

## CHAPTER 5

# THE BINDING OF ISAAC

(Gen. 22)

The binding of Isaac, or '*aqedah*', as it is usually called by the religious Jew, has played a major part in the piety of the Synagogue down the centuries. At the first the stress may have been in conscious opposition to Christianity, but if this is so, it must have begun early; already in Dura Europos on the Euphrates we find the scene depicted on the wall of a ruined synagogue built about the middle of the third century A.D. The mosaic showing the same scene from the ruins of the synagogue at Beit Alpha, some three centuries later, is known to most visitors to Israel, who are interested in its antiquities.

In contrast to the average Christian picture Isaac is depicted as a full grown young man. Indeed, already Josephus (*Ant.* I. xiii. 2) states that he was twenty-five at the time, while *Jubilees*, not later than 100 B.C., and possibly a century earlier, makes him twenty-three (17:15). Behind such estimates must lie reasonable deductions from the fact that Isaac was able to carry the wood for the burnt-offering up the hill (22:6) and even more the realization that the sacrifice derived its full value from the fact that Isaac accepted God's will as well as his father. The estimate of thirty-seven given by *Seder Olam*<sup>1</sup> is clearly based on the

<sup>1</sup> The *Seder Olam*, from the late third century A.D. gives the rabbinic interpretation of Old Testament chronology. It has no authority.

supposition that Sarah's death (23:1) took place immediately afterwards, which is most improbable.

Clearly, God spoke to Abraham at night (cf. v. 3). It makes little difference whether it was in a dream, or whether like Samuel he was wakened from sleep by the divine voice. It was about fifty years since Abraham had left Haran in obedience to the voice of God. He had made his mistakes and had thought that the voice of his own desires represented the will of God. Now he knew better and made no effort to dodge the command as it came remorselessly to his inner ear.

"Abraham" – this was something for him and for him alone; something he and no other could carry out.

"Here am I" – this is the answer of the ready and obedient servant; the master has only to command and he will obey.

"Take your son" – the Hebrew by adding *na'* turns the apparent command into a request, though to render it by "please" would be unduly to weaken it. God is making his will quite clear, but he also indicates that he will understand, if Abraham considers its burden too great.

"Your only one" – but Ishmael was also his son, the only one of his mother; "whom you love" – but Abraham loved them both; "Isaac" – now there was no longer any doubt, and we are told that "he rose early in the morning", for the will of God does not become easier as we put off doing it.

We are told that God tested Abraham – the AV rendering "tempted" meant exactly the same at the time it was made – and something in most of us rebels at the thought of the old man having to suffer like this. The simple and inexorable fact is that in the physical, mental and spiritual realms alike, we cannot tell how much value to give to a claim until it has been tested. Abraham had proclaimed his complete faith in God, but if he was in fact to become the father of all who believe, the reality of his faith had to be shown beyond a doubt.

"Go into the land of Moriah" – in 2 Chr. 3:1 the Temple hill is called Mt Moriah, but no attempt is made to link it

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with Abraham's sacrifice. Doubtless this identification had been made by the Chronicler's time, while the Samaritans claimed that Shechem was indicated. The name is otherwise unknown to us, and archaeology has not helped in its identification. The Genesis story is deliberately vague, for God was not seeking to create a holy place out of Abraham's suffering and obedience. If pious imagination links the place of Abraham's sacrifice with Golgotha, no harm is done, provided we realize that it is the act and not the site which is of importance. So let it be Jerusalem for our present purpose.

Abraham slipped off early with Isaac and two servants. This was not merely for the reason suggested earlier. He wanted to avoid awkward questions from Sarah. It would be bad enough to return to her without Isaac; it would be almost more than flesh and blood could bear to be pursued by her lamentations, and in any case he did not want the purpose of the journey revealed to his son in this way.

Slowly they trudged along the old road that came out of Egypt and after passing through Beer-sheba ran northwards past Hebron, Jerusalem and Shechem until it joined the *Via Maris*, the main trade route to the Euphrates. When they came to a suitable place they cut enough wood for the sacrifice, for even in those days Canaan in many of its parts, especially in the south, was short of trees.

We may picture the three young men happily exchanging news with the caravans they passed. They were young, without a care and on the high road. They will hardly have noticed that Abraham was strangely silent. There will have been a pause during the midday heat, and then the road led ever northwards until they camped for the night.

The young men were soon tight asleep, enjoying the rest of youth, but old Abraham by the fire, kept burning to frighten away wild animals, was sunk in thought. The voice that had been dogging him all day became clearer. "Abraham, you poor fool. Did I not warn you in Ur, in Haran, that you could not trust El Shaddai. I told you that

he was merely leading you by the nose, to leave you in the lurch at the last. You thought you had everything, when he gave you Isaac, and now in a few hours you will have nothing. Poor fool!"

He lifted his eyes to the stars above him. Years earlier God had called him out of his tent and told him to look up at the stars (15:5). As many as the stars in heaven would his descendants be. He had believed, and his God had reckoned it to him as righteousness. That night heaven had seemed so near, and the stars looked like holes poked by angel fingers in the vault of heaven to let the glory of heaven shine through, but now they seemed cold, far away and mocking.

So the night passed and a new day came. They were soon on their way again ever northwards. Hebron with its well-known faces was behind them. Probably he had had to stop and introduce his son to old friends, while all the time his heart was bleeding. And so at last the second night came, and once again there were three asleep and one awake. This time it is Abraham that sleeps and Isaac watches.

New thoughts had come to the old man during the day. He looked back on the many years of obedient following, and repeatedly he had to confess that God had been as good as his word, better than Abraham had ever expected. So insistently the question presented itself: why should God be different now? Why? More than that – Isaac was a miracle child. If God could give them a child when all natural hope was long past, did he not have the power to give back life too. Resurrection from the dead was something no one had experienced, but why should the Lord of life not be able to do even this? "He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead" (Heb. 11:19), and so with lighter heart he slept before the crisis of the morrow.

For Isaac the novelty of the journey had worn off and he had more time to think of its purpose and of his father's strange silence. Sacrifice was an occasion for joy, but there was no joy here. All that was necessary for the offering had been prepared except the victim. True enough, a sacrificial

animal could easily be bought in one of the places they had to pass, but yet there was something strange, inexplicable. So we can picture the feeling stealing over him that he was destined to be the offering.

Until recently it was generally accepted that human sacrifice was a commonplace in Bible lands, and so both Abraham and Isaac were well acquainted with the custom. The archaeologist now informs us that the custom was extremely rare, the chief exception being the Phoenician practice of passing children through the fire "to Moloch", which had a stronger and more continuing life in Carthage. There is not much evidence for its practice among the Canaanites generally. To be noted is that it would seem that it was mainly little children that were involved, and at least in Phoenicia the sacrifice was resorted to only in times of major crisis, cf. 2 Ki. 3:26, 27. So both Abraham and Isaac, while they could not see any reason, must have envisaged a major motivation for God's demand.<sup>1</sup>

With this in mind we may imagine Isaac praying by the camp fire. "O God, God of my father Abraham, thou hast given me life; thou hast promised that through me thy blessing will pass on to the world. I do not know thee as my father does; I have not served thee as he has, and yet I must trust thee and obey thee. If I am to be the sacrifice, I do not understand thy will. I am afraid, and yet I am willing, if only for my father's sake".

And so the third morning came. They crossed the shoulder of the hill near where later Bethlehem was to stand, and before them lay the little Jebusite town of Urusalim, where once Abraham had been greeted by Melchizedek. Then God said, "You are nearly there, Abraham". They passed under the shadow of the walls as they mounted the Kidron ravine. Abraham said to his servants, "This will do, lads. The sacrifice concerns only Isaac and me. Stay here with the donkey, while we go over there". There was a moment's

<sup>1</sup> Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, pp. 441-446, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice*, pp. 52-90; W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, pp. 203-212.

hesitation; then with the full, clear certainty of victorious faith he added, "We shall come again to you".

Father and son climb the hill in silence in the early morning light. Isaac bowed under the weight of the wood, Abraham with the knife and fire. Isaac decided that the time had come for certainty. "Father!";

"Yes, my boy."

"Here are wood and fire, but where is the lamb?"

"My boy, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering."

Isaac looked at his father and said, "I understand, and I am ready". So the heaviest burden rolled from Abraham's heart.

The final preparations cannot have lasted long. Rough stones soon made an altar on which the wood could be laid. Then Abraham tied Isaac's legs together. The verb *'aqad*, used only here, would seem to be a technical term for tying up an animal for sacrifice. Isaac was to be treated in all things as though he were a sacrificial animal, for otherwise there would have been no point in the binding. Isaac could almost certainly have resisted his father, and quite certainly could have run away. He was acting like a much greater sacrifice, of whom it was foretold that he would be "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter".

Abraham had picked up the knife to complete the sacrifice, when the Angel of the Lord, God himself, called "Abraham, Abraham". So close had Isaac come to death, so concentrated was Abraham's mind on his terrible task, that nothing less than the double call could break through to his consciousness. Almost mechanically the answer comes, "Here am I". The voice continued, "Do not raise your hand against the boy; do not touch him. Now I know that you are a God-fearing man".

"Now I know" – surely God had known it all along, and the only one who might have been surprised at the successful end of the test was Abraham himself. That is of course true, but it is not the whole truth. When God handed Job

over to the power of Satan, it was more than a test of Job's faith; it was also a demonstration to Satan of Job's loyalty and faith. Similarly Paul tells us "that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). There are spiritual beings who do not have merely to accept God's statements about men, but who see them borne out by the facts of their behaviour. The painful testing and manifold sufferings of God's people here on earth have a wider meaning than we can know down here.

Abraham stood there as a God-fearing man. At least three things conspire to make it very difficult for us to understand what is meant by the fear of the Lord. The advance of the physical sciences has largely stripped man of his sense of awe as he deals with God's creation and hence of a sense of awe as he faces the Creator. The rise of the United States of America and the French Revolution have so impressed us with a sense of man's equality, that respect for one's fellowman and then for his Creator have largely vanished. The revelation of the incredible love of God as revealed in Jesus the Messiah has to a great extent been debased by our common debasing of the term love itself. The God-fearer is one with a true vision both of God and man and is able to bring them both into true perspective. The man who had pleaded for Sodom (Gen. 18:22-32) was not afraid of God, but he was keenly aware of the true relationship between man and God.

We may picture Abraham with tear-filled eyes hardly able to see to undo the rope that bound Isaac, and then they were wrapped in one another's arms.

Suddenly Isaac said, "Father, do you see what I see?"

"Yes, surely I do".

"But where has it come from? It was not here while we were preparing for the sacrifice".

"Ah, my boy, didn't I tell you that God would provide the lamb for the burnt offering? Only he has done even more; it is a fine ram."

As Abraham and Isaac knelt beside the altar and watched the smoke of the sacrifice ascend to God a stranger might have said to them, "A strange God is this God of yours; why has he played such tricks on you?" Assuredly they would have answered, "Sir, we have suffered more than you can imagine, but in our suffering we have come to know our God more than you can imagine. It was terrible while it lasted, but it was abundantly worth it". Ever since, similar words have been used by those who have had to suffer, though normally in less degree.

The story ends with God swearing by himself to accomplish all that he had previously promised Abraham. In all the previous promises there had been the implied condition that Abraham would have to show trust and obedience. Now there was no need for any implied conditions, for it had been triumphantly demonstrated that trust and obedience were there in full measure, and so the promises were made absolute.

No attempt has been made to handle the story typologically. Provided the reality of Abraham's testing, and for that matter Isaac's, is not overlooked the reader may indulge himself.

Some little effort was made to bring out the reality of the three days journey from Beer-sheba to the place of sacrifice. Let us try to realize the burden not of three days but of thirty-three years both on Father and Son, as the shadow of the cross grew ever heavier, and both knew that it was to be no picture death and resurrection that lay ahead but the grimmest reality. He bore our sins in his own body right up to the tree, and God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.