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# Genesis 22: When the Meaning is Not Moral

Roger Newell

George Fox University, [rnewell@georgefox.edu](mailto:rnewell@georgefox.edu)

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## GENESIS 22: WHEN THE MEANING IS NOT MORAL

One of the common ways we misread biblical narrative is by thinking we must extract a tidy moral lesson that can be applied today in a more or less straightforward manner. But since the nineteenth century, when Kierkegaard re-examined the story of Abraham and Isaac in *Fear and Trembling*, there has been a growing awareness that many of the most significant biblical stories do not easily translate into morality lessons. An alternative way of reading is to conceive of a threefold depth perspective to narrative: individual story, Israel and the nations, and finally the level of fulfillment based on the New Testament (cf. G. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 79). Rather than making biblical stories less applicable to contemporary life, reading narrative with a depth perspective actually makes them more relevant.

Using this threefold perspective, I outline for the students how the Abraham and Isaac story is, first, a tale in which Abraham is obedient and God is faithful. But lest we reduce the story to a glib motto, we proceed to the next level. Let us suppose, as do many commentators, that child sacrifice was a well-known practice of Israel's neighbors. The story exposes the child sacrifice system as a mocking parody of the ways of

Yahweh. Although it is troubling that God should propose such a deed, the narrative reveals that God does not require it as an act of faithfulness.

At this point I introduce an interpretation from Hebrew midrash which notes that the Hebrew text says *Elohim* (the generic term for God) tells Abraham to sacrifice his son. The rabbi asks, "Has Abraham perhaps some difficulty distinguishing the voice of the cultural expectations from the true voice of God?" For when the story reaches its climax, we are explicitly told that it is not *Elohim*, but the voice of *Yahweh's* angel who tells Abraham not to harm the child (Michael Lerner, *Jewish Renewal* [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994], 45). Abraham puts down the knife. Yahweh then shows Abraham a lamb caught in a thicket nearby, thus inaugurating the ritual substitution of animals for humans.

Finally, I introduce the idea from the Girardian Gil Bailie that here is where the biblical tradition introduces the notion that God shall provide a substitute who will take our place in a redemptive way. Read in the light of the New Testament, we discover that in the fullness of time, God shall totally identify with the victim, indeed shall be the victim, taking our place (Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* [New York: Crossroad, 1995], 141).

Having viewed the narrative in this threefold manner, we discuss the following questions: (1) How does this text forever change Israel's experience of God? (2) How can this text still speak to people living in a very different world, but one in which violent sacrifices are still central events of our lives? (3) If Abraham had difficulty distinguishing the voice of God from the voice of cultural expectations (or his unconscious), is this task any less of a challenge today?

To bridge the gap between the ancient story of Abraham and the modern world, I read aloud Wilfred Owen's poem, "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young," written in the trenches during World War One (see [www.poemtree.com/poems/ParableOfTheOldMan.htm](http://www.poemtree.com/poems/ParableOfTheOldMan.htm)). On the one hand, an ancient text boldly denies the religious justification for sacrificing children to God. On the other hand, by the end of the war ten million young soldiers had been killed on the battlefield; another twenty million died of war-related injuries, illness, and disease. In addition, although the U.S. entered the war rather late, over 100,000 American soldiers likewise perished. Owen suggests a tragic relevance between this ancient text and the world of 1914. The "righteous old men of Europe" in 1914 had refused to hear the angel of Yahweh, humble themselves, and abandon their ambitions. They chose instead to sacrifice their sons to war.

I want students to consider how Owen's reading of this narrative helps him "read" his own predicament in the trenches. Then I ask students to discuss in small groups whether this narrative and the history of its interpretation (from midrash to Kierkegaard to Rene Girard) helps us

distinguish the voice of cultural expectations from the authentic voice of God. My goal in this exercise is to help students explore alternatives to simply extracting moral lessons from the text. By giving attention to ancient context, Hebrew midrash, and contemporary Jewish and Christian theology, I want students to consider more deeply how the text continues to prompt reflection on current issues as well as a deepening contemplation of God's nature and intentions.

*Roger Newell*