

How the Aqedah Distinguishes Yahweh from Molech

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Introduction

Genesis 22 details the well known, yet curious story of God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. A version of this same story occurs in the Koran as well. Hebrew speaking people refer to this story as the "Aqedah" ("The Binding") based on the hebrew word for "bind".

To many modern readers, this account is both confusing and disconcerting. The story often results in a series of questions; How could God demand such a thing? Why doesn't Abraham seem to resist or object at all? What is the point of this story? What modern application does it have today? What does this tell us about the character and nature of the God of the Bible?

In order to answer the questions of modern readers, other questions must be asked of the text. Based on his place in redemptive history, how would Abraham have understood God? How developed, if at all, was Abraham's religion? How did Abraham understand human sacrifice? How did Abraham understand polytheism and monotheism? What were the other tribal and territorial gods and religions like? What might Abraham have been thinking as this story developed? How does the rest of scripture shed light on this story?

As these questions are addressed it becomes evident that the story of *Abraham's binding of Isaac is, in part, an effort by Yahweh to distinguish Himself from the pagan deities of the Canaanites, specifically Molech*. Much in the same way that Yahweh distinguished Himself from the deities of the Egyptians by way of the plagues in Exodus, Yahweh is revealing to Abraham that He is, in fact, not at all like the gods of the Canaanites.

This story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac begins to take shape as it's context is uncovered. This paper will explore Abraham's concept of God, based on where his lifetime falls in redemptive history. Further, this paper will explore the religious practices of the Canaanites, particularly the worship of Molech. Finally, this paper will make use of other portions of both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles to shed light on how this passage has been traditionally and interpreted and applied.

Obviously, the story of Abraham binding Isaac takes place in time and space. The author of the biblical account uses both time and location to communicate that story. As Jacobs points out in his outline of the account: "The story of the Binding of Isaac is comprised of nine brief scenes, each demarcated by means of a change of location, indication that time has passed or a new character that is introduced."¹ It is evident that the author of the account uses time and location to add depth, meaning and context to the story.

Abraham and Isaac in Time

The first issue to be addressed in understanding the Aqedah is the period of time in which it took place. The story of Abraham binding Isaac is a nearly 4,000 year old story. Judaism, Islam and Christianity all make references to this account, though each religion interprets this story in it's own unique way.

Abraham is ten generations removed from his ancestor, Noah. While Abraham is the most prominent worshipper of Yahwed from this period of time, he is not considered an Israelite, Hebrew or Jewish, as his lifetime pre-dates each of these designations. Thus, Abraham's concept of monotheism was probably under-developed, if it existed at all. He certainly lived and

¹ Jonathan Jacobs, "Willing Obedience with Doubts: Abraham at the Binding of Isaac," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 60, Fasc. 4 (2010): 549. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41062716>

moved among polytheistic people and likely would have understood Yahweh to be one deity (though perhaps the greatest) among many.

During this period the Canaanite pantheon included deities like Ba'al and Molech, both of which were known for demanding and receiving human sacrifices.

Abraham does not have access to a single portion of scripture, Old or New Testament. He is unfamiliar with the Ten Commandments (he pre-dates them by centuries!) and knows about Yahweh only what has been passed down through oral tradition (from ancestors like Noah) or what Yahweh has revealed to him through firsthand encounters.

At the time of Abraham there were no prohibitions against child or human sacrifice nor any provision for animal substitutes. Abraham really is dealing with a blank slate as it relates to many of the questions and objections that modern readers insert into this story.

Abraham and Isaac in Space

Furthermore, Abraham is the product of the location in which he exists. Though Abraham was originally from Ur of the Chaldeans,² but he spends much of his adult life in Canaan. As early as Genesis 12 (some 40 or more years before binding Isaac in Gen. 22) Abraham was traversing Canaan. During Abraham's travels in Canaan he receives a promise from God; "To your descendants I will give this land."³

When Abraham (then, Abram) and his relative Lot parted ways, Abraham settled in Canaan while Lot went to Sodom.⁴ Abraham's attempt to father a child with Hagar took place after living in Canaan for a decade.⁵ Abraham's wife died and was buried in Canaan.⁶ Clearly,

² Genesis 11:29-31, NASB

³ Genesis 12:7, NASB

⁴ Genesis 13:12, NASB

⁵ Genesis 16:3, NASB

⁶ Genesis 23.2, 19, NASB

Abraham spent a significant portion of his adult life, particularly the portion preceding the birth of Isaac, in the land of Canaan.

Canaan was not devoid of its own religious practices. Referring specifically to the religion of Canaan and its subsequent impact on the formation of religion of Israel, Oden writes; "...the formative period of the religion of Israel and, indeed, throughout the period of the Old Testament, the religion of Israel's near neighbors, that religion whose 'strange gods' were Israel's most besetting temptation..."⁷ However, in this case, it was not Israel's "near neighbors" that were influencing the developmental period of Israel's religion, it was actually the previous inhabitants of the very land that Israel would occupy. Canaan was not Israel's neighbor, it was their predecessor in the land. Abraham didn't live near the Canaanites, he lived among them.

Abraham's understanding of religion was no doubt impacted by spending several decades living in Canaan. With no scriptures or well developed religious system/tradition of his own to rely on, Abraham would have been in the minority as he observed the religious practices of his Canaanite neighbors.

Canaanite religion consisted of a panteon of many gods (polytheism). Among the Canaanite deities that Abraham and his descendents interacted with were El, Ba'al, Asherah and Molech.

For the purpose of this paper, Molech is of particular interest. Youngblood, Bruce and Harrison describe the Canaanite deity; "Molech was the national deity of the Ammonites (Lev. 18:21; Jer. 32:35), whose worship was accompanied by the burning of children offered as a

⁷ Robert A. Oden Jr., "The Persistence of Canaanite Religion," *The Biblical Archeologist*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Mar. 1976):36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3209414>

sacrifice by their own parents.”⁸ Levenson adds; “...biblical Molech was a chthonic deity honored through the sacrifice of little boys and girls.”⁹

The worship of Molech included the sacrifice of children, more often than not, first-born sons. A giant bronze (or other metal) statue of Molech was fashioned. The statue was hollow at the base with room to stack wood and other flammable material. Once the fire was kindled it would heat the bronze until it glowed with heat. The statue was fashioned with its arms extended, ready to receive the child sacrifice, a living infant placed in the arms of the molten hot statue. The infants were left to burn to death. This slow and painful process of burning children alive on hot metal was not instantaneous and would leave the children to scream in agony for several minutes. Therefore, musicians were employed to play drums and blow horns in order to drown out the sound of the screaming children or weeping parents. To the modern reader's conscience, this is truly horrifying.

It is almost certain that Abraham interacted with families that had sacrificed a child to Molech. It is likely that he was familiar with the practice and possible that he had witnessed the statue if not the sacrificial act itself. Molech worship was part of the culture that Abraham lived in for decades.

Abraham's Response

We know from the information about Abraham in Genesis 12-22 that conceiving a child with his wife, Sarah, was physically impossible. Nonetheless, Yahweh miraculously provides Abraham with a son, Isaac, when Abraham and Sarah are 100 and 90 years old, respectively.

⁸ R. F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, and R. K. Harrison, editors., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 513

⁹ Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 19

One of the more challenging aspects of this story is the seemingly easy and willing obedience of Abraham to God's difficult command to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22. Abraham's unquestioning compliance with God's request is disturbing to the modern reader, presenting Abraham as emotionally detached or robotic in his affection for his son. This is difficult for the modern reader to accept. As Jacobs summarizes;

“Among biblical commentators and scholars, the accepted view of Abraham in the story of the Binding of Isaac is of a one-dimensional, almost superhuman figure whose entire consciousness, on the way to sacrifice his son, is focused solely on fulfilling the Divine will. According to this view there is no textual evidence of any deliberation or hesitation in Abraham's mind, and he is to be viewed as praiseworthy for fulfilling God's will without any doubt or misgiving.”¹⁰

In his paper, “Willing Obedience with Doubts: Abraham at the Binding of Isaac”, Jacobs argues that the text provides clues, suggestions and “hints” that Abraham was actually significantly grieved at the prospect of sacrificing his son. Jacob's arguments rely on subtleties and implications in the text, however, and are unconvincing.

More likely, Abraham's seemingly stoic response to God's demand of Isaac is the result of Abraham's time in Canaan and his familiarity with the cult of Molech. Walton comments:

“...the command to sacrifice his son would not have been as shocking to Abraham as it is to us. In the Canaanite worldview, the god who provided fertility (El) was also entitled to demand a portion of what had been produced. This was expressed in sacrifice of animals and grain and in the sacrifice of children...Abraham's compliant acquiescence, as much as it reflects the power of his faith, also suggests that human sacrifice is familiar to his conceptual

¹⁰ Jacobs, *Willing Obedience*, 546

worldview. However saddened he may have been, he is not dumbfounded by the macabre or peculiar nature of Yahweh's demand. It was culturally logical, despite being emotionally harsh..."¹¹

As unpleasant as the thought may be, Abraham was familiar with the concept of child sacrifice and was likely not surprised that Yahweh seemingly demanded it. Perhaps Abraham had even anticipated this moment. Had Abraham already considered the possibility that he may one day be put in the position to offer Isaac as a sacrifice? Had he settled in his heart years before that he would not withhold Isaac from Yahweh? If anything, Abraham might have been surprised that the demand on Isaac's life took so long, as Isaac is referred to as a "lad"¹² or young man (probably around 12 years old), in contrast with those who were sacrificing infants to Molech. This point is made by Walton, Matthews and Chavalas;

"The story of Abraham's 'sacrifice' of Isaac suggests that Abraham was familiar with human sacrifice and was not surprised by Yahweh's demand. However, the story also provides a model for the substitute of an animal for a human sacrifice that clearly draws a distinction between Israelite practice and that of other cultures."¹³

To Abraham, the shock of the Aqedah was likely not Yahweh's demand of a human sacrifice, but rather, the last minute command to halt the sacrifice, as well as the provision of the ram that would introduce the idea of animal substitutes for sacrifices. In this experience, it is demonstrated that *Yahweh is not like Molech* (or any of the Canaanite deities) a theme that is repeated and further developed in the Old Testament.

¹¹ John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 510

¹² Genesis 22:5, NASB

¹³ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2000), 53

Abraham and Isaac in Scripture

There is more to be gained from this story as portions of it are further developed in Scripture. It appears that the practice of sacrificing offspring to Molech was a significant issue that the Hebrew people dealt with repeatedly.

During the time of Moses, Leviticus 18-20 lists several prohibitions against offering children to Molech. This indicates that Molech-worship was still a real issue among the Hebrew people. During the Solomonic kingdom a high place for Molech was erected.¹⁴ During the exilic period Jeremiah prophesied against and confronted Molech worship.¹⁵ From the days of Abraham to the days of the exiles, the worship of Molech plagued the Hebrew people.

It's not until the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews that some insight is given into Abraham's expectations regarding his sacrifice of Isaac. The author of Hebrews reveals that Abraham "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead..."¹⁶ Whether the author of Hebrews knows this by oral tradition or by revelation, it is a clear statement that Abraham fully intended to sacrifice Isaac's life - making the interruption by the Angel of the Lord an unexpected surprise.

The typological significance of the Aqedah is clearly documented in Romans, Hebrews, James and elsewhere in the New Testament. Both the ram and Isaac are types of Christ. Both James and Paul refer to this story as the establishment of justification by faith and root their explanations in the account of Abraham and Isaac.

When read in light of the New Testament, the Aqedah is understood as a story whereby Yahweh is foreshadowing the offering of HIS own son, rather than demanding the offering of Abraham's son - a stark contrast from Molech.

¹⁴ 1 Kings 11:7, NASB

¹⁵ Jeremiah 32:35, NASB

¹⁶ Hebrews 11:19, NASB

Conclusion

Yahweh is accomplishing multiple objectives in the Aqedah. The text itself refers to it as a test of Abraham by God.¹⁷ The New Testament reveals that God was both foreshadowing Christ and establishing justification by faith. The context demonstrates that Yahweh is creating a distinction between Himself and Molech by taking Abraham to the brink of sacrificing Isaac, only to stop Abraham at the last second and provide a ram as a substitute. The ram represents the introduction of animals as a substitute for sacrifices.

When taking into consideration the time and space that Abraham lived in, the Aqedah is not only a story of Yahweh testing Abraham's faith by demanding the sacrifice of his son, it is also an intense teachable moment - a foundational moment - whereby Yahweh distinguished Himself from Molech. Yahweh takes Abraham right up to the moment of decision, as if to drive the point home; that Yahweh is not like Molech.

¹⁷ Genesis 22:1

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