

Abraham's Faith Tested. Nahor's Descendants. Sarah's Death.

Genesis 22 and 23

Abraham's Sacrifice on Moriah

An unknown number of years had passed since the preceding chapters. Isaac had grown into a youth of perhaps 12 or 13. Abraham's heart's desire was fulfilled and, moreover, he had a vast and relatively secure place in which to live in the area where the Philistines held power.

Then it happened. On a certain night, God called him and, so it seemed, in one blow destroyed his entire future. He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you," — heaped up words which came down on him and dealt him a blow like one by a sledgehammer. Moreover, they left no room for misunderstanding. God had spoken clearly, had first called him by his name, and Abraham had understood everything correctly, had even answered, "Here am I." No, it was also not the voice of an evil demon trying to destroy God's work; this did not even occur to Abraham; besides, nowhere does Scripture indicate that Satan is able to address anyone with a clear human voice other than through a man or a beast, and in the latter case it was a miracle which he would not be able to perform without God's will.

It can be said that this is the heaviest demand which God made of a mere creature, taking into account that with Isaac was connected the promise of the innumerable seed and the salvation of the world.

Besides this, this seemingly senseless sacrifice was not to be made in or near the camp, but about three days' travel away, in the land of Moriah, that is, in the area of Jerusalem, where the hill Moriah lies. This gave

Abraham time to reconsider. He would not only sacrifice quickly, in a moment of despair, but after much thought. Only in this way would it be of value.

Abraham obeyed. He arose early, saddled his ass, and took two servants, after first splitting the wood—which seems to indicate that he had not been given the command in the course of the previous evening, so that he would have had time to prepare himself during the night. There is no better remedy for temptation of the flesh than immediately carrying out God's order.

On the third day, he arrived in the land of Moriah. To the south of Jerusalem, one is shown a jutting mountain top, the Abu Tor, where God allegedly showed Abraham the hill Moriah; later the temple was built on the Moriah. On this Abu Tor, Abraham left his servants behind—also an act of faith: they would likely have wanted to prevent this human sacrifice. Alone with Isaac he went on and climbed the Moriah.

His statement, “I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you,” is remarkable. Abraham was not obligated to explain the matter to them. Above all, the Word of Hebrews 11:17ff. applies here: that he considered that God was able to raise his son from the dead. Because Abraham spoke so decidedly, and because this small piece is recorded in Scripture, we will have to see his speaking here as a profession of his faith. He comforted himself with the promise. Holding on to the promise and, at the same time, obeying the command is the mark of true faith.

The simplicity in which this “going in faith” is pictured makes it so beautiful. Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering from his servants and laid it on Isaac; he himself took the fire pot and the knife. “So they went both of them together.”

The boy's question, “My father . . . behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” is understandable. And how full of faith is the answer: “God will provide Himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Sufficient for Isaac, at this point.

“So they went both of them together.” Again it is said. Going in faith is going forward. A quiet journey. Going down the mountains, they walked along a road in the valley, past old Jebus of Melchizedek, and then up the Moriah, about 2 km. from Abu Tor. There Abraham builds an altar of stones, gathered together from the abundant supply on the mountains, and on it he lays the wood in order.

And then comes the most difficult and painful moment: first, informing Isaac of the actual situation; then binding his son and laying him on the altar, which Isaac quietly allowed; and then the grasping of the knife. . . to perform the last deed: the slaughter of his son.

But then, suddenly, the call of the Angel of the LORD sounds from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” Twice, to force Abraham to listen quickly. “Do not lay your hand on the lad 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.”

When Abraham looks around (was he perhaps already seeking the lamb of which he had previously spoken to Isaac?), he notices a ram, that with lively leaping had become caught in a thicket by the horns (divine providence!), and he makes haste to offer this animal in the place of his son. Figuratively speaking, he had received his son back from the dead (Hebrews 11:19).

Then the Angel of the LORD speaks the Word of the LORD, confirming with an oath the promise made previously with regard to his fatherhood. *For now Abraham has proved his faith by his deed* (James 2:17, 20-22, 26). That was the purpose behind the testing of his faith. And he has become the father of the innumerable many who go in his footsteps and thus prove their true, living faith through trials (cf. James 1:2-8).

Message Concerning Nahor’s Children

After these things it was told Abraham: “Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor.” This has no relation to the preceding part as far as time goes, but it does relate to the same matter. Therefore, we do not read about when it took place. It could be that 20 years had passed

in which nothing worthy of a place in Scripture occurred. Everyday life had gone on, uninterrupted by any new divine revelation. Considering the form and the contents of the message, we may assume that in all the time since the birth of Isaac, and perhaps even before that, as long as Abraham had been in Canaan, there had been no contact between Abraham and his brother, Nahor, in Haran. The distance was about 1000 - 1200 km. (Amsterdam to Warsaw). There were no means of communication, and Abraham had had no pressing reason to leave his whole encampment behind to visit relatives.

But then, what can the reason be for Nahor to outfit a caravan for such a long journey, to discover the whereabouts of Abraham in that far country? Would it have been to announce the birth of his sons, who by now were fathers, perhaps grandfathers? What was the sense of such a birth announcement?

There is something to be said for the theory that—although Scripture does not specifically mention it—it occurred when their father, Terah, had died, as also Ishmael later received notice of Abraham's death (see 25:9). Outline 8 has already given the calculation of Terah's age from Scriptural data, and we have seen that he still lived for 60 years after Abram was called and went to Canaan. It could be that Nahor heard, by way of trading caravans, where Abraham was staying, but we do not know anything definite. If we may connect this visit with the death of Terah, Isaac was then 35 years old (he was born 25 years after Abraham arrived in Canaan).

At the time of this visit, family circumstances, of course, were also exchanged. Abraham then reported the birth of his son (if he was in the camp, the messenger will undoubtedly have seen him), and it was to this that the messenger replied: "Behold, Milcah, she also (literal translation) has borne children to your brother Nahor" Notice that *she also*. This fragment of the conversation is important to the author of Genesis, while the other circumstances are left out. Milcah also bore sons to Nahor; Scripture then mentions eight, as well as four by Reuma, a concubine. Not all names are mentioned, for example, not Laban, a grandson, also no daughters and granddaughters, except Rebekah and also the grandson,

Aram (probably the father of the Arameans, who have played such an important role in the history of Israel) is mentioned.

Inquiring after the significance of this portion of Scripture, we should notice the following points:

- a) These names are not to be found in the genealogy of Terah (11:27-29) where they could be expected, from which follows that *they are not recorded from a genealogical point of view*.
- b) Of the grandchildren, only Aram and *Rebekah* are mentioned, this with regard to the continuation of the history.
- c) The bringing of these tidings can be found between the relating of God's oath on Moriah and Isaac's marriage, *so that a connection is drawn with the future of Abraham's seed*.
- d) Verse 23 again states that Nahor was Abraham's brother. Why is this repeated in this small portion? We should see this name "brother" (that can be regarded as a comment by the author of Genesis) as a statement showing *religious kinship* (cf. 14:14,16).

Combining this evidence, we see that already for some time God was busy taking care that there would be a generation in which knowledge of God had not died out, from which descendants of Abraham could obtain wives (Rebekah, Leah, Rachel). Noteworthy is the deliberate mention later of the fact that Judah and Simeon both took Canaanite women (38:2; 46:10). This could indicate that the other sons of Jacob, who for the greatest part had grown up in Haran, had also obtained their wives there. God took care that Abraham's generations did not have to mix with the heathens.

Thus the list of Nahor's sons is placed in the light of the seed, of Isaac, of Christ. Nahor, Terah's second son, has complemented the oldest one, Abraham. God's peculiar providence.

Sarah Dead and Buried

When Sarah was 127 years old, she died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron)

in the land of Canaan. “And Abraham *went* in to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.” The Dutch “Staten-bijbel” (and also the King James Version —J.P.) reads: “and Abraham *came* . . .” which is the primary meaning of the word used in the original, and the marginal note explains “in the tent of his wife.” This explanation, in my view, is a little too simplistic. Most commonly known translations use the word “came.” In my opinion, it is plausible that Abraham, who at that time lived in Hebron, was out of the encampment at the time of Sarah’s death. Most likely, then, he was temporarily with his son in the camp at (or near) Beersheba (24:62; 25:11), in other words, about a day’s journey from Hebron. Abraham and Sarah had returned to their previous habitat near Hebron to spend the last of their life in Canaan, and to be buried there (of course, taking a small part of their personnel and livestock with them), while the main camp stayed in the Philistine region, headed by Isaac. That Sarah’s burial had to wait a little longer is no problem there, for Sarah will have been embalmed, the technique being well-known, also outside of Egypt. That the funeral had to be postponed also happened at Abraham’s and Isaac’s death (25:9; 35:29). Notice that it is mentioned twice that Hebron was in Canaan, a fact unknown to no one then or now; the purpose undoubtedly is to show that it was their desire to be buried there.

Having returned to his residence near Hebron at the death-notice, Abraham, after the customary mourning, went to the Hittites of Hebron to buy a grave. It is remarkable that Hittites are mentioned, while 14:13 speaks of an Amorite population. The case is that, as a result of a still uncompleted migration of Hittites to Asia Minor, part travelled on to Palestine, and in the time of Abraham, an advance settlement had established itself in Hebron. The times in which the patriarch lived were troubled times, and Abraham’s moving of his camp to the Negeb, where it had been even before the birth of Isaac, could well have been a result of the present circumstances (20:1; 21:34; 22:19).

The negotiations were conducted in the gate of the city, where the people were gathered. Abraham, who had lived here again for quite some time with Sarah, was well-known and well-favoured (23:6). The negotiations were orientally courteous.

Abraham started by introducing himself as a stranger and sojourner, desiring of the people a grave to bury his dead. This was a request which normally was not lightly complied with, at least if one wanted to buy a personal grave with the adjoining piece of land, for they did not readily give land to strangers. But God let Abraham's trip to Hebron fare well. The answer, that he could take the choicest of the sepulchres, was very encouraging, because it shows the goodwill of those present.

However, that was not the end of the negotiation. Abraham knew oriental customs well. He therefore stood up (they negotiated in a squatting position) and with a polite bow thanked them for their goodwill. Sitting down again he asks the people to entreat for him Ephron (one of the notables) to sell him the cave at the end of his field for the full price. But Ephron showed his willingness to give away the field with the cave; this friendly gesture only had the purpose of continuing the negotiations. It is remarkable that he did not wish to sell the cave without the field.

Again Abraham rises to bow in thanks, and then in the hearing of all he declares his desire to pay the full price. Then Ephron answers: "My lord, listen to me; a piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead." The price was very high, considering that that amount, in Babylonia at that time, would buy a piece of land of 1 kilometre by 1/2 a kilometre. The price will probably have been inflated ten times. But Abraham did not even consider bargaining; he knew he was a stranger, and obviously wanted to please Ephron and the people; besides, he was rich.

Thus the sale was completed, and the money weighed out by a slave. Naturally, a bill of sale was made up in duplicate, written in clay, hardened in the sun. What we read in verses 17 and 18 can be seen as the essence of the bill of sale. Abraham's copy was kept by the family and the author of Genesis knew of it.

So Abraham could bury his wife on his *own* land, granted to him by God's goodness as a pledge of all the promised possessions. Abraham, too, was buried there, and Isaac and Jacob, Rebekah and Leah. The fathers shunned pagan death-cults and ancestor-worship.

That small fragment of his declaration, that he was a stranger and a sojourner, was later captured in the spotlight of Hebrews 11 and profoundly interpreted in verse 13.

This whole story of the burial of Sarah is to illuminate Abraham's being a stranger. Hebrews 11 gives the deepest religious significance: being a stranger on earth. According to Philippians 3:20 we are citizens of a commonwealth in heaven. The word "stranger" is used for someone who only stays somewhere a short time, travelling through a country, for someone who is a *pilgrim* (a strongly accented idea in songs, for example). Above all, however, being a stranger in Scripture occurs in the sense of: *living* (the Hebrew has another word for this) in a country as a stranger (Exodus 20:10; 22:21; Ruth 1:1; etc.). This sense is being used here. He lived in Canaan as a stranger, longing for the heavenly homeland (Hebrews 11:15, 16). This should also be the case with us.

Questions

1. (Re: verse 1) What has been the purpose of what is related in Genesis 22?
2. Is there any indication that Abraham had to struggle within himself to obey?
3. (Re: verse 9) Why did Abraham bind his son?
4. (Re: verse 13) Was it one or two sacrifices that Abraham made?
5. Did this substitute sacrifice point to Christ? What was the character of the substitute sacrifice of Christ?
6. (Re: verse 16) Was the blessing deserved or was it a reward?
7. (Re: verse 16) Why the oath?
8. What does James 2:21 mean? (Notice the connection with James 2:17, 22, 23.) Does this not contradict Romans 4:2? (Compare Romans 4:1.)

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9. Why did God speak of Abraham's only son? Was Ishmael no longer a son?
 10. Abraham's believing is mentioned previously. But what does James 2:23 mean when it connects Genesis 15:6 to Genesis 22?
 11. What does Genesis 22:20ff. teach about mixed marriages?
 12. What does Abraham's example of being a stranger teach us?
 13. Does that exclude our earthly calling in labour, culture, science, etc.? Does this make for an internal conflict between being a stranger and being a pilgrim? Or can these two be united?
 14. What should be our attitude towards the modern trend of cremation?
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