

Dear friends,

Why is the story of Abraham and Isaac in the Bible? The answer occurred to me last week after having thought about the question from time to time over a period of years. Given that there are many interpretations, from literal to mythical, this question could be answered at least a few different ways, and you could apply the reasoning herein to a number of different stories from the Bible. While the subject, and this letter in general, are Bible based, which might repel some people, I hope that this might appeal in an easy, open way to a general sense of curiosity in terms of how people might think and talk about the Bible.

For anyone not already familiar, Abraham was the founder of Judaism, and he's ultimately credited by some as the original progenitor of both Christianity and Islam as well. While the earlier creation characters in Genesis, Adam and Noah, for example, are aware of God, Abraham is the first to carry on a running dialogue with him, even questioning his retribution. In return for Abraham's obedience, God promises that his progeny will be many, and that they will be given the land of the Canaan, from the great river of Egypt to the Euphrates in Mesopotamia in what is modern-day Iraq.

A relevant element of the buildup to the story of Abraham and Isaac is Abraham's relationship with his wife Sarah, who was with him from the beginning of his story, and Abraham's desire to have a child with her. According to Genesis, God promises Abraham that they will conceive a son who will be called Isaac and through whom God's covenant with Abraham will be established even though Abraham is already 99 and Sarah 90 years old. It is necessary to understand here that we have to exercise some latitude when it comes to the ages of people in the Bible, where people in the pre-history are often written to have lived for many hundreds of years. Abraham, who doubts himself capable of having children at all, goes on to father a great number of other children after Isaac through at least one other wife and a number of concubines. But it is clearly established in the story that Abraham and Sarah are both very old and Sarah is beyond child-bearing years, and the birth of Isaac is as great a gift/miracle as either of them could hope for.

The relevant part of the story is the following: God calls to Abraham and commands him to take Isaac up onto the mountain and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the altar. In total obedience Abraham obeys, leading his young son into the mountains. He builds the altar and prepares to cut his throat. As he is about to kill Isaac, an angel of the Lord appears and stays his hand, stopping him in the act of delivering the killing stroke God demanded, and Abraham is allowed to sacrifice a sheep on the altar instead.

This story caused me consternation in my youth, and reading it again some years ago it still didn't sit particularly well. It makes perfect sense from Abraham's perspective. His devotion is such that he would obediently follow God's command even to the point of sacrificing his most beloved son to appease God. But why would God ask him to do such a thing? The Bible gives no suggestion that Isaac was anything more or less than an innocent child. Why would God want Abraham to believe, even for a moment, that he would ask his servant to make such a sacrifice, to do what is an act of evil, simply to appease him? Does God not already know the extent of Abraham's faith? Is God so vain as to expect that his servants should make such a show of devotion? The whole story makes God seem unnecessarily cruel at best and petty at worst. Are we supposed to assume that this is a reflection of God that is accurate in some way, but that if God commands it then it is good because God's motives are inscrutable, and we as men are not intended to understand them? This is the conclusion that some draw.

Yet the story is moving, and in the grander scheme of the Bible it seems to belong. So, as this letter begins, why is it in the Bible? On one extreme is the literal interpretation. God did in fact tell Abraham directly to kill his child to test Abraham's faith, and we're to accept that if God commands us to do something that appears evil to us, like murdering our children, that we should do it without question and possibly hope that God will stay our hands at the last second. The other extreme is the completely faithless one. This is just a story that someone made up, and since it depicts a person killing a child, we should simply reject it.

The reality I've come to realize, however, is more complex than these extreme positions. It requires that we consider the larger historical perspective, both in the Bible and in the other histories we've written and recorded, and it requires us to apply the ability to reason God has ultimately given us.

The Old Testament in the Bible is a history of a people that develops among and distinguishes itself from other peoples. It is a story of tribes and families uniting into a nation. They undergo a number of trials, tests and tribulations, doing evil to others as well as good, and having acts of evil as well as good perpetrated upon them. They go through a series of unifications and divisions, fighting other nations and each other, until the story eventually ends with the people again more-or-less united and rebuilding Jerusalem prior to Roman occupation, where the New Testament begins.

Unlike most histories, however, within this one is intertwined the evolution of a faith from its earliest origins, and the story of Abraham and Isaac is at the core of this evolution. To understand the story of Abraham and Isaac, one must understand that it is written as a third person account, passed down by word of mouth for generations and eventually written down, memorialized in the Bible, with the intention that the people who hear the story have understanding going forward. The world of the ancient Hebrews was not a static world, as the Bible makes clear, and the other peoples in it have their own religions and their own oral histories. Part of the mission of the early Hebrew priests was to distinguish their understanding of God by remembering and examining the past and applying that understanding to the present and future so that their people would feel a sense of cohesion by way of faith, through belief in God. In so doing, they examine the actions of past leaders and other individuals constantly through the lens of faith, always noting how this king or that obeyed or rejected the laws of God and their other laws and ordinances. Even with their strict adherence to religious law and custom, it is a constant struggle for them to keep people from turning away and worshiping idols and adopting the customs of other peoples. Maintaining their identity as a people while simultaneously evolving and refining their faith and their understanding of God to the point that the faith remains strong and the record of it still exists today was a remarkable accomplishment, given particularly the odds against them, being relatively small in number and surrounded on three sides by typically more sophisticated nations.

Among the gods of other nations mentioned in the Bible, and often worshiped by the Hebrews themselves, are Baal, a god of fertility and rain, important in a land where drought was a common catastrophe, Dagon, a fish-man/sea god worshiped by Philistines on one side and the Ninevites on the other, geographically, and Moloch, a malevolent sun god. While the Bible is filled with stories of the Hebrew priests admonishing their people for worshiping these idols, a more sinister element of this worship rarely put into print in the Bible is human sacrifice. Research reveals that modern Biblical scholars widely accept that human sacrifice as an appeasement was a common part of the worship of all three of these and other gods, and those committing this atrocity would have demonstrated that their willingness to sacrifice their own people makes their faith of the highest intensity.

Remembering a world of much harsher realities than many of us typically experience today it becomes more conceivable how such thinking that seems so repugnant to us now might have had an appeal to people of that time. And this element of human nature is supported by other non-Biblical historical examples. Outside of the Bible there are numerous examples of human sacrifice to appease the gods, from the druids of the Celts to the Polynesian island religions to some native American cultures. It would present difficulties for the people of Israel confronted by this reality all the way back to the days of Abraham to make the argument that their faith was greater and that their God was true. One could argue that it could have been said that God simply told Abraham that human sacrifice was forbidden, but without the narrative, and there are memorable narratives behind so much of Biblical law, it would not have stuck.

And that is why the story of Abraham and Isaac is memorialized in the Bible, in the beginning. It was necessary for the people to see demonstrated in a story that Abraham's faith was greater than the faiths of others around them. In a world where priests are sacrificing their own people, or other people, to appease their gods, Abraham is unquestionably willing to sacrifice his own beloved son, who was miraculously granted to he and his wife well into old age, simply because God asked him to do so. And God stays Abraham's hand, the angel telling him that he may instead sacrifice a sheep. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and God showing him mercy, demonstrates by extension the depth of the faith of those who follow his religion as well as their willingness to serve God. It's symbolically more powerful than simply saying, "God doesn't want human sacrifice," and yet the understanding of that is well established.

Maybe some of you reading this have already come to a similar conclusion, but I've never heard it put that way. Is the story true? Given the understanding that evolves later in the Bible, the answer can only be no. God would never instruct us to do evil. If someone asks you if you would murder your child simply to appease God if he commanded it, or to demonstrate your faith, they're only tempting you. The question itself is ludicrous because it's something God would never do. And God has not changed. We have changed. Our understanding has evolved, and in so doing, our faith in God's will for us can be stronger than before. It doesn't make the story of Abraham and Isaac any less divinely inspired. It remains an integral and necessary part of the greater Biblical narrative.

This understanding is important, paramount really, because when confronted with a changing world and changing conditions for survival, situations can arise where priests and others may try to convince us to do evil in the name of God. There are situations even now, happening this very day, where some exhort the faithful to harm others who are ultimately innocent of wrongdoing in the name of God, or as an extension of God's law or God's will. It happens in many faiths, and it is condoned and even instructed by the leaders of some more than others. But they are wrong, their understanding is flawed or conceived by evil intent, and their teaching is false. Bible thumping priests have used such false teaching to convince followers that God condones slavery and genocide, but God does not. God is neither cruel nor petty. If you want to serve God, you can best do so by loving your neighbor as yourself and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Anyone who suggests in the name of God that you should do otherwise is misleading you.

So it is.  
Bob Young