Abraham, Isaac, and the Covenant

Speaker: Craig Payne

One of the most puzzling and provocative stories in the entire Bible occurs in Genesis 22. After blessing Abraham and Sarah with a son, Isaac, and promising them that their son would establish a family with thousands and even millions of descendants, God asks Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice and a burnt offering. Not only does this request seem obviously morally wrong, but it also seems to violate the terms of what God has already promised to Abraham. It seems even further puzzling because elsewhere in the Torah, God condemns the practice of child sacrifice and even says that one of the reasons He is going to give Canaan to the Israelites is the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice. So why does He tell Abraham to do the same thing?

A few possible interpretations have arisen. Here are three examples:

1. There is what might be called the “existentialist” interpretation (it can be called this because this particular interpretation is usually associated with the Christian existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard). The idea behind this interpretation is simply that religious or spiritual duties are higher than ethical duties and take precedence over them. If God commands that something be done, even if that action seems irrational or even unethical, it is to be done because our highest duty is to obey God's perfect will. One problem with this, of course, is that it seems our knowledge of what God commands us personally to do might be highly subjective. However, for an existentialist, this is the price we pay for a living faith in God—which is why Paul the apostle, in the New Testament, writes of serving God with “fear and trembling.”

2. A second interpretation, the “test of faith” interpretation, is more commonly held, especially among Jewish readers of this story. This interpretation sees God's command as a supreme test of faith, or a “once-for-all-time” commitment on the part of Abraham. Since in Genesis chapter 15 God has already made a covenant with Abraham by this time, this means that everything God has belongs to Abraham; God even takes Abraham's name and becomes known as the “God of Abraham.” On the other hand, everything Abraham has also belongs to God, up to and including his own life and the lives of his family members. Therefore, God can require of Abraham the life of his son. It is interesting to note that Abraham apparently has so much faith in this covenant that he even thinks that God will give him back Isaac alive again. Notice in verse 5, Abraham says to the others with them, “The boy and I will go and worship, and WE will return to you.” Even if Abraham obeys God and sacrifices Isaac, he knows that in order for God's promises to come true, Isaac would have to be restored to life. So this story reveals Abraham's great faith in his covenant relationship with God.

3. The third interpretation sees this story as a foreshadowing of the Christian Gospels, and therefore might be called a specifically “Christian” interpretation. Again, in the covenant relationship, Abraham shows that he is willing to sacrifice his son for God; because of this,
God on behalf of the covenant must also be willing to sacrifice His Son as well. Notice the many parallels to the Christian story: Isaac is Abraham’s “only son, the son whom he loves”—this is mentioned three different times in the chapter. They go up a mountain for the sacrifice. Isaac carries the wood of the sacrifice. In Abraham’s heart, it is as if Isaac were already sacrificed, so when he receives Isaac back again, it is as if he receives Isaac back from the dead. Because of Abraham’s obedience, God tells him in verse 18 that all the world would be blessed. The parallels are obvious: Jesus is referred to as God’s only son, whom He loves. He goes up onto Mount Calvary to be sacrificed. He carries the wood of the cross. He is sacrificed and yet received back again from the dead, and through Him all the world is blessed.

Of course, this last interpretation would not be accepted by a non-Christian; however, it seems that all three of these interpretations are at least possible and perhaps even plausible in the attempt to deal with this troubling story.

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