rest in obscurity" (LEIBOWITZ, 196). The trip is an emotionless, silent one but for the brief speech between Abraham and Isaac in which they speak to each other as "my father" and "my son". In rising early and saddling his ass himself (instead of having a servant do the work), Abraham is seen as obeying God with eagerness and attempting secrecy. Rashi notes the significance of

taking two men: "For a distinguished man is not permitted to go forth on a journey without two people (B.R.); for when one will need to ease himself...the second one will be with him (the distinguished man)" (RASHI, 201). R. Abiu says that it was so he would not eventually become a servant to his servant (KASHER, 137). Meaning has even been found in Abraham splitting wood; it is argued that God divided the Red Sea in honor of the Patriarch who divided wood to sacrifice his son (R. Hiyya b. R. Jose Gen. R., 5518; KASHER, 138). Benno Jacob sees these exertions of Abraham as a very moving analysis of how he was feeling, as they seem to reflect Abraham's attempt at passing the difficult hours by keeping busy (JACOB, 143). He portrays Abraham as being intensely involved in fulfilling the command, even to the extent that he cut the wood himself, and did not allow a stranger's hand to "...participate in this noble deed" (JACOB, 143).

The fact that Abraham and Isaac's journey took three days is seen as having tremendous significance in reference to Abraham's consideration of his act, as well as how subsequent generations would view his act. Both Rashi and Nachmanides used the three day delay for the purpose of apologetics: "So that they shall not say, 'He confounded and confused him suddenly and distracted his mind, and if he had time to consider in his heart, he would not have done (it)'" (RASHI, 201). This is a valid

consideration, and the Rambam as well held this view:

If the act...had taken place immediately when he received the commandment, it might have been the result of confusion and not of consideration. But the fact that he performed it three days after he had received the commandment, proves the presence of thought, proper consideration, and careful examination of what is due to the Divine command and what is in accordance with the love and fear of God (LEIBOWITZ, 189 quoting Rambam)

Other possibilities for the reason for <sup>the</sup> ~~a~~ delay have been suggested. The Midrash Vayyosha; Tan Vayyera 22 speaks of several interruptions that Abraham had on his way which delayed him from getting there sooner. Leibowitz explains the symbolism of these legends in which Satan accuses Abraham, trying to dissuade him, and then becomes a large river to keep him from the actual sacrifice. She points out how the promptings of the tempter are actually questions in Abraham's own mind. The voice of the tempter reveals a.) the voice of one who was familiar with the ways of serving his creator ("If a man [is] going to pray, why the fire and the knife in his hand and the wood on his shoulder?"), b.) <sup>(Satan)</sup> Abraham's paternal instinct ("Was I not there when the Holy One blessed be He did say to thee: "Take thy son..." Notwithstanding an old man the likes of thee will go and put away a son vouchsafed him at the age of a hundred!") and c.) the voice of conscience ("Tomorrow He will tell thee, a shedder of blood art thou for shedding his blood!") (LEIBOWITZ, 195, 196).

Lastly, Benno Jacob has suggested that Abraham was given this time

"...so that God may see whether he remains firm in his resolution..." (JACOB, 143). Along with the obvious reason of needing enough time to get to Moriah, the place where God had chosen, the above suggestions are all helpful in giving us a fuller picture of the thoughts and considerations of the patriarch's heart in preparation for this awesome task.

#### F. The Journey, part two

On the third day Abraham *lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.* And Abraham said unto his young men: *'Abide ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come back to you.'* And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and *laid it upon Isaac his son;* and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and *they went both of them together.* And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said: 'My father.' And he said: 'here am I, my son.' And he said: 'Behold the fire *and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?*' And Abraham said: *'God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son'* So *they went both of them together.* (Genesis 22:4-9)

In this second section of the journey, the intensity of the story begins to increase and we see what seems to be a transformation in Isaac's understanding of the incident. In this portion of the narrative the six elements italicized above have been the main subject of commentary.

Rashi and Nachmanides (quoting Bereshith Rabbah 56:2), held that when scripture says that Abraham 'saw the place', that he was actually

seeing a cloud attached to the mountain. This does, of course, remind us of an event which was to come -- the cloud which led the Israelites by day in the wilderness. Thus, <sup>it appears</sup> ~~think~~ that these scholars were only trying to show a cohesiveness in revelation. The Zohar (pg. 374) says that when scripture portrayed Abraham as seeing the place "on the third day", that it meant the third generation: Jacob. Abraham saw that there would be a third generation, that Jacob was destined to descend from him, and thus he could trust God to take care of Isaac. Seeing the place "afar off" meant that this vision of Jacob was one that was at a distant time, not soon. This interpretation brought up the question of the merit of Abraham. If Abraham saw Jacob, and knew that his seed would not perish, what reward then would there be for him in offering Isaac on the altar? To answer this problem, the Zohar quotes R. Judah as saying that Abraham saw him through "a dim glass" (afar off) and thus his reward was greater than if he saw him clearly (ZOHAR, 374). It certainly is a lot simpler to just assume the plain meaning of scripture, that Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the actual mountain that God had promised to show him. It doesn't really matter what he saw when he lifted up his eyes. What matters is that God showed him the place.

Secondly, the command that Abraham gives to his servants is seen as

significant in that it appears to be an additional attempt at secrecy.

Benno Jacob paints the picture well:

# Feeling that he will receive a great revelation, one way or the other, he wants to be alone with his sacrifice and with God as Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19, 23 f.). *Yonder* is spoken with a gesture which leaves the destination undefined. *We will worship*: By the preparations the servants saw that it would be more. *And we will again come to you*. Indeed Abraham speaks the truth even if unintentionally (JACOB, 144).

Of course, this passage could not be let go without obtaining material for a good sermon. When Abraham says "abide you here", some have even seen his statement as an allusion to that place (which would be the Temple) as the resting place of God -- Ps. 132:14 (KASHER, 140).

Thirdly, we see that even the detail of Abraham laying the wood on Isaac is significant. Christians who see in Isaac a type of Christ would no doubt compare the wood that was laid on Isaac to the cross which was laid on Christ. Both instances portray a sentenced individual, burdened down with the very material which would be their end. Kasher speculates that Abraham laid the wood on Isaac as a means of breaking the news gently to him, or to prevent him from running away; he says that it is quite likely that Abraham tied the wood on him (KASHER, 142).

It is after this event that the narrative records for the first time that "they went both of them together". At this point Isaac most likely still did not know his father's intentions. The phrase "they went both of

them together" shows some of the tenderness that was between father and son. Rashi notes, "Here they are, Abraham, who knew that he was going to sacrifice his son,...[going] with the same joy and good-will as Isaac who knew nought of it" (KASHER, 142).

The fifth and probably most piercing element of this section is the dialogue between father and son in reference to the question of a lamb for the sacrifice. Many have commented on the potency of the words "my father" and "my son". They seem to reflect the tension of the entire event, and in them we can feel the strain of the event on Abraham. Kasher feels that Isaac's use of the phrase "my father" was to remind Abraham of his fatherly compassion; he says that Isaac was amazed that the sacrifice was going on without a lamb, and that the idea was starting to sink in that he was going to be the sacrifice (KASHER, 143). Whether or not this is true, we do sense at this point an intuition at least on Isaac's part.

Abraham's answer seems vague, though superficially clear. The phrase "elohim yireh lo hasseh l'olah" has <sup>do in Hebrew</sup> been translated in numerous ways: a.) "God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering" (Interlinear, vol. 1) , b.) "God will provide/see for Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering" (JPS, vol. 1:44), c.) "Before the Lord (it) is revealed (which is) the sheep for the burnt offering" (TARGUM), and d.) "God will provide

Himself the lamb" (KASHER, 145). The Targum's translation, while not linguistically accurate, is translated thus to avoid an anthropomorphism. The Zohar says that Abraham meant "God will provide for Himself when necessary; but for the present it is going to be my son and nothing else" (ZOHAR, 374). The connection between "yireh" (the future of 'to see') and "provide" is that God sees the situation and knows where the lamb is, and will provide the lamb. Most commentators do not feel that Abraham was lying when he told Isaac that God would provide the lamb (knowing that he was going to offer Isaac and not a lamb), but rather see his statement almost in a prophetic sense, that he spoke what he did not realizing the full weight of his words. To Arietti, his words were an "...expression of an act of faith and not of a lie" (ARIETTI, 152), because Abraham actually believed that God would provide. The New Testament (Hebrews 11:19) *states ~~say~~ that* shows Abraham ~~as~~ <sup>ed</sup> believing that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead if need be, and therefore he offered him up. While some might look at this view and thus deny Abraham any "merit" for his act (i.e., what merit is there in offering him if he knew God would give him back?), I suggest that Abraham's act of "faith" was actually a great "work". If indeed this was the case (that Abraham was believing that God would raise Isaac from the dead), he was in the same / position as he would be in losing Isaac

altogether. He had no other assurance that Isaac would not be lost other than his reliance on God to fulfill His promise of making Abraham a great nation through Isaac. For Abraham, that was enough.

Christian interpretation of Abraham's remark has often included an additional element, the prophetic element. Thus, in Abraham's statement that God would provide "Himself" the lamb, God "Himself" is seen as the lamb, in the person of Jesus, who was seen in the New Testament as the "lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29).

Lastly, this portion of their journey concludes with the words, "*So they went both of them together.*" Speiser says that when Abraham answered Isaac's question, that Isaac must have sensed the truth (SPEISER, 165). Isaac, seeing the wood in his hands, and having heard his father's words, is seen, then, at this point as realizing what was going to happen to him. And yet Isaac went on willingly with his father. In the Talmud (ARN MS. T.S. 22, 92), it is recorded that Isaac consented and said "O my father, fear not. May it be the will of the All-Present to accept the measure of my blood." Then he requested that when Abraham would tell Sarah of the event that he tell her slowly; then he prayed to God, his only Helper, and the angels saw there two righteous men (KASHER, 144). It is also recorded that "When the Temple was destroyed...Abraham pleaded with

the Holy One..." asking him to remember how he offered his son and Isaac plead with God to remember how he offered himself (KASHER, 145: Midrash Echah Proem 24. T.S.22.98).

#### G. The Binding

*Xr "And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." (Gen. 22:9, 10)*

The account in Genesis 22 has been referred to as the "Akedah" (the "binding") and not the "sacrifice" of Isaac simply because of the fact that Isaac was not killed, but was bound. Some rabbis have made special note of the altar in this story, and have tried to show a universal tradition connected with the altar, beginning with Cain and Abel, and proceeding from Noah to Abraham, David, and Solomon (KASHER, 146). Again we see the attempt to substantiate existing institutions within Judaism by finding an allusion to the same sort of element in a previous time and place.

If Isaac had indeed given consent by the time he and Abraham had arrived at the altar, why the need for the binding? It has been suggested that both Abraham and Isaac feared "...that in the very moment of sacrifice

his (Isaac's) resolution might fail him and he would flee. Therefore he bound him with his consent" (KASHER, 146). Some have actually seen this event as one which liberated Isaac from his father (PLAUT, 152). This is held because there is no mention <sup>in the narrative</sup> that Isaac return<sup>ed</sup> with Abraham. Plaut <sup>holds that</sup> ~~sees~~ the trauma of the event <sup>shook</sup> ~~as so shaking~~ Isaac <sup>so badly</sup> that the ties between father and son were torn at that instance. R. Judah viewed Isaac's "fate" in another sense: "Isaac purified himself and in intention offered himself up to God, was at that moment etherealised and, as it were, he ascended to the throne of God like the odour of the incense of spices which the priests offered before Him twice a day; and so the sacrifice was complete" (ZOHAR, 375).

The preparations for offering Isaac up are seen in minute detail, yet appear emotionless. In the silence of the narrative, ~~in this respect~~, however, we sense an even greater depth and awesomeness in the event. All that Abraham knew and understood of the revelation of God to him from his initial call out of Ur to this point -- all this was being stretched out on the altar and was being laid on a heap of wood and bound. All of Abraham's faith, all of his strength, all of his hope, his courage, his desire...all of these things were being spread out on a stone table before the eyes of heaven. And why? What was he to gain in such a venture?

What would he lose if he disobeyed the divine command? How can we really know what was going on in his mind? Was he really all that we attribute him with having been? Was he more? How can these 18 short verses from an ancient text <sup>have for</sup> be meaningful in our lives today? Is this <sup>merely a</sup> myth, legend, or ~~a~~ fairy tale? Is this a story of a mad murderer ~~and~~ idolater, or the story of a man who was totally dedicated to serving the One true God? If this event is to mean anything to us today, we must see Abraham as a man, like any man, who believed in his heart that he had indeed had a revelation of the God who created the universe. If we see Abraham as <sup>simply</sup> ~~merely~~ an epic hero, then can we maintain hope that God would operate in the lives of people today as he did in Abraham's day? In his faith and obedience, Abraham became "...both the ultimate paradigm of obedience and the guarantor of the promises for all Israel" (SETERS, 239). In his obedience and faith, Abraham was discovering more than simply a road to a more "civilized" religion. He was in fact finding the way to relationship with God.

The mutual relationship of the one making the demands, who makes them only in order to bless, and of the one making the sacrifice and receiving the highest blessing in the moment of greatest readiness to sacrifice, here appears as the reciprocity of seeing. God sees the innermost reality of the human soul,...and man sees the way of God, so that he may walk in His footsteps. The man sees, and sees also that he is being seen (BUBER, 42).

In understanding Abraham's obedience, we need to consider how his

act was different from that of the Jewish martyrs who followed him, and the pagans who were around him at the time, and see ~~what~~ the significance of his obedience. Leibowitz quotes R. Yosef Albo (The Fundamentals of Judaism, Sefer Ha-ikkarim, 14th-15th cent. Spain) on this issue. Albo says that Abraham did what he did out of free choice. Abraham could have been justified in giving God the reply: "but surely you've already told me that in Isaac will my seed be!". But since Abraham didn't do so, and chose to suppress "his paternal feelings out of love for God" (p. 202), he is honored. According to Albo, Abraham is different from the Jewish martyrs because they gave their lives to fulfill religious duty ~~by~~ not profaning God's name; Albo does not feel that Abraham was obliged by religious duty. He says that "The criterion of a really free act is whether a person can do the opposite without incurring any unpleasant consequences, and yet chooses not to do it" (LEIBOWITZ, 203). Do we assume then that had Abraham refused to take Isaac up to Mount Moriah that there would have been no 'unpleasant consequences'? Did Abraham obey God out of love? duty? fear? faith? Was the Akedah just a passing "trial" in his life, an "obstacle" to overcome? Or would the life of the patriarch and his descendents been significantly altered if he had disobeyed? Was Abraham's act all that different from the Jewish

martyrs? Did they not both offer up what was precious to them because of their firm conviction of the truth?

And what of the sacrifices and other religious acts of the pagans in comparison to Abraham's act? One answer that is given is that "...what the idolaters performed out of primitive fear to placate their gods, Abraham did out of love, without any expectation of reward" (LEIBOWITZ, 203); yet Leibowitz gives another side, quoting Rabbi Kook who says that the pagans actually were convinced of the preciousness of the Divine. The difference was that

*↑ (up one line?)*  
 when the Divine light had to shine forth in its purity, it was revealed in the fierceness of its brightness in the trial of Abraham which showed that passion and self-surrender in a Divine cause, did not have to take the disgusting form of idol worship in which the Divine spark of good has become completely lost but that it could be apprehended in purity...[Abraham] fought against emotional barbarity in the struggle towards the Divine (LEIBOWITZ, 204, 205). ✓

We see Abraham, then, acting not out of blind, cringing obedience, but out of "...rational, faithful submission..." (DEANE, 139). He understood the world around him, and was attempting to serve the living God who had revealed Himself to him. In his obedience, Abraham was also "sanctifying the Name".

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H. The Second Message

*Insert Pg Break.*

*"And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said: 'Abraham, Abraham.' And he said: 'Here am I.' And he said: 'Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him; for now, know that thou art a God-fearing man, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from Me.'" (Gen. 22:11, 12)*

### 1. The angel of the Lord

The Christian interpretation of "the angel of the Lord" as he is seen in the Tenach is that he is the preincarnate Christ. Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad...Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." (John 8:56, 58)<sup>NAS</sup>. In Jewish thought, however, the angel of the Lord is usually seen as a heavenly being who speaks in the name of the Lord. In this instance, as well as in the Genesis 18 narrative where the Lord appears to Abraham 'by the terebinths of Mamre', the speaker in the messages seems to fluctuate from the Angel of the Lord to the LORD Himself. It is for this reason that in Christian thought the Angel of the Lord is seen as being the Lord Himself, the Son, the second person of the trinity. Arietti suggests that the reason that God does not initially speak to Abraham directly in this message is that possibly "He does not want to confound him with a direct confrontation after having demanded so much.

In acting through an intermediary, God wants to respect Abraham's human dignity" (ARIETTI, 154).

## 2. Call and Response

The fact that Abraham's name is called two times has spiritual significance to some. Rashi says that using his name twice was an expression of love and endearment (RASHI, 203). Benno Jacob saw it as being related to a sense of urgency and anxiety, lest the call come too late and Abraham slay his son (JACOB, 146). R. Hiya saw the purpose of the repetition of his name as being to "animate him with a new spirit, and spur him to a new activity with a new heart" (ZOHAR, 375). Lange says that we can see in the use of his name twice that ~~the~~ "A clearer, wider, more definite...revelation is thus described...also the urgency of the interruption, the decided rejection of the human sacrifice" (LANGE, 467). It has also been suggested that the Angel of the Lord called his name twice because Abraham was so consumed with his task that he didn't hear his name being called the first time (KASHER, 149). The Zohar ~~even~~ makes use of ~~the~~ Hebrew grammar in noting that the disjunctive mark (a pausal sign) between the first and second 'Abraham' indicates that the two were different; the first Abraham was incomplete, the second - perfected (ZOHAR, 375). The same is thought to be true with "Samuel, Samuel" and

"Jacob, Jacob", but not in Moses' case when God calls <sup>his name</sup> ~~to him~~ twice; there is no disjunctive mark there, and the rabbis felt that this was due to the fact that God spoke to Moses continually (KASHER, 149). ✓

We see in Abraham's response an indication of his readiness. He has been intensely involved in performing his task, and has mustered all of his strength to come to the point of raising his knife above his son's body. His answer seems to come as if out of a dream. He stands in anticipation, waiting to hear what the Lord would would say.

### 3. "Now I Know"

It is, of course, impossible that the Omniscient God would not have known that Abraham would prove himself to be God-fearing. This knowledge, then, must have another meaning. The midrash Habiur says that

**ידעתי** should be taken as "gidati" (I have made known) instead of yadati (I know) (KASHER, 150). The idea that most have in reference to this knowledge is that through the Akedah, Abraham was tried and proven, and the love that he had for God that was potential was actualized. <sup>God made this</sup> ~~This~~ love and dedication, ~~God made~~ known to the world through Abraham. Benno Jacob says that the idea is, "I have always known, or now it has been demonstrated"; he quotes Rashi as saying, "now I have an answer for those who wonder why I love you. Now they see that you fear God in the fullest

✓

✓

sense of the word" (JACOB, 146).

### 3. Fear of God

In his "friendship" with God, Abraham was not presumptuous. He recognized who he was before the Almighty, and even moreso after the event of the Akedah. No doubt his reverence for God's holiness was increased as a result of witnessing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Had Abraham disobeyed the command of God, (by going along with his better moral senses), he would in fact have been rebelling against the Almighty's direct command. Abraham knew that God was holy and could not tolerate sin. In obeying God, more than his love for God was made evident (in that he was willing to offer up that which was dearest to him). Abraham realized who man is, and who God is.

### 5. Not withheld your son

Two Hebrew words are used for "withhold". The first, 'mana', is "...used of an action that *ought* to take place, whereas the withholding of it is *wrong*" (KASHER, 152). An example of this is in Proverbs 3:27 where scripture says, "withhold not good from him to whom it is due." The second use of the word, and the one which is used in this verse in Genesis 22, is 'hasach', which "...connotes to refrain from or prevent an action that ought not to be done, so that it is *right* to refrain" (KASHER, 152). An

example of this is "I also withheld you from sinning against me" (Gen. 20:6). Even though withholding Isaac would have seemed right, Abraham did not do so; it was right that he did not withhold his son. What was important was not the blood of Isaac, but rather the fulfillment of the command, which Abraham did. God asked Abraham to *take* Isaac, and to *offer* him. Even up to the last minute, Abraham was willing. Had not the Angel intervened, no doubt Abraham would have followed through with his plan. In this was made known his total willingness to obey God.

## I. The Ram "Instead"

### 1. Origin of the Ram

The image of a ram caught in a thicket has been found to be present in Ur of Chaldees (in Sumerian statues), as well as in Greek mythology (PLAUT, 147). In the Greek myth, "...a goat is presented as a sacrificial animal for Iphigenia, whom her father, Agamemnon, would sacrifice to Venus at Aulis" (LANGE, 468). Whether or not these instances have any significance or connection with the Genesis narrative is questionable. Those who utilize the higher criticism method make attempts to utilize similar elements, such as the ram, which are found in stories of other civilizations, to show that this was an idea that Abraham had brought with

him, or had been a universal religious idea. Certainly the idea of sacrifice and substitution is an ancient one. It seems that if we take the position that Abraham got this idea from somewhere and utilized it in his own "tale", that we are diminishing the impact of the entire story, and are submitting all of the elements of this story to literary criticism. Certainly the God who could speak to Abraham from heaven could provide a ram in a thicket.

As to the origin of the ram, <sup>The</sup> ~~the~~ early rabbis <sup>then</sup> believed that the ram was predestined from creation to appear at the moment it was needed - as a substitute (ZOHAR, 375). This idea is similar to an idea in Christian theology, and many have seen the ram (along with Isaac) as a "type" of Christ. *"And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).* R. Joshua said that "an angel brought it

~~The ram~~ from the Garden of Eden, where it had been feeding under the tree of life...when had it been placed in the Garden? At twilight on the last day of the six days of Creation" (KASHER, 152).

## 2. Substitution/Typology

Regardless of where the ram came from, or when it originated, its importance in the Akedah is that it was the substitution. *"Instead of his*

In Christian  
Theology,  
Jesus  
is the  
Lamb  
slain from  
the foundation  
of the world.  
His death  
as atonement for  
man's sin was  
planned by the  
Father even before  
the world was  
created.

son" are tender words, and also remind us that "...every sacrifice is a substitute for a man" (JACOB, 146). We see in this some of the symbolism and meaning of sacrifice. To Christians, the provision of the ram is seen as a type of Jesus, who was a substitute for the sins of the world.

The church fathers saw in it [the ram] a symbol of the redeemer. St. Cyril of Alexandria...stated that 'the ram represented the figure of the cross.' St. Athanasius of Alexandria asserted that Abraham, 'having been restrained from sacrificing Isaac saw the Messiah in the ram which was offered up instead as a sacrifice to God (REIK, 178).

In Jewish thought, the substitution of the ram is seen by some as the precedent for the animal sacrifice of the Mosaic law. Other symbolism has ~~also~~ been found in reference to the place of the ram in Jewish thought. R. Huna, R. Hinena b. Isaac, R. Judah and R. Simon all speak of the entanglement of the ram in the thicket as a figure of the entanglement that the children of Israel would have, because through their sin they would be afflicted (KASHER, 153). The symbolism of the ram is seen each year on Rosh ha-Shanah when the shofar is blown. ~~In this time,~~ The shofar is blown for many reasons, one of which is to remember the Akedah. Plaut points out that the horn "...should be bent so that the children of Israel may bend their hearts toward their father in heaven...[as] Isaac [was] ready to sacrifice [himself, the] shofar [is] blown to remind us to offer our lives for the sanctification of His name" (PLAUT, 152).

### J. Adonai-Yireh

Most likely there are as many definitions for 'Adonai-Yireh' as for 'Moriah'. Some renderings have been "Jehovah sees", "Jehovah observes or takes care", "upon the mount of the Lord it shall be seen, chosen, i.e., be provided or cared for", "upon the mount of Jehovah it is provided", "On the mount of Yahweh he will be seen", and "on the mount of the Lord is Jireh". It has even been translated "Here before the Lord shall (future) generations worship"; this is the translation of the Targum Onkelos, and is rendered that way because "Adonai sees" would be seen as an anthropomorphism, and the Targum tends to avoid that. The "Targum Onkelos evidently connects **יִרְאֶה** (from the root **רָאָה**) with the root **אָרַי** - to fear, hence 'to worship'...(generations) is an explanatory gloss..." (TARGUM, 130).

Kasher provides us with more elaborate possible definitions:

- 1.) The Lord will see and choose this place for the dwelling of the Divine Presence (i.e. The Temple).
- 2.) God will see to it for all time that the merit of Isaac's binding shall be credited to his descendants.
- 3.) He named it so to commemorate his assurance to Isaac, "God will provide," etc. (vs. 8), and lo! He has provided.
- 4.) God will always see and remember my intentions in this place. (KASHER, 155)

God had commanded. Abraham had trusted and obeyed. God had seen the faith of the patriarch (and of Isaac?) and had provided. The event which had happened on Mount Moriah had come to be so significant to

subsequent generations that the actual place had come to receive the name "In the mount where the Lord is seen". Truly Abraham the prophet, the <sup>italians</sup> "roeh", had "seen" God. He had come face to face with the peril of evil, and the glory of faith, and had "seen" and in that seeing, understood that he held a precious treasure that would be passed down from generation to generation. His descendents would look upon that event and would claim it as a precedent (even a binding obligation on the basis of Abraham's merit) for divine intervention in time of crisis.

#### K. Reiteration of the Promise

*"And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: 'By Myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast hearkened unto my voice.'"* (Gen. 22:15-8)

Having completed the most difficult task of his entire life, Abraham <sup>d</sup>hears the word of the Lord again from heaven. This time there is a divine oath, and it is this oath which summarizes and reiterates all the former promises. It is this oath which is immediately predicated upon Abraham's

willingness to offer his son. Jews throughout the ages have seen in this ultimate promise to Abraham meaning and hope for their own existence:

Thus Abraham was assured that no sin whatever would cause the destruction of his descendants, nor would they fall into the hand of their enemies and not rise again. Thus this constitutes a perfect Divine assurance of the redemption which is destined to come to us (NACHMANIDES, 279).

For while hitherto the promise given to Abraham is mainly an expression of divine favor, it now comes for the first time as an acknowledgement of Abraham's worth. This is the point where divine effort meets with full response in the human being. It is toward this goal, first in Israel and then in all of mankind, that all divine efforts from the viewpoint of the Torah tend (PLAUT, 153 quoting Mordecai M. Kaplan)

One of the most beautiful ingredients in the entire Genesis 22 narrative is that while the story seems to portray the total forfeiture of the divine promise, it concludes with an even stronger assurance from God of His blessings and protection for Abraham and his descendents.

### III. HISTORY AND INTERPRETATION

Within both Judaism and Christianity, interpretations of the Akedah have changed significantly during certain time periods. The first event which affected how the Akedah was interpreted was the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple. Bowker explains what he feels to be the significant change:

Before the fall of Jerusalem the offering of Isaac was usually seen as the supreme example of martyrdom, a willingness to put faith and trust in God before everything. There is less emphasis on Isaac having been a *sacrifice*....After the fall of Jerusalem, when the rabbis were

searching for equivalents to the sacrifices that could no longer take place, the offering of Isaac was taken up and interpreted as having anticipated further sacrifices....This change in emphasis...explains why those parts of the New Testament which were written before the fall of Jerusalem referred to the offering of Isaac, *not* as a prototype of the crucifixion (and sacrificial death) of Christ, but as an example of faith (Heb. 11:17ff, James 2:21) (BOWKER, 231, 232).

Subsequent to the Bar Kochba rebellion in 135 A.D., the church ~~began~~ <sup>became</sup> to be predominantly Gentile, and the Gentile church fathers were beginning to teach that all the promises of the Old Testament were now for the church; the church was the "New Israel"; all the curses of the Old Testament applied to "the Jews"; God had rejected the Jews because they had rejected His Son as the Messiah; etc. This attitude of superiority infiltrated every area of theology and practice, and along with many other stories in the Tenach, the church saw meaning in the Akedah only as it related to Christ and Christianity, and not as being at all significant for the Jewish people. Especially during the second century, the church "...untiringly compared Isaac's death with the sacrifice of Jesus" (REIK, 180 quoting Israel Levi). The church saw no significance in the Akedah for Israel or Judaism, but rather applied the promises which God had given to Abraham to themselves. It is true, of course, that God's promise of blessing to Abraham included the fact that through Abraham all the nations of the world would be blessed. This was no reason, however, for the church to nullify and invalidate all that Judaism, Jews, and Israel

were.

Thirdly, there was a major change in the way the Akedah was interpreted during the middle ages. During this time of intense persecution of the Jews, many rabbis (ex. Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn in his poem "The Akedah" as has been mentioned) held that something was actually done (whether harm or actual murder) to Isaac on the altar. It seems that this view was possibly the result of two phenomena. First, it is possible that this tradition originated during a time "...when the supreme sacrifice of the Christian Messiah was invoked as demonstration that the complete, the perfect act had been enacted only on Golgotha, that the act on Moriah was only a preamble, a partial adumbration of the greater and full one later" (Goldin, xiv in forward to SPEIGEL). In Goldin's view, this theology could have possibly been an attempt to not be "outdone" in loving God. Secondly, during the crusades and pogroms of the middle ages, many Jews were giving their lives for the Sanctification of the Name. In teaching that something had actually happened to Isaac on the altar, possibly the medieval rabbis were providing answers for their people who were questioning, "how could God spare Isaac, the son of the great patriarch Abraham, and yet require our very lives?". This seems to be the essence of the poem "The Akedah" by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, which

we have already alluded to.

The ~~third~~<sup>fourth</sup> major change in interpretation ~~has come~~<sup>came</sup> as a result of the Enlightenment of the 18th century. As with the rest of the scriptures, the Genesis 22 narrative has come under the close scrutiny of the higher critics and for many people, much of the meaning of the traditional interpretation has lost its meaning. Along with questioning the "divine inspiration" of the scriptures in general, particular elements of each story are questioned. Are the characters in this story historical? What was the nature of Abraham's revelation of God and his understanding of "divine messages"? Did Abraham's God actually command him to offer his son, or was this a fictional story written at a later date to substantiate Judaism? These and many other questions are the result of the philosophical thinking of the 19th century. The "tools" of the Enlightenment have aided many theologians in developing a more critical analysis of scripture, and have assisted both Judaism and Christianity in finding "reason" behind many "issues of faith". For many others, however, the "tools" of the Enlightenment have resulted in a total abandonment of faith in the teachings of the Bible. To the extent that a person utilizes higher critical methods, this will most likely determine the extent of that person's religious faith and practice.

#### IV. PERSPECTIVE

##### A. Significance of the Akedah from a Christian Perspective

For those who have compared Isaac with Jesus, the basic position has been that what Isaac suffered in spirit, Jesus suffered in the flesh. Because Jesus suffered and died in the flesh, those who believe in Him also "die with Him spiritually and rise with Him to everlasting life" (KEIL-DELITZSCH, 253). In allowing himself to be offered by his father, Isaac is seen as being sanctified for "...his vocation in connection with the history of salvation" (K-D, 252); i.e. he is shown as a type of the salvation that would come to all men through Jesus. What the Heavenly Father required Abraham to do in offering his son on Moriah, He performed Himself in offering His Son on Golgotha. The main connection in Christian thought between Isaac and Jesus comes primarily from John 8:56, which we have mentioned.

When Christ says Abraham saw His day [John 8:56], He must refer to the offering of Isaac. To instruct Abraham in this great doctrine, [redemption/ atonement] and to teach him the boundless extent of God's goodness towards men, God made him act this picture, and himself feel what it was to lose a beloved son" (DEANE, 140)

If one centers on the story in reference to God offering up his son, then the "...various typical elements of the text are successfully used, and

everything centers about the true sacrifice of Christ" (LEUPOLD, 636). This is why perspective is so important in understanding the Akedah. Those who approach the narrative do so most often from their own theological perspective. In doing so, the elements of the narrative are shaped to fit their theology. Another possible alternative for Christian interpretation, Leupold says, is to "...center on Abraham and his faith life and...the type...[is] brought in incidentally" (LEUPOLD, 637). Along with the similarities that have already been mentioned (both Isaac and Jesus submitting to their father's will, the place of offering -- Moriah, Isaac's wood and Jesus' cross, the idea of 'death' and 'resurrection', and that they were both the beloved son), other comparisons have been made. Both Isaac and Jesus had miraculous births; as Abraham tells his servants to stay where they were while he goes to worship, Jesus tells his disciples in the garden to stay where they were while he goes to pray (Mt. 26:36); and comparison has even been made between the thicket that the ram was caught in, and the crown of thorns which Jesus wore (REIK, 177).

While the majority of Christian commentary on the Akedah has been been for the purpose of showing its typology of the work of Jesus, those who have not 'dismissed' the validity of Judaism have seen its importance as an example of faith, faithfulness, and as part of the fulfillment of God's

divine plan and promise for the nation of Israel. Many Christian thinkers have found it possible apply the truths of the Tenach to their own lives without holding the negative views previously enumerated concerning God's relationship to Israel. Though the Akedah has been seen from these two different perspectives, many elements have been similar. The idea of the Akedah as an "example" of love for and dedication to God, and also the idea of "merit" are found in both Jewish and Christian thought on the Akedah. As we have seen, many rabbis saw Abraham's obedience as "merit" for future generations who could petition God on the basis of his obedience. This idea of "merit" is also in Christianity in that the event symbolizes the obedience of Jesus, who was the substitution for mankind. When one puts his faith in the Substitute, it is "counted to him for righteousness" (Romans 4:5). The Apostle Paul quotes Genesis 15:6, "*Then, he [Abraham] believed in the LORD, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness*". He does this to show that even the great patriarch could not claim merit on the basis of his obedience, but rather on the basis of his faith, trust, belief, and reliance on God. In Christianity, the "merit" is by virtue of the work of Jesus, not the work of the patriarch.

## B. Significance of the Akedah from a Jewish Perspective

Martin Buber summarizes the three significant traditions in Judaism which he feels can be traced back to Abraham: the origin of the people, the mission of the people, and the birth of prophecy (BUBER, 43). According to Buber, the tradition of a family of ancestors is preserved among the people; the tradition concerning divine revelation is preserved by the Torah, and the tradition about the "...historic origin of the prophetic gift" is preserved by the prophets (BUBER, 43). Had Abraham not successfully 'passed' the trial he was faced with in the Akedah, would Judaism have been the same?

Arietti has provided a sound synopsis of the significance of the Akedah for Judaism. He says that as a result of the Akedah, Abraham's love for God is shown to the world. God wanted to show how great and demanding this love for God is. God chose Abraham to display this love, says Arietti, because Abraham was the "first one on earth who experiences it, he is the first Jew, and he has to transmit to his descendants how important and all-inclusive is such a love....this love requires full commitment, and any sacrifice. Without such love the whole world would remain a world of idolaters and pagans" (ARIETTI, 156, 157).

The love for God that Abraham has revealed after discovering Him...will from now on pass to mankind through the knowledge and ways that Abraham will transmit to the generations after...Once

Abraham understands the magnitude of this love for God, God stops him... (ARIETTI, 156)

The Jewish tradition, according to which this trial of Abraham represents the commitment, the willingness, the readiness to sacrifice everything for the love of God that the Jewish people had to possess through the ages, from Abraham to our present day, is a correct interpretation...many...have given their lives -- as Isaac is ready to do -- to keep their faith and the love of God. (ARIETTI, 157)

The significance of the Akedah in from a Jewish perspective is directly in connection with dealing with the evil in the world. Abraham faced the evil of his day, and combated<sup>x</sup><sub>^</sub> it by demonstrating his love for God. "The greater the evil, the greater must be the understanding and the love to undo that evil" (ARIETTI, 163). Abraham obeyed God not because it was his fate, but because he loved God, and chose to listen to His call. Abraham made God known in the earth, and made for Him "...a place...in the human heart" (ARIETTI, 162). Abraham's descendents, then, have been given the responsibility to play the role that he did in "...revealing the potential of evil in the world and the love required to undo it" (ARIETTI, 164). This idea is also similar to Christian thought, in that by trusting God as Abraham did, and totally submitting oneself to Him, man is transformed and is able to make God's love known in the world. A man who appropriates this love is able to make a change in his world and combat evil. In analyzing the Akedah, the "faith-works" controversy seems irrelevant. Certainly Abraham would not have taken Isaac to Moriah had he

not believed that God was faithful to fulfill His promise. And certainly, had Abraham believed that God was faithful, and yet refused to obey God's command, his faith would have been meaningless.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The Akedah stands as a timeless treasure for all who desire to know God and to make Him known to the world. Though many will disagree as to the details of the story, there are certain truths <sup>which can</sup> ~~are able to~~ be discovered and ~~which can be~~ applied to our lives. I feel that those who see the Akedah as merely myth, legend, or fairy tale let slip through their fingers one of the greatest examples of all time that man can indeed know who he is, why he exists, and how he can attempt to make that truth known to the world.

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