

Genesis 22

The Offering of Isaac

22 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." ³ So Abraham got up early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the boy will go over there; and **we will worship** and **return** to you." ⁶ And Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. **So the two of them walked on together.** ⁷ Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." **So the two of them walked on together.**

⁹ **Then they came to the place** of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ And Abraham reached out with his hand and took the knife to **slaughter** his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not reach out your hand against the boy, and do not do anything to him; for now I know that you **fear** God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." ¹³ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind *him* was a ram caught in the thicket by its horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in the place of his son. ¹⁴ And Abraham named that place **The LORD Will Provide**, as it is said to this day, "On the mountain of the LORD it will **be provided.**"

¹⁵ Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your **seed** as the stars of the heavens and as the sand, which is on the seashore; and your **seed** shall possess the gate of **their enemies.** ¹⁸ And in your **seed** all the nations of the earth shall **be blessed**, because you have obeyed My voice." ¹⁹ **So Abraham returned** to his young men, and they got up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived in Beersheba.

²⁰ Now it came about after these things, that Abraham was told, saying, "Behold, Milcah ^ualso has borne children to your brother Nahor: ²¹ **Uz** his firstborn, **Buz** his brother, **Kemuel** (the father of Aram), ²² **Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel**"— ²³ and *it was Bethuel who* fathered Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. ²⁴ His concubine, whose name was Reumah, ^ualso gave birth to **Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah**. [Abraham's brother has TWELVE, just as Jacob/Israel eventually would.]

Footnotes

- a. Genesis 22:8 Lit *see*
- b. Genesis 22:10 I.e., following prescribed ritual
- c. Genesis 22:12 Or *revere*; lit *are a fearer of God*
- d. Genesis 22:14 Heb *YHWH-jireh*; lit *the LORD will see*
- e. Genesis 22:14 Lit *be seen*
- f. Genesis 22:17 Or *descendants*
- g. Genesis 22:17 Or *descendants*
- h. Genesis 22:17 Lit *his*
- i. Genesis 22:18 Or *descendants*
- j. Genesis 22:18 Or *bless themselves*
- k. Genesis 22:20 Lit *she also*
- l. Genesis 22:24 Lit *she also*

Gen. 25:1 Now Abraham took another wife, ¹whose name was **Keturah**. ² ^aShe bore to him **Zimran** and **Jokshan** and **Medan** and **Midian** and **Ishbak** and **Shuah**.

³ Jokshan ¹became the father of Sheba and Dedan.

And the sons of Dedan were Asshurim and Letushim and Leummim.

⁴ The sons of Midian *were* Ephah and Ephher and Hanoch and Abida and Eldaah.

All these *were* the sons of Keturah.

⁵ ^aNow Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; ⁶ but to the sons of ¹his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and ^asent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east.

Gen. 25:7 These are ¹all the years of Abraham's life that he lived, ^a**one hundred and seventy-five years**. ⁸ Abraham breathed his last and died ^ain a ¹ripe old age, an old man and satisfied *with life*; and he was ^bgathered to his people. ⁹ Then his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in ^athe cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, ¹⁰ ^athe field which Abraham purchased from the sons of Heth; there Abraham was buried with Sarah his wife. ¹¹ It came about after the death of Abraham, that ^aGod blessed his son Isaac; and Isaac ¹lived by ^bBeer-lahai-roi.

BILL MOYERS: I'm Bill Moyers. No story in Genesis asks harder questions. Would God make an unethical demand? Should we consider pious or crazy or both the father who puts a knife to the throat of his son because he's heard the voice of God telling him to do so? And why would the mother, who waited so long and fought so fiercely for her child, now fall silent in the face of this divine command? Jews, Christians, and Muslims wrestle with these questions, because each of the great religions finds revelation for itself in the story of Abraham and the sacrifice. It's an old, old discussion which continues today. Join us.

STORYTELLER MANDY PATINKIN: After many years without a child, Abraham and Sarah had their promised son Isaac. Now after everything else God put Abraham to the test. The Lord said, "Abraham, take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice.

"So Abraham rose up early in the morning and he gathered the wood for a burnt offering. They went towards the mountain which God had chosen. Abraham left his servants at the bottom of the mountain and said, "My son and I will climb this mountain and worship. Stay here until we return." Then Abraham placed the wood for the offering on Isaac's shoulders and the two of them walked on together. "My father," Isaac said. "Here I am," said Abraham. And Isaac asked, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

"God will provide the lamb, my son." And Abraham and Isaac came to the place chosen by God. Abraham built an altar, he laid out the wood for the fire, and bound Isaac to the altar for, sacrifice. Now Abraham lifted the knife in his hand to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called out from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham! Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God. You wouldn't withhold even your son, your only son from me." Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught in a thicket by his horns.

He took the ram and sacrificed it instead of his son. Then Abraham called the place Adonai-yireh which is to say, "God will see to your needs. God will provide." And the angel called out, "The Lord says I swear on myself that because you did not withhold your only son I will bless you. You will have more children than the sky has stars and the seashore sands and all the nations of the world are blessed because you obeyed my voice." And Abraham came down the mountain to his servants and together they walked to Beersheba. Now Sarah lived 127 years, and she was buried in the town of Hebron, in the land of Canaan.

BILL MOYERS: Just taking this text as it is, as we have it in the Scriptures, do any of you have a **problem** with this story?

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: I have a problem with that story that I will always have. I think that this is quite literally a **terrifying story**. When — when we pray in the Lord’s prayer, “lead us not into temptation,” which in Greek literally says — do not bring us to the test — this is what comes to mind. And — and at the heart of my faith is the conviction that God would never put me in this situation. **If this is a test, I’d flunk it.**

NORMAN COHEN: The issue is — I think — **the issue of the voice**. It would seem to me that the voice that Abraham hears beckoning him to sacrifice his own son **perhaps is Abraham’s own voice**. As he hears this voice call out to him to bring the child to the mountain, for me, it’s Abraham, the ego that needs to **prove his fidelity and show his faith to himself and to the world**. Will push him to the point of sacrificing that which is most precious to him. And perhaps from that perspective, as I read it then, the entire story is Abraham **coming to understand what ultimately God really wants**.

BILL MOYERS: But haven’t you changed it to **clean it up**?

NORMAN COHEN: I don’t — I don’t really think so. Because ... from the point of view of the simple meaning of the text, **the punch line comes at the end, that God doesn’t want the sacrifice**. I think that’s the starting point for me. **That the message of the story is God doesn’t want human sacrifice. God doesn’t need human sacrifice**. And the lesson that Abraham has to learn is that **God really wants him to focus on what’s most important in his life and that’s Isaac**.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: You cannot do that, the story is so —

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: It would undo the story.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: **Terrifying — precisely because God sets up this test.**

BILL MOYERS: Nice try, Norman. No, go ahead.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: Let me — let me come back to what Francisco said.

BILL MOYERS: I think it’s fascinating what he says, though.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: And the question which you first posed, whether any of us is horrified by the story. And my answer is a very strong **no**, but I want to come back what — to why. There's a verse in the Koran that says we put you in this world in order to test you. **The whole of life is a test.** Now from a certain point of view, the test that Abraham is put through — precisely because of the **father of monotheism is a supreme test.** The supreme test which acts as the highest level, through which we could not go very easily, because we're not on that level of reality. We're not on that level of consciousness. Now it's very important to understand this from a spiritual point of view. That if we cut off the hands of God from the events of this world. What happens in if our — if — in our ordinary life, our small child who is innocent from a moral point of view dies of cancer, what happens to that? Usually we do not associate that with the trial of Abraham. But if we have a kind of **premodern cosmology, according to which it is God's will that acts in human life, in history, in nature, in the world outside of us, then this supreme story is — in — there in order to enable us, actually, to face the most difficult tasks of life, which is like the loss of a son.** That certainly is a condition which all of us face in this life if we have children.

BILL MOYERS: Hossein — the puzzle in what you say is that —this is God putting Abraham through a test. God — God has put Abraham through **one test after another. Surely by now, God knows** that Abraham is steadfast in his faith.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: That's **not the only question.** The question is that Abraham must act as a perfect exemplar for **all the different facets of life.** And all of the problems which we as followers of monotheism face. It's not whether he is perfect in the eyes of God or not. But how God creates a perfect exemplar for us. And these are two very, very different things.

BURTON VISOTZKY: **Hossein's right about that.** Throughout the Middle Ages, Jewish communities, Jewish communities that were I was gonna say put under the gun, put under the

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: Sword.

BURTON VISOTZKY: — sword saw their **model as Isaac bound on the altar.** As they lost their children as their children were taken away as their families were slaughtered. They imagined themselves as Abraham's ancestors. They — they — they knew this, that this was the way it was gonna be. And **if they could be like Abraham with perfect will and submit to God then they were okay.** That it somehow explained the tragedy of their life. And,

and I think — I hear myself say “**submit to God**”. It — **it took Islam for the Jewish community to open up to this idea of submission**. But you also mentioned that it’s a **pre-modern idea** and I think it is. I — I grew up in college in the years of the Vietnam war. And — as a result of that, I grew up with a very deep resentment of fathers sending their children off to be killed. So in — in my early rabbinical school years, when we would read the binding of Isaac as a test of Abraham, virtually all of us had the unam — you know, this — this unanimous response. Well, if it was a test of Abraham, Abraham failed the test. I remember one fellow, Danny Siegel, a poet — had a poem that ended “**I like it better thinking Father Abraham had said ‘forget it Isaac, let’s go home.’**” And — and we all very much like that reading of the binding of Isaac much better. That if this is to teach us anything, it’s to teach us not the power to submit, but the power to resist that voice.

DIANNE BERGANT: You asked — if it’s a terrifying story before. I think it is a terrifying story. But **for what purpose?** Why is — **why is the story teller telling the story that way?** And that’s why... I don’t want to get God off the hook. I wanna know why does the author tell the story that way?

BILL MOYERS: And **why does God do this kind of cruelty to a variety of people in order to test our faith?**

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Well, it’s not only this. It’s not only that Abraham has to learn something, **God has to learn something. And God says at the end “Now I know that,”** as though God did not know.

BILL MOYERS: He said now I know that you are in all of God.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: That you fear God.

BILL MOYERS: But **don’t — you don’t think he knew that already** from — from Ur to Canaan to Egypt to —

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: There’s another test. It’s yet another test — and I loved the way the Hebrew says, “And it came to pass after these things.” As though this is enough. Why do we need some more?

NORMAN COHEN: Right. (LAUGHTER)

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: And translations usually just leave that phrase out or — or shorten it in such a way that you lose the impact of it. But the text itself recognizes why does Abraham need another test? Now the idea of testing — of **God testing is not unique to this story**. It-it’s — it’s scattered throughout most

of the Bible. And so the Bible carries this terrifying note about God as a tester. At the same time there is a built-in, some people call it **“a contradiction,” a — a paradox in the story. The God who tests is also the God who provides.** God will provide the burnt offering. And that is never a resolved issue in the story about God the tester and God the provider. But God also needs to learn something. At the beginning God says to Abraham, “LECHLECHA” — go forth from your native land and from your clan and from your father’s house. In effect, **“break totally with your past”** which is ... something you don’t ask of people in ancient cultures to break that way. And now we return to that when he uses the same — God uses the same two words **“Lechlecha” and he says, “Break with your future.”** And it is a terrible test of faith.

BILL MOYERS: Break with your future by —

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Killing Abraham.

BILL MOYERS: Killing Abraham.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Sacrificing Isaac.

BILL MOYERS: Sacrificing Isaac who is the future.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Who is the future.

BILL MOYERS: So God has something at risk here?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: **God has something at risk. God is taking a great risk because suppose Abraham flunks the test?**

BURTON VISOTZKY: So what is God learning? That does God need to know then?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: What — my understanding is that the story has something to do basically with **idolatry**. The idolatry of the son — of the story is **take your son, your only son whom you love Isaac**. Now you don’t need all of that language to say, “Take Isaac and sacrifice him.” But it’s **heavy laden language** that is telling us something. It’s the **accumulation of attachment**. Isaac is the promised child once the giver has given the gift God has given Isaac then **does Abraham focus on Isaac and forget the giver?** And — and the climatic line is, “Now I know that you worship God, implied **that you do not worship your son.**”

BILL MOYERS: You're suggesting that perhaps because this child came so late when Abraham was over 100 and Sarah was 90 that both .. Sarah and Abraham have made an — an idol? They worship this boy?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: I think the story says that about Abraham but I don't think that's true. I don't think Abraham worshipped the child, **I think Sarah worshipped the child which is a wholly different interpretation.** But as the story is set up it is truly a patriarchal story. It's **father-son bonding.** And I — it — it — just within itself the story is about **Abraham's attachment to Isaac.** And if we borrow here categories from Zen Buddhism attachment, detachment and non-attachment, I see the story moving through those three levels. That is Abraham is so attached to this child that the whole issue of idolatry is acute and it is acute for God. God takes a risk to test Abraham — to test Abraham.

BURTON VISOTZKY: So God is jealous?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Well, it's not a matter of God's jealousy it's a matter of what is **the nature of faith.**

NORMAN COHEN: I think in terms of the idolatry for me it's more about Abraham himself mainly with the promise of the future and greatness. Abraham has a **sense of self** I think that he has to detach himself from. If the Abraham, as I said before, the **ego of Abraham** that has to be sacrificed on that mountain so that Abraham can come back to the reality of who he is in relationship to God. And that **promise of future greatness perhaps for me then becomes the kind of idolatrous focus.** And that's what ultimately has to be sacrificed on that mountain because **Abraham has to be able to see what's important in life and that is that attachment to.**

P.K. MCCARY: I think I'm in — in agreement with you that the just was so really **detached from a lot of the emotional involvement in — in people's feelings.** That he was kind of **self-centered** in some ways and that the test that he needed to have for himself was one in which he got rid of that — that ego. And I think that when we look at this from so many thousands of years later, **we look at it in the context of the children of today and the parents of today.** Here, as a parent, I'm horrified. As a child of — of parents that were very strict disciplinarians, **I'm understanding how Isaac didn't resist.** But knowing my child, I don't think I could have done that. And the real question becomes **how can we get to what Abraham had, which was either blind faith and blind devotion, or true surrender** that helped him to have this relationship with God that we all want.

BURTON VISOTZKY: When I was in college, I guess I identified with the story very closely by **identifying in fact with Isaac** — that **I didn't like the ideas that the parents were killing the kids**. Now that I have children of my own I **identify more strongly of course, with Abraham**. And I'm all the more horrified actually at the possibility that God would ever ask me — I mean it's just unimaginable to me to sacrifice my children in just about any way. I think it's kind of the **American Jewish ethos that parents do all the sacrificing for their children not the other way around**. I have a colleague at the seminary who said, "You know I used to think I understood this story. And now I realize that had God asked Abraham to sacrifice his grandson well boy we'd really have another story." (LAUGHTER)

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: It's interesting that in the Koran, that is in Islam, one of the names of God is **the person who uses ruses in order to — to bring about certain situations in the world**.

BILL MOYERS: Who **tricks us**.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: Who tricks us. [SPEAKING IN ARABIC] the Koran says who is the best of those who can trick you. Now what does this means? This if we just use a purely human based understanding of morality just lives leaves us with a horrible understanding of the divine nature. But if you understand it theological and metaphysically that only God is real and therefore, to be in this world which we assume to be a reality is already in a world of trickster. Illusion.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: There's an element of trick in this world — the world — **element of illusion** which are — other religions have been emphasizing so much like Hinduism. Then we will understand that some of the elements of this **must not be understood in a purely anthropomorphic sense**. Otherwise this story as many of the other stories will make a horrible image of God himself which would be very difficult to worship and to which one — could surrender.

BURTON VISOTZKY: But this — this is a difficult concept. I think theologically looking at it from the point of view of trying to understand God there's a lot to be said for your point of view. But then we have to live our lives every day. **And how we live our lives every day is often divorced from our experience of the divine I think in healthy ways**. That is to say if — if there's an ethical system what people agree upon works for the betterment of the community almost independent of God. That may promote better community than an exclusivist notion or — or an aggressive notion of — of a God who's a

trickster who commands you to kill your children. I've been thinking about... what it means to me to be a rabbi who's very visible in a Jewish community. It means one thing to me. But it means something entirely differently to my children. It's **not fun to — for my kids to be preacher's kids**. PK grew up with that. I mean Norman is sensitive to that problem. Frank I — it puts burdens on them that are difficult burdens. And — and I think in some ways that the Abraham Isaac story exemplifies this. That **my own personal relationship with God, my career path with God if you will, makes demands on my family that maybe very unreasonable**. And it's — it's incumbent upon me to be aware of that.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: So that's one reason the story's so terrifying to all of us. Because **at some level we all suspect we have been sacrificed by our parents**.

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: Yes.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: And then — then **if we are parents we fear that we will do the same thing to our children**.

BURTON VISOTZKY: Exactly.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: And **parents are always sacrificing their children**. You say you're sacrificing your children to your status as a rabbi. Other parents sacrifice their children to other ambitions, to success, to their pride, to whatever. And **this is the human predicament we're all suffering from and that makes the story even more terrifying. We're threatened by it**.

NORMAN COHEN: The text says that Abraham placed the wood upon Isaac. I'm always caught by that image when **Isaac himself is carrying the burden of the journey to the mountain**. And I think as Burt says I just can picture in my own mind's eye when our kids were little and my coming home from a long day at the office at the Hebrew Union College and walking in at 7:30 at night and seeing our youngest son who is now 19 standing by the door just waiting for me to come in. And said, "Daddy do you have 15 minutes to watch the basketball game with me? And the whole response was in this outward journey of life, this little boy saying, **"Where are you for me? Are you going to sacrifice me in terms of all of this?"**

BILL MOYERS: But having said that aren't we a long way from what Hossein was saying that we're concerned here with ourselves and offspring and our children and our seed and our needs and our passions when only — **when God is only concerned with what God is concerned with**.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: Yes because **logic is from a religious point of it is what we are doing in in this world?** So what if you have 45,000 more generations? Of very happy people who live and die and who are buried and then live and die who are buried and finally the earth collapses or is it hit by a meteor? **What is the purpose of human life? From a religious point of view. The purpose of human life is the life beyond this world, to return to God. And the life of this world has value to the extent that it points us to God. Otherwise I cannot understand the logic of religion at all.**

BURTON VISOTZKY: I always think of this as Groucho Marx theology, but, I think it was Groucho Marx who said that he didn't wanna be a member of any club who would have people like him as members? I kind of sometimes when I read the binding of Isaac feel the same way. **I'm not sure I wanna be involved with a God who makes these kinds of demands of me.** It's a — it's very different than — than what Hossein would — would say, I think, theologically. The — **the Muslim submits. And — and — and I resist.** I — I just find it — very difficult. Blind faith is not.

BILL MOYERS: So you're saying it's not faith —

BILL MOYERS: It's not faith that's being called into question here?

BURTON VISOTZKY: **If it's faith it's a kind of faith I don't want to subscribe to.** That is to say, I think there's **intelligent faith.** And I think there's **blind faith.** **I would prefer to believe that what God demands is a faith that requires the intellect to be engaged, rather than just say, "Yes sir."**

BILL MOYERS: Is this story telling us that when a command comes from God, we do it no matter what and **isn't that blind faith?**

DIANNE BERGANT: Yes, it a — that's one thing the story's telling us. There's so much about the Book of Abraham or the story of the binding of Isaac that is similar to the **Book of Job.** Which again is a **test.** And I think it is interesting **whenever the biblical story teller, whoever that is, wants to show something about human beings rising to almost superhuman qualities, God does not look good in that story.**

BILL MOYERS: Why?

DIANNE BERGANT: I wonder if that has to do with hero? In a hero story you can **only have one hero.** And if you've got two players, if you've got two

actors, one of them is human, and one of them is divine, then **in order to for the human to really look like a hero, it does not seem that God looks good.**

BURTON VISOTZKY: Although, Dianne —

DIANNE BERGANT: God looks —

BURTON VISOTZKY: Your point is very well taken. In this story, Abraham — the father who raises the knife doesn't look as good as God does. Who stops him. God plays quite the hero here.

DIANNE BERGANT: The second step.

BURTON VISOTZKY: Yeah. Certainly in the latter half of the story. Even though it's God who sets this story underway. When God says — “Don't touch the lad,” God's coming in. I mean, I was gonna say “deus ex machina”. But I mean it's — I mean it's — it's “deus”. God comes in and stops it. **God is very much the hero there. And it's an important reminder that Genesis is a book about God, not just about human beings.**

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: The real question here — when you were asking if God asked you to do something, you just do it —the — the prior question is — **how do you know it's God?**

NORMAN COHEN: Right.

DIANNE BERGANT: Um Hmm

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: And one of the few tests I have, being after all a human being and not being able to see anything from the point of view of God, I can't — I don't have any other point of view, is **whether the request or the command — it doesn't really matter at that point. Whether it makes sense in ethical terms, in — in terms of relationships and so on, and I think that this story fails that test in a way. I mean — what kind of a god would ask me to kill my son?**

BILL MOYERS: The story is very clear. The story teller is very clear. God is the actor —

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: I know —

BILL MOYERS: God is the speaker here. It's — it's taking it out of the story for us to say this. If it isn't God —

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: But imagine someone today, killing a child or abusing a child in this way and **then saying “God told me to do it”** —

BURTON VISOTZKY: People do it all the time — (OVERTALK)

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: What do we do with those people?

BURTON VISOTZKY: We lock them up.

P.K. MCCARY: We lock them up.(OVERTALK)

DIANNE BERGANT: But **the child is not killed here**. I mean, that’s where — you get back to the test. It’s a question of — okay, now jump and trust that I will catch you. That’s what this story is about. Jump and trust that I will catch you.

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: No — no. No. Throw Isaac and trust that I —

DIANNE BERGANT: Oh, okay, all right.

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: It’s a very different question.

DIANNE BERGANT: That’s right.

BURTON VISOTZKY: **Isaac may not be killed here. But Isaac is very profoundly abused here.**

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: Yes.

BURTON VISOTZKY: He is never the — I mean, he is an abused child. This is a child whose father has taken a knife to his throat. **Isaac is- impaired for the rest of his life**. Whether it’s — you know, some psychosomatic disease that he — I mean, he **can’t see** from — from virtually that point onward. He is blind to everything going on around him. He is **almost muted**. I mean, he — he’s just **such a disabled child**. I was thinking about this — this question. If this is a test of Abraham’s faith. And in the end the angel says, **“Yes, now I know you have faith.” But then there’s the next generation. What kind of faith must Isaac have as a result of this?**

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: Yes.

BURTON VISOTZKY: What — **what kind of relationship could Isaac have with God, let alone with his father?** ...

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: It's really remarkable how different Islamic understanding of this story is from what I'm hearing here right now. Of course in Islam there's a debate whether it was Isaac or Ishmael or Ismail who was really offered for sacrifice. But anyway, that aside, **Isaac is a prophet.** And as a prophet, he does not have the ordinary human consciousness that we have. And to read our own sentiments or reactions into how — what Isaac experienced, would be totally be totally misunderstand what the heart of the story is. **His surrender to the will of God is no less than that of Abraham.** And therefore he participates in this act which is perfection of the surrender to the will of God.

And was **not an abused child** as Burt just said. But I want to come back to another aspect of this that we've overlooked completely. One of the names of Abraham, in fact the most important title of Abraham in Arabic is **"Ah, Halil", the friend.** He's considered to be the supreme friend of God. The name "Halil" implies not only friendship, but many of the Sufis, the mystical interpreters of the Koran believe that it comes from another meaning of Arabic, meaning to be **"impregnated by the presence of Allah"**. And therefore to understand this relationship between Abraham and God, as being one of Abraham being impregnated by the presence of God. And therefore not only is there this question of **complete faith and surrender**, but as a surrender of a person who's **God's friend.** And therefore **ultimately he would know that God will always remain his friend.** This is an element that I think I should have to bring in at this moment.

NORMAN COHEN: **If religion leads to human suffering and human self-denial, then it's not a religion I wanna be part of.** I think ultimately that's the question here as we read the story. And I can read it on-two different levels. On one level it's Jamestown. It's anyone who is impregnated or—

BILL MOYERS: The Jonestown Massacres?

NORMAN COHEN: The Jonestown — I'm sorry —

NORMAN COHEN: — anyone who is — seems to be impregnated by God's spirit, and it leads to just **human misery** —

BILL MOYERS: The Inquisition —

NORMAN COHEN: And Inquisition — Holocaust — whatever. You can name it. But for the — for the average human being, as he or she reads this story, the notion — the metaphor of a sacrifice is **more subtle**. And it comes down to the **daily lives of human beings**. We can relate to it on the mega level. But on the more **subtle level of our sacrificing that which is precious to us, or those whom we love, there's a subtlety there I think that this story begs us to address. And if we don't, I think that ultimately religion falls flat in terms of what it means.**

BILL MOYERS: And that subtlety is?

NORMAN COHEN: And the subtlety is that **ultimately religion has to lead us to people. Has to lead us to relationship that ultimately will be self enhancing and leads to the betterment of humankind.**

[MISSING TEXT 29:00-30:32]

...“Standing on the Promises of God”? And that's often presented as a model of faith. And I often juxtapose that to my understanding of this story, because I think the story is **letting go of the promises of God. And that that is the radicality of the faith in the story.** Also it — it is ironic that we should even think of this story in terms of blind faith. It always bothers me that we put that adjective blind in front of faith, as a way of demeaning faith. And faith is not blind, **faith is sight. Faith is insight.**

P.K. MCCARY: Absolutely —

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: And in this particular story, of all stories **the Hebrew verb to see is running throughout the whole story.** So that in one of the climactic lines, “put on the mouth — in the mouth of Abraham” — translated, God will provide, the Hebrew verb is **God will see.** And then we have a wonderful way of translating — provide — back to the Latin — **video** — to see — to see before. And it is — it is quite the contrary of a blind faith here. But it is a radical faith.

BILL MOYERS: In what sense is it radical?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: The **willingness to give up even the promises of God.**

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: That's right.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Which is **a testing of God.**

BURTON VISOTZKY: You know, Phyllis, **I couldn't disagree more about this.** I mean, here's a man who has gone through an enormous disruption in his life. He's moved from his homeland, he's survived through one, I think, two famines, he's had all this trouble with his wife, with having children. After, and God promises him consistently offspring as many as the sands, as the sea, as the stars in the sky. And, **finally, he's got this son.** He had one son — got sent away. Now he's got this son and then God says, "Kill him." There's **something unconscionable about the way God toys with Abraham.** This is **something far beyond just a test of faith.**

DIANNE BERGANT: It's **not just God.** It's the way the **story teller** tells the story. I — I keep wanting — to go back to —

BURTON VISOTZKY: There's cruelty there, though.

DIANNE BERGANT: But from — **why does the story teller tell the story that way?** I mean, that — I think is the issue that constantly challenges me. There is a **struggle between the faith in God and the faith in the tradition that we had that helps us — you know, to talk about and understand God.** And this may sound like some kind of an esoteric struggle, but it's not. I think — I — **the way we understand God in our religious tradition changes.** It certainly has changed within the Roman Catholic church. And it's changed within the Christian church. I am sure that it has changed you know, within the other traditions that are represented here. Now **does that mean that God has changed and God's relationship to us?**— I mean, you know — the only way you could answer that question is to put yourselves into the position of God, and who can do that?

P.K. MCCARY: But it does sometimes like God has changed from the beginning when he brought Adam and Eve to this beautiful garden, to even now, that it's **almost been like he's been in training himself.**

DIANNE BERGANT: But the way you're talking about — it sounds like the story is an account of history as it is unfolded. And I don't understand the story that way.

BILL MOYERS: You understand it how?

DIANNE BERGANT: **I understand it as a religious story teller really struggling with not so much the past as the present.** Using traditions from the past or stories from the past to explain something that is very much a — a struggle within his or her or their life time, at the time of the telling of the

story, in a way very similar to what we are doing now. And what can the story tell us today? Not really about what happened in the past. But with this tragic, horrifying story, **how can it continue to speak to us as people of faith?**

NORMAN COHEN: You said it very, very well. **I think the story itself is shaped to speak to its time and its place.** We can then probe the issue of what is this message? When it was shaped in the eighth and ninth century BC.

DIANNE BERGANT: That's right.

NORMAN COHEN: Every generation of interpreters does the same thing as they **filter the prism of their own lives.** And **we're doing it here.** The issue for me, in terms of blind faith is a very important issue. Because I don't think it's a moment of blind faith. After all, this is the 11th chapter of Abraham's life. There are ten preceding chapters with nine preceding tests — tests according to the rabbinic tradition. Abraham comes with a relationship with God that's **built up over time.** And the question is — **who is he at this moment and what is God asking of him? There's a difference in this moment of testing that sets it apart from everything that preceded.** And that is, whereas every single test before there was a **guarantee that the promise and the future would be upheld.** **That life is supreme on some level.** Even with the banishment of Ishmael, the promise that he would survive and all of the rest. There's the **one seeming test. That says — life has lost its value, because Isaac's life will be lost and, in fact, the test is one that undermines the entire promise.** At — at the denouement of the story, when the — when the angel cries out twice "Abraham," the rabbis come in as if to imply there are **really two Abrahams here.** Up to this point, we've seen only one. The — the — the **person of faith** who was willing — thinks that he has to sacrifice everything to show his faith. But there is another Abraham. A second Abraham in the call. And that is **Abraham the father.** And Abraham the person of faith who wants to demonstrate who he is, needs so much to show that. As a matter of fact — at that point in the dialogue, when the angel cries out and says, "Abraham," Abraham's awakened to the reality perhaps that it's his son on the altar. As if to say "No, you can't sacrifice him." And then in that moment of dialogue, the angel — Abraham says "Okay, I won't sacrifice him. But let me put my **hands around his throat according to the rabbinic tradition,** to do something to him." And the angel then adds "AL TISHIACHYAHA" (PH). Don't touch the boy. Yes? So Abraham's — "All right, I won't strangle him. But let me just — a nick — a small nick **just to show who I am.**" And then the second statement from the angel — (UNINTEL PHRASE). "Don't do anything to him." As if to say, this is **the need on the part of Abraham. To what he thought demonstrated the**

ultimate faith in the divine. And I think he has to say no to himself ultimately as he hears that voice filter in through him.

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: I take — it a little differently. I think that this story — the only way that I can see religious meaning of, of great value in this story is in the — in the tendency that **mystics** have had in Islamic, Judaism and I'm sure in Christianity. To look at this story as you were saying, **from God's point of view**. In that sense, it — I can — I'm not a mystic. But I can see the sense. I can see the direction in which we make can sense of it. Because it then has to do with **that moment where you totally approach the mystery**. And where you — as a human being lose yourself or become impregnated by God. Whichever way. In that kind of sense, I can understand this story. However, when we try to start using it **ethically. I find this a very dangerous and very troubling story**. Because it does indeed talk about a **theological suspension of the ethical**. It does indeed say to a father, kill your son. It does indeed say to a believer, be ready for God to cause the death of another human being.

Maybe the problem is that this is one of the those stories that is not meant to be used religious — religiously this way.

BILL MOYERS: Well, it — but — but if you take it as a religious story, as I do. It's saying something that modern American Christians in particular are loathe to say. And that is that in — that **the love and devotion to God bring with it terror and trauma**. And that's something that happy America does not want to face. Any of you read it that way?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: That's right. **The cruelty of God is something from which the Bible does not flinch**. Whether you look at it in Genesis or Job or Jonah — The Bible struggles with that-

BILL MOYERS: What — what conclusion do you draw from that?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: That **I do not think that it is a good idea, as you suggest — as you said, Francisco, to make this an ethical story**. And that means to make it a **should** story. This is the way we should be and this is the way we should behave. And this is the way God should do. But it is very, very much alive as a **descriptive story. This is the human predicament. And God is perceived in these ways. And there is a mystery in the inscrutability about God that has — has in it a dimension of terror which we — we can only tremble before**.

BILL MOYERS: Is Holocaust, is suffering, is loss, is pain — are all of these at the heart of religion and revelation?

DIANNE BERGANT: —the way we understand it.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: The heart of human existence.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: At the heart of human existence.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: Yeah. At **the heart of human existence, you cannot exist in this world, as it is — without these tragedies.** And **what religion does is try to make sense of it. But this making sense of it is not always on a single level.** And even this very profound story should not be a should story on the level of external ethics. But it could be a should story on the level of the mystical understanding of it. In which Isaac or Ishmael are really:- our carnal soul. Are passionate souls. There are thousands of poems in Arabic and Persian on this. And **in order for us to prove, first of all, our perfect faith in God, and to really be a friend of God, intimacy with God, we must be able to sacrifice our passionate soul. Once he does that, then God will always give you something much better. He will not really kill you. He will transform the soul. He will transform your soul into that which is luminous. And full of charity and love and close to God.**

DIANNE BERGANT: If you read the story as a believer — a believer, without the specifics of the story, a believer believing he is following God's will. Where, as we all, as committed people, you know, would hope that we live such. And yet something happens in — in our society and in life as happened there, where **he realized what I thought was God's will is not God's will. I mean, it — our theology shifts.** And as I think about what I thought was God's will for me, being faithful to what I thought is God's will, I discover, as I mature and as my religious tradition matures, we **change.** God does not want that. God does not want child sacrifice. And we know Israel was involved in child sacrifice. **So what you have here is a story moving from child sacrifice to substitutionary sacrifice.** Now I have to admit, I don't think that's bad. I don't like the details of the story, but it is a story showing we move from child sacrifice to substitutionary sacrifice.

BILL MOYERS: Meaning?

DIANNE BERGANT: You don't sacrifice your child. You sacrifice an animal in place of the child. We don't sacrifice animals anymore. We do something else. Have we given up sacrifice? I — I think not.

BILL MOYERS: What is sacrifice then? (BOTH TALKING AT ONCE, UNCLEAR)

DIANNE BERGANT: Well, that's it. I mean, I think that in the lives of all believers, it's not — it's not merely what God wants or what does — God does not want. It's a **question of a conflict of values and it is as our own moral sense and ethical sense is developed that we realize what I thought was God's will, or what I thought was good really, I have new insight now, and that's not the way we should we should go.** That's not the kind of decision that I should make.

BILL MOYERS: So **we obey God with what light we have,** as Abraham did, not always understanding why we do so.

DIANNE BERGANT: I would say yes, but I- again, I don't want to get Abraham off the hook in this story. But I would say yes.

NORMAN COHEN: The only —

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: could we come back to attachment, detachment, and non-attachment. Because it has always tantalized people that at the end of the story, **Isaac does not return with Abraham. Abraham returns alone, and that has led, as you know better than I, to all kinds of rabbinic interpretations of what happened then to Isaac.** Was he, in fact, sacrificed? I think this is a way of saying to us, Isaac, if you — if Abraham is willing to sacrifice the child, that does not give Abraham a license then to reattach himself to that child.
(AGREEING COMMENTS)

NORMAN COHEN: Yeah, but he — but —

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: But it establishes a new relationship between Abraham and that child, as well as between Abraham and God.

BILL MOYERS: **Where is Sarah? Why is Sarah missing from this story?** Up until now in the beginning of this whole saga of "Genesis" Sarah is as central to the plot as Abraham is, and suddenly she's gone.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Some years ago when I read this story, reread the story — an idea began to work its way into my consciousness. The story begins, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, the one you love." And at first I said, "Well, **Isaac is not the only son.**" Now I know there are explanations to say, "Well, Ishmael's been banished, and so Isaac re — is the only remaining son and so forth. But Isaac was not the only remaining son. Ishmael is still there. I — I said, "What evidence do we have that Abraham really loved Isaac that

much?” And I went back and looked at the chapters that precede this. And the evidence is not there that — that Abraham had such an attachment to Isaac. In fact, the evidence is that he had the attachment to Ishmael.

BURTON VISOTZKY: Right, that’s right.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Not to Isaac. (AGREEING COMMENTS)

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: So then I asked myself, **who had the attachment to Isaac? And the answer is very clear. It was Sarah. And the preceding this story, it is Sarah who says, “My son, Isaac.” Abraham never says, “My son, Isaac.”** But he says his son, Ishmael. And when Sarah said to Abraham, “I want to get rid of this child”, Abraham didn’t want to cast Ishmael out. And God sided with Sarah, and said, “Do what Sarah tells you.” **So Sarah becomes to me the pivot in the whole thing. Now is there some way we can appropriate the biblical text for the healing of Sarah?**

BILL MOYERS: Wait, I — I — healed of what?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: **Healed of her attachment to Isaac which led her to be a tyrannical and malicious woman.** And if Sarah were the chief character in this story, the chief human character, rather than Abraham, Sarah would be healed of her attachment to Isaac. And by being healed of her attachment —

BILL MOYERS: How — how would she have been healed?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: The same way Isa — Abraham is healed.

BILL MOYERS: By sacrificing —

BURTON VISOTZKY: By the choice (UNINTEL) — (ALL TALKING AT ONCE, UNCLEAR)

BILL MOYERS: Offering to sacrifice?

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: By — by offering to sacrifice. And God would say, “Now I know that you fear God.” And she would be healed of the attachment to Isaac. And it’s not simply that we decide from outside we’re going to appropriate that way. But **the story gives us that permission to do so by saying from the beginning, Sarah is the one who had the attachment to Isaac, not Abraham.**

NORMAN COHEN: Perhaps we do hear Sarah's voice. Perhaps it is Sarah's death that ultimately is Sarah's song. When Sarah dies is, in some sense, almost like the thorn bird — in that one moment of agony at the end, a thorn bird sings its song and the whole world hears. When she dies — for me at least what I hear Sarah saying is if this God of Abraham is a God that means human misery, the death of Isaac, I want to opt out. I can't live in a world in which God is defined as a God who will lead the human suffering.

BILL MOYERS: Maybe she's the one who says, "Enough, you ask too much."

NORMAN COHEN: That's exactly right. That's — that's exactly right. And her death is a commentary in terms of the sense of the — the sense of powerlessness that we feel in the face of a God who will do this to in the world.

BURTON VISOTZKY: I think, Phyllis, your reading is very, very on the mark. She recognizes her own attachment to Isaac and recognizes that it is in disservice to her relationship to God. So she too is ready to sacrifice her son in favor of showing her devotion to God. I mean, it makes it all the worse for Isaac in those years of therapy that follow. But —

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Well, the — one little — one more note. At the end of the story about Isaac getting a wife, Rebekah, we have those words, "And Isaac was comforted with Rebekah for the death of his mother, Sarah." Which is another note talking about the attachment of mother and son.

BILL MOYERS: I wanna come back to this question of faith. How is it possible for Isaac to have faith after this experience on that mountain?

NORMAN COHEN: If we — if we look at — through the eyes of the cosmology which Hossein has described, then there's an Isaac in every family and there's an Isaac that we know. It might be our own child, it might be our own spouse —

BILL MOYERS: What do you mean? You've gotta explain this to me.

NORMAN COHEN: Let me explain it. We have a son who's 19 years old. At 15 he was diagnosed with lymphocytic leukemia. I will remember as long as I live the first conversation I had with him when I was in the pediatric oncology ward at the Yale University Hospital after arriving there after his testing. And we were sitting on his bed, and he said, "Daddy, tell me. They tell me that there's an 80% cure rate for lymphocytic leukemia in children my age. But what happens if I'm in the other 20%?"

And here was with this child faced with the lack of coherence about the world — what the world is all about. Whatever faith he had was being tested in terms of the rationality of the world. He had a sense of God's presence, and he talked about his belief in God. But how could God do this to him? But the question is, how does Elon survive? Where does he find the strength to know that there is life after that conversation, that somehow he can summon that strength to know that the world is not all bad, but there are forces for good and for wholeness that are in him and that can be brought to the surface? I think there's an Isaac in every family we know, and it could be our own selves having gone through that trauma?

BILL MOYERS: And faith is the issue of what, then?

NORMAN COHEN: There — I think faith is the issue of — coming to the realization that there's a force for goodness that works in the world and through us that ultimately can be drawn upon so that we can continue living even faced with the greatest despair in it, the greatest incoherence.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: I have problems with the phrase, "to have faith." "Faith is not a possession and it bothers me — to ask, "Does Isaac have faith?" or "Does Abraham have faith?" Faith is a mode of being in the world that is — the realization that God provides. The story itself has an unresolved tension or a paradox between the God who tests and the God who provides. It keeps both of those things in there and that's what we've been struggling with in this whole conversation. We want it this way or that way and the story will not allow us to do that.

FRANCISCO GARCIA-TRETO: I want to be — I want to be even more — more proactive in my definition of faith than that though. I think that — that — that faith is a commitment you make, it's more than a realization because sometimes it's hard to realize that God provides. It's a commitment you make. And I love the Jewish concept of "TIKKUN", correcting, perfecting, improving, fixing up this imperfect world that we live in. In that process, we become human. In that process, we become our best. And I think in that process, we're faithful to God. I — I think that's the only way I can look at it.

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR: There's a very interesting fact that has to be pointed out and that is that of all the civilizations of the world, there's none in which as many people have left religion because they see evil in the world as in Western civilization. And that in the last few centuries, starting in the Middle Ages or Early Middle Ages. And one of the main reason for that is that all traditional civilizations, all traditional religions remember the Word of Christ

that only God, only my Father in heaven is good. Therefore, this world not being God cannot be good. So, **the imperfection of the world was accepted as part of human existence.** The 18th and 19th century philosophy, going back to the — encyclopedias and then all of this idea of progress with Hegel and Marx in the 19th century that converted this idea — **for people to think that this world is for happiness, for — it is to be good and, therefore if God does not make it good, there's something wrong with God rather than with the nature of the world.**

NORMAN COHEN: Just to pick up on your perspective from an Islamic point of view and add a Jewish nuance to it. If we think that that source of redemption is not in this world, but it's in the world to come, from a Jewish point of view, I — I think we should **focus on the ram**, because the Rabbis as they talk about the ram standing upon that mountain reach out to us and say that **that ram has been there, according to Rabbinic tradition, from the end of the Sixth Day of Creation, just waiting for Abraham to come by in order to grasp that ram and save Isaac's life.**

The metaphor is very powerful as if to say **the source of redemption, the way to s — to feel as though we can move ahead and — and maintain our faith is there, if only we can see it. And what does Abraham have to do? He has to raise his eyes from the mundane and see the — ram.** He has to be able to go and **grasp the ram and pull it towards him.** In fact, according to rabbinic tradition —since the text says, (HEBREW) “A ram,” but the word “Ahar” in Hebrew means “behind.” **The ram was behind him. And what did the ram have to do? The ram had to stick out his hoof and grab hold of Abraham's garment to pull Abraham, to motion Abraham. “I'm here just waiting for you to open your eyes, if only you could see me.”**

BILL MOYERS: — But, Norman, even that story presupposes that this is a God, that the nature of God requires something to suffer for God to be satisfied.

NORMAN COHEN: And again, from my perspective, I'd — you know, I don't read the story as God wanting the human beings to suffer. It's **Abraham that has to give up his own ego so that ultimately he can come to his higher self that God wants.**

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: Speaking of his ego, there's that wonderful haunting poem by Wilfred Owen, the British poet who was killed himself on the battlefields of World War I. And he writes a — poem using this story as a

metaphor for what is going on. And in the poem, God says to Abraham sacrifice — don't sacrifice the son, sacrifice the ram of pride.

NORMAN COHEN: Yes —

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: And then the poem says, "The old man would not so, but slew his son and half the seed of Europe, one by one."