

LESSON 7:
ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

Genesis 21:1-7 The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac, when he was eight days old as God had commanded him. Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

- Isaac means "he laughs".
- A quote from *The Gifts of the Jews* by Thomas Cahill: God has made Abraham laugh, God has made Sarah laugh, God makes Isaac laugh.

Genesis 21:8-13 The child grew, and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

- Continuing the quote from *The Gifts of the Jews*: And "the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great drinking-feast on the day that Isaac was weaned." At this point, winter has been dispelled and everyone's nightmares are over.
- Not quite.
- For one thing, Sarah is determined that Hagar the Egyptian will not share in the laughter and drives out her and her son for good (although they remain under God's protection).

Genesis 21: 14, 20 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

- Abraham loses his son Ishmael.
- Ishmael will become the father of the Arabs.
- Continuing the quote from *The Gifts of the Jews*: And then, in piercing staccato phrases, the narrator begins the Hebrew Bible's most fearful and piteous story.

Genesis 22:1-6 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. 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." 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.

- Child sacrifice was not unheard of but was only used in very unusual circumstances and would have been extremely difficult for Abraham.
- 2Kings: 3:26-27 When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom; but they could not. Then he took his firstborn son who was to succeed him and offered him as a burnt offering on the wall.
- The phrase "we will come back to you" may express the hope that God will find a way to accomplish it.

Genesis 22:7-8 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?: Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

- From *The Gifts of the Jews*: Is this God? What are we to make of such a God? Does the primitive period in which the story takes place somehow explain or excuse the torment that God inflicts on the man and the boy? Isn't the boy, like Sarah in the Egyptian story and Lot's wife in the destruction of Sodom, just another pawn in God's game?
- Isaac is a pawn, surely, even though with swift strokes the narrator gives us a real child who asks a real question.
- As E. A. Spieser remarks, “The father's answer is tender, but evasive, and the boy must by now have sensed the truth. The short and simple sentence, ‘So the two of them walked on together.’ covers what is perhaps the poignant and eloquent silence in all literature.
- Yes, the narrator's skill is great, leaving the reader speechless at the impending horror.

Genesis 22:9-12 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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” 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.”

- From *The Gifts of the Jews*: It is tempting to hate Abraham for what he does here. We have already seen him as a wily conniver, blithely willing to sacrifice his own wife to prosper himself. And though we can say to ourselves that the standards of the time were different from our own, it is so difficult to let it go at that—just as difficult as when we try to absolve Thomas Jefferson, prophet of human equality and slaveholder.
- However we may loathe Abraham's attitude toward Sarah, we cannot doubt that he loves Isaac. It is precisely Abraham's love that makes the episode so unbearable.

- The key to this awesome puzzle must lie not in Abraham's relationship to Isaac but in his relationship to God. Abraham was a man of Sumer. Initially, 'the god' was for Abraham little more than a (statue, almost a good luck charm)—though from the first there is no statue, no visual manifestation. Even in the earliest stages, then, this relationship is different from the relationships of other Sumerians to their patronal gods. But if the relationship is to last, Abraham requires education and this he receives in a series of manifestations in which 'the god' gradually reveals himself as God—not just a divinity but the only God that counts.

Genesis 22: 13-14 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. 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."

- From *The Gifts of the Jews*: From voice to vision to august potentate, Abraham's understanding of God grew ever larger; but given the society out of which he came, this understanding remained—by our standards—a very earth-bound one. Something must, after all these years of preparation, jolt him into a recognition of Just-Who-Is-Speaking-to-Him. For the God who calls Abraham to the Mountain experience must no longer be seen merely as the "Mountain God." He is the opposite of the Sumerian gods with the patently human motivations. He is the God beyond the mountain, even beyond the sky, the unknowable God whose purposes are hidden from human intelligence, who cannot be manipulated.

Genesis 22: 15-19 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, 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, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba.

- Again a quote from *The Gifts of the Jews*: And who are we? We are the contingent ones, dependent utterly on this God. And who is Abraham? He is the contingent one who must understand that he is utterly dependent, who must cling consciously to his God, who gives and takes beyond all understanding. For, as the sage Job will say in later times, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord.”
- Abraham passes the test. His faith—his belief in God—is stronger than his fear. But now he knows he is dealing with the Unthinkable, beyond all expectation. The God who called him out into the wilderness and made impossible promises has begun to bring those promises to fulfillment. But this must not mean that, through this God, I can see the future and control what has not yet come to be. I control nothing. My task is to be as open to God as I am to my own child; to both I must say, “Here I am!”