

The Long and Winding Road Abraham

If one picks up a Bible, the very first writings are five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The books of Genesis through Deuteronomy are five, yet they form a whole. They became five by virtue of needing to be put on scrolls, and scrolls could only be so long before they became unwieldy.

So, while there are five “books,” scholars are quick to assign them an appropriate name as a single entity. That name in Hebrew is “Torah” or “Law.” Another name scholars give the books is the “Pentateuch,” a word in Greek meaning “five books.”

The books center on Moses. Not surprisingly, they are often called, “the five books of Moses,” although Moses couldn’t have written them in their entirety. (For example, they contain the story of Moses’ death.) They relate the story of God using Moses to bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the cusp of the “Promised Land.” This storyline consumes four of the five books (Exodus through Deuteronomy).

The book of Genesis (from the Greek word denoting an “origin” or “beginning”) serves as the set up and prelude that makes sense of the rest of the Moses storyline. It is in Genesis that one learns who the Israelites were. They are the offspring of a man named Abraham through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob. It is also in Genesis that one learns what the “Promised Land” is. It is land that God promised Abraham would be his and his descendants. Genesis also explains how the Israelites initially landed in Egypt in need of freedom.

In the book of origins, the storyline of Abraham is seminal, and it flows through the story of Moses, through all of Israel’s history, straight into the pages of the New Testament. Consider a story about Jesus recounted in the eighth chapter of John’s gospel.

Jesus was explaining to certain Jews how important it was to abide “in Jesus,” and those Jews were perplexed at his meaning. Jesus explained that if they knew the truth (Jesus), then the truth would set them free.

Those Jews responded that they were automatically free, because they were children of Abraham. Evidently, it didn’t occur to them that the Israelites in bondage in Egypt during the days of Moses were also children of Abraham, yet they desperately needed freeing!

Jesus harkened back to that story with his reference to being a liberator, but the bondage from which Jesus would liberate was more than simply that of release from political tyranny. Jesus was going to release people from a bondage more severe. He was going to release people from the bondage set up by the original story in Genesis, the sinning of

Adam and Eve and the curses and results from that sin. Jesus was explaining that he was the promised Messiah and would bring liberation from all that sin entailed. Jesus was the door into the true Promised Land that God had in place since the very beginning.

Those engaging Jesus didn't follow what he meant. Jesus emphasized his point by explaining that he was speaking of God the Father's deliverance through Jesus. The Jews then replied that Abraham was their father, but Jesus challenged that and went back to their genealogy before Abraham. Abraham was not the first human. He had ancestry too. Their real and ultimate father was found before Abraham.

Once Adam and Eve had followed the instructions of the serpent, their lives reflected that choice. In a true sense, those challenging Jesus were no longer the spirit-filled people God had made, but were a creation of Satan. Satan's work altered their state and they became, in that way, children of Satan, rebellious in nature and living in sin.

This incensed those Jews and they called Jesus names and accused Jesus of being under Satan's control ("you are a Samaritan and you have a demon!" Jn. 8:48). Jesus countered that he was nothing of the sort. Jesus was liberation from death, liberation from the sentence of Adam and Eve's rebellion.

The Jews replied that Jesus was clearly deluded, because everyone dies, even Abraham and the prophets. Jesus explained that he surpassed even Abraham. Abraham had rejoiced at seeing the day of Jesus the Redeemer.

Your father Abraham exulted in seeing my day. He saw it and it gave him joy! (Jn. 8:56).

At this, the response was incredulous. In reply, the point was made that Jesus wasn't even fifty years old. It wasn't possible for him to have seen Abraham from thousands of years earlier. Jesus replied, "Before the genesis of Abraham, there was the 'I AM'" (Jn. 8:58).

The Jews hearing this picked up stones to kill Jesus. They believed he had violated one of the most important commandments. For reasons I give below, they thought Jesus had taken the name of God in vain.

But Jesus did not take the name of God in vain. Rather Jesus was laying claim to the most important role spoken of in the Old Testament. Jesus was claiming to be the fulfillment of the long-awaited prophecy of Genesis and beyond. To best understand this and the storyline of Jesus and Abraham, one needs to go back through the pages of time, and unpack certain historical events in the books of Moses. A good place to start is with Moses, and then the storyline can go back further to Abraham.

Abraham and the Three Visitors

Immediately after Abram's rescue of Lot and interactions with Melchizedek, God appeared to Abram and the interaction was most interesting. God tells Abram,

Fear not, Abram, for I am a shield to you; your reward will be very great (Gen. 15:1).

Because modern Bibles have inserted "chapters" and "verses," it is easy to miss the connections between verses like this and what happened in the previous chapter and verses. This one is glaring.

Abram has just rescued not only Lot, but others that had been captured as well. One of the beneficiaries of Abram's defeating the five warlords was the "king" or ruler of Sodom. As Genesis reveals shortly, Sodom was a most unrighteous town, on the road to judgment and destruction.

The king of Sodom offered a reward to Abram for rescue, but Abram refused. Abram didn't take booty or profit lest the king of Sodom boast that he was the reason for Abram's economic success. It is following this proclamation that chapter 14 closes and the verse in chapter 15 asserts God would be true to his word and would be Abram's blessing.

Abram responded to God expressing personal frustration. Abram doesn't have a child, and sees little point in any "great reward." There is no one in his family to pass the reward onto!

God takes Abram out under the night sky, challenging Abram to count the stars. God promises Abram that Abram will have progeny, and that his offspring will be innumerable, just as the night stars. Abram trusted that God was honest and right, and Abram's trust was credited as "righteousness," a word generally used to reflect a right relationship with God, as well as good moral actions and deeds. Abraham's faith was reckoned as equivalent to good deeds before the Lord.

After the promise of innumerable offspring, Genesis follows the story as Abram and his wife Sarai attempt to make true the promise of God by giving Abram Sarai's servant Hagar to mother an offspring. Ishmael is born to Hagar, but is clearly not the son of the promise God had made. Abram tries to manufacture an heir, as if his actions can fulfill God's promise.

Genesis 17 relates that the LORD appears to Abram again at the age of 99 where, for a second time, God promised a covenant through Abram's offspring. Not only would Abraham have a child, but through Abraham's offspring would come nations, kings, and many others. God would have an everlasting covenant through Abraham's offspring throughout all generations.

In this conversation, God changed Abram's name. Henceforth, "Abram," meaning "exalted father," is to be named "Abraham," meaning, "father of a multitude." God then instructed Abraham to circumcise himself and every male in the household then and in future generations (on the eighth day after birth for all male children).

God further instructs Abraham to call Sarai "Sarah" (two alternate pronunciations of the Hebrew word for "princess." God promised that Sarah was going to give birth to the promised son, even though she was ninety years old. Abraham laughs to himself over this promise, likely out of joy and astonishment. The Hebrew for "and he laughed" is literally "and Isaac." This is a subtlety in the Hebrew lost on the English reader, as Isaac becomes the name of Abraham's son through Sarah. God then instructs Abraham to name the coming child "Isaac," or "he laughs" in the Hebrew.

Following this, in Genesis chapter 18, there is a third encounter with God where God, in the form of three, once again assures Abraham of a coming birth of a son. Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent by the "oaks of Mamre" when "the LORD appeared to him." Abraham looks up, but does not see one LORD. Instead he sees three men standing before him. Abraham readies his best hospitality, giving instructions for food and drink. Verses nine and ten then make an interesting statement:

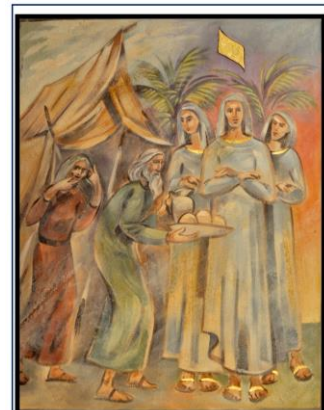
They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.

While the passage earlier indicated three *men* were standing before Abraham, here we are told that the one speaking was the LORD. Sarah laughs this time and it is again the LORD that says,

The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son."

It is during this same conversation that the LORD tells Abraham about the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Over the centuries, Christian art has seized on this story as one where the three visitors represent the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Getty museum holds a 16th century painting of the scene called "Abraham and the Three Angels." In the painting, the visitors look very much alike in personal features as well as clothing. This is typical of many paintings of this scene, with the three being close to identical as representative of the Trinity. In many old paintings of this scene, the angels



The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre... 'Sarah your wife will have a son.' (Gen. 18:1, 10)

are also painted androgynous, denoting that God in his fullness in Scripture is beyond the simple representation of a sexed being like humans.

The history behind seeing the visitation as one of the Trinity goes back at least as far as Augustine (354-430). In his work on the Trinity, Augustine noted the way Abraham shifted his conversation between the singular and the plural when addressing the three men.¹ Augustine emphasized,

And then, setting forth in due order after what manner the Lord appeared to him, it has added the account of the three men, whom Abraham invites to his hospitality in the plural number, and afterwards speaks to them in the singular number as one.²

Some scholars see the text as shifting between the idea there were three men visiting or the one LORD visiting.³ Augustine explained,

Whereas three appeared, Abraham there speaks to one as the Lord.⁴

Augustine explained the three as the same in the story in ways that bring forward the paintings like that in the Getty and that on the previous page,

But since three men appeared, and no one of them is said to be greater than the rest either in form, or age, or power, why should we not here understand, as visibly intimated by the visible creature, the equality of the Trinity, and one and the same substance in three persons?⁵

Many throughout church history have seen this passage as prophetically teaching not only of Jesus the Messiah, but also of the Holy Spirit.

THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC

¹ While this is hard to pick up in the English translation, the Hebrew has singular verbs in verse 3 but plural verbs in verses 4 and 5. So in verse 3, Abraham speaks of “finding favor in *your sight*” [singular] and a request that the visitor [singular] “not pass by.” Verses 4 and 5 use plurals “wash your [plural] feet” and “rest yourselves [plural],” etc.

² Augustine, *On the Trinity*, (Eerdmans Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 3), trans’d by Haddan, Chap. 10 at 19.

³ Reno, Russell, Genesis, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Brazos Press 2010) at 182ff.

⁴ Augustine Chap. 11 at 21.

⁵ *Ibid.* at 20.

After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, an encounter with Abimelech (king of Gerar), Sarah conceives and gives birth to a son. As instructed, Abraham names the son Isaac. At the time, Abraham is 100 years old, and here is perhaps, the seminal story referenced by Jesus when talking to the argumentative Jews, saying,

Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would *see* my day. He saw it and was glad (Jn. 8:56).

Genesis chapter 22 relates the account of Abraham being called to sacrifice Isaac.

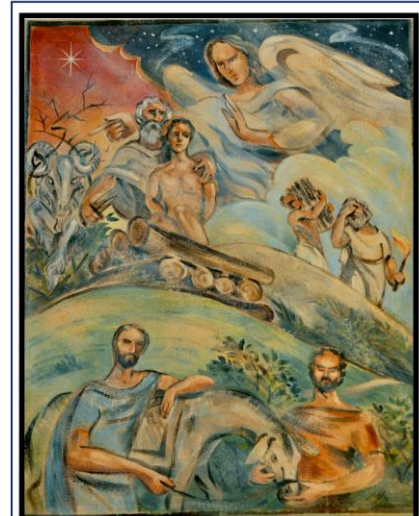
After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." (Gen. 22:1-14 ESV).

Like the Melchizedek story, this one seems to immediately offer not just words of prophecy related to Christ, but events of prophecy as well. One should note the comparison between these events with those noted in Genesis 12, where God called Abram out of Ur. In both cases, the rare Hebrew verbal command "Go" is used. Further in Genesis 12, Abram is

told to go to an unknown country while in Genesis 22, Abraham is told to go to an unknown mountain.

Abram, his name at the time, was promised that by going, God would make a great nation of him (Gen. 12:2). God also promised that he would make a great nation of Isaac (Gen. 17:19). Even as Abraham took Isaac to the sacrifice, the New Testament book of Hebrews tells us that Abraham considered that God “was able even to raise him from the dead” (Heb. 11:19). Abraham’s faith in God is evident in his statement to the men left behind with the mules. Abraham made clear both he *and* Isaac would return (Gen. 22:5). Of note, once Abraham made the heart and mind decision to sacrifice Isaac, it took three days before Isaac was, in essence, returned to Abraham alive (Gen. 22:4). This bears a resemblance to the three days that Jesus the Messiah stayed in the tomb before his resurrection and return from the dead.



Then God said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love... And sacrifice him there as a burnt offering. (Gen. 22:2)

The story begins with God’s call to Abraham that is echoed two thousand years later in the Gospel of John. God tells Abraham, “Take your son, *your only son*, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there” (Gen. 22:2). John noted that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” in sacrifice (Jn. 3:16).

God ultimately led Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah. 2 Chronicles 3:1 identified Mount Moriah as the hill where Solomon built the temple. Almost a millennium after Solomon, and two millennia after Abraham, this is the same hill where the second temple was built, and where the curtain that separated the Holy of Holies was torn in two at the death of Christ (Mark 15:38).

Once Abraham and Isaac arrived at Mount Moriah, the text adds the clause that,
they went both of them together.

This echoes in the ultimate harmony between Father and Son in the sacrifice of Christ. For while “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,” Jesus so loved the world that he came! He was faithful and obedient as a Son, “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8).

As Abraham and Isaac made their way to the area for the sacrifice, Isaac carried his own wood for the sacrifice. This parallels Jesus being made to carry the wooden cross on which he would be sacrificed.

Isaac asked his father where the sacrificial animal was. Isaac specifically asked where the lamb was, rather than a bull or bird, other creatures commonly sacrificed. Prophetically, Abraham replied,

God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering (Gen. 22:8).

This is ultimately exactly what God did. He was not using the sacrifice of a human father's son to atone for sins. The Sacrifice was of God's own son. The lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world is the capital S—Son of the capital F—Father, not the son of the father (Abraham meaning "father of many").

In this sense, the prophetic voice of John the Baptist echoed two thousand years later when, upon seeing Christ, he proclaimed,

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29).

Isaac was bound feet and hands upon the wood, as Jesus would be two millennia later (Gen. 22:9; Mt. 27:2). Then, when Abraham was about to kill Isaac, an angel of the Lord intervened. God stopped Abraham, who then saw a ram caught in the thicket. The ram was substituted for Isaac, a foreshadowing substitute for what God would later provide.

Another prominent note in the foreshadowing of Christ comes in the fact that the place of sacrifice was secured on the third day (Gen. 22:4). The echo of the "third day" reverberates in the New Testament once the sacrifice of Christ is completed with the resurrection.

As noted earlier, this story line seems the likely candidate for the direct thoughts of Jesus when he proclaimed to the Jews that, "Abraham rejoiced that he would *see* my day. He saw it and was glad" (Jn. 8:56). Every father can attest, there should be no doubt about the day of Abraham's life that made him most "glad" and "rejoicing." It surely was the day that Abraham found out that he would not have to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

But there are deeper indications that this story drove Jesus' comment. The Isaac story so fits the gospel account of Jesus that in living it Abraham "saw" the day of Jesus with great clarity, even if Abraham didn't realize it at the time. A key is the word "saw." While John wrote his gospel in Greek, Jesus would have been speaking in either Hebrew or Aramaic.

Laced within the story of Abraham and Isaac, the Hebrew word for "see" (*ra'ah*) is used repeatedly. It is used where Abraham looks up and "sees" [*ra'ah*] the mountain where the sacrifice is to take place (Gen. 22:4). It is used where Abraham looks up and "sees" [*ra'ah*] the ram that is caught in the thicket as a substitute for Isaac (Gen. 22:13). It is also used in places where most English Bibles translates it as "provides." It is found in Genesis 22:8 – "Abraham said, 'God will provide [*ra'ah*] for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.'" Importantly, it is used twice in the verse where Abraham prophetically names the place in Genesis 22:14 – "So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The LORD will

provide' [*ra'ah*] as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided [*ra'ah*]."

After this episode, the LORD again visits Abraham and confirms that his offspring will number like stars in the sky and grains of sand on the seashore.

Conclusion

Before concluding one should note that there is much about this story that puzzles and causes discomfort among many. For example, the story begins with the explanation that

After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him...

The idea of God performing such a test rankles many. One might note, however, that some scholars believe the statement of "testing" at the beginning of the story is not to emphasize that God goes about testing people in such a manner. Rather it is included to make sure that no one ever thought that the story could be used to justify the child sacrifices seen in other contemporary cultures.⁶

Of course, the content of the story shows God putting Abraham to the test, but in a manner that demonstrated Abraham's faith. Surely God, who knows the words on one's tongues before they are expressed, pre-knew Abraham's choice. Abraham's faith was actualized by his actions, something probably most important to Abraham!

The Prophets' Message

If the prophets' message ended with the saga of Abraham, there would be plenty to establish the identity of Jesus as the promised Messiah. He is the solution to the sin of Adam and Eve, a male offspring of woman, who conquered the work of Satan, though it exacted a personal price. Jesus is the clothing provided by God to cover the shame of sin. Jesus is the ark that rescues God's followers from the coming destruction of judgment on sin in the world.

Jesus is the culmination of the Abraham story, as the descendant through whom all the world would be blessed. He is a high priest of God like Melchizedek, who reigns as a King of Peace and a righteous king, and who properly receives the worship of Abraham and his offspring, imparting his blessings to those bowing before him.

He is the fullness of God. He is the sacrifice that God provided, at the location prophesied, in a manner that was foreshadowed, and with a resurrection that was assured.

⁶ Sarna, Nahum, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (JPS 1989) at 151.

If this was *all* the prophets said, this would be enough, but this story has a long way to go. There is much more...

Points for Home

1. “...*these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*” (Jn. 20:30).

I have often wished to eyewitness something so miraculous there could be no doubt that it involved the holy hand of a mighty God. Yet in truth, my life is that way. That is seen not only in what has brought me to this point today, but in the history that undergirds my faith.

John chose marvelous ways to underscore the true nature of Jesus. He gave not only a narrative, but he drew a map from prophetic words of the Old Testament. Deeper than simple miracles, John brought out the truth of Jesus as greater than life or death, law or religious system, time and space. Jesus is not a great man, nor a dead prophet. He is the unique Son of God who came in love and power and promises and will come again to redeem his own.

2. “*see...see...see...*” (Gen. 22).

Over and over Abraham saw what God had before him. In so doing, Abraham saw Jesus. I wonder how often I fail to see God because I am not looking. God’s hand is no less active in our lives today, even if he is not expressing prophetic events about his coming salvation on Calvary. God is at work. He calls, he sends, he affirms. I want to open my eyes to see and then do!

3. “*The LORD appeared...three men*” (Gen. 18:1-2).

We do not know if the three that appeared to Abraham were the Trinity. But we do know that God takes an interest in his people, that God has a plan, and that God’s plan unfolds before our very eyes, in what may start out as ordinary days. We should pause for a moment and contemplate this. God takes an interest in his people. Do we belong to him? If so, we know *he is interested in us*, in what we say, what we do, and where we are going! Let us commit anew to acknowledging the LORD in all our ways, trusting him to make our paths straight! (Prov. 3:6).