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THE TEST OF ABRAHAM

GENESIS 22:1-19

JOHN I. LAWLOR

THE incredible story of the ordeal of Abraham and Isaac begins, presumably, with Abraham sojourning in the land of the Philistines (Gen 21:34) and concludes with Abraham, the main character in this drama, returning to Beer-sheba with the two young men and Isaac.¹

The pathos of this account is unequaled by any other portion of the Abraham sequence and perhaps the entire Pentateuchal tradition. The reader emotes with Abraham, for the entire story radiates great tensions, strong reactions, and human emotions. Skinner felt this, for he remarks that parts of it "... can hardly be read without tears."²

The manner in which the narrative has been put together evidences great literary artistry. Two factors unite to make the case. First, the use of repetitious statements seems intentional. The use of one such repetitious statement in v 1 ("Abraham!" And he said 'Here I am.')

and v 11 ("Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, 'Here I am.')

naturally divides the story into two general movements. The use of another "... your son, your only son ..." used three times (vv 2, 12, 16) tends to increase the gravity of the situation. Such redundancy creates great tension; it seems as if God almost strains to remind Abraham that the stakes are high. Such obvious repetition, it seems, is premeditated, perhaps for the purpose of raising the anxiety level of the reader. Still another, "So the two of them walked on together" (vv 6 and 8), puts the reader off; it also heightens the tension that builds toward the climax.

Second, there is a certain symmetry to the story which is, in part, achieved through the use of both triplets and tensions/resolutions. With respect to the former, the imperatives "take," "go," and "offer" (v 2) are a case in point. Vv 3, 6, and 10 are further examples.

¹The text is actually silent on the matter of Isaac's return to Beer-sheba with Abraham and the two young men; however, later episodes in the Abraham cycle have Abraham and Isaac together, a point which at least suggests his return with the rest.

²J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1910) 330.

Furthermore, the blessing formula of vv 17 and 18 appears as a triplet. With respect to the tensions/resolutions, several examples are apparent. The “only son” at the beginning is contrasted by the “greatly multiplied” seed at the conclusion. The initial command of God underscores the fact that the son whom Abraham was being called upon to offer was his only son. In one sense that was not true, for Ishmael was also his son. But he was the only son through whom the promises already given to Abraham could be realized. As the story closes, Abraham receives an emphatic enunciation of blessing (וְהִרְבָּה אֲרָבָה) which would result in his “only son” being multiplied into descendants that would number “as the stars of the heavens and the sand which is on the seashore” (v 17). The text supplies the key element to the transition; v 16 says: “. . . because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son. . . .” The nature of the experience is initially described as a “test”; at the end it is turned into a “blessing.” The crisis point of the story (v 10) divides the two motifs. The first half (vv 1-9) lays an emphasis upon the “testing” motif; the use of the term נִסָּה in v 1 clearly signals this point. The כָּרַךְ אֲכָרְכֶךָ of v 17 confirms the blessing motif of the second half. There is a sense in which the story begins with a child sacrifice motif, but in the second half of the narrative that fades and the concept of animal sacrifice surfaces. For this reason, it has been suggested that the purpose of the entire account is to present an etiology on animal sacrifice, and to set up a prohibition of child sacrifice.³

The employment of these various techniques not only improves the readability and interest level of the narrative, but also helps to generate meaning in one’s understanding of the text. This point will be further discussed following a closer look at the text itself.

TEXT

An acquaintance with the text of the story seems to be the basis for an attempt to understand some of the concepts it is intending to communicate. The episode of Gen 22:1-19 reads like a two-act play, with both a prologue and an epilogue. The literary structure of the passage suggests the following arrangement of the material:

Prologue, 22:1

Act I: Ordeal/Crisis, 22:2-10

Scene 1, 22:2-5

Scene 2, 22:6-10

³C. A. Simpson and W. R. Bowie, “Genesis,” *The Interpreter’s Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, n.d.), 1. 645.

Act II: Resolution, 22:11-18

Scene 1, 22:11-14

Scene 2, 22:15-18

Epilogue, 22:19

Prologue, 22:1

That there is a conscious effort on the part of the writer to establish relationship between the Abraham cycle up to this point and the particular passage in focus seems evident from his opening statement: "Now it came about after these things. . . ."⁴ Its place in the saga of Abraham⁵ will be discussed later, so further detail is not necessary at this point. Suffice it to say that this opening line supplies an internal, textual connection to the preceding context, in addition to the more literary relationship presented in the later discussion.

An important observation is made by the writer at the outset of the narrative; it is an observation primarily for the benefit of the reader. The narrator is careful to explain that what he is about to describe represents a "test" (נִסֵּי) of Abraham. This not only informs the reader of an important point, but also seems to give some direction to the significance of the story. It is an account of a test of Abraham by his God. Testing in regard to what? For what purpose? The answers to these questions are to a certain extent inherent within the text, and will be considered later.

While Abraham's response to God's address, seen in v 1, is undoubtedly a normal one, its appearance both here and again in v 11 seems too obvious to be viewed merely as "accidental." As previously suggested, it functions as a "formulaic expression" which helps to shape the narrative.

⁴This is a debated point. Von Rad says that "this narrative . . . has only a very loose connection with the preceding" (G. von Rad, *Genesis*; trans. J. H. Marks [OTL; revised edition; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972] 238; hereafter cited as von Rad, *Genesis*). However, Coats remarks: "A patriarchal itinerary scheme provides context for this story. . . . Unity with the context derives, however, not simply from structural context provided by an itinerary pattern, but of more importance, from unity in theological perspective with other Abrahamic tradition" (G. W. Coats, "Abraham's Sacrifice of Faith: A Form-Critical Study of Genesis 22," *Int* 27 [1973] 392; hereafter cited as Coats, "Abraham's Sacrifice").

⁵The term "saga" is used here in the sense of an extended series of stories revolving around a central figure; cf. R. B. Björnard, "An Unfortunate Blunder: A Tradition-Historical Study of Some Form-Critics' Use of the Word 'Saga'" (unpublished paper read at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, Nov 18, 1978, at New Orleans, LA).

Act I: Ordeal/Crisis, 22:2-10

The main body of the narrative reads like a two-act drama, vv 2-10 forming the first act which has two scenes, vv 2-5 and vv 6-10. Act I, Scene 1 (vv 2-5) conveys the basic instructions given to Abraham along with his initial response. In "rapid-fire" succession the three imperatives ("take," קַח; "go," וָלֶךְ; "offer," וְהַעֲלֵהוּ) of v 2 inform Abraham what it is that God expects of him. This is the test. Both the "hard-hitting" style of the divine instructions as well as the content of the instructions surface an issue that is perhaps one that the story is intended to explore. What is the nature of Abraham's God? Twice (cf. Genesis 12) he has instructed Abraham to take certain actions which would result in close family ties being broken.

What is of almost equal amazement is the relative passivity, the "cool detachment" with which Abraham is seen to respond. By two sets of triads the writer methodically records the calculated actions of the patriarch: he "rose early" (וַיִּשְׁכֶּם), "saddled his donkey" (וַיַּחֲבֹשׁ), "took lads" (וַיִּקַּח), and "split wood" (וַיִּבְרֹקֵעַ), "arose" (וַיִּלָּךְ), and "went" (וַיֵּלֶךְ).

Upon arriving at a place that was within eyesight of the destination (v 4), Abraham utters a statement that is most intriguing: "Stay here . . . I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you." The first person plural verbs "worship" and "return to you" (וְנִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וְנָשׁוּבָה) raise an important question: Was this a hollow, evasive comment on Abraham's part, or was it an expression of an honest faith which he genuinely possessed, based upon the promises which led up to and culminated in the birth of the son whose life was now seemingly in jeopardy? Perhaps the reader is to see some correlation between the manner in which Abraham responded to the divine directive and the statement in question.

Scene 2 (vv 6-10) of this portion of the narrative brings about an intense heightening of the tension; this is accomplished both through the development of the sequence of events as well as the various literary techniques employed by the writer to describe the sequence of events. As now seems characteristic of the writer, another triplet is employed in v 6: Abraham "took the wood" (וַיִּקַּח), "laid it on Isaac" (וַיִּשֶׂם), and "took . . . the fire and the knife" (וַיִּקַּח). The reader is then put off by the interlude: "So the two of them walked on together." It is a statement which seems designed to continue the account, but more so to allow the anxiety level of the reader an opportunity to level off momentarily before introducing the next build-up of tension.

There are two possible approaches to the dialogue between father and son of vv 7 and 8 — the only recorded conversation between Abraham and Isaac the entire story. The more traditional view

takes this, together with the "prediction" of v 5, as an evidence of Abraham's growing faith in his God and that he was expressing his firm belief that Isaac would either be spared or miraculously raised up, à la Heb 11:17-19. As one reviews the complete saga of Abraham, it is to be recognized that several indications of an "evolving faith" on the part of Abraham do appear; this may be cited in support of the understanding just referred to. On the other hand, however, many regard this as an "unconscious prophecy" by Abraham, a statement which in actuality was intended either to evade the question or to deceive the son.⁶ Again, it is true that deception was a part of Abraham's way of dealing with crisis situations (cf. Gen 12:10-20 and Gen 20:1-18). However, that this was a situation in which the truth could not be long withheld from Isaac must be kept in mind. This fact raises a question as to whether or not deception was even a viable option for the patriarch. Perhaps it is true that Abraham was trying to side-step the question and in so doing gave an answer which gave Isaac no cause for alarm yet in the end became reality.

The second use of the formulaic expression, "So the two of them walked on together," gives the reader an opportunity to prepare for the climax.

Father and son arrive at the appointed place. The slow, deliberate, calculated, blow-by-blow description of events at this point is most impressive. "The details are noted with frightful accuracy," says von Rad.⁷ However, not only is the reader impressed by the manner of description, he is also impressed by what is not said or what is only implied. The writer alludes to the passivity of Abraham in binding Isaac; that is accomplished by the lack of any particular emphasis being placed on that part of the description. Yet nothing is said about Isaac's conduct. The implied non-resistance of the son along with the willingness of the father suggest the idea that there was a commitment to the belief that God had the absolute right to make this demand upon both.

The narrative of v 10 is a continuation of the previous verse; this is seen in the fact that the long string of waw consecutives continues. Another triad is employed at the peak of the description of the crisis. Individual details at this point characterize the description: ". . . he stretched out his hand and took the knife. . . ." At the very peak of the story a noticeable change in the descriptive method takes place, a change which seems to serve as a mediating factor between some of the binary elements which are found on either side of the crisis point.

⁶Von Rad, *Genesis*, 241; Coats, "Abraham's Sacrifice," 394.

⁷Von Rad, *Genesis*, 241.

A “string” of imperfects, apparently based upon the perfect of v 1 (הִפָּתַח) characterizes the account up to this point. While the change at this point to the infinitive, לְשַׁחֵט, is necessitated by the fact that he did not, in fact, slay his son, it also seems to denote inner disposition.⁸ He fully intended to carry through with the action initially required. For all intents and purposes, Isaac had been slain.

Act II: Resolution, 22:11-18

The intervention by the angel of YHWH, which is seen in Scene 1 (vv 11-14), is a welcome turn of events. In spite of the opening statement of the story, the reader tends to wonder by the time he reaches v 10, whether God was actually going to let Abraham carry out his intention. Though great relief is experienced by the reader and presumably Abraham, the patriarch, nevertheless, continues to act in the same “restrained” manner as before. Crenshaw remarks: “Most astonishingly, we do not hear a word of rejoicing when the ordeal is ended by an urgent command. . . .”⁹ For the first time he notices the ram, he retrieves it, and offers it in place of his son. There is no hint that this sacrifice was rendered in response to divine directive.

A good example of paronomasia is evident at this point in the narrative. In response to Isaac’s question, Abraham had responded, “*ʔelōhīm yirʔeh.*” According to v 14, Abraham called the name of the place “*yhwh yirʔeh.*” To add to this, the comment of the angel is noteworthy: “. . . I know that you fear God . . .” (*yereʔ ʔelōhīm*) (v 12). This latter comment by the angel signals an important link to the statement of purpose for the testing.

Scene 2, vv 15-18, records the divine response to the now proven patriarch. That the blessing pronounced in vv 17-18 is directly related to Abraham’s willingness to offer Isaac is clearly established by the redundant expression of v 16: “. . . because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son. . . .” The announcement of the blessing is presented in the now characteristic style of the writer, another triad. The blessing formula which appears in the narrative is not entirely new to the Abraham cycle (cf. Genesis 12, 15, 17). However, the form in which it is seen here is somewhat intensified over previous similar formulas. As an example, the “I will bless you” (וְאַבְרָהָם) of Gen 12:2 now becomes “I will greatly bless you”

⁸“A noteworthy shift from finite verb to infinitive takes place in the description of Abraham’s intention. Thus one cannot miss the purpose of these actions described with such minute detail and in technical language of the sacrificial cult” (J. L. Crenshaw, “Journey into Oblivion: A Structural Analysis of Genesis 22:1-19,” *Sounding* 58 [1975] 248; hereafter cited as Crenshaw, “Journey”).

⁹Crenshaw, “Journey,” 252.

(כַּרְךָ אֶכְרֹכֶךָ), Gen 22:17. As Speiser suggests, the promise that Abraham's descendants would "... possess the gate of their enemies . . ." (v 17) "... refers to capture of the opponent's administrative and military centers."¹⁰ A similar blessing was invoked upon Rebekah by her brothers prior to her departure for Canaan to become the wife of Isaac (cf. Gen 24:60).

Epilogue, 22:19

The notice that "Abraham returned to his young men" and that together they returned to Beer-sheba is of special interest because of what it *does not* say. Rather obvious is the complete lack of any reference to Isaac in this epilogue. There is no clear indication that he returned with his father; neither is there any clear indication that he remained at Moriah. The text is silent. For this reason Crenshaw refers to this as the "Journey into Oblivion."¹¹ This fact seems to point the reader's attention toward Abraham rather than Isaac, and justifiably so, for this is not a story of the sacrifice of Isaac, it is the story of the testing and obedience of Abraham.

PURPOSE/INTENT

It is doubtful that anyone would deny the moving nature of this account, but what contribution does it make to the Abraham cycle in particular and to Hebrew thought in general? How does it make that contribution? It is not only important to discover the meaning, but also to discover how it has meaning. The narrative of Genesis 22 conveys meaning as it is read both diachronically and synchronically: diachronically, it seems to take on meaning as it is seen as the climax to the Abraham cycle; synchronically, it generates meaning as it is viewed as a paradigm on certain sociological issues.

The relationship of this incident to the entire Abraham cycle

One's appreciation of this moving account is increased when it is viewed diachronically in the light of the entire Abraham cycle: Gen 11:27-25:11. It appears as the climax to the saga of Abraham. All that precedes this event leads up to it; what follows almost seems anticlimactic. The introduction to the Abraham cycle (Gen 11:27-30) emphasizes the point that Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. After long years of barrenness, anxiety and struggling, a son is born to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 21:1-7). Almost as though with a vengeance, the saga leaps over several years and hastens to the story which portrays the

¹⁰E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; New York: Doubleday, Inc., 1964) 164.

¹¹Crenshaw, "Journey," 245.

fruit of the once barren womb as being in grave danger.¹² However, it is not just a son who is in danger; it is an entire future, a potential nation. All that Abraham had lived for is suddenly at stake. If his God's word is to be believed, all the nations of the earth would somehow be affected by this demanding order. Either way Abraham might respond, it appeared as though the covenant was in danger. If he were to disobey, the covenant may be in jeopardy; on the other hand, if he were to obey God and slay Isaac, the covenant likewise stood in jeopardy. Abraham, indeed, was on the horns of a dilemma; and the demands that were placed upon him placed him in a situation in which it appeared that he could not win.

When viewed as a whole the Abraham cycle is a study in progression, development, maturing. Perhaps as a regular reminder that the patriarch is very human, there appear stories, strategically located, which clearly portray his vulnerability. While these accounts are in no way to be minimized, the overall trend of the saga is upward; each segment seems to build upon and add to the previous ones. A call and promise are issued, to which there is response (Gen 12:1-9); Abram demonstrates graciousness to Lot (Gen 13:1-13), after which Jehovah appears to him and reiterates the promise (Gen 13:14-18). In turn, Abram spares Lot (Gen 14:1-16); later, the promise is formalized as a binding covenant (Gen 15:1-21). The covenant is expanded (Gen 17:1-21) and sealed by circumcision (Gen 17:22-26). The seed aspect of the covenant is particularized (Gen 18:1-15); Abraham intercedes for Lot (Gen 18:16-33). At last the promised son is born (Gen 21:1-7).

The sequence of these events suggests that both Abraham and the reader are being prepared for something. The cycle is going somewhere; it is not static. At almost any point along the way, the reader can stop, look behind him, and see that the plot has advanced; Abraham has progressed. Difficult circumstances have consistently presented themselves, and at times the patriarch has reacted in a very immature and deceitful manner. Yet overall, the relationship of these individual stories one to another makes the point that Abraham was "growing up."

Then comes the ordeal. One is inclined to believe that had such a sore test come earlier in his experience, Abraham would not have been able to cope with it. Hence, the climax of the cycle comes and with it the most formidable test of the patriarch's life: God orders

¹²The amount of time between the birth of Isaac and the Genesis 22 incident is unknown; estimates seem to range from 7-25 years. The term employed here, נֶעֱרַב is no real help in that it is used in reference to an unborn son (Judg 13:5, 7, 8, 12) as well as the sons of Samuel who were ministering in the Tabernacle (1 Sam 2:17). Gen 21:34 says, "And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days."

him to slay his long-awaited son. The nature of the test and the manner in which Abraham faced it are issues which are taken up in the following portions of the study. Suffice it to say here that there seems to be some evidence that this event marked a change in the patriarch's life.

What the term נִסָּה contributes to the narrative

That the narrator is so careful to introduce his account as a "test" is both obvious and important. It is obvious because it is the first statement employed by the writer in this narrative sequence. The importance of this point is seen in several different ways. First, it is important for the reader's benefit. So it was viewed by the writer, for he informs the reader from the very outset that this is "only a test." Abraham, of course, was not privy to that information. The reason for that appears obvious. It would not have been a genuine test if he had been informed that it was "only a test." Nothing would have been proven through it, had he known.

Second, it is important because it contributes to one's understanding of the God-man relationship; specifically, it gives insight into an apparently new dynamic in the Elohim/Yahweh-Abraham cycle. This is the first, and the only, time in the Abraham saga where the nature of a particular event is so labeled. Nevertheless, its use here suggests that from Yahweh's perspective, Abraham needed to be tested.¹³ There is no clear indication why He deemed such a test necessary; only that He did. No unusually troublesome flaws in Abraham's character have been brought to the surface up to this point. On the contrary, Yahweh appears to have looked with favor upon the patriarch.¹⁴

With no clear explanation of this question coming from the text itself, one is left to offer several possibilities for consideration.¹⁵ One possibility is that the test is a clear indication of the somewhat tyrannical nature of Abraham's God. Yahweh, a young, ambitious deity, was perhaps attempting to demonstrate his rather cynical

¹³Crenshaw makes the following thought-provoking remarks: "In a sense the story bears the character of a qualifying test. The fulfillment of the promise articulated in Genesis 12 and reaffirmed at crucial stages during Abraham's journey through alien territory actualizes the divine intention to bless all nations by means of one man. Abraham's excessive love for the son of promise comes dangerously close to idolatry and frustrates the larger mission. Thus is set the stage for the qualifying test." Crenshaw, "Journey," 249.

¹⁴That this is true is evidenced by the initial promises of Gen 12:1-3, the formalizing of the promises into a covenant in Genesis 15, the statement that "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness" (Gen 15:6), the fulfillment of the promise of a son, the manifold blessings of Yahweh on Abraham, *et al.*

attitude toward one of his subjects/devotees. In this writer's opinion, to establish such a suggestion as legitimate would require much more evidence than this one passage can be construed to present. Another suggestion is that the key to understanding the reason behind the test is to be found in a study of the term נִסָּי , which the writer employs. This suggestion brings our attention back to the original point regarding the importance of the identification of this as a "testing" experience by the writer.

A third reason why the writer's opening statement is important, therefore, is that it may hold the key to understanding the reason why God tested Abraham as he did. The term נִסָּי is employed, in addition to the usage in Genesis 22, eight other times in a context where Elohim/Yahweh is said to be the "tester." In six (Exod 15:22-26; 16:4; 20:18-20; Deut 8:2, 16; Judg 2:21-22; 3:1-4) of these cases, Israel was the object of His testing; in 2 Chron 32:31 Hezekiah, king of Judah, was the one tested; in Ps 26:2 David appealed to Yahweh to test him. In five of the six cases where Yahweh/Elohim speaks of "testing" Israel, the context of each clearly shows a relationship between the motif of "testing" and his concern over the nation's obedience to his commandments/statutes/law/ways.¹⁶ In Exod 20:18-20 the obedience concept is implied though not specifically stated, and interestingly enough, the subject of the nation's fear of God is a central issue, as it is in Gen 22:1, 12. Again in the Ps 26:2 occurrence of the term, the obedience concept is implied when David says: "Prove me, O Lord, and try (נִסָּי) me; test my heart and my mind." Of Hezekiah, the Chronicler observes:

And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to try him and to know all that was in his heart (2 Chron 32:31).

If the pattern seen in the use of the term נִסָּי , when Yahweh/Elohim is said to be the "tester," can serve as a legitimate key for understanding its use in Gen 22:1, then one may conclude that the reason Yahweh deemed it necessary to test Abraham was to know what was in his heart, to test his obedience to and fear of Yahweh when his promised and beloved son was at stake.

¹⁵In addition to the two suggestions which appear in the following discussion, see Plaut's discussion in W. G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary. Vol. I: Genesis* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1974) 210-11.

¹⁶Exod 15:22-26; 16:4; Deut 8:2, 16; Judg 2:21, 22; 3:1-4.

Exploring relationships

One of the functions of this particular story seems to be that of exploring relationships: relationships between man and his God as well as relationships between a father and his sons. Both of these areas of investigation are in themselves fairly complex. An attempt will be made here to probe both realms in an effort to understand the dynamics involved in these two areas of relationships. The latter one seems to be the result of or the outgrowth of the former; therefore, they will be analyzed in the same order as they have initially been mentioned.

The God/man relationship is explored at different levels in this narrative. The images of both God and man are studied to some degree; the demands of God are seen in contrast to the response of man. Fundamental to the account is an obvious question: "What kind of a God would subject a man to such an ordeal?" This, of course, immediately raises the whole issue of the image of God as seen in Genesis 22. Responses to the question vary. In large measure one's response depends upon which aspect of the narrative is emphasized. If the emphasis is upon the initial command to sacrifice Isaac and the concept of the divine deception involved, the view of the image of God obviously will be somewhat negative. On the other hand, if the emphasis is placed upon the fact that Yahweh stayed the hand of Abraham and subsequently increased his blessing upon the patriarch, one's conclusions concerning the image of God would agree with de Vaux, who commented: "Any Israelite who heard this story would take it to mean that his race owed its existence to the mercy of God, and its prosperity to the obedience of their great ancestor."¹⁷

More, however, is to be gained by viewing the image of God as portrayed in Gen 22:1-10 in a broader context. When seen in the perspective of both that which precedes and follows these verses, a noticeable "role reversal" occurs in this problematic section. In Genesis 12-21 Yahweh is depicted as the deity who desires to bless greatly the patriarch; the promises abound in these chapters. Not only is he seen as one who promises blessing; he is unmistakably set forth as the one who fulfills the promised blessings. Genesis 21 records the birth of the son of promise, Isaac. Suddenly, a reversal of roles occurs. The God of promise and blessing appears to become the antagonist, the tyrant, the adversary, the God of contradiction. In the minds of some, the problem is not so much in the initial demand

¹⁷R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel; Vol. II: Religious Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965) 443.

which Yahweh/Elohim made on Abraham as with the fact that he allowed Abraham to think right up to the very last moment that he was actually serious when in fact he was only testing Abraham.

Just as the careful student of the saga of Abraham must see the role reversal just described, he is also obliged to see another drastic reversal in Gen 22:11-18 — a reversal in the portrayal of the image of God back to that which prevails in Genesis 12-21. This second reversal sheds a different light on the first reversal. Certainly there should be no attempt to minimize the image of Yahweh in Gen 22:1-10. There is no question that a “different side” of Yahweh is to be seen there. At the same time, however, one must reckon with the double role-reversal which is evident in the story. But, as demonstrated elsewhere in this study, Yahweh/Elohim is to be understood as a God who sorely tests his subjects. According to Exodus 15, Israel needed water; in Exodus 16 and Deuteronomy 8, the nation needed bread; Judges 2 and 3 suggest that the nation needed military assistance. While the exact circumstances differ in the Genesis 22 incident, the basic point is the same. Yahweh/Elohim is set forth by the biblical writers as a God who takes his servants through perilous situations for the purpose of testing them. In almost every one of these examples, including Genesis 22, there is evidence of divine provision as a means of survival through the experience. This is not at all unusual in the realm of religion. The religions of the ancient Near East were characterized by deities who demanded devotion; in some cases demonstration of one’s devotion was evidenced through child sacrifice. The unique feature in Abraham’s experience was that his God stopped him from completing the act. Thus the double role-reversal shows itself to be significant in the story.

A second fundamental question must be asked concerning the story: “What kind of a man would respond to such a command in the manner in which Abraham did?” Almost as important as the image-of-God motif is the image of man in relationship to his God as it is explored in this fascinating account. Once again, there is difference of opinion on this question. In fact, the same individual sometimes experiences mixed emotions in this regard, as Kierkegaard demonstrates:

Why then did Abraham do it? For God’s sake and (in complete identity with this) for his own sake. He did it for God’s sake because God required this proof of his faith; for his own sake he did it in order that he might furnish the proof. The unity of these two points of view is perfectly expressed by the word which has always been used to characterize this situation: It is a trial, a temptation. A temptation — but what does that mean? What ordinarily tempts a man is that which would keep him from doing his duty, but in this case the temptation is itself the ethical . . . which would keep him from doing God’s will.

Therefore, though Abraham arouses my admiration, he at the same time appalls me. . . . He who has explained this riddle has explained my life.¹⁸

An interesting and perhaps significant ingredient is to be gleaned by tracing the role-reversal pattern in the case of Abraham. With one major exception, it is opposite that of Yahweh/Elohim's. It is not at all unusual to find Abraham arguing with Elohim throughout Genesis 12-21. Whereas in that segment of the cycle God is the "blesser," Abraham is somewhat the "antagonist." However in Genesis 22, where he is called upon to do something of a far more severe nature than anything else up to this point, a clear reversal is seen. He does not argue with God, in spite of the fact that to obey would mean the death of his long-awaited and dearly loved and favored son. There is no hint even of any hesitancy on Abraham's part, though to actually follow through would place the covenant in jeopardy in addition to suffering the loss of his son. How is this phenomenon to be explained? Does his response represent a "blind obedience," which in present times seems to have been operative to some degree in Jonestown, Guyana? Or does his response indicate that he had reached a level of maturity and obedience which enabled him to carry out God's instructions and at the same time leave the consequences to God? In answer to this perplexing problem, it may be significant to note that there is no evidence in Genesis 22, or in the remainder of the Abraham cycle, of a reversal back to the image which characterized Abraham prior to the Genesis 22 incident. It is true that there is no strong or positive evidence in the rest of the Abraham saga that he was a "different Abraham" from this point on. However, the failure of the text of the cycle to allude to a second role reversal may be significant in this respect.

Further evidence that the tale seems to be exploring relationships between God and man is the heavy emphasis which is placed upon testing/obedience and fear of God/love of son. It seems quite apparent that there is a direct relationship between the discussion concerning the image of God/image of man and testing/obedience as well as fear of God/love of son. Both of these latter issues seem to be engaged at a level different from the former matter. Allusion has already been made to the fact that the writers of the OT portray Yahweh as a God who tested his subjects. That is not so unusual or surprising. Abraham's unflinching obedience is somewhat more puzzling. He appears as a man who believed that the God whom he

¹⁸S. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1945) 89-90.

worshipped had the right to make such a demand of him and that the sacrifice of Isaac was the right thing for him.

It seems significant that both comparisons and contrasts can be drawn between this experience and Abraham's initial encounter with Yahweh, as told in Gen 12:1ff. Both experiences began with a divine emphatic imperative, "go."¹⁹ Both situations involved going to an "undesigned place": ". . . to the land that I will show you" (Gen 12:1); ". . . upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you" (Gen 22:2). In both cases a "sacrifice of family" was required: in the former experience, it was to leave family behind; in the latter, it was an actual sacrifice of his son. This final confrontation by Yahweh was, in a sense, not a completely new experience for the patriarch, although obviously the most trying. Abraham's entire experience with Yahweh, beginning with the initial call and promise, may be viewed as preparing him for this final, supreme test. While the general direction of Abraham's response in both cases was toward obedience, in the first situation there was only partial obedience, while in the last situation there was total obedience. This fact "puts a little distance" between the two experiences. The major contrast, of course, between the two is the fact that the first imperative was accompanied by a promise of blessing; there was no such promise which came with the imperative of Gen 22:2. In fact, this latter imperative seemed to place all the foregoing promises in jeopardy. This set of facts greatly increases the distance between the two situations. But that distance is then reduced by the fact that both responses are followed by blessing from Yahweh. Sarna, commenting on a comparative study of these two passages, draws some conclusions which deserve consideration because they relate the study to the matter of exploring the relationship between Yahweh and the patriarch:

The great difference between the two events is what constitutes the measure of Abraham's progress in his relationship to God. The first divine communication carried with it the promise of reward. The final one held no such expectation. On the contrary, by its very nature it could mean nothing less than the complete nullification of the covenant

¹⁹The form is אָלְ-אֶל. Cassuto remarks that this form ". . . is not *without* specific signification." He further observes: "In both cases Abram undergoes an ordeal: here he has to leave behind his aged father and his environment and go to a country that is unknown to him; there he has to take leave of his family circle for a little while, and of his cherished son forever; his son, it is true, will accompany him for the first part of the way, but only so that he might bid him farewell forever. Thereafter he must go on his way *alone*, the way of absolute discipline and devotion. In both instances the test is made harder by the fact that the destination of the journey is not stated beforehand." Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II: From Noah to Abraham*; trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964) 309-10.

and the frustration forever of all hope of posterity. Ishmael had already departed. Now Isaac would be gone, too. Tradition has rightly seen in Abraham the exemplar of steadfast, disinterested loyalty to God.²⁰

A third level of interest in regard to the Yahweh/man relationship is the set of binary elements: fear of God/love of son. There appears to be something of a relationship between this and the testing/obedience motif, yet the fear of God/love of son struggle goes beyond or becomes more particularized than the former. Gen 22:2 sets up the frustration by the way in which Yahweh referred to Isaac, "... your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love." At the point where the angel stops Abraham, the clear pronouncement is made, "... now I know that you fear God ..." (Gen 22:12). The implication seems to be that the fear of God on Abraham's part was in question because of his love for his son. Two factors in the text unite to mediate between these two elements. The description of the raised knife in the hand of the patriarch together with the writer's employment of the infinitive **טחש** clearly indicates Abraham's intention of slaying his son. An inner disposition reduces the distance between Abraham's fear of God and love of Isaac.

A second major realm of relationships is explored through this narrative: a horizontal realm. The relationship of a father to his sons is a theme that is investigated. At this point it is instructive to place two incidents side-by-side. The expulsion of Ishmael, as recorded in Genesis 21, and the binding of Isaac, described in Genesis 22, lead to an interesting study in comparisons and contrasts when analyzed together. Generally speaking, these two segments of the Abraham cycle illustrate the pattern, seen often in the OT, of the younger son becoming the favored son over the firstborn.²¹ As a matter of fact, this case sets the pace for those which follow in the patriarchal sequence. Ishmael, the result of Abraham's attempt to "help God fulfill His promise," was rejected by Yahweh and eventually expelled by Abraham. Isaac, the younger of the two sons, is described as having been sovereignly chosen by Yahweh and favored by Abraham. This, in itself, is not foreign to the biblical record; but the paradox is seen in the fact that Abraham became quite distressed over Sarah's instructions to cast Hagar and Ishmael out, yet when God instructed him to slay Isaac, the favored son, there was no evidence of any reluctance whatsoever on the father's part.

²⁰N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1974) 163.

²¹See Genesis 27 (Jacob) and Genesis 37 (Joseph).

A number of interesting comparisons and contrasts can be observed between the two events. The following chart summarizes the main details:

Ishmael in danger
Genesis 21

Isaac in danger
Genesis 22

CONTRASTS

Crisis created as a result of a human directive: Sarah tells Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael (v 10)

Crisis created as a result of a divine directive: God tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering (v 2)

Abraham shows real reluctance to follow through (v 11)

Abraham shows no real reluctance to follow through (vv 3ff.)

God refers to Ishmael as "Abraham's seed," עֲרֵב (v 13)

God refers to Isaac as "Abraham's son," בֵּן (v 2)

Sarah aware of the circumstances; she was the "perpetrator" (vv 9-10)

Sarah apparently not aware of the circumstances

Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, could not stand to watch her son die (vv 15-16)

Abraham, the father of Isaac, did not shrink from observing (in fact, participating in) the death of his son

Action takes place in the wilderness of Beer-sheba (v 14)

Action takes place in the land of Moriah (vv 2-4)

COMPARISONS

Firstborn cast out, becomes a nation

Firstborn cast out, becomes a great nation

God promised to make a nation of Ishmael because he was Abraham's seed (v 13)

God promised to make a great nation of Isaac because Abraham had not withheld him (vv 16-18)

Abraham "rose up early in the morning" to follow through (v 14)

Abraham "rose up early in the morning" to follow through (v 3)

Divine intervention occurs; angel of God calls out to Hagar; reversal of danger (v 17)

Divine intervention occurs; angel of Yahweh calls out to Abraham; reversal of danger (vv 11 ff.)

Water (life-preserving)
was providentially provided
(v 19)

Hagar saw the heretofore
unseen well (v 19)

Hagar appropriates the water
without a specific divine
directive (v 19)

Hagar, an Egyptian,
takes a wife from
Egypt for Ishmael
(v 21)

Ram (life-preserving)
was providentially provided
(v 13)

Abraham saw the heretofore
unseen ram (v 13)

Abraham appropriates the ram
without a specific divine
directive (v 13)

Abraham, a Mesopotamian,
takes a wife from
Mesopotamia for Isaac
(Genesis 24)

CONCLUSION

It seems apparent that one of the themes that the story presents as it is read diachronically is the testing and obedience of Abraham. That concept keeps reappearing in several different ways. That is not meant to imply that this diachronic motif exhausts the contribution of this celebrated story. One is inclined to ask the question: Is it really possible, on the basis of the details of the story as they are given, to know what was going on in the heart and mind of the patriarch? What do his unusual reactions mean?

In the synchronic direction, the account contributes to the exploration of certain religious and sociological relationships: God/man and father/son. But is there more? After some fairly extensive study, looking at the passage in many different ways and from several perspectives, it is obvious that the passage warrants further attention.