

Genesis 22 (see color-coded text)

Perspectives

God's

The people it happened to

The storyteller

The ones who originally heard the story

Those who interpreted it over centuries (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, etc.)

Ours

Terror - Fear of God's cruelty, fear of loss, fear of not passing the test

"The cruelty of God is something from which the Bible does not flinch." – Tribble

If the purpose of religion or of God is to lead to suffering, then...!

"Love and devotion to God bring with it terror and trauma." -Moyers

Voice – WHO is asking Abraham to do this?

God? Is He toying? Is it a ruse? An illusion? What kind of God asks this?

Abraham's own voice? (Insanity? People say, "God told me to...")

The storyteller's alone?

How is one to *know*?

Purpose(s) of the Story and the God-Human Relationship

Who looks good and who looks bad in this story and why? (See Google images!)

For God

He initiates the test!

"God in training?"

To know? "Now I know" (???)

For Abraham

Ultimate Test of Abraham's [10 Tests](#) (Prove fidelity/submit to God) – like 10 plagues!

Friend of God – "impregnated with the presence of Allah" -Nasr

Willingness to break with past and future, give up ego/pride -Tribble, Cohen, McCary

Attachments and idols (Isaac? Ishmael??)

Abraham so intent - the **ram** had to have a part in getting his attention!

The "two Abrahams" – the person of faith, the father (and us?)

For Isaac

Continue to have faith after trauma? ("An Isaac in every family...")

Impact of event (Abused? Traumatized? Faithful? Surrenders, "a prophet")

Sacrifice - Who sacrifices for whom? Parents for kids or kids for parents?

For Sarah

Sarah - Where is she in this story? -Moyers

Sarah's attachment to Isaac (idolatry?) and absence in the story

Jewish texts (see [Sefaria](#))

Isaac told Sarah the story

Another text: Sarah died because she was told Isaac had been offered

For the World (Understanding and Living)

To see what God really wants (not sacrifice)

To consider the nature of faith –blind? Do we see/have insight in it? Use our intellect?

Do we stand on the promises or let go of the promises?

Process tragedy in life; “You cannot exist in the world without tragedy.” -Nasr

Consideration of Paradox - The God who tests is the God who provides

Continuation of mystery

Our understanding of God changes; our theology shifts.

Our moral senses develop and we realize what we should do. -Bergant

To know how to live/not to live

Tikkun olam – repair the world. (Ethical message to this story? Or merely descriptive?)

Other characters - “His young men” (22:5, 19) – *What did they think? Abraham ret'd alone.*

NT Perspectives Not Mentioned in the Video

Substitutionary sacrifice (the ram) but not in terms of Christ's.

Rom. 9:7 nor are they all children ^abecause they are Abraham's ¹descendants, but:
 “^{2b}**THROUGH ISAAC YOUR ¹DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED.**”

Rom. 9:10 ^aAnd not only this, but there was ^bRebekah also, when she had **conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac;**

Gal. 4:28 And **you brethren, ^alike Isaac,** are ^bchildren of promise.

Heb. 11:17-19 By faith ^aAbraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had ^breceived the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸ it was he to whom it was said, “^a**IN ISAAC YOUR ¹DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED.**” ¹⁹ **He considered that ^aGod is able to raise people even from the dead,** from which he also received him back ²as a ^btype.

Heb. 11:20 **By faith ^aIsaac** blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come.

James 2:21 ^aWas not Abraham our father **justified by works** when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar?

By the way...

Akedah (Jewish tradition) took place on Yom Kippur (Abraham – high priest)

Gen 22 is traditionally read on Rosh HaShanah (blowing of ram's horn)

Gen 22:20-24 – Abraham's brother Nahor - 12 sons! (Comparison of bounty to near loss of Isaac? Or just the fore-story to Rebekah, mentioned there.)

Gen 25:1 – Abraham has SIX more children (w/Keturah) after he's 100!

Gen 25:9 – *Both* Ishmael and Isaac bury Abraham

Akedah paper

- Written to combat child sacrifice
 - “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).
- Psychological interpretations – Oedipus Complex
- JCR - Christian son seeks to destroy the Jewish father
- Primitive puberty ritual
- Jewish interpretations – medieval – correlation with persecution (prophetic telling of the sufferings of the Jewish people; Jews would suffer for the Name) *P’sikta M.S. T.S. 22, 29* “It is Isaac that I love, said God, because he is the persecuted.”
- Jewish interpretations – Ramban – devotional/exemplary approach (what to do/believe)
- Kierkegaard (see pp 19-20):
 - Is there a “teleological suspension of the ethical” (i.e., a way at times in which one may transcend ethics to obey God?” “Abraham goes in ‘fear and trembling’ but the ultimate for him is not the ethical norm but his individual relationship to God” (Perkins, 2).
 - Is there an absolute duty toward God?
 - Was Abraham ethically defensible in keeping silent about his purpose before Sarah, Eliezer, and Isaac?
 - Implications:
 - We are not justified by the law but by faith thus Abraham’s relationship w/God superseded or suspended the ethical demand.
 - In living by faith, we relinquish our right to self-determination. Abraham’s duty to obey God was more important than choosing his own way.
 - 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. Thus, we only obey God, trust and believe in Him, and only see the explanation consequent to that obedience. One putting faith in God does not speak to others about his actions when they are being done for faith. Had he spoken, his society would have stopped him. One only explains when doing things for ethical reasons not for reasons of faith (Kierkegaard, 131).
- Usage of two names of God in Gen 22 (Elohim and Adonai) Elohim initiates the command, Adonai is the personal, self-revealing, familiar God (Buber, 41). Reflects change in Abraham.
- Rabbinic legend – connects Abraham w/Job. Satan comes to God to accuse Abraham...
- Punishment of Abraham for his treatment of Ishmael (Kasher, 128).
- Rabbinic interp – source of the command neither Abraham nor God but Satan (Zohar, 372).
- Rabbinic interp – result of disagreement between Ishmael and Isaac (Rashi, 198).
- Get thee (Gen 12:1) and (Gen 22:2) – separation from past, separation from his future (Buber, 41)
- Kant says Abraham becomes unethical
- Isaac’s age: 25 (Josephus), 26 or 27 Mishnah on Genesis, 13 by Ibn Ezra (believed he was taken by force), 36 by the Targum Jonah, 37 by the Zohar because Akedah and death of Sarah are related. Sarah died at 127. Isaac would have been 37 since he was born when she was 90.

- Isaac – Jesus – Mt. Moriah – Temple Mount in Jerusalem (sacrifice...) Ramban said God chose Moriah so the merit of the Akedah would be in the sacrifices forever. Rambam (217) – says Abraham chose and chose the west side since the idolators used the east side (Ezek 8:16).
- The trip: Abraham rises early, saddles the ass (himself), takes two young men, splits wood for the offering, travels for three days (Rashi and Ramban find significance in the three days; Rashi says it was so people cannot say he was confused). Silence of the journey is significant.
- Saw the place on the third day – some say, i.e., saw Jacob (the future)
- If he saw the future (as the NT says, that God would raise him), then what merit is there in his obedience?
- Called the *Akedah* (binding) and not *sacrifice* since he was not killed.
- “Abraham, Abraham” Rashi says calling his name twice is an expression of love and endearment (Rashi, 203). Benno Jacob says it was related to urgency and anxiety, others to animate him with a new spirit, others say because he was so occupied that he didn’t hear. Zohar makes note of the pause between the first and second, saying the first was incomplete, the second perfected. (Samuel, Samuel and Jacob, Jacob)
- “Now I know” (I have made known) according to the Midrash Habiur.
- Abraham’s potential love was actualized (“Now it has been demonstrated...”). Rashi: “Now I have an answer for those who wonder why I love you.”
- Two words for “withhold” (see paper, bottom of page 48, page 49)
- Ram – image of ram caught in thicket is found in Ur (Sumerian statues) and Gk. Mythology, Rabbi Joshua said the angel brought it from Eden where it had been since creation. – Like Jesus the lamb slain “before the foundation of the world”
 - Foreshadowing of substitution of animal sacrifice
 - Symbolism of entanglements Israel would have because of their sin
 - Shofar – blown on Rosh ha-Shanah to remember the Akedah (bend hearts toward their father in heaven, offer our lives for the sanctification of His name)
- Adonai-Yireh (Jehovah sees, observes, takes care, upon the mount of the Lord it shall be seen, chosen, provided or cared for, it will be seen. Targum Onkelos translates that here future generations shall worship before the Lord – targum avoids anthropomorphism of “seeing”. Abraham saw God; future generations could claim that as a precedent for divine intervention in time of crisis.
- Reiteration of the promise – even stronger assurance
- History and Interpretations (54ff) fall of Jerusalem, after Bar Kochba rebellion – development of supersession, persecution of Middle Ages, Enlightenment
- The Akedah and Jesus (58ff), idea of merit both in Judaism and Christianity

Unbinding Isaac: The Significance of the Akedah for Modern Jewish Thought - Aaron Koller

Feb 10, 2022

Aaron Koller (Yeshiva University) with William Schniedewind (UCLA)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNFIYZq9qug>



universal ethics vs. the call of faith (personal, inscrutable)

Soren Kierkegaard

Carol Gilligan

Were there people troubled by the Akedah before the 20th cent? Yes.

Some in literary interpretations, some in art

Caravaggio "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (1603)



Michelangelo Merisi
de Caravaggio
(Italy, 1571-1610)

The Sacrifice of Isaac
(1603)

The Uffizi, Florence

The eye of Isaac is the only thing that's directly looking at the viewer. Hard to know whether he's screaming, gasping for air, or stunned. But his eye asks us to pay attention to him. Making sure we don't just *only* notice the religious turmoil of Abraham, but pay attention to the fact that Isaac is about to die. When we think of this only as the story of Abraham, we have some serious ethical issues. If you pay attention to Isaac, we are in a different ballgame.

Wilfred Owen, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" (1918)

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife,
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretched forth the knife to slay his son.



When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

SLEW HIS SON! Half the seed of Europe, one by one.

One of the first to draw attention to the fact that the binding can stand in for the way modern warfare affects people. Older people sacrificing younger ones (WWI)!

Abraham is not only making a decision about his own life, but about Isaac's as well.

That ought to bother us. Owen did actually die in the trenches. He was the Isaac in the story.

Leonard Cohen, "The Story of Isaac" (1969)

You who build these altars now
To sacrifice these children,
You must not do it anymore.
A scheme is not a vision
And you never have been tempted
By a demon or a god.
You who stand above them now,
Your hatchets blunt and bloody,
You were not there before,
When I lay upon a mountain
And my father's hand was trembling
With the beauty of the word.



I Will Not Offer

Ra'aya Harnik (transl. Ruth Kartun-Blum)

Genesis 22:1–19

I will not offer
My first born for sacrifice
Not I

At night God and I
Make reckonings
Who can claim what

I know and am
Grateful
But not my son
And not
for sacrifice



רעיה הרניק / אני לא אקריב

אני לא אקריב
בכורי לעולה
לא אני

בלילות אלהים ואני
עורכים חשבונות
מה מגיע למי

אני יודעת ומכירה
תודה.
אבל לא את בני
ולא
לעולה.

(She says, I'm no less faithful than Abraham, but I won't sacrifice my son.)
He was in fact killed in the 1982 invasion of Lebanon (*For Guni*)

The Torah's criticism of Avraham

A Shavuot piyyut by R. Elazar b. Rabbi Qilliri

The faithful one answered to the Lord, to praise him and exalt him /
The young man with whom you graced him when his strength was spent /
he bound on the wood of the altar /

Arrested for three days, he offered his chick /
It was pleasant, and his offering was accepted /

He became great, and his reputation spread throughout the land.
*But he forgot how a father is supposed to have mercy on a son /
a prayer or plea he should have offered!*

"Now I know," you said to him, to praise him, the One who made the land
with his strength.

ענתה אַמון לַאֲדון לְעֵלְסוֹ וּלְנַחְחוֹ 205
עֵלְם אֲשֶׁר חֲנַנְתּוֹ בְּכֹלֹת כֹּחַ
עָקְדוֹ עַל עֲצֵי מִזְבְּחוֹ
עֲצוֹר שְׁלוֹשָׁה יָמִים עֵשׂ אֶפְרוֹחוֹ
עָרַב וְנִרְצָה נִיחֹחוֹ
עָצַם וּבְכָל אֶרֶץ הַפִּיחַ רִיחוֹ 210
עֲנִיּוֹן כְּרַחֵם אֱבֹהַּ עַל בְּנָיִם בְּשִׁכְחוֹ
עֲטִיפֹת תַּחְנָה הָיָה לוֹ לְעֶרְוֹד בְּשִׁיחוֹ
עֲתָה יִדְעֵתִי שִׁמְעֵתוֹ לְשִׁבְחוֹ
עוֹשֵׂה אֶרֶץ בְּכֹחוֹ

Criticism of Abraham is not a recent phenomenon. The above poem, 1500 years ago.

Why was the Torah not gifted until the time of Moses? No one meritorious enough to receive it until then? "I can't go to him...he bound his son." Abraham never offers a word in protest. This poet says, what kind of father is that? Yes, he's pious, but he's not a good parent or a good human being.

Syriac poem (6th-7th century)

The upright Abraham was fervent in love / while faith resided in his heart.
He began to prepare what was required for the sacrifice of his son, / just as he had been bidden.

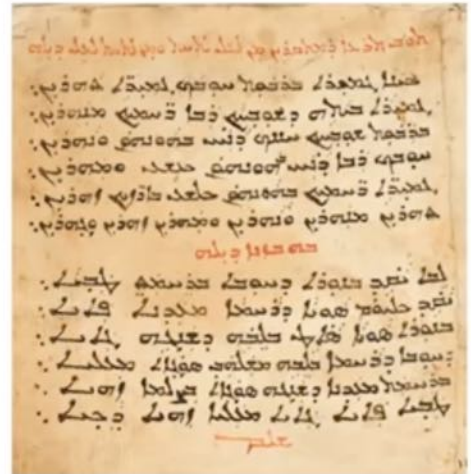
Sarah says, 'What are you doing, / splitting that wood which you have in your hands?

Might it be that you are going to sacrifice our son / with that knife that you are sharpening?

Abraham says, 'Sarah, be silent: / you are already upset, and you are vexing me.

This is a hidden mystery, / which those who love men cannot perceive'.
"You are not aware of how much I endured – / the pains and birth pangs that accompanied his birth.

Swear to me on him that he will not come to any harm, / since he is my hope. Then take him, and go."



So not only Jewish poets, but Sebastian Brock has published a series of poems reflecting on the binding that have this innovative objection, putting objection into the mouth of Sarah (she reappears in these Syriac poems).

Yehuda Amichai

(1924 – 2000)

"Take your son, your only one, whom you love,
And raise him as a sacrifice" – so God to Abraham.
And we call him "Abraham our Father." What father
Is he to us, that he was prepared to sacrifice his son on the altar!
Another way: God knew nothing of love for sons,
But he knew of love for hills
And of all the hills he loved most the hill of Moriah
His only hill, which he loved, and therefore made on it
The Akedah and the Temples.

יהודה עמיחי

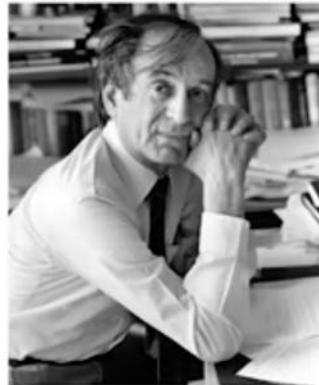
פתוח סגור פתוח

קח את בנך את היחיד אשר אהבת.
והגדתו לעולה, כך אלהים לאברהם.
ואנחנו קוראים לו אברהם אבינו. איזה אב
הוא לנו, שקהה סוכן להקריב את בנו על המזבח:
דבר אחר, אלהים לא ידע אהבה לבנים,
אבל הוא ידע אהבה להרים
ומקל הקרים אהב את הר המוריה
הר יחידו, אשר אהב ולכן עשו עליו
את העקרה ואת כתי המקדש.

So, yes, there's been discomfort. What are other ways of reading the story?
Some have been proffered in antiquity, some in modern times.

Alternative #1

The Covenantal Drama: Dead Sea Scrolls and Wiesel



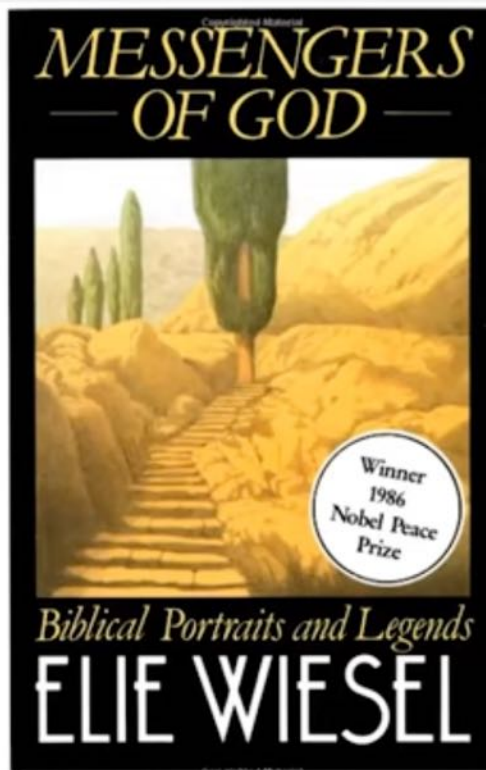
Avoids the ethical problem.

4Q225 (Pseudo-Jubilees)

"The angels of Mastema were rejoicing and saying, 'Now he is finished. For if Abraham withholds his son he will be found to be false; and if not, he will be found faithful, b[ut his son will die].'"



Dead Sea Scrolls, story is retold. Angels react to what is going on down below. The whole covenantal story of Genesis hangs in the balance in that moment. Possibility C comes along to surprise you (third option). Angel steps in and calls it off. We as readers ought to be paralyzed with fear and terror at this moment because the covenantal story seems to be crashing to an end one way or another.



He delivered this as a lecture in the 1980s.

He develops the story in way that's in tune with the Dead Sea Scroll but goes further.

Abraham knew more than we're giving him credit for.

Abraham knew the covenantal story had been reaffirmed. He has more faith than that.

OK, you asked me to sacrifice Isaac? I know that you can't allow that to happen.

So, he engages in a high stakes game of chicken with Isaac's life.

You're testing me? OK, I'll test YOU! God does call it off, so Abraham wins.

Now, YOU owe ME one. You put me through that. (5th cent. CE midrash says:)

Abraham's prayer (Bereshit Rabbah 56)

"Eternal Master, may it be your will, the Lord our God, that at the time when the children of Isaac do transgressions and bad deeds, that this very Akedah be remembered for them, and may you be filled with Mercy on them!"

So, it's not an ethical story...it's something different entirely.

Alternative #2: Historically contextualized, the command to sacrifice is not the highpoint



[See transcript for the rest...]

so that's one reading of the akedah which i think has again roots back in qumran but takes us all the way to eli
32:32
wiesel uh that it's not an ethical story it's something else entirely
32:38
the story that i the the interpretation i'm going to do is just a few minutes um that i argue for in my book is something
32:45
different uh it's actually says look i i want i want this to be historically contextualized um we know something
32:52
about the ancient world now you know we shouldn't read the story the way kierkegaard did uh in early 19th century
33:00
copenhagen where the bible sort of lives in a vacuum we now know a huge amount about the ancient near east about
33:06
religious life about practices and beliefs and all sorts of uh all sorts of elements of life that can potentially
33:13
help us contextualize uh and illuminate biblical narratives now there's nothing
33:19
directly relevant to genesis 22 and anything that we that we know of but we actually know a huge amount about the
33:25
practice of child sacrifice and i think this has sort of permeated the popular consciousness as well it's not a broad
33:32
near eastern practice it's not the case that lots of people sacrificed their children in the in the ancient near east
33:38
um what we basically have is evidence for phoenicians in the phoenician diaspora
33:44
sacrificing their children uh and this comes from a number of sites in the mostly in the central mediterranean i'm
33:50
not going to go into all the archaeological details now but the most the most important and the largest site
33:57
is the site of carthage which has been excavated a couple of times
34:02
and a team led by lawrence steger who was one of my dissertation advisors unfortunately
34:09
passed away uh too young a few years ago um excavated it back in the 70s
34:16
and they they discovered a cemetery with approximately 20 000
34:23

internments of infants over the course of about 800 years

34:30

so you know this is what part of the cemetery looks like i see just you know

Tombstones

34:36

anywhere you look there's dozens and dozens of these tombstones some of them i hope you can see on the right side uh

34:41

have inscriptions not not all or even most of them have inscriptions but but some of them do

34:47

they also have various icons and other things that are helpful for us in understanding the religious beliefs and

34:53

practices of the people at carthage um and then under the tombstones you

Human Infant

34:58

find things like this so this is a an eighth century pot intact and when it's opened up you

35:05

actually can find the you see in the caption the charred remains of a one to two month old human

35:11

infant so this is yeah i actually i i can't quite imagine

35:16

the emotions of the archaeologists who found these over and over and over again um it's horrifying on the one hand uh

35:24

it's also fascinating on the other hand because we have hundreds and thousands of these things

35:31

and again as i said some of them have inscriptions so many of them say that this is in fulfillment of a vow that the

35:36

parents made to some god or goddess or god and goddess because

35:43

we vowed what we vowed and he heard their voice or she heard his voice or

35:48

but the details differ from inscription to inscription um with lots of evidence that essentially parents were

35:55

sacrificing infants as payment for vows so it's we never know the full story you

36:02

have to imagine that there was some crisis in the family um maybe an illness maybe something else

36:08

and the parents said well if we get out of this if god if the face of baal if tinit uh helps us

36:16

then we will sacrifice our next child to the god or goddess and so

36:21

they did and we have the remains of it and it's i don't think there's any way to look at this or think about it

36:27

without breaking down thinking about that emotional experience but it's crucially

36:32

important for thinking about the background of a story like genesis 22 because what it means is that uh the

36:39

idea of sacrificing a child to god in fulfillment of a vow is not

36:45

unique in the ancient world again i i don't want to exaggerate how common it was but it existed as a practice um

36:54

and if we had more time we could talk about when and where maybe we could talk about that afterwards presidential um

37:00

but but it existed as a practice and so it's actually probably anachronistic

37:06

to see the major drama in the story as being the question of whether abraham would be willing to sacrifice his child

37:13

to god because that wouldn't make abraham all that special in the scheme of things we even have other stories in the hebrew

37:19

bible of parents sacrificing their children for religious faith we could tease out differences between

37:25

them but we have the uh terrible story of jephthah who sacrifices his daughter

37:31

we have the moabite king mesha who sacrifices his son to save his city

37:37

and we have stories from classical literature this is actually not all that unique in genesis 22.

37:42

so what is unique in genesis 22 then what's the point of the story well here i found actually the most insightful

37:48

reading to come not from someone who is a professional biblical interpreter but

37:53

from the uh 20th century philosopher lithuanian french jewish philosopher

38:00

emmanuel levinos who here looks happy but in most pictures looks dour like that uh and levinas

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas

38:08

um actually wrote about the binding of isaac a couple of times and he says you know the story is really

38:13

not about the command that to offer isaac as a sacrifice the high point of the drama is the second command where

38:20

the angel comes and tells abraham don't offer isaac as a sacrifice this is a

38:25

passage from one of his essays published in english in a book called proper names

38:30

where he says abraham's attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order and forbidding him to

38:37

perform a human sacrifice is the highest point in the drama that he obeyed the first voice is astonishing

38:43

that he has sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice that is essential in other words what

38:50

levinas is saying is oh child sacrifice yeah i've heard of that that's not a big

38:55

deal if he told me abraham offered his child i'd be like oh okay so he's like a good phoenician

39:01

not all that interesting what's astonishing about abraham in the story of genesis 22 is that when the angel comes and says actually don't

39:08

sacrifice your child leading him back to the ethical order abraham attends to that equally he said

39:14

okay so then i won't do it now leviness has this in a different essay has this amazing line

39:20

to see a face as a ready to hear you shall not kill and i i want to just i uh

39:28

dwell on this for 30 seconds um for loving us this is the beginning of all ethics the beginning of all

39:34

ethics is me realizing that actually the person across from me which right now is you professor shinuan uh the person

39:41

across from me is no less complex and rich and deep and valuable

39:49

as i am we all know how rich and complicated we all are we contain multitudes but

39:56

everyone else is simplistic right everyone else is just a cardboard cutout of a person

40:02

levina says to see another human face and to absorb it to realize that like that human face is actually not

40:08

different from my human face that means that that person is no less complicated and interesting and valuable than i am

40:14

that's the beginning of all ethics at that point suddenly i give up on any claims that i'm more important than

40:19

anyone else and from that point flows the what we take to be obvious but actually

40:24

profound teaching you shall not kill it's profound because why shouldn't i kill well what it means is that my life

40:32

is not more valuable than his life or her life and so i have no right to take that life for my

40:37

own purposes now i would love to think that this opens the door to a slightly new

40:43

interpretation of that scene in the in the binding of isaac what is the messenger of god that tells

40:49

abraham don't kill so i'd love to i'd love to propose that the messenger of god is in

40:55

fact isaac's face loving us would say when abraham looks into isaac's face abraham suddenly

41:01

realizes wait a second i might be a pious person hearing the call of god

41:07

but isaac is not inferior to me there's no reason that my piety should

41:12

mean the end of isaac's life and so isaac's face bring it brings abraham back to the ethical order

41:19

isaac's face is the one that tells him you shall not kill now just to conclude lots of artists in

41:26

the renaissance and before and after but especially uh in the uh in the 16th 17th centuries portrayed the binding of

41:33

isaac most of them chose to portray the moment that isaac was saved

41:40

abraham's there with his knight this is rubens the angel comes in and saves isaac

41:45

rubens is the rembrandt uh on the right uh jan leuens on the left uh these are

Comparisons

41:52

obviously really closely similar and that's not surprising levins and rebrands were close colleagues

41:57

um but levins painted another painting of the binding of isaac and that's this one

Aftermath

42:03

where he chooses to depict not the moment where isaac has saved but the aftermath of that

42:09

where abraham and isaac come together in what we can only imagine is the most heartfelt and yet anxious embrace

of

42:16

their lives where they know that they were an inch away from the entire life the entire world ending from that for

42:23

them uh emotionally they don't understand it they're looking up in in fear and consternation and

42:29

anxiety and maybe gratitude but the most important thing is that they're brought together

42:35

isaac is not just unbound but reunited with his father emotionally and covenantally

42:42

and so it's that painting that i put on the cover of my book uh unbinding isaac

The High Point

42:48

because i think the high point of this story is in fact the moment that isaac after isaac is unbound and reunites with

42:54

his father uh covenantally

43:00

okay i will end it there sorry for going a bit over time well it's such an incredibly rich topic

The Problem of the Book

43:07

and thank you so much that was really fantastic um there are so many questions this is the

43:13

fantastic thing why you know i really recommend people buying this book i mean

43:18

i've read this story a million times like many pious readers will have and and

43:24

just thought it was one of the most incredible pieces of literature um

43:29

i've often thought you know uh i work on scribes a lot and i've often thought like this would be a great

43:35

school text in ancient israelite academy and for a lot of different reasons some of it has

43:41

to do with the grammar and style some has to do with the topic you know um

43:47

and how interesting it is but this seems like the problem of this book too is the topic is too rich you

43:55

know so how did you decide like what to talk about what to leave out you know

44:01

why kierkegaard for example as a one of the foci of the book

44:06

one of the things i was very interested in um about the story were inner biblical and pro possibly second temple

44:14

um texts which you seem to have mostly left out of the book in favor of

44:20

um later medieval to modern interpretations but like what was the the process of

44:26

deciding like what do i talk about here in this book yeah no that's a really great point and

The Text

44:32

um i think you're right about the text it's uh it's actually you know maybe it's to some extent a function of

44:37

how how uh the brevity with which the story is told but you know you sort of can't

44:43

can't get away from it uh people just keep coming back to it from all sorts of angles i actually struggled a lot with

44:49

this book um right i said you know i started working on this like really a very long time it was collecting things
teaching speaking

44:56

about it here and there um but had a really hard time actually writing the book

45:01

in part for exactly the sort of literary question reasons that you just mentioned it's hard to

45:07

hard to to figure out how to conceptualize a book about it um there is a

45:13

a comprehensive intellectual history of how everyone has read this story

45:18

is way beyond my capacity um but it's it would be fascinating um but um what i

45:25

actually wound up doing was trying to stick as closely as possible to sort of

45:31

one question one answer and the question is are we really stuck with kierkegaard like character guard has i think
really

45:38

uh to a large extent frame the way that people have seen this this story this is not universal and i think

45:45

there's different communities and different communities of readers um in modern times but but in many

45:51

reading communities uh the the story is sort of unreflectively seen in

45:56

kierkegardian terms like it's like oh yeah it's a story of the suspension of the ethical like that's the question

46:01

um so i tried to keep it to like well is that really the you know let's let's uh

46:07

unpack that reading i said i i did go into kierkegaard in the book uh because i think actually understanding where he

46:13

comes from is really useful in uh taking him apart to something i don't you know i don't want to use the loaded

46:19

term deconstructing because it's not i it's not it's not a very highly theorized book but just understanding

46:25

what was on kierkegaard's mind i think goes a long way to understanding why he read this story in a particular way

46:31

and why lots of other people actually just didn't read the story in the same way at all they don't see that uh those questions there but i basically kept it

46:38

as like well here's kierkegaard here's what he did here's what i think is really problematic um and you know i have a couple of

46:45

chapters that that uh sort of uh air out why i think this is really a

46:51

very difficult reading to swallow um some somewhat textually

46:56

um also in terms of religious tradition um mostly jewish a little bit uh christian as well

47:02

um and then try to articulate an alternative reading so i you know what i what i tried to do in the last you know

47:09

uh five ten minutes here uh takes a few chapters to sort of uh unfold in the book

47:15

but um that's the i guess the nature of writing is you know try to document it all and make sure it's all you know all

47:21

the eyes are dotted and the t's are so the only the only concession i had but you know having said that

47:28

one of the thrilling parts of working on it was just the sheer variety of approaches that people have

47:34

taken to the story and i just couldn't get myself to like actually not include that at all so so there's sort of two

47:41

ways in which i i included that one is that along the way i actually do try to include as many voices as possible who i

47:48

think are sort of fellow travelers um so you know they're medieval thinkers who i think were sort of going in

47:54

similar directions to the way i want to develop the story so i try to build on them uh it's actually muslim and jewish

48:02

thinkers who we saw it in terms of the story as we told in the quran and with different interesting differences that like also

48:08

open up some interesting uh interpretive possibilities but then my big concession is i do have a first chapter uh in the

48:14

book that um is really different from the rest of the book it's just sort of a road map to

48:21

different ways in which uh jewish readers have encountered this story so you know what are the big

48:27

themes that jewish readers have seen in the story over the past couple of millennia

48:32

and they're it's certainly not comprehensive you know not trying to be covered but all trying instead to just sort of like

48:38

the layout of like the different ways that people have read it what they've seen in it you know a story of martyrdom

48:44

the story of faith um the different things that are there um and i think i

48:49

think even if even if a reader like is unchallenged by kierkegaard uh or

48:55

unconvinced by by the reading that i've proposed i think this is just such a wealth of prior interpretations that i

49:01

try to like distill in that first chapter that they'll probably be something that i'll be like oh that's actually my my favorite reading

49:08

yeah i mean one of the things i liked about reading this book is that you know in some ways these

49:15

this kind of approach could have just been an anthology of what people other scholars are

49:21

but that's not what i felt what i felt like in it's the way you've written it is

49:27

that i'm part of this group of fellow travelers who are studying this incredible

49:33

difficult story and um going in different directions for different reasons i i think that you know your

49:40

focus on on child sacrifice as being normative in

49:46

to some extent in in antiquity does give a new a twist that i think a lot of

49:52

readers like kirkegaard would have done well to have realized but of course you can't really blame

49:58

them for not realizing some things that they wouldn't have necessarily been fully aware of

50:04

um you know the other thing that was really interesting i mean i read i've read the

50:09

story many so many times with students even and one thing i didn't notice and so you

50:15

know i'll i i was really struck by it was the kachna

50:22

that when god commands um abraham take your son he doesn't

50:28

he just doesn't use a a straight imperative he says he

50:34

softens it and i was like that's really weird why would god command you and then kind

50:40

of like you know not now is this you know word that sort of softens it and it reminds

50:46

it makes me think of another part of the story that um i don't know that bothers me but it's

50:52

part of the role of the divine in this story that bothers me god asking abraham to do this

50:59

thing that seems so horrendous is that is that god himself to me disappears in the story because

51:07

he tests abraham but then in verse 11 it's the angel of the lord right not god

51:14

who stays abraham's hand why and i was noticing when i was reading the book

51:19

that this issue of the angel of the lord as opposed to god himself staying

51:24

abraham's hand isn't reflected upon as much as i thought it might be so i

51:31

was thought well if you had any any thoughts of those two aspects of you know the role of god in

51:38

the story um uh that you might want to share with me give me some some

51:45

insight oh yeah that's that's a great observation i mean both of those are really great observations and it's

The Angel

51:51

true i think just in general like it's such a tersely worded story

51:56

it seems tempting to think like every word you know i don't think this is a religious statement i think just you know if a story is written like that

52:03

like like any poet right so if you only have x number of words to work with you're going to choose your words well

52:09

so like words seem to be significant um so the na seems very

52:14

enticing for our interpreters um i i guess i'll leave that one aside for

52:20

right now but um in terms of the angel i guess two things to say so one is um you know one

52:26

of the thinkers who did think a lot about that was maimonides and i i try to bring him in uh late in the book

52:34

um you know i i think the story like the binding of isaac essentially everyone who's ever read the

52:40

bible has thoughts about the binding of isaac uh it's just it's impossible not to i mean you could recoil from it and

52:46

close the book or you could you know say this is the most profound and sublime story i've ever read uh or anything in

52:52

between but like everyone has thoughts about this about the story so you know one of the things i realized early on

52:57

you know in scholarships sometimes you're like looking for the like here's my contribution right i realize early on

53:03

like if i actually say something brand new about the binding of isaac it's probably just nonsense which is why no one said it before like smart people

53:10

have been reading this story for you know at least 2 000 years that we have recorded interpretations uh

53:17

you know there's really no reason to think that i'm going to say something like no one's ever thought of so i really was trying to like i think the

53:23

fellow traveler is a good as a good idiom here really to try and say you know what while it's true that people

53:29

have been saying things they're often scattered in a comment here or work there and like you know let's try to articulate something uh

53:36

more synthesized so maimonides does think a lot about this angel thing and and for him that means that it's a

53:43

i'll say these words but it's sort of hard to uh uh understand like a higher level of revelation a more profound

53:50

understanding of god's will so that takes its own unpacking but i think actually the more

53:55

interesting thing to say um and maybe more tragic thing to say is that uh after the commands offer isaac

54:02

as a sacrifice abraham and god never converse again that's it

54:08

so the story is you know whether you like it or don't like it is one question but i think just

54:15

as as literature it's clearly tragic because all of abraham's relationships

54:21

are severed by the end of the story so if you if you asked me like the beginning of genesis 22 who are the who

54:27

are the most important uh relationships in uh abraham's life i'd be like oh there's three really i mean he's already kicked out ishmael so can't go with him

54:34

so uh so we have sarah his new son isaac and god i mean that's you know i don't

54:39

in some order and it's hard to know which order but like in some order and by the end of genesis 22 all three of those relationships are gone he never

54:46

speaks any of those three characters again sarah is about to die in the next chapter he and isaac are never in the

54:51

same place never share a conversation and abraham and god never talk again so i actually think that's a more

54:56

powerful observation than maimonides sort of theological interpretation that it may well be that

55:03

at this point maybe abraham really is pious but abraham also not uh abraham and god are

55:09

not on speaking terms and of course you can then take that in different directions uh but just as an observation

55:15

uh it's really striking that those three relationships all come to a crashing end in this story

55:22

yeah you know that's that's a great observation um let me just end with one more question

Ignoring Isaac

55:29

and and this is probably comes back to your theme a little bit more um i was i

55:35

was really struck by um lots of things in this book and um there's one passage that you quote from

55:41

moshe habertal where you say where you after quoting him you summarize saying

55:48

ignoring isaac in the story is monstrous which i just i just loved in a way

55:55

it's part of your in a sense critique of kierkegaard um and

56:01

on the other hand one could say well kierkegaard was right in the sense that

56:07

isaac seems to disappear from the story himself right i mean he's in some ways

56:14

in the first part of the story he's central abraham is talking with him walking together but then after

56:21

the um the moment of of staying abraham's hand

56:27

isaac disappears and you talk about this in the book too um and in some ways you know kierkegaard

56:35

ignoring of isaac is part of what the story does

56:41

too i guess i guess in character but i think you're right you know that

56:46

no unfortunately i think you're right also is given to isaac and when you and when

56:52

you think about isaac in the story it changes um the story and the reading quite a bit

56:59

right no i think that's exactly right and i i wish it weren't so i mean i yeah it's actually

57:05

there's sort of um sort of a uh i guess interpreters dilemma uh here um

57:13

i'm i'm not willing to ignore isaac uh on all sorts of grounds but as you say the text ignores isaac at the end i mean

57:20

literarily as far as we know isaac's still bound up on the altar like he no one ever unties him he never comes down

57:26

you know he's just sitting there uh like screaming or like i don't know what he's doing

57:35

right right you know if this were like a comedy sketch and there are plenty of comedy sketches about the binding of isaac but for a comedy sketch you can

57:41

imagine him like at night you know abraham's long gone celebrating the fact that isaac's still alive and isaac's

57:46

like you know the cameras go back to the altar and he's like still stan you know still tied up there like dad

57:53

but it is it's terrible for years right you know right now but it is terrible i actually think it actually

57:58

that actually uh troubles me a lot um because then it's not just a question of interpreters missing isaac like the text

58:05

itself elides isaac and that that really is troubling uh and i don't have a good solution for
58:10
it i mean i i like you say you know i mentioned it i try to i talk about some of the other things that people have said
about the
58:16
absence of isaac in the end of a story but i wish i had a more insightful
58:21
solution to that problem in some ways i say though i was reading the stories i was thinking
58:27
about um the akida and the job story um because of the the problem of ethics
58:34
in that and of course a lot of that you know i rationalize by saying
58:40
it's it's a parable you know it's not these aren't actually happening you know it helps me to sort of think of
58:47
this as a story that explores an ethical problem right um as opposed to thinking
58:54
about it well there were some i sort of i mentioned this really quickly in the book because it would have been a bit of
58:59
a side point but there were some medieval thinkers uh jewish thinkers who uh argued that the whole thing was a
59:05
dream of abraham's uh and that if you had asked isaac you know what do you think about that binding you'd been like
sorry i have no idea what you're talking
59:11
about and then you might have been wise not tell him no need to traumatize him um some people
59:18
understand that that's maimonides view it's not clear if that's my monitor's view but of course my monitors like
59:23
explicitly says that he's not going to tell you his own views on a lot of things so it's uh it's an open question
59:29
whether he thought so but some some thinkers explicitly are you know very clear that they think
59:34
that this whole thing was a dream and i think i think they're getting to it from the same direction that you just said
59:39
well if the point of the story is to sort of play out a scenario that teaches a lesson
59:45
what do you have to traumatize actual people for like tell right write a story that that uh develops these ideas and
59:51
tell me what the answer is and then we're good right i mean that's how fiction works so you know some readers
59:56
this is actually a question that i've wondered about a lot especially with students
1:00:01
there's like this bias against fiction in sacred writing you know students like uh students who have always assumed
that
1:00:07
the bible was sacred a really hard time thinking of it as anything other than historical fact even with a book like
1:00:14
job where you know lots of readers for eternity have thought that it's just a parable
1:00:20
um so how could that be you know is fiction really religiously significant i think that's actually a really
1:00:25
fascinating question yeah i don't know conviction be religiously significant like why not it does a lot of other
1:00:30
things for us but um but it is i think an interesting question and a significant question uh it's obviously not the way
most
1:00:37
readers have approached this but uh but i'm not sure it's off the table even for a you know a sort
1:00:43
of pious reader of the bible to say like well like other parts of the story that we know um were parables or
1:00:50
literary works of genres other than history is it possible this one uh is as well

1:00:57

yeah well on that you know i i just will um end this but i just wanted to like re

1:01:04

reiterate this was a fantastic read this was a fantastic um discussion and i really encourage

1:01:11

people to become fellow travel travelers in this story by reading your book it's it's a great book thank you thank you if

1:01:18

i could say one last thing is that when i've had a chance to talk about the story so it's a story that like everyone

1:01:23

has an opinion about right so i'll get up and give my like uh you know talk about some aspect of it and i don't get

1:01:30

any questions about what i say people are just like well here's how i read the story so i actually love this i think this is

1:01:35

fantastic i've learned from those conversations and i i hope that if people listen to this talk uh read the book and

1:01:42

say you know forget what kohler said but like here's how i read the story like that is great i i would love to hear it

1:01:48

and i just hope people continue to engage and think about it well thank you very much thank you