

The Binding of Isaac

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אֶקֶדַת יִצְחָק



Genesis 22:1-19

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Introduction

This story is so often represented from a Christian perspective, as the story of Abraham's incredible love for and faith in God. However, it has far more depth than many of us realise. It is a powerful messianic prophecy presented in the first book of the Bible.

Unfortunately it is misrepresented in nearly all Christian literature. Many Christians believe that when these events took place, Isaac was only a child, somewhere between 7 and 17 years of age. He is usually depicted as a child in biblical stories for children. However Jewish depictions of the same passage of scripture look very different. Abraham is an old man, and Isaac walking behind him, is tall and bearded. He is a fully grown adult man, somewhere in his thirties, carrying the wood up to "the place" God showed to his father.

The accepted Christian depiction of this event raises a number of disturbing questions. How could the God of the Bible ask for a human sacrifice? Not just any human sacrifice, but the sacrifice of a child? The Jewish perspective clarifies this, and offers a magnificent picture of a father prepared to give up what is most precious to him, his son and a son prepared to obey his father even to the extent of laying down his own life.

The purpose of this short article is to address some of the misconceptions around this fascinating passage of scripture.

Isaac's age - The Death of Sarah

One of the most important clues to Isaac's age during these events, is the context of the story.

Immediately after "the binding of Isaac" in Genesis 22, we read that Sarah, his mother, died. Genesis 23:1 tells us that she was 127 years old at her death. Genesis 17:17 tells us that she was 90 years old when Isaac was born. Therefore, Isaac would have been about 37 years old. The Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible in Aramaic explicitly states Isaac's age as 37 years old¹. This was the most common translation of the Bible used in Jesus time.

The word "lad"

In the English translations of the text of Genesis, the word "lad" is used to describe Isaac (Genesis 22:5). In Hebrew, this is the word: na'ar. The New King James translation has a note in the text to indicate that this could also be translated with the words: "young man"².

How "na'ar" is translated elsewhere

Exactly the same Hebrew word "na'ar" appears two verses earlier in Genesis 22:3. This is translated with "young men", ("And Abraham rose...and took two of his young men with him..."). It refers to two servants. They could not have been children in any sense, as there was only one donkey, and Isaac and Abraham's servants had to split and carry the wood for an offering on a three day journey. The area they traveled through on the approach to Jerusalem is dangerous, rocky, mountainous and mostly uphill.

The Hebrew word "na'ar" is most commonly used to refer to a man who is not yet married. It is in some way similar to the English word "bachelor". "Na'ar" does not give an indication of age, as we can see from the various contexts in

¹ From the targum of Pseudo Jonathan on Genesis 22.

² In Genesis 22:5 we read, "...And Abraham said to his young men [na'ar], 'Stay here with the donkey; the lad [na'ar] and I will go yonder and worship and we will come back to you'". The first time na'ar is translated as "young men" and the second time the exact same word is translated as "lad". This gives the reader the false impression that Isaac is younger than the two menservants who came with them.

which it appears in the Bible. It is often translated as "young men" and used to describe everyone from the baby Moses to trained men of war (see Appendix notes).

Would God even ask such a thing?

In Leviticus 18:21³ God specifically forbids the practice of offering children as living, burnt sacrifices. It would not be consistent with God's character; in fact it never even entered His mind:

In Jeremiah 7: 31, the text speaks plainly for itself: *"And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart."*

Also in Jeremiah 19:4-5:4 *"Because they have forsaken Me and made this an alien place, because they have burned incense in it to other gods whom neither they, their fathers, nor the kings of Judah have known, and have filled this place with the blood of the innocents 5 (they have also built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind)."*

And lastly, Jeremiah 32:35 *"And they built the high places of Baal which are in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I did not command them, nor did it come into My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin."*

The Term "burnt offering"

This raises the question: What then, was God asking of Abraham? The original Hebrew is very helpful in understanding what took place.

Many of our translations use the term "burnt offering" because of a Latin translation of this portion which makes use of the word "holocaustum" literally meaning burnt offering⁴.

The Hebrew word used in Genesis 22 is the word "olah". It is a specific word that literally means, an offering that "goes up" or "ascends", in other words, an "ascending offer". The word "olah" designates something that is wholly dedicated to the Lord. It indicates the purpose of the offer, rather than the manner in which it is offered.

The Bible speaks of two categories of offerings – obligatory offerings and voluntary offerings. Obligatory offerings were made necessary by our sin and rebellion. However the voluntary offerings otherwise known as freewill offerings were brought on the basis of our own free choice. An "olah" or ascending offer was a voluntary offering – in other words a free will offering. In Genesis 22 the "olah" of Isaac was not only Abrahams voluntary freewill offering. Which it

³ The text actually refers to "Moloch" in the translation, but it is interesting to know that the word "Moloch" is not a name. It is a title. It is derived from the Hebrew word "Melech" which means king. Israel took for themselves another Lord and another King in place of YHWH the God of Israel. God was their King, but they chose another, as their king. In Hebrew there are no vowels, so the two words "Moloch" and "Melech" are spelt exactly the same way, and have the same meaning. It was such an abomination though, that Jewish tradition demanded that different vowels be used when the words were spoken. The vowels used in "Moloch" are the same vowels as those from the Hebrew word for "scandal". The rest of the verse in Leviticus is very clear that this is an issue regarding the purity of God's name.

⁴ The **Latin** word **holocaustum** is a word formed from Greek roots, *holo-* (meaning "whole, entire") and *caust-* (meaning "burnt"). The word is used in Biblical **Latin** to refer to olah offerings. The word "**holocaust**" was used in English religious vocabulary as early as the thirteenth century, and it referred to destruction by fire, even in a trivial sense. In the twentieth century, the word "**holocaust**" acquired a definitive new meaning in English, referring specifically to the systematic extermination of six million Jews, and others, by the Nazis.

would have been if Isaac was a small, helpless child. Isaac himself was a grown man, free to make his own choices. Isaac also brought an offer, and he offered himself.

In the same way Christ was an "olah". He didn't kill himself, but he laid down his life voluntarily. God the Father asked it of him, He was willing to sacrifice his only son, but the final decision was in Jesus hands.

Abraham interpreted the Lord's request for an "olah" or ascending offer, an offer that was entirely for God, to mean that it should be burnt up. Sometimes an ascending offer "olah" is also an offering made by fire "ishsheh". The book of Leviticus chapter 1⁵ specifies an "olah" that takes the form of "an offering made by fire". Usually with other freewill offerings, some of the meat was burnt, some of the meat was eaten by the priests and some of the meat was eaten by the person bringing the offer. The "olah" however differed from other freewill offerings in that it was entirely and only for God, and this was embodied in the fact that it was burnt up entirely. However the "olah" is not always an offering made by fire in every situation. The very specific Hebrew word for an offering made by fire, "ishsheh", is not used in this passage.

Unfortunately, most Bible translations do not consistently reflect these very specific terms, but it is fairly simple to look them up with the assistance of the Strong's numbers.

Jephthah's daughter

In Judges 11 we see an example of an "olah" or ascending offering that did not require the offering to be burnt up. This is the story of Jephthah the Gileadite. Jephthah promised God that if He would deliver the people of Ammon into his hands, which he, Jephthah, would give God whatever came out of the door of his house to meet him when he returned, as an "olah", an ascending offer. Unfortunately this has been translated in Judges 11:31 as a burnt offering.

Jephthah was victorious, but tragically, the first thing to come out of the door of his house to meet him, was his only child, a daughter. When her father told her of his vow, she was insistent that he keep it and asked only for two months to go to the mountains with her friends and "bemoan her virginity". We read then in the next verses that *"she knew no man. And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went four days each year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite"*. When Jephthah's daughter became an ascending offering or "olah", she was not killed or burnt alive; she was set apart, never to marry or have children. She was to dedicate herself to service and intercession at the entrance of the tabernacle.⁶ This was a massive sacrifice in a culture where children defined the status of a woman.

The Perfect "Olah" or Ascension Offer

In the New Testament, Christ's sacrifice on the cross is compared to the most holy offers described in Leviticus. In Hebrews 10:8-10 we read: *"Previously saying, 'Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them' (which are offered according to the law), 9 then He said, 'Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God'. He takes away the first that He may establish the second. 10 By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all"*. Jesus' sacrifice was voluntary, entirely for God and he most definitely was not burnt.

⁵ The "olah" was offered as an atonement offer (see Leviticus 1:4). The word atonement was invented in the sixteenth century by William Tyndale who recognized that there was not a direct English translation of the Biblical Hebrew concept. The word is composed of two parts "at" and "onement" in order to reflect a relationship, and if necessary an aspect of restoration – the removal of whatever was in the way of that relationship.

⁶ We read about these women in Exodus 38:8 and 1Samuel1:22, which is why the sin of Eli's sons was so great.

Isaac as a Type and Shadow of Messiah

The whole story of the binding of Isaac is full of messianic references.

In Hebrew tradition a man is obliged to obey his parents up to the age of 30. After the age of thirty, he may choose for himself, and is not sinning should he choose not to obey. Abraham, an old man of 137, could never subdue and tie up a young strong thirty something year old Isaac by himself. Isaac chose, of his own free will to obey his father. Isaac chose to do what his father asked of him, and in doing so, to lay down his own life. He was not forced to. Just as our Messiah, chose, of His own free will, to lay down His life, in obedience to the will of His Father. Both choices resulted in all the nations of the earth being blessed.

The Land of Moriah – Where it all happened

The place where Genesis 22 takes place is called the land of Moriah. The book of Chronicles tells us that this is where Solomon later built the first temple. It is also where Nehemiah and Ezra built the second temple on the ruins of the first. The temple mount is part of a chain of mountain tops, the highest of which became a stone quarry (for the building of the temple) and a place of execution, north of the Temple Mount. God had instructed Moses and Aaron in Leviticus 1:10-11, that the ascending offerings had to be killed on the north side of the alter. God was very specific to Abraham about where Isaac was to be offered; scripture calls it the place (as opposed to a place). The place “Ha makom” is a Hebrew expression, used many times in scripture, and referring always to the city of Jerusalem, which at that time had not yet been built.

It was on this spot that Abraham declared that God would provide for Himself the lamb (not a lamb) for an ascending offer. Thousands of years later, John the Baptist, when he first saw Jesus, called out *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (John 1:29).

The place was called "YHWH Yireh", (“God will provide”), but the Hebrew name can also be read as "God will be seen". This makes us think of the stunning words that Jesus said to Philip...*“he who has seen me has seen the Father”*. How appropriate then are the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 48 *“Beautiful in elevation, The joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, The city of the great King.”*

Abraham - A Friend of God

Abraham received one of the most incredible compliments in the Bible. He was called “a friend of God”. We read many times in scripture how God longs to share how He feels (read the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations). So often though, with everything in our lives, even as Christians, it is just all about us. With God we share the things that touch our hearts, all of our grief, pain, and the things we weep for. Do we ever have concern for, or even enquire about what God weeps for? A friend is someone, who knows your pain, your sadness, your grief, as well your joy and delight. A friend is someone who is moved to care about the things that you care about, because you care about them.

God shared with Abraham how He felt to give up the most precious thing He had. Of all the amazing people we read about in the Bible, only Abraham really understood this. Abraham understood what it was to lay your only son on the alter. He was capable of doing what he did because of his relationship with God - he believed God. He knew that Isaac was a child of promise and that even were he to die, God was able to raise him from the dead (Hebrews 11:18). God is still longing to share His heart, with whoever has an ear to hear. It will surely break your heart, when He begins to let you see what breaks His heart. It will definitely cost you everything. But even as the Angel of the Lord promised Abraham so long ago, *“...blessing you will be blessed, and multiplying you will be multiplied and your descendants will be multiplied and will triumph over their enemies and all the nations of the earth will be blessed in your seed, because you were willing to hear His voice”* (Genesis 22:17-18).

Appendix

The Hebrew Word Na'ar

The first time this word is used in the Bible is in Genesis 14:24 as "young men" to describe the fighting men Abraham took with him, to subdue Chedorlaomer. These are described earlier in the chapter as 318 trained servants who were born in his own house.

In Genesis 19:4 the same word is used to describe "young men" who surrounded Lots house with the evil intention of having carnal knowledge of his guests.

In Genesis 21:12, 17-20, "na'ar" is used to describe Ishmael, who was that time, somewhere between 16 and 18 years old.

In Genesis 25:27 "na'ar" is translated with the word "boys", in reference to Jacob and Esau: "So the boys grew and Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents." The sentence is very clear that it is not referring to two children, but to two young men.⁷

In Genesis 37:2 Joseph is referred to as a "na'ar" at the age of 17. After eleven years in prison, at the age of 28, he is still referred to as "a young Hebrew man" by the Pharaoh's chief butler (Genesis 41:12).⁸

Benjamin who was somewhere in his twenties, was referred to as a "lad" in Genesis 43:8, 44:22, 44:30-34 when Joseph demanded that his brothers bring him with them when they return to Egypt.⁹

In Exodus 2:6 the baby Moses is also referred to as a "na'ar" and the unborn Samson, when his parents were informed that he would be a Nazirite.

In Joshua 6:23 the two spies who were sent to spy out the city of Jericho, and were hidden by Rahab the prostitute, are also referred to as "young men".

Conclusion

There is therefore no basis to estimate Isaac's age based on the use of the word 'lad'. The translation is, alas, somewhat misleading. A better translation would simply have been: "young man".

⁷ In the NKJV this verse is divided into two sentences, but in the original Hebrew there are no punctuation marks such as full stops and capital letters, and the word "and" indicates that what follows belongs to that which has just been said.

⁸ In Genesis 41:46 we are told that Joseph was 30 years old when he stood before Pharaoh, and that his encounter with the Chief Butler and the Chief Baker had occurred two years earlier in Genesis 41:1.

⁹ Benjamin was born in Genesis 35:18 before Joseph was sold into slavery at the age of 17. Joseph was released from prison at the age of 30, and then followed seven years of plenty and two years of famine before Joseph's brothers brought Benjamin to him in Egypt (Genesis 45:6). Benjamin was therefore at least 22 years old.