

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 22 & 23 – The Test

OUTLINE OF THE ABRAHAM STORY – Genesis 12-25

- Genesis 12: 1–9 God calls and blesses Abram and he moves west into Canaan.
Genesis 12: 10–20 Abraham risks his blessing in Egypt by giving up Sarai.
Genesis 13: 1–18 Abraham and Lot divide their territory and Abraham receives Palestine.
Genesis 14: 1–24 Abraham shows himself a hero and blessed in warfare.
Genesis 15: 1–21 God renews promises and makes a covenant with Abraham, but after declaring a curse.
Genesis 16: 1–16 Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael.
Genesis 17: 1–27 God renews his covenant and promise of a son, but commands Abraham to take on the sign of circumcision.
Genesis 18: 1–15 God renews his promise to give a son to Sarah and Abraham.
Genesis 18: 16–33 Abraham shows his blessing by interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah.
Genesis 19: 1–38 Lot proves to be the only faithful person in Sodom; it is destroyed.
Genesis 20: 1–18 Abraham risks the blessing to Sarah with Abimelech, the king of Gerar.
Genesis 21: 1–21 God gives the blessing of a son, Isaac, and sends Ishmael away.
Genesis 21: 22–34 Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech and his people.
Genesis 22: 1–24 Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God.
Genesis 23: 1–20 Abraham lays claim to possession of the land by buying the cave of Machpelah
Genesis 24: 1–67 Abraham arranges a wife for Isaac to continue the blessing.
Genesis 25: 1–18 Abraham’s death and burial; Ishmael’s descendants; the blessing passes to Isaac.

THE TESTING OF ABRAHAM

How does God test Abraham throughout his story in Genesis?

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| Challenge: Leave your homeland for a new land | Abraham: Okay. (Genesis 12:1-4) |
| Challenge: Famine in the new land | Abraham: I am going to Egypt |
| Challenge: Safety concerns in Egypt | Abraham: “She’s my sister” |
| Challenge: This town’s not big enough for the two of us | Abraham: “Lot, choose where you want to live” |
| Challenge: Sarai is childless | Abraham: Hello Hagar! Hello Ishmael! |
| Challenge: Sarai upset with Hagar | Abraham: Do with them as you please |
| Challenge: Circumcision as a sign of the covenant | Abraham: Snip, Snip |
| Challenge: God appears | Abraham: Have some food |
| Challenge: Abraham moves to Gerar | Abraham: “She’s my sister” |
| Challenge: Sarah “Send them away”; God: trust me | Abraham: Okay, go away |
| Challenge: Well of water seized | Abraham: Bribes Abimelech |
| Challenge: Sacrifice your son | Abraham: “Isaac, carry this up the mountain.” |

CHAPTER 22 – THE COMMAND TO SACRIFICE ISAAC

Finally, we come to the story where God tells Abraham to go to Mount Moriah and sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Where is Mount Moriah? It’s the rocky hill in Jerusalem on which Solomon built the temple (2 Chronicles 3:1). It is the location where David purchased a threshing floor and built an altar to the Lord (see 2 Samuel 24:18-25). The importance of this location can’t be emphasized enough. It all starts here with the “almost” sacrifice of Isaac.

So, God is testing Abraham. That’s clear from the first verse. And unlike Adam in the garden, Abraham, the new Adam, is obedient. Abraham makes all the necessary preparations and is about to plunge his knife into his only son, when an angel tells him, at the last second, not to go through with it. Abraham passes the test.

This is a disturbing story. First, Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac. Second, why this as a test? Couldn't God think of something else? We see elsewhere that God hates child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). So why test Abraham in this way?

Again, we need to look at this story from the point of view of later Israelites. They were against child sacrifice. That's something the pagan gods tell their people to do. But Israel's God still laid some claim on the first born (see Exodus 13:1, 11-13). The first born belongs to God (which is a theme we will see again and again). If the firstborn is an animal, you "give it over" to God, which means you sacrifice it. A donkey, however, you can "redeem" with a lamb, that is, a lamb can take the place of a donkey (because donkeys are unclean animals and were needed to haul things).

Firstborn humans are redeemed also. In Numbers 8:17, we see another way firstborn humans are redeemed: the tribe of Levi is a stand-in for the firstborn of Israel. God takes that tribe "for himself," not by killing it but by separating it from the other tribes to run the sacrificial system in the tabernacle (and later the Temple). The point is that the Israelite firstborn *still belongs to God*. God just decides not to go through with it and accepts a substitute.



The story of the binding of Isaac makes more sense with that in the background. It is a story about whether God would exercise God's right over the firstborn, whether God would actually go through with it and say, "No substitute." Abraham believed that God would not go through with it, and he says in verse 8, that God would replace his son with a lamb—exactly in keeping with Exodus 13 and Numbers 8.

And so, we see that Israel is, was and always will be God's firstborn son (Exodus 4:22) and is, was, and always will be safe in God's hands—no matter how dire the circumstances.

The Israelites that shaped this story into its final form, those living in the wake of the numbing national tragedy of the Babylonian Exile (586-539 BCE), were asking questions of trust in God's goodness and faithfulness to them. They, too, were confronted with the choice of radical trust that God would intervene for them as he had for Isaac and deliver them from dire circumstances. And he did: Israel is, was, and always will be God's son (Exodus 4:22), as was Isaac to Abraham.

We begin the transition from Abraham to Isaac in Genesis 23, with the death of Sarah at the age of 127. Abraham dies in chapter 25 at the ripe old age of 175. But in between those chapters, Abraham makes his senior household servant swear that he will travel back to his homeland to get a wife for his son Isaac, rather than pick one from the hated Canaanites, cursed by God since the days of the flood.

Genesis will now continue with a few episodes on Isaac, including the death of his mother and father, before moving quickly to Abraham's grandson, Jacob, the true father of the Israelites.

Genesis 22:1–24 (NRSV)

¹ After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." ⁶ Abraham

took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"⁸ Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill 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 lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.¹⁴ So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."¹⁵ The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven,¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies,¹⁸ and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.²⁰ Now after these things it was told Abraham, "Milcah also has borne children, to your brother Nahor:²¹ Uz the firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram,²² Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel."²³ Bethuel became the father of Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother.²⁴ Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

SOURCE THEORY – Mainly from the E-source, followed by something from the J-source, with an insertion from the redactor who combined the two. E Source = **bold**; J Source = normal; RJE Source = **bold italicized**.

HERE I AM – When God calls out to Abraham, Abraham responds "Here I am." This is a response we will hear again and again throughout scripture. Like Noah, Abraham was willing and ready to answer God's call immediately. This is the ideal response to God. The difficulty of this final test lay not only in Abraham's love for his son Isaac, but also in the promises God had given Abraham in connection with him.

GO – The command "go" or "get going" which previously occurred only in Genesis 12:1, the initial divine command to Abraham, connects this story to the very beginning of Abraham's dealings with God. Notice the similarities between what was said there and what is said here.

Genesis 12:1 (NRSV) – ¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Genesis 22:2 (NRSV) – ² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."

THE LAND OF MORIAH – How long was the journey to Mount Moriah? Probably about three days. This links back to the oaks of Moreh from Genesis 12 creating an inclusion between Genesis 12 and 22. Also Mount Moriah has clear hyperlinks forward to the temple mount on which David will later establish the site for the temple.

In Genesis 22:14, the "Mountain of Yahweh" is used only elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to refer to Mount Zion, the temple mount in Jerusalem (see Isaiah 2:4, 30:29; Micah 4:2, and Psalm 24:3). Mount Moriah appears only one more time in the Hebrew Bible, as the location where the events of David's great test took place in 2 Samuel 24:18-21, where David built an altar to the Lord so that "a plague may be held back from the people."

2 Chronicles 3:1 “And Solomon began to build the house of Yahweh in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where Yahweh had appeared to his father David, which he established at the place of David on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.”

YOUR SON, YOUR FAVORED ONE, ISAAC, WHOM YOU LOVE – Isaac is Abraham’s most treasured. What about Ishmael? Ishmael is also blessed by God due to being Abraham’s son. Isaac, the child of laughter, will he become the child of sadness?

PICKED UP THE KNIFE – The text really slows down in verse 10. This is masked in some English translations (as in NJPS that we are using here), where the first part of the sentence is missing in translation altogether: וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶת־יָדוֹ אֶבְרָהָם (va-yishlach Avraham et yado), literally something like “and Abraham sent out his hand.” Only after this does the text continue וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכֶלֶת לְשַׂחֵט אֶת־בְּנוֹ (va-yikach et ha-maachelet lishchot et beno), which means “and he picked up the knife to slay his son.”

AN ANGEL OF THE LORD – The angel speaks from the first person as if it is God (as we see at the end of the speech). “since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.” (Gen 22:12).

RAM – The substitution of a male sheep for the firstborn son has parallels in the ancient Near East and foreshadows the story of the paschal lamb (Exodus 12:1-42) in both its temporary and ultimate fulfillments. Notice the footnotes on verse 14. יהוה יִרְאֶה – “the LORD will provide.” The יִרְאֶה part comes from the Hebrew verb רָאָה, which means “to see, to perceive, to look.” This same root is used to describe someone who has an ability to see things others cannot, a רֹאֶה “seer” or “prophet.” So, the phrase can be translated more literally to say “the LORD will (fore)see” instead of the usual “The LORD will provide.” The comparison of “providing” vs. “seeing,” although not identical, is actually not dissimilar. In Genesis 22, this verb is used several times where God is being described as “one who will see to it” or “one who will look out for his interest.” When God sees God’s people in need, God acts to provide for them, all that is needed. There may also be a play on words here, as the “Messenger of the LORD” in a sense saw that Abraham feared God. God יִרְאֶה אֱלֹהִים. The word יִרְאֶה means “feared,” but the similar-sounding word יִרְאֶה used in יהוה יִרְאֶה means “sees.”

A FURTHER PROMISE – The second angelic address conveys the Lord’s final blessing on Abraham, using language similar to previous blessings (Genesis 12:3; 13:16; 15:5). However, this time the earlier promises are restated as a consequence of Abraham’s obedience to the voice of God. A further promise is added: “Your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies.”

BEER-SHEBA – בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע – The major city in the northern Negev desert, in the territory of the tribe of Simeon (Josh. 19:2). The Beer-sheba plain with its ample winter pasturage is well suited for seminomadic living; thus it served as the principal homestead of Israel’s ancestors. A biblical tradition explains the derivation of the name Beer-sheba. Abraham and Abimelech, king of Gerar, settled their dispute over a well (Heb. בְּאֵר) by concluding a treaty “sworn” (Heb. נִשְׁבָּעוּ) ceremoniously with an offering of “seven” (Heb. שֶׁבַע) ewes; the site was thereafter named Beer-sheba, i.e., “the well of swearing seven” (Gen. 21:22–32). A generation later, renewed contention between the shepherds of Isaac and Abimelech was resolved by another oath at Beer-sheba (Genesis 26:26–33).

A FOOTNOTE FROM DR. RICHARD FRIEDMAN: It is possible that in the original old Elohist story, Abraham actually carries out the sacrifice of Isaac. The evidence that vs. 11-14, in which the sacrifice is stopped, were added by the RJE is as follows:

- 1) This is an E text, referring to God as Elohim in narration three times (vs. 1, 3, 9), but suddenly, as Abraham takes the knife in his hand, the text switches to an angel of YHWH.
- 2) Verses 11-15, which describe the angel’s instructions to Abraham not to sacrifice his son after all, are enclosed in a resumptive repetition in which the angels calls out two times.
- 3) Following this resumptive repetition, the angel (or God) says, “because you *did* this thing and *didn’t* withhold your son.”

- 4) The story concludes, “And Abraham went back to his boys.” Isaac is not mentioned—even though Abraham had explicitly told the boys, “We’ll come back to you.”
- 5) Isaac never again appears in the E source after this.
- 6) In the E story of a revelation at Mount Horeb in Exodus 24, there is a chain of eighteen parallels of language with this story of Isaac, but not one of those parallels comes solely from these verses (11-15).
- 7) There is a group of Midrashic sources that say that Isaac was in fact sacrificed.

In light of these factors, it is possible that in the E story, Abraham sacrifices Isaac, but that later this idea of a human sacrifice was repugnant, and so the Redactor who combined the J and E sources after the fall of the Northern Kingdom added the lines in which Isaac is spared and a ram is substituted. It is not possible to say how the original E version accounted for the introduction of Jacob. Notably, though, it is in E (in the very next passage that is traced to E) that Abraham later has another wife, Keturah, and has more children.

Genesis 23:1–20 (NRSV)

¹ Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah’s life. ² And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. ³ Abraham rose up from beside his dead, and said to the Hittites, ⁴ “I am a stranger and an alien residing among you; give me property among you for a burying place, so that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” ⁵ The Hittites answered Abraham, ⁶ “Hear us, my lord; you are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places; none of us will withhold from you any burial ground for burying your dead.” ⁷ Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. ⁸ He said to them, “If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me, and entreat for me Ephron son of Zohar, ⁹ so that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as a possession for a burying place.” ¹⁰ Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites; and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, ¹¹ “No, my lord, hear me; I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it; in the presence of my people I give it to you; bury your dead.” ¹² Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. ¹³ He said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, “If you only will listen to me! I will give the price of the field; accept it from me, so that I may bury my dead there.” ¹⁴ Ephron answered Abraham, ¹⁵ “My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver—what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.” ¹⁶ Abraham agreed with Ephron; and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants. ¹⁷ So the field of Ephron in Machpelah, which was to the east of Mamre, the field with the cave that was in it and all the trees that were in the field, throughout its whole area, passed ¹⁸ to Abraham as a possession in the presence of the Hittites, in the presence of all who went in at the gate of his city. ¹⁹ After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah facing Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. ²⁰ The field and the cave that is in it passed from the Hittites into Abraham’s possession as a burying place.

Source Theory: All of chapter 23 is from the Priestly Source

KIRIATH-ARBA – The place where Sarah died (Hebron). It is in the hill district of Judah (see Joshua 15:54) and is a city of refuge (a Levitical city). The name means “city of four” or “four-fold city,” possibly because there was a cluster of four cities in the area of Hebron (Aner, Eshcol, Mamre, and Hebron). This is why it is also identified as Hebron as well as Mamre. See Joshua 15:13, 21:11. Deut 9:2. Arba is the father of Anak. Anak is a descendant of the Anakites who came from the Nephilim.

HITTITES – A pervasive tribe among the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan (see Genesis 10:15; 15:20; Exodus 23:28). We have this phrase in Genesis 23 “sons [or children] of Heth.” Heth is listed in Genesis 10:15 and the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 1:13 as one of the sons of Canaan, along with other ethnic groups who consistently occur with the Hittites as peoples of Canaan. We will see the phrase “daughters of Heth,”

translated as “Hittite women” twice in Genesis 27:46, describing the native women from whom Rebekah fears Jacob will take a wife. We will see the Hittites appear again in the time of David with Ahimelech and Uriah.

Ahimelech was the great grandson of Eli. Eli was a judge of Israel and the priest of Shiloh where the ark was kept during the period of the judges. Ahimelech was in charge of the priests at Nob located North of Jerusalem; a part of the religious establishment of Saul’s kingdom. He was the one to whom David would go seeking food and a weapon; the sacred bread and sword of Goliath.

Uriah (whose name means “YHWH is light [or fire]”) belong to David’s elite group of warriors known as “the Thirty” (see 2 Samuel 23:39; 1 Chronicles 11:41. He was also the husband of Bathsheba, with whom David committed adultery while Uriah was on the battlefield (2 Samuel 11:2-21). He gets mentioned in the summary of David’s career that appears in 1 Kings 15:5: “David did what was right in the sight of the LORD, and did not turn aside from anything that (the LORD) commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.”

MACHPELAH – There is a cave in the field of Machpelah. Abraham purchased the site from Ephron the Hittite for four hundred shekels of silver. The purchase is recorded in great detail in Genesis 23, emphasizing that the burial place was the only land that the patriarchs owned in Canaan. According to biblical tradition, the field with its cave was located east of Mamre (Genesis 23:17). In the cave of Machpelah, Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah were buried (Genesis 23:17-20; 25:7-10; 35:27-29; 49:28-33; 50:12-23). According to Josephus, Herod had built a wall around the traditional burial place and set up impressive monuments to Abraham and the other ancestors in the town of Hebron. Acts 7:15-16, however, places the tomb “that Abraham had bought,” not in Hebron, but in Shechem (40 miles north of Jerusalem in the pass between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim), the first city visited by Abraham in his migrations from Haran (Genesis 12:6).

MAMRE – An Amorite ally of Abraham in his battle against Chedorlaomer and the coalition of four eastern kings (see Genesis 14:13-24). Mamre was the brother of Eshcol and Aner. In Genesis 13:18, Abraham built an altar at Mamre. Later at Mamre (in Genesis 18:1-15), Abraham was told that Sarah would have a son. And it was here that Abraham pleaded for Sodom and Gomorrah to be spared.

HEBRON – One of the central cities in the southern hill country of Judah some twenty miles south-southwest of Jerusalem. Hebron is situated at one of the highest points (about 3,040 feet above sea level on the central mountainous ridge as is one of the oldest cities in the Near East. It’s a city closely connected to Abraham (see Genesis 13:18; 18:1 regarding references to the Oaks of Mamre).