

Moving southward to the region of Ai and Bethel Abram erected an altar eastward from Bethel. There he built an altar and "called on the name of the Lord" (12:8). At Shechem an altar had been erected after God's revelation. At Bethel Abram takes the initiative and erects an altar in order to call upon God. In calling upon God he acknowledged God's mercy and help very likely expressed in prayer, praise and thanksgiving. It signified Abram's attitude of dependence upon God and his concern about maintaining a vital relationship with God.

Calling on the name of the Lord distinguished an earlier generation from the godless descendants of Cain (Gen 4:25-26). With the birth of Seth hope was renewed that individuals again would call on God.

When Abram migrated southward to live near Hebron he again built an altar. No divine revelation is noted but the erection of an altar very likely expressed his desire to maintain communion with God.

Since Abram built his first altar at a place of divine revelation he apparently made it his priority to erect an altar as he moved to another location. The altar was his meeting place with God. Very likely he offered sacrifices even though none are noted in the record nor is there any indication that God required altars or offerings. Both seemed to be normal means of responding to God in maintaining this divine-human relationship.

The first recorded command by God for man to bring an offering was given to Abraham. God instructed him to sacrifice his son Isaac. For more than three decades Abraham had fostered a vital relationship with God using various altars he had built for this purpose reminding him of God's verbal and visible revelation. Now came divine instructions for Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering on a mountain divinely designated in the region of Moriah. This involved building a new altar.

During the first 25 years Abraham's relationship with God was repeatedly tested as he awaited the fulfillment of God's promise that he and Sarah would have a son. Abraham's response to God's promise was that he "believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). During the passing of years Abraham conformed to contemporary customs through the birth of Ishmael but God renewed his promises in repeated assurances that the true son would come through Sarah. This was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac.

The early years of Isaac's life may have been a period of unprecedented optimism and hope for Abraham. In response to divine guidance he had left his homeland and relatives, in obedience to God he expelled Ishmael even though it must have been very difficult for him to part with his son. As Isaac grew into boyhood Abraham must have pondered anew the promises for the future that were vested in his son Isaac.

For Abraham the severest test of his relationship with God was pending. Would he be willing to sacrifice his only son at God's request?

Abraham dearly loved his son Isaac. Awaiting his birth for almost 25 years it was most reasonable that Abraham loved his son more than any treasure in this world. In his paternal care Abraham "may have been in extreme danger of coming by slow degree and in a manner hardly observed by himself to the point where he would have loved his son more than his God."⁵ Now he faced the simple but crucial question, did he love his son