

Generous Hospitality, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 07080629
Genesis 22:1-14 and Matthew 10:40-42
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The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is billed as God's testing of Abraham. "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."¹ As it is written, the story has a happy ending. Abraham raised his knife to kill his son in sacrifice to God and he heard the voice of an angel, which is an appearance or manifestation of God. In this instance, God 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."² Abraham saw a ram stuck by its horns, took it, and sacrificed the ram instead of his son.

I know that we are to revere God more than anything else. I know we are to obey God's commands. I know we are to trust God, but this story troubles me greatly. As Sue and I read this story in one of our devotions this past week, she broke into tears and could not finish reading. Can you, as a parent, imagine those eyes looking up at you, and a little voice asking, "Father...where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Here was a child who trusted his father. His question reflects his brilliance. He knew about sacrifices, because he saw the fire and the wood, but no lamb for the burnt offering.

Can you imagine the feeling in his heart when his father had bound him, set him upon the altar, and raised the knife above his neck? Those must have been the longest seconds in history: an old man with his only son. All the hopes and dreams, all the future promise for both father and son were about to be obliterated in one religious act.

Let's be honest. I am not interested in a god who would ask worshipers to kill a child, and I'll bet you would say the same. I am not interested in worshipping a god who demands that I kill my child in order to appease it—the god.

This is a story of trust in God. God needed to know that Abraham trusted God. God needs to know that we trust God: that we entrust our future to God. God needs to know that we would rather sacrifice our children to God's service than to the false gods that we set up in our lives... the gods everyone else around us is worshipping.

Remember, this child Isaac was Abraham's entire future. Abraham has already been cut off from his past. He had journeyed away from Haran, his ancestral home. Now, Abraham could be cut off from his future: the great promise given by God.

This is also a test of God's faith in Abraham. God places the shape of God's own future in Abraham's hands.

I look at this story in a different, a non-literal way. The event may have happened. An angel of God probably told Abraham not to harm his son. The frame of this story, however, most probably came from a different religious setting, perhaps a thousand years after the event itself. If you have been taught to worship the inerrant and literal truth of every word of the Bible, then you may have difficulty following me. If you have been taught never to ask questions about the stories in the Bible, this will be uncomfortable for you. But then, you will just have to go on living with the discomfort of worshipping a God who takes pleasure in child sacrifice.

Let us put this story in the larger context of the expanse of human history. Let us view it as a step in a growing human understanding of the nature of God. We can see it more clearly if we rise far above that altar on Mt. Moriah, far above the world of this patriarchal family, and far above Canaan and the Middle East. Let us rise to view the sweep of the history of human life before God.

As it is written, the story makes little sense. There was a day when everyone sacrificed their first

¹Genesis 22:2

²Genesis 22:14

born sons to god. There was a day when “everyone did it,” so it would not be a test of Abraham’s faith.

I think it is possible that something else happened on that day on Mt. Moriah when Abraham took his only son up to sacrifice him to god. The god was called by different names but here in the land of Canaan, this god was called Molech. This was a god to be feared, and in order to have a good and prosperous life, one had to appease this god by the ritual sacrifice of your firstborn son. This was true because one’s welfare, retirement, health, and pension benefits were all represented in having male children. If you got rid of your firstborn son, you had to trust that this god Molech would provide you with other male children in the near future.

Those who visit Megiddo, the five millennia old city in northern Israel, will see an altar to the god Molech. On that altar, human beings were sacrificed. As I looked upon that altar, I had a revelation. In the grand sweep of the history of humanity, Abraham is the one who said, “I will not do what all the other parents do. I will not worship a god who demands the murder of my child.”

He had waited many years to have a child. He was now older and wiser, and had had a long relationship with this God Yahweh. We call Abraham the “Father of our Faith.” One reason is that he was the one who brought the worship of God (JHWH) with him in his journey from Haran, far to the north, down to the promised land of Canaan. Abraham was the one who made God portable!

Worship rituals throughout history have been more the inventions of mankind than commandments from God. I believe that Abraham is the one who said, “Yahweh, the God who led me to this land, has allowed me to prosper, and I am grateful, and I dedicate my son to Yahweh’s service. That dedication involves living, not killing.”

We have the advantage of looking at this story through Jesus. As Christians, we believe that the nature of God was revealed more fully through Jesus’ life and teachings. Jesus taught us how important was the life of each child. He was the one who said, “Let the children come to me.”³ He said, “whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”⁴

Jesus taught generous hospitality. This is the way of God, and God is still speaking! As the people of God, we are not consumers of the Gospel, we are providers of the Gospel. The God who speaks asks us to provide radical hospitality to the world. Jesus asks us to open our hearts, our arms, our homes, and our church doors to others. Welcome all in the name of Christ. Offer gifts of compassion: kindness to others.

If we look at God as one whose anger is satisfied through child sacrifice, we will have a difficult time opening our hearts to others in compassion. If, on the other hand, we see God as one who cares for each and every human as God’s own child, then we will be more inclined to care for others. Practicing radical hospitality, we will offer the cup of cold water to strangers and visitors. We will share the Gospel by participating in Meals on Wheels and the Allied Churches Shelter meal.

Jesus is not asking for extravagant shows of hospitality. Simple gifts suffice. Sharing food through Loaves and Fishes, settling a refugee family from Burma, taking a meal to a family in grief, visiting a shut-in in her home, and praying with her. These are the proclamation of the Good news of God’s kingdom.

God’s kingdom is already present among us and we can see it in these acts of compassion. God is not one to demand child sacrifice or to test our faith. God is a God who is compassionate and cares about each and every person as a child of God’s.

³Luke 18:16

⁴Matthew 10:42