

Isaac more than he loved God?

In the contemporary religious culture it very likely was considered appropriate for man to offer the best that he had even if it involved the sacrifice of children in expressing the highest moments of worship. There is no indication that Abraham had been given the divine prohibition of human sacrifice such as was given later to Moses, (Lev 18:21). Consequently he may not have considered it wholly irreconcilable with true religion.

Nevertheless Abraham must have been very perplexed and troubled. His faith in God undoubtedly was disturbed by his intellect and reason. Had not God promised concerning Isaac that "I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (17: 19)? Would God reduce his own worship momentarily to the inhuman rites of Baal in requiring human sacrifice?

In his experience Abraham had witnessed the miraculous power of God in giving him and Sarah this son Isaac when both of them were beyond the normal age to have children (Gen 17:15-16; 18:11-15). Having witnessed this miracle Abraham had a reasonable basis to believe that God could or would perform another miracle if he offered Isaac as a sacrifice. This reasoning however was only possible within a context of faith in God (cf. Heb 11:17-19).

Abraham's faith in God was expressed in obedience as he took Isaac and two servants with him on the three day journey to the regions of Moriah. It is reasonable to assume that he did not share this awesome mission with Sarah whose maternal concerns naturally would have caused her to object. With Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham the knife and fire the two ascended the Moriah mountain. En route Isaac asked the most piercing question ever addressed by a son to his father, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham having proceeded beyond the point of any reasonable or rational explanation gave an answer reflecting his faith in God, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."

With firm resolution Abraham continued making preparation for offering his son as he constructed an altar, bound Isaac and with knife in hand was poised to make the sacrifice. In his obedience to God he demonstrated that his love for God exceeded his love for his only son Isaac. His faith reached beyond reason and understanding and explanation in his willingness to make this sacrifice. Concerning this crucial experience in Abraham's life J. Oswald Dykes observed, "Obedience was suffered to proceed to that point at which it became undeniable that this worshipper of Jehovah was as ready as any Canaanite to give his best to his God."⁶

At the point of actually slaying his son Abraham was halted by a divine voice saying, "Abraham, Abraham, do not lay a hand on the boy . . . I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

A ram caught by its horns in a thicket was then substituted for Isaac as a burnt offering on the altar Abraham had built for the sacrifice God asked him to make. In this manner human sacrifice was divinely prohibited.

In this first sacrifice prescribed by God Abraham was confronted with the ultimate essential in the human-divine relationship. The sacrifice God