5786 - Genesis 18-22 - Vayera (And He appeared)

THE *AKEDAH*: THE BINDING OF ISAAC

This section recounts the climactic event in the life of Abraham, the ultimate trial of faith. God asks the aged patriarch to offer up his son as a sacrifice. Abraham binds the child on the altar and poises the knife for the fatal thrust. But the deadly act is stayed by a heavenly voice.[1]

The Akedah, as the story is popularly called-because of the Hebrew stem עקד, "to bind," in verse 9-is organically connected with the preceding chapter. Abraham has lost one son and now is about to lose the other. **In both narratives, the child is saved by divine intervention at the critical moment, the only two biblical instances of AN angel calling from heaven to human beings. In both cases there is a fortuitous discovery: a well of water in the earlier story, a ram in the thicket here.**

Beyond its connection with the foregoing chapter, the Akedah brings to a close Abraham's spiritual odyssey that began with God's call at Haran. The curtain rises and falls on the patriarch as he receives a divine word that demands agonizing decisions. **The first time God bids him to take leave of his father and to cut himself off from his past**; now, in this last theophany that he is to receive, God asks that he sacrifice his beloved, longed-for son and thereby abandon all hope of posterity. On both occasions Abraham responds with unquestioning obedience and steadfast loyalty.

This correspondence between Haran and Moriah encases the biography of Abraham within a framework of unwavering faith. For added emphasis, the two crucial events are cast in a common literary mold so that chapters 12 and 22 share many connecting links. God's first call to Abraham is introduced by the declaration, "Go forth ... to the land that I will show you"; and His last employs almost identical language, "Go forth ... to the land of Moriah ... on one of the heights that I will point out to you." **The Hebrew phrase *lekh lekha*, "go forth," does not occur again in the Bible, a fact that underscores the deliberate and meaningful nature of its use in these two passages. In both instances, the precise ultimate destination of the trek is withheld**, and in both the tension of the drama is heightened by the cumulative effect of several Hebrew epithets,[2] the last of which is the most potent: "your land, your homeland, your father's house"; "your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love." Both episodes culminate in promises of glorious posterity, the second one containing striking verbal echoes of the first. One blessing was received at the terebinth of Moreh, the other at the similar sounding Moriah; and at both sites, it is stated, Abraham "built an altar there." Finally, just as the account of the initial call is preceded by a genealogy that introduces the main character of the next episode, so the story of the final call from God is followed by a genealogical note having the same function.

1 Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis*, (The Jewish Publications Society), pp. 150-154.

2 An epithet is a characterizing word or phrase accompanying or occurring in place of the name of a person or thing.

GOD TESTS ABRAHAM (vv 1-2)

1. ***Some time afterward*** As noted (earlier), the phrase indicates an indefinite connection with foregoing events. Isaac was about three years old when Ishmael was expelled; he is now old enough to carry a load of firewood and to ask an intelligent question based on experience and observation.

God put Abraham to the test This information is imparted to the reader, not divulged to Abraham, in order to remove any possible misunderstanding that God requires human sacrifice as such. Therefore, the purely probative nature of the divine request is emphasized. As a result, the focus of tension shifts from Isaac to Abraham. **Now the reader knows that the son will not be slaughtered.** But is the father's faith in God of such transcendent quality as to overcome his natural love for his heir in full consciousness that obedience to God's cruel request would mean the end of all his hopes and dreams, the nullification of the promises he had so often heard from the mouth of this self-same God?

He said As the following verse indicates, Abraham receives the divine call in a nightdream or vision.

Here I am Hebrew *hinneni* expresses an attitude of attentiveness and receptivity. **It is the only word Abraham utters to God in the entire episode.**

Isaiah 6:8

[8]Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "**Here am I (*hinneni*). Send me!**"

2. The enormity of God's request and the agonizing nature of the decision to be made are conveyed through the cumulative effect of the descriptive terms set forth in ascending order of endearment. This is the same device used in God's first call to Abraham in 12:1.

Take your son The Hebrew adds the participle *na'* to the imperative,[(2)] which usually softens the command to an entreaty, as noted in Sanhedrin 89b, Genesis Rabba 55:7, and Rashi's commentary. Abraham has absolute freedom of choice. Should he refuse, he would not incur any guilt.

your favored one **Literally, "your only one"**-here construed as a term of value.[(3)]

whom you love This is the first use of the key biblical stem *ahavah,* significantly in the parent-child relationship. Its next usage (24:67) is in the husband-wife relationship.

ABRAHAM MEETS THE CHALLENGE (vv. 3-10)

3. The patriarch makes no verbal response, not even *hinneni*, "Here I am!" **He who was so daringly eloquent on behalf of the people of Sodom surrenders in total silence to his own bitter personal destiny**. He does not question divine constancy. Early next morning, the old man rises to fulfill the divine charge. He performs a series of preparatory acts all described with an economy of words appropriate to the somber silence that pervades the scene. **Remarkably, Sarah is ignored throughout the chapter. Early exegesis has Abraham concealing from his wife the true purpose of his journey lest she hinder him from doing God's bidding.**[4]

two of his servants An eminent personage would be accompanied by two attendants.

He split the wood Since the exact destination is as yet unknown to him, he cannot be sure he will find fuel there.

4. On the third day In biblical consciousness, three days constitute a significant segment of time, particularly in connection with travel,[5] The long interval is crucial to the trial of faith, for Abraham's instantaneous assent to God's request may have been impulsive and emotional and without proper consideration. The long trek enables him to regain his composure. It allows time for sober reflection; yet his resolve is not weakened. His decision to obey God is thus seen to be an undoubting act of free will.

saw the place from afar Is it an existing sacred site, or does he instinctively know the spot? The sight of it "from afar" immediately stirs consciousness of the actuality of the impending horror. According to rabbinic legend, Abraham and Isaac, but not the attendants, saw a cloud hovering over one of the hills.[6]

5. ***we will return*** Use of the plural form conceals the true purpose of the journey from Isaac.

6. ***Abrabam took the wood*** That is, he took it off the beast of burden. He himself carried the dangerous articles—the firestone and the knife—**so that the boy not be harmed and the sacrificial victim be unblemished at the moment of slaughter**. There is a touch of bitter irony here: Isaac, unaware, cooperates in carrying some of the instruments of his own destruction. **He whose name means "laughter" appears to be on the verge of becoming the personification of tragedy**.[7]

the two walked off together **There is perfect rapport between the two**, encompassed as they are in mutual solitariness and enveloped in silence. The tension between the unsuspecting innocence of the son and the unuttered agony of the father does not disturb the harmony.

7-8. The oppressive silence is broken by Isaac's simple query, which is at once artless and penetrating. Is a suspicion of the awful truth beginning to dawn upon the boy? If so, the father's equivocal reply must surely sustain whatever doubts there are, especially in an age when human sacrifice is possible. The poignant tension inherent in the situation is heightened by the repetition of the words "father" and son." **The bond between the two remains unbroken**. The brief dialogue over—the only such recorded between Isaac and his father—they continue their fateful trek in perfect harmony.

9-10. The detailed, laconic description of the various preparatory procedures conveys something of the eternity of that terrible moment in time **before the angelic voice is heard**. Once again, not a word escapes the father's lips. Isaac too is speechless. **The intensity of the anguish is beyond the ability of words to express**.

bound The Hebrew stem עקד is found nowhere else in the ritual vocabulary of the Bible In postbiblical texts it is a technical term for the tying together of the forefoot and the hindfoot of an animal or of the two forefeet or two hindfeet.[9]

GOD ACKNOWLEDGES ABRAHAM'S FIDELITY (vv. 11-12)

11. ***called to him from heaven*** Angels need to travel between heaven and earth, as is clear from 28:12, as well as from place to place on earth, as proved by 18:22. But the critical urgency of the moment precludes their usual personal appearance, such as made to Hagar (16:7ff.), and dictates this exceptional mode of angelic intervention, just as it did in 21:17.

Genesis 28:12
[12](Jacob) had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

Genesis 18:22
[22]The men (i.e., two of the three "men/angels" who visited him) turned away and went toward Sodom, **but Abraham remained standing before the LORD**.

Genesis 16:7
[7]**The angel of the LORD** found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.

Abrabam! Abraham! The repetition connotes both urgency and a special relationship between the one addressed and the One who calls.[10]

12. *And he said* In biblical angelology, **God and His angels often interchange imperceptibly** ...

for now I know As Ramban points out, it is not that God's foreknowledge is wanting but that, for Abraham's sake, the quality of character that now exists only potentially must be actualized.[11] **In the biblical view, the genuinely righteous man must deserve that status through demonstrated action**. Henceforth, Abraham is the incontestable paradigm of the truly "God-fearing man, one who is wholehearted in his self-determined, disinterested, self-surrender to God's will. It is not important that the act was unfulfilled, for the value of the act may lie as much in the inward intention of the doer as in the final execution.

THE SUBSTITUTION OF A RAM (v. 13)

Abraham interprets the fortuitous presence of a ram to mean that a substitute animal offering is desired in place of Isaac.

4 *ram* Hebrew *'ayil 'echad*, literally "one ram." This is the reading underlying many ancient versions, as well as of several medieval manuscripts. Our printed editions read *'ayil 'achar*, as did a few other ancient renderings,[12] This text is taken to mean "a ram behind [him]" or a ram, later [caught]."

THE NAMING OF THE ALTAR (v. 14)

This incident reminds Abraham of his reply to Isaac's question (v. 7f.). He had foretold better than he realized at the time. In accordance with patriarchal practice, the site of a revelation becomes sacred and receives a name somehow reminiscent of the occasion.[13]

whence the present saying A popular saying arose based on this episode (i.e., *Adonai yira'eh*—"on the mount of the LORD there is vision." This is not part of the narrative but an editorial note.[14]

there is vision **Hebrew *yira'eh*, literally "He/it shall be seen." The subject of the verb is unclear, although the apparent reference to verse 8 would favor the impersonal rendering, referring to the sheep. A different exegetical tradition is represented by the Septuagint, which renders, "On the mount the Lord appears."**

REAFFIRMATION OF THE BLESSINGS (w. 15-18)

Abraham has demonstrated his willingness to forfeit his posterity in obedience to God's will. It is fitting, therefore, that all previous promises be now reaffirmed. The formulation features several unusual elements. All previous blessings are pure acts of divine grace; now, for the first time, these are presented as a reward for Abraham's devotion to God. For the first time, too, they are introduced by a solemn oath, with God swearing by His own Being;[15] and they are prefaced by the prophetic formula, "The LORD declares" (Heb. *ne'um* YHVH). There are also two innovations in the content of the blessings: Sand is employed as a metaphor of multitude, and the patriarch's posterity is promised victory over its foes.

(2) For imperative with *na'*, cf. Num. 20:10; Judg. 13:4; 16:6, I0, 28; 18:5; Isa. 1:18; Amos 7:2, 5.
(3) So LXX, SyroP. Cf. Judg. 11:34; Amos 8:10; Zech. 12:10.
(4) On the concealment from Sarah, see Josephus, Ant. 1.I2.2 (Loeb, p. 1). On two, cf. Exod. 17:10; Num. 22:22; I Sam. 28:8. See Comment to 18:2.
(5) **On three-day units, cf. Gen. 31:22; 42:18; Exod. 3:18; 15:22; 19:11, 15, 16; Num. 10:33; 19:12, 19; 31:19; 33:8; Hos. 6:2; Jon. 3:3; Esther 5:1.**
(6) Targ. Jon., Gen. R. 56:2, Tanh. Va-yera' 46.
(7) On Isaac carrying the wood, see Gen. R 56:4, Tanh. Va-yera' 46
(9) On עקד, see Shab. 54a, Tam. 31b.
(10) Exod. R 2:12; cf. Gen. 46:2; Exod. 3:4; 1 Sam. 3:10.
(11) For a similar usage, cf. I Kings 17:24.
(12) *'Ayil 'echad*, so LXX, Sam., Targ. Jon., Pesh., SyroP., Jub. 18:121; *'ayil 'achar*, so Targ. Onk., Sym., Vulg. H. M. Orlinsky, Notes on the New Translation of the Torah (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society,1969), 98;C. Rabin, "Etymological Miscellanca," Scripta Hicrosolymitana 8 (1961): 387.
(13) For altar naming, cf. Gen. 16:14; 21:31; 28:19; 32:3.
(14) Cf. Gen. 1o:9.
(I5) For God swearing by Himself, cf. Isa. 45:23; Jer. 22:5; 49:13; Amos 6:8.

1. ***3.*** *The patriarch makes no verbal response, not even hinneni, "Here I am!"* ***He who was so daringly eloquent on behalf of the people of Sodom surrenders in total silence to his own bitter personal destiny.***

a. Matthew 26:47-56

47While (Yeshua) was still speaking (to his disciples), Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." 49Going at once to Yeshua, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. 50Yeshua replied, **"Do what you came for, friend."** Then the men stepped forward, seized Yeshua and arrested him ... 56But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

b. Matthew 27:1-2

1Early in the morning, all the chief (*or* "head") priests and the elders of the people (**i.e., the leading priests and elders—NOT all the priests and all the elders**) made their plans how to have Yeshua executed. 2So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

2. ***your favored one*** ***Literally, "your only one"****-here construed as a term of value.*[3]

a. Judges 11:34

[34]When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was **an only child**. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter.

b. Amos 8:10

[10]I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for **an only son** and the end of it like a bitter day.

c. Zechariah 12:10

[10]"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for **an only child**, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

d. John 1:18

[18]No one has ever seen God, but **the one and only Son**, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

3. ***Remarkably, Sarah is ignored throughout the chapter. Early exegesis has Abraham concealing from his wife the true purpose of his journey lest she hinder him from doing God's bidding.***

a. Antiquities 1:225 (JOE)

[225]Now Abraham thought that it was not right to disobey God in anything, but that he was obliged to serve him in every circumstance of life, since all creatures that live enjoy their life by his providence, and the kindness he bestows on them. **Accordingly he concealed this command of God, and his own intentions about the slaughter of his son, from his wife**, as also from everyone of his servants—**otherwise he should have been hindered from his obedience to God**; and he took Isaac, together with two of his servants, and laying what things were necessary for a sacrifice upon an ass, he went away to the mountain.

b. Legends of the Jews[3] 1:5:229

Satan then appeared unto Sarah in the figure of an old man, and said unto her, "Where did thine husband go?" She said, "To his work." "And where did thy son Isaac go?" he inquired further, and she answered, "He went with his father to a place of study of the Torah." Satan said: "O thou poor old woman, thy teeth will be set on edge **on account of thy son, as thou knowest not that Abraham took his son with him on the road to sacrifice him**." In this hour Sarah's loins trembled, and all her limbs shook. She was no more of this world. Nevertheless she aroused herself, and said, "All that God hath told Abraham, may he do it unto life and unto peace."

c. Legends of the Jews 1:5:261

While Abraham was engaged in the sacrifice, Satan went to Sarah, and appeared to her in the figure of an old man, very humble and meek, and said to her: "Dost thou not know all that Abraham has done unto thine only son this day? He took Isaac, and built an altar, slaughtered him, and brought him up as a sacrifice. Isaac cried and wept before his father, but he looked not at him, neither did he have compassion upon him." After saying these words to Sarah, Satan went away from her, and she thought him to be an old man from amongst the sons of men who had been with her son. Sarah lifted up her voice, and cried bitterly, saying: "O my son, Isaac, my son, O that I had this day died instead of thee. It grieves me for thee! After that I have reared thee and have brought thee up, my joy is turned into mourning over thee. In my longing for a child, I cried and prayed, till I bore thee at ninety. Now hast thou served this day for the knife and the fire. **But I console myself, it being the word of God, and thou didst perform the command of thy God, for who can transgress the word of our God, in whose hands is the soul of every living creature?** Thou art just, O Lord our God, for all Thy works are good and righteous, for I also rejoice with the word which Thou didst command, and **while mine eye weepeth bitterly, my heart rejoiceth**." And Sarah laid her head upon the bosom of one of her handmaids, and she became as still as a stone.

d. Legends of the Jews 1:5:262

She rose up afterward and went about making inquiries concerning her son, till she came to Hebron, and no one could tell her what had happened to her son. Her servants went to seek him in the house of Shem and Eber, and they could not find him, and they sought throughout the land, and he was not there. And, behold, Satan came to Sarah in the shape of an old man, and said unto her, "I spoke falsely unto thee, for **Abraham did not kill his son, and he is not dead," and when she heard the word, her joy was so exceedingly violent that her soul went out through joy**.

4. *There is a touch of bitter irony here: Isaac, unaware, cooperates in carrying some of the instruments of his own destruction.* ***He whose name means "laughter" appears to be on the verge of becoming the personification of tragedy.***

3 The *Legends of the Jews* is a chronological compilation of aggadah from hundreds of biblical legends in Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash.

a. Genesis 3:15

[15]And I will put enmity between you (the Serpent) and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; **he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel**."

1) Genesis 4:1

[1]Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, **"With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man."**

וַתֹּאמֶר קָנִיתִי אִישׁ אֶת־יְה

(*va-tomer kaniti ish et-Adonai*)

Lit: "and said 'I have gotten a man, *even* the LORD"

a) There is/are no word(s) "with the help of" or "by" or "from" the LORD.

2) Genesis 4:1 (PJE)

[1]And Adam knew Hava his wife, who had desired the Angel; and she conceived, and bare Kain; and she said, **I have acquired a man, the Angel of the Lord**.

3) **He whose name means "salvation" (Yeshua) is executed like a common criminal on a Roman cross**.

Matthew 1:21

[21]She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Yeshua (Salvation), because **he will save his people from their sins**."

Matthew 27:50

[50]And **when Yeshua had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit**.

b. Antiquities 1:226 (JOE)

[226]and (Abraham), having his son alone with him, he came to the mountain. **It was that mountain upon which King David later built the temple**.

5. **12.** ***And he said*** In biblical angelology, **God and His angels often interchange imperceptibly** ...

a. Genesis 22:10-12

[10]Then (Abraham) reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. [11]But **THE ANGEL OF THE LORD CALLED OUT TO HIM FROM HEAVEN**, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. [12]"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

1) There is a significant difference between angels generally and The Angel of the LORD specifically.

2) God and The Angel of LORD "often interchange imperceptibly" but **this is NOT true of angels generally**.

3) Genesis 16:7-9-13

[7]**The angel of the LORD** found Hagar near a spring ... [9](and spoke to her) ... [13]She gave this name to the **LORD** who spoke to her: **"You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."**

4) Exodus 3:2-6

[2]**The angel of the LORD appeared to him** in flames of fire ... Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up ... When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, **God called to him from within the bush** ... Moses said, "Here I am." "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." Then he said, "**I am the God of your father**, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." **Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God**.

5) Judges 6:11-22

[11]**The angel of the LORD ...** [12]**appeared to Gideon** (and) said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." [13]"But Sir," Gideon replied, "if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" ... [14]**The Lord turned to him** and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel" ... [17]"give me a sign that it is really you talking to me" ... [21]With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, **the angel of the LORD** touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And **the angel of the LORD disappeared. [22]When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"**

6) Zechariah 1:13-15

[13]So the LORD spoke kind and comforting words **to the angel who talked with me**. [14]Then the angel who was speaking to me said, "Proclaim this word: **This is what the LORD Almighty says**: 'I am very jealous for Jerusalem and Zion, [15]and I am very angry with the nations that feel secure. I was only a little angry, but they went too far with the punishment.'