

# GENESIS 21–23

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## ABRAHAM'S GREATEST TEST

### Overview

Jewish tradition speaks of the ten tests of Abraham,<sup>1</sup> but what they were varies from list to list. A list compiled by the Jewish scholar Maimonides (also known by the acronym Rambam) gives the tests as follows:

1. Departure from Abraham's homeland to become a stranger in Canaan (Genesis 12:1)
2. The famine in Canaan (Genesis 12:10)
3. Sarah taken by Pharaoh (Genesis 12:15)
4. The rescue of Lot in the battle of the kings (Genesis 14:14)
5. The marriage with Hagar after Sarah could not give birth (Genesis 16:3)
6. Abraham's circumcision at one hundred years old (Genesis 17:24)
7. Sarah taken by Abimelech (Genesis 20:2)
8. Hagar sent away after Ishmael is born (Genesis 16:6)
9. Hagar and Ishmael sent away again, this time permanently (Genesis 21:12)
10. The near-sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:2)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moshe Lieber, *The Pirkei Avot Treasury: Ethics of the Fathers: The Sages' Guide to Living, with an Anthologized Commentary and Anecdotes*, ed. Nosson Scherman (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995), 303–305. Ten, of course, is a symbolic round number.

<sup>2</sup> "Rambam on Pirkei Avot 5:3, Sefaria Community Translation," Rambam on Pirkei Avot, Sefaria, [https://sefaria.org/Rambam\\_on\\_Pirkei\\_Avot.5.3.1?ven=Sefaria\\_Community\\_Translation&vhe=Vilna\\_Edition&lang=bi](https://sefaria.org/Rambam_on_Pirkei_Avot.5.3.1?ven=Sefaria_Community_Translation&vhe=Vilna_Edition&lang=bi).

All the lists agree that God’s command to sacrifice Isaac was Abraham’s greatest test. In Jewish tradition this test is called the *akedah* (Hebrew for “binding”). Widespread appreciation of the difficulty of Abraham’s test and the magnificence of his response have made the term “Abrahamic test” a synonym for the most difficult trials that believers may face during their discipleship.

### ***What is an Abrahamic test?***

An Abrahamic test is, as described in Doctrine and Covenants 101:4, when one is “chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son.” It is, as Elder Bruce C. Hafen termed it, to experience a “divine tutorial.”<sup>3</sup> Faithful responses to divine tutorials enable one’s faith to become “sufficiently strong to lay hold upon the promise of eternal life,”<sup>4</sup> “knowing (not believing merely) that [one has claim on] a more enduring substance.”<sup>5</sup> Exercising such faith requires one to “submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord” (Mosiah 24:15), even when such submission flies in the face of logic or common sense. “Many of us will say that we do not have that kind of faith,” observed Truman G. Madsen, but “I submit to you that you do not have that kind of faith until you pass that test.”<sup>6</sup>

President John Taylor “heard the Prophet Joseph say, in speaking to the Twelve on one occasion: ‘You will have all kinds of trials to pass through. And it is quite as necessary for you to be tried as it was for Abraham and other men of God, and (said he) God will feel after you, and He will take hold of you and wrench your very heart strings, and if you cannot stand it you will not be fit for an inheritance in the Celestial Kingdom of God.’”<sup>7</sup> Joseph Smith also said “that if God had known any other way whereby he could have touched Abraham’s feelings more acutely and more keenly he would have done so.”<sup>8</sup> The selfless, unflinching nature of his devotion to God had to be demonstrated beyond any doubt—and by that experience Abraham would feel something of the love that the Father felt for His Only Begotten Son.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes the Abrahamic tests we encounter result from situations that expose or chasten our weaknesses (see, for example, Ether 12:27; Doctrine and Covenants 101:2–5). Sometimes they spring from the need to respond humbly, charitably, and patiently to the weaknesses or cruelty of others (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 8:9–13; Mosiah 24:15; Alma 27:29, 1 Nephi 19:9). Sometimes they come from a call to confront

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3 Bruce C. Hafen, *Spiritually Anchored in Unsettled Times* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2009), 28–29.

4 *Lectures on Faith* 6:11.

5 *Lectures on Faith* 6:3. See Hebrews 10:34.

6 Truman G. Madsen, “Power from Abrahamic Tests,” in *Five Classics by Truman G. Madsen* (Salt Lake City, UT: Eagle Gate, 2001), 238.

7 John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London, England: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1853–1886), 24:197.

8 Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 24:264.

9 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 393.

circumstances that seem impossible or incomprehensible (for example, Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–8; 122:5–7). Though we cannot know in this life, it is possible that some of these circumstances are the result of a premortal assignment (Abraham 3:23; Doctrine and Covenants 138:53–56).<sup>10</sup> Often such challenges come when we’re sincerely trying to do right (see, for example, Matthew 5:1–11; 1 Peter 2:20, 3:17). No matter the origins of our predicament, there is only one antidote to the paralysis of doubt. According to Terryl L. Givens, we can be free of our dilemma only when we exercise “our obligation to know that [the] voice [that directs us] is emanating from a divine source. . . . Once we have that assurance, then the rationality [of the heavenly directive] is irrelevant.”<sup>11</sup>

### ***What can we learn from Abraham’s response?***

From Abraham, we learn that the sign of absolute faith is not found in the sequence of public motions that outwardly proclaim obedience, but rather in the perfect inner assurance that accompanies that outward performance—a faithful response to a divine call that cannot be seen by ordinary observers but is recognized by God.

The great Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard compared Abraham’s “leap *by* faith” to the leap of a skilled ballet dancer.<sup>12</sup> He wrote, “It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a dancer to leap into a definite posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that posture. Perhaps no dancer can do it—[but Abraham] does.”<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the poetic hyperbole of Kierkegaard exaggerates when it implies that Abraham had already achieved perfect faith. While standing in awe of his greatness, we can see subtle signs that this stretch of Abraham’s great soul strained him. Remember that even the incomparably perfect Jesus Christ said that His “suffering caused [him], even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that [he] might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink.” “Nevertheless,” He continued—in words that follow a long dash, suggesting perhaps, that His agonies

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10 Elder John A. Widtsoe taught that those who kept their first estate agreed in the premortal council “to be not only saviors for [themselves] but measurably, saviors for the whole human family” (cited in Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* [Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1980], 216). According to President Spencer W. Kimball, both men and women were “given certain assignments” to carry out on earth (Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 102).

11 Terryl L. Givens and Blair Hodges, “Feeding the Flock, with Terryl L. Givens,” December 8, 2017, in *MIPodcast*, produced by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, podcast, 1:06:38, <https://mi.byu.edu/mip-74-givens/>. Of course, one cannot allow room for acceptance of the seemingly irrational in God’s commands to sincere disciples without also opening the door to the illusions of the psychotic and the false pretensions of the conscious deceiver. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: A Dialectical Lyric*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), 39–40.

12 Nathaniel Kramer, “August Bournonville: Kierkegaard’s Leap of Faith and The ‘Noble Art of Terpsichore,’” in *Kierkegaard and His Danish Contemporaries*, ed. Jon Bartley Stewart (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 80.

13 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 56. See also Kramer, “August Bournonville,” 73.

were beyond expression—“glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men” (Doctrine and Covenants 19:18).

Our Savior, having borne all, “will bear no more,” continuing to work all things through an absolute faith, having become “perfect, even as [His] Father who is in heaven is perfect” (3 Nephi 12:48).<sup>14</sup> Of course, we cannot hope in this life for such perfection; we can only strive for the ideal of faith that Kierkegaard described. With the English poet Robert Browning, we can be comforted rather than discouraged by the thought that “a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what’s a Heaven for?”<sup>15</sup> As we look at those of great faith around us who have, through long experience, conquered doubt in daunting situations, we realize that progress is possible, that faith can become knowledge in one thing at a time (Alma 32:34), and that practiced efforts require less effort with each repetition.

In the meantime, we of lesser faith are unable to immediately assume the posture Kierkegaard described when we are called to do so. We are shaken by such experiences and “vacillate an instant,”<sup>16</sup> and our wavering proclaims the imperfection of our pose. Contrastingly, the perfectly executed leap is not one of “bravura or virtuoso display” but rather “a refined, technically demanding kind of dance; one that capture[s] a sense of lightness and the ethereal.”<sup>17</sup> As we continue to grow, our response to calls to increase our faith will be, in this manner, more reflexive. Eventually, we will need no pause for preparation, no deep breath to muster courage and strength, but will eventually have an immediate, effortless forward spring to bridge the chasm of earth and heaven (see Luke 9:57–62; 17:31–32).<sup>18</sup>

Genesis 22 provides a perfect glimpse of what that kind of faith looks like better than any event in scripture except, of course, the great atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ that Abraham’s experience foreshadows.

Reading Genesis 21 helps prepare us for the story of Isaac’s binding. Bible scholar Nahum Sarna observed that the story of Isaac’s near-sacrifice in Genesis 22 “is organically connected with the preceding chapter [about Hagar and Ishmael]. Abraham has lost [the company of] one son [Ishmael] and now seems about

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14 Parley P. Pratt, “Jesus, Once of Humble Birth,” in *Hymns* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 196. As to the absolute nature of the faith of the Father and the Son, we read, “There is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it” (Abraham 3:17). Regarding the independent nature of God’s faith, we read, “God is the only supreme governor and independent being in whom all fulness and perfection dwell. . . . In him the principle of faith dwells independently, and he is the object in whom the faith of all other rational and accountable beings centers for life and salvation” (*Lectures on Faith* 2:2).

15 Robert Browning, “Andrea del Sarto (Called the ‘Faultless Painter’),” in *Men and Women*, (London, England: J. M. Dent, 1899), 149, <https://archive.org/details/menandwomen03browgoog/>.

16 Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 57.

17 Kramer, “August Bournonville,” 74.

18 Kramer, “August Bournonville,” 78.

to lose the other [Isaac]. In both narratives, the child is saved by divine intervention at the critical moment, the only two biblical instances of an angel calling from heaven to human beings. In both cases there is a fortuitous discovery: a well of water in the earlier story, a ram in the thicket here.”<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Genesis 23 provides a closing bracket for the three chapters. Abraham’s handling and honoring of Sarah’s passing in his acquisition of the cave of Machpelah quietly echoes the same faith and kindness evident in chapter 22 within a much more ordinary business transaction. “The sublime influence of God here reaches so deeply into the everyday that the two realms of the sublime and the everyday are not only actually unseparated but basically inseparable.”<sup>20</sup>

In the words of Erich Auerbach, the great figures of scripture are, like Abraham,

bearers of the divine will, and yet they are fallible, subject to misfortune and humiliation—and in the midst of misfortune and in their humiliation their acts and words reveal the transcendent majesty of God. There is hardly one of them who does not, like Adam, undergo the deepest humiliation—and hardly one who is not deemed worthy of God’s personal intervention and personal inspiration. . . . Adam is really cast down, Jacob is really a refugee, Joseph really in the pit and then a slave to be bought and sold. But their greatness, rising out of humiliation, is almost superhuman and an image of God’s greatness. The reader feels how the extent of the pendulum’s swing is connected with the intensity of the personal history—precisely the most extreme circumstances, in which we are immeasurably forsaken and in despair, or immeasurably joyous and exalted, give us, if we survive them, a personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence, a rich [personal] development [through testing].<sup>21</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Abraham’s Hebron Then and Now, Part 2: The Tomb of the Patriarchs,” video, 14:21, February 14, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=T8lOjtD2sd4>; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 146–161.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 21–23

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<sup>19</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 150. See also the list of parallels in Jonathon Riley, “Two Views of the Foreign Women: Reading the Hagar Narratives and 1 Kings 19” (paper presented at Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, CA, November 24, 2019), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 22.

<sup>21</sup> Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 18.

## Genesis 21:1–7. The Birth of Isaac

**21:1. “the Lord visited Sarah as he had said.”** Sarna translated this as “the Lord took note of Sarah as he had promised.” He observed that this Hebrew verb is used in connection with the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:21) and, even more momentously, becomes a major theme during the story of the Exodus. “The birth of Isaac thus marks a new and momentous stage in the unfolding plan of history.”<sup>22</sup>

**21:3. “Isaac.”** Sarna concluded that the reason Isaac did not receive a new name like his father Abraham and his son Jacob was because the name Isaac had already been given by God before Isaac was born.<sup>23</sup>

**21:4. “eight days old.”** The age of Isaac was highlighted here because Isaac was the first person reported to have been circumcised at the age that God had specified. In the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 17, we are given the additional information that infant circumcision at the age of eight days was that “thou mayest know forever that children are not accountable before me till eight years old.”<sup>24</sup>

**21:6. “God hath made me to laugh.”** Sarah’s “laughter is now joyous, in contrast to the early laugh of skepticism recorded in 17:17 and 18:12 [and following].”<sup>25</sup>

### Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 145–146.

### Related verses

Genesis 21:1–7

## Genesis 21:8–21. Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away

**21:8. “the child grew, and was weaned.”** The age of weaning varied but was usually when the child was between two and five years old.<sup>26</sup> Families celebrated weaning and other major stages in a child’s life rather than following the modern idea of a fixed schedule of annual birthday celebrations.

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<sup>22</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 145.

<sup>23</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 145.

<sup>24</sup> Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 132 (see OT1, page 41).

<sup>25</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 146n6.

<sup>26</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah

**21:9. “mocking.”** Others translate this verb as “playing” or “laughing.” Robert Alter explained the complexities of translation for the Hebrew term *metsaheq*:

The same verb that means “mocking” or “joking” in Lot’s encounter with his sons-in-law and that elsewhere in the Patriarchal narratives refers to sexual dalliance. It also means “to play.” . . . Some medieval Hebrew exegetes, trying to find a justification for Sarah’s harsh response, construe the verb as a reference to homosexual advances, though that seems far-fetched. Mocking laughter would surely suffice to trigger her outrage. Given the fact, moreover, that she is concerned lest Ishmael encroach on her son’s inheritance, and given the inscription of her son’s name [Isaac, laughter] in this crucial verb, we may also be invited to construe it as “Isaac-ing it”—that is, Sarah sees Ishmael presuming to play the role of Isaac, child of laughter, presuming to be the legitimate heir.<sup>27</sup>

**21:10. “Cast out this bondwoman.”** Or, in Alter’s translation, “Drive out this slavegirl.” “In language that nicely catches the indignation of the legitimate wife, Sarah refers to neither Hagar nor Ishmael by name, but instead insists on the designation of low social status.”<sup>28</sup>

**21:12. “God said unto Abraham, . . . hearken unto her voice.”** Abraham’s reluctance to act prompted direction from God. The nighttime instruction followed by his rising early in the morning to follow the Lord’s command parallels the events that open the episode with Isaac in the next chapter.

**21:17. “And God heard the voice of the lad.”** The phrase both evokes the name of Ishmael and fulfills what its meaning promises—namely that “God will hear.” Up to this point, Ishmael has been called a “child.” Now, he is “referred to as *na’ar*, “lad”—a more realistic indication of his adolescent status and also a term of tenderness, as in the story of the binding of Isaac in the next chapter.”<sup>29</sup>

**21:17. “called to Hagar out of heaven.”** “Both sons of Abraham are saved at a critical moment by an angelic ‘voice from heaven’ (compare Genesis 22:11).”<sup>30</sup>

**21:18. “I will make of him a great nation.”** “Unlike Isaac, Ishmael is promised only nationhood, not national territory.”<sup>31</sup>

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Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 146n8.

27 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:69n9.

28 Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 1:69n10.

29 Alter, *Hebrew Bible*, 1:70n16.

30 Sarna, *Genesis*, 148.

31 Sarna, *Genesis*, 148n18.

## ***The place of Abraham and Ishmael in Islam***

André Chouraqui described the place of Abraham and Ishmael in Islam as follows:

The sacrifice of the son of Abraham is of central importance in the Qur'an (37:101–11) and has an even greater importance in Islamic tradition, which identifies Ishmael as the son who was designated by God for the sacrifice. Each year Muslims commemorate Abraham's sacrifice through the slaughtering of a sheep in a family setting where the members are united in prayer and intention with the Mecca pilgrims. The commemoration is called *Eid al-Kabir* [or *Eid al-Adha* "Feast of Sacrifice"].

Regarding the identification of the son destined for sacrifice, it seems that the Qur'an and the oldest Islamic traditions followed the Bible, while later scholars and theologians—al-Tha'labi, al-Tabari, and Baydawi, for example—suggested that it was Ishmael who was the required sacrifice, thus assigning the merits of this sacrifice to the ancestor of their people.

[In Islamic tradition,] Ishmael and his father Abraham not only built the House of Allāh [*Bayt Allāh*] at Mecca, but they were also the founders of the *hadj*, the annual pilgrimage that draws Muslims from around the world to Mecca, the center of the world, foreshadowing the Paradise of Allāh. Sura 14 [of the Qur'an], called Abraham's sura, should be read in its entirety by anyone wishing to understand the central place of Abraham *al-khalil* [Abraham the friend (of God)] in Islam—he who fulfills the duty of prayer; he whose prayers are granted by Allāh (Qur'an 14:35–41).<sup>32</sup>

### ***Source***

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 146–148.

### ***Related verses***

Genesis 21:8–21

## **Genesis 21:22–34. Abraham Secures Ownership of the Well at Beer-Sheba**

Sarna summarized and described the import of this incident:

The last incident [of Genesis 21], which is connected with the topic of chapter 20, presupposes a knowledge of the previous encounter between Abraham and Abimelech. It assumes that the reader knows who Abimelech is and that he has treated Abraham decently (Genesis 20:15ff.; 21:23). The account of the stolen well, Abimelech's plea of blamelessness, and the restoration of the property to the

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<sup>32</sup> André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992), 240.



patriarch parallels the monarch's kidnapping of Sarah, his protestation of innocence, and her return to Abraham (Genesis 20; 21:25ff.). Abimelech made Abraham a gift of sheep and oxen, and Abraham reciprocates (Genesis 20:14; 21:27); the identical formula, "took and gave," is used in both cases.

In light of the close connection between chapters 20 and 21:22–34, the first two stories would appear to be intrusive. Yet a closer look reveals that their present position is intentional and purposeful. The relief of Sarah's infertility through the birth of a son is juxtaposed with the removal of the infirmity that afflicted Abimelech's household, thereby enabling the women to give birth (Genesis 20:17f.). This close association of motifs is underscored by the use of the name Sarah to close the preceding chapter and to open the present one. Finally, the action of both the second and third episodes centers around a well in the Beer-sheba area.<sup>33</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 148–149.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 21:22–34

## **Genesis 22:1–2. God Tests Abraham**

**22:1. "God did tempt Abraham."** The opening of Genesis 22 discloses to the reader something that Abraham did not know, namely that God's request for him to sacrifice Isaac was a means to "tempt" (King James Version), "try" (Joseph Smith Translation), or "test" him.<sup>34</sup> By stating this purpose at the outset, the narrator of the chapter precluded "any possible misunderstanding [by the reader] that God requires human sacrifice as such."<sup>35</sup> This point is especially relevant when we remember that Abraham, as a child, was nearly sacrificed in a similar manner (Abraham 1:7–15). The scriptures are clear that God abhors human sacrifice; what He wanted in this instance was for "Abraham . . . to learn something about Abraham."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 145.

<sup>34</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 151n22:1.

<sup>35</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 151n22:1.

<sup>36</sup> Hugh B. Brown, cited in Truman G. Madsen, "Power from Abrahamic Tests," in *Five Classics by Truman G. Madsen* (Salt Lake City, UT: Eagle Gate, 2001), 232. Monika Pesthy-Simon found evidence that child sacrifice was offered to YHWH as well as to other gods in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. This practice was prohibited after the Deuteronomic reform of Josiah (Monika Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius: Martyrdom and Human Sacrifice* [Budapest, Hungary: Central European Press, 2017], 13–1). In the Bible, two other passages besides Genesis 22 describe concrete cases of human sacrifice:

Importantly, the Hebrew text implies that God couched His request as an entreaty rather than a command.<sup>37</sup> This allowed Abraham to demonstrate that his willingness to comply sprang from love rather than obligation. In brief, because God had technically not commanded Abraham, Abraham “ha[d] absolute freedom of choice,”<sup>38</sup> as did Adam when God said, immediately after giving the commandment about the forbidden fruit, “Thou mayest choose for thyself” (Moses 3:17).<sup>39</sup> The choice was made more painful because it came after God’s promises had all been fulfilled. Abraham had finally received his greatest blessing in Isaac, but now he was asked to give him up.<sup>40</sup>

Abraham was prepared for this test. He knew God’s voice through repeated experience in his previous trials. Abraham’s faith in God’s word was sure, knowing that “Jehovah could raise his son from the dead, if necessary, in order to fulfill His promise” of posterity through Isaac.<sup>41</sup> After God instructed Abraham to make the sacrifice, there were no long, agonizing soliloquies, no impassioned protests, no doleful mourning in anticipation of his presumed loss. Significantly, “he who was so daringly eloquent on behalf of the people of Sodom surrender[ed] in total silence to his own bitter personal destiny.”<sup>42</sup>

**22:1. “here I am.”** Abraham’s simple response (Hebrew *hinnenî*) “expresses an attitude of attentiveness and receptivity. It is the only [recorded] word Abraham utters to God in the entire episode.”<sup>43</sup> Describing the silence and the spare dialogue of the account, André Chouraqui wrote:

The narrator creates an extraordinary dramatic effect through the silence of the actors in this tragedy. The question of Isaac, “Where is the lamb?” breaks the silence for an instant to better highlight the horror of the situation. The heartbreak of Abraham is expressed by his three statements of “Here I

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the firstborn son of Mesha and the king of Moab in 2 Kings 3:27 and Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11:30–40. Pesthy-Simon explored the various patterns of human sacrifice and found the sacrifice of Isaac unique “because no human reason lies behind it. To put it somewhat crudely: Abraham expects nothing in return for his offering.” See Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius*, 17–29. For an earlier, detailed discussion of this and related topics, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993).

37 Nahum Sarna explained that the Hebrew phrase translated as “Take now thy son” in Genesis 22:1 “adds the participle *na’* to the imperative, which usually softens the command to an entreaty, as noted in Sanhedrin 89b, Genesis Rabba 55:7, and Rashi’s commentary” (Sarna, *Genesis*, 151).

38 Sarna, *Genesis*, 151

39 See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *The First Days and the Last Days: A Verse-By-Verse Commentary on the Book of Moses and JS—Matthew in Light of the Temple* (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Reading, CA: FAIR; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 57.

40 See André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992), 220.

41 Madsen, “Power from Abrahamic Tests,” 232. See Hebrews 11:19.

42 Sarna, *Genesis*, 151n3. Compare Chouraqui, *Entête (La Genèse)*, 220.

43 Sarna, *Genesis*, 151.

am,” said twice to the Lord (vv. 1, 11) and once to his son (v. 7). He is fully present to each of them, but doubly present to the Lord, to whom he belongs, having given himself freely to Him.<sup>44</sup>

**22:2. “Take now thy son.”** In Genesis 12, Abraham’s sudden engagement with his divine mission required a successive exit from each tie that bound him to his former life: “Get thee out (*lekh lekha* “Go forth”) [from] thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house” (Genesis 12:1). Nahum Sarna noted that the elements of God’s directive were “arranged in ascending order according to the severity of the sacrifice involved: country, extended family, nuclear family.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in Genesis 22, when Abraham reached the time of his greatest trial, there are “striking verbal echoes”<sup>46</sup> of his first call. Observe that God again used the unusual expression for going forth (*lekh lekha*), which appears here for the second and last time in the Bible. The scriptures describe the supreme sacrifice of Isaac in a sequence that, like Abraham’s first call to leave his homeland, reflects an ascending order of emotional intensity: “your son, your *favored* son, *Isaac*, whom you *love*” (Genesis 22:2).<sup>47</sup>

**22:2. “offer him there for a burnt offering.”** In their rapid scan of this brief description, modern readers may not experience the vivid mental picture that must have run through Abraham’s mind as he considered what the sacrifice of Isaac as a “burnt offering” (or “holocaust”) would entail. God’s command would require Abraham “to lift [the tightly bound] Isaac to the top of the altar, slit his throat, and burn him so completely that his body would be reduced to ashes.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 150–151.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 22:1–2

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44 Chouraqui, *Entête (La Genèse)*, 220.

45 Sarna, *Genesis*, 88.

46 Sarna, *Genesis*, 150.

47 Sarna’s translation as given in *Genesis*, 150.

48 Chouraqui, *Entête (La Genèse)*, 221–222.

## Genesis 22:3–10. The Journey to Moriah and the Binding of Isaac

The eminent BYU expert of literary style, Arthur Henry King, underlined the importance of considering what is included and what is omitted in the inspired telling of this brief and rich story:

Why . . . are we told so much about Abraham’s preparations for the journey—the fuel, the knife, the donkey, the two young men that assisted—and nothing whatever about his state of mind? Could it be that he was not introspecting and worrying? We have one question from Isaac in that story, and only one, but it is a very pregnant question—it is a weighed question: We have the knife, the fire, we have the wood, but where is the victim? Think how effective that question is when there is nothing whatever said about what Abraham or Isaac were thinking. Then, after the story is told, we get that bit of genealogy at the end of the chapter (vv. 20–24). Why? And why are we not told what Sarah felt? Perhaps she did not feel anything, for she may have been left in complete ignorance. Did it not occur to the writer to mention Sarah at all in that chapter? Or did he deliberately exclude Sarah from that chapter? Sarah made some important decisions in the life of Abraham, like the decision to send away Hagar. Abraham didn’t want to send Hagar away. Sarah insisted, and the Lord spoke to Abraham in the night and told him that Sarah was right and that he must send Hagar away. So why isn’t Sarah in the chapter about Isaac? I don’t suppose a modern teller of that story would have dared to leave Sarah out, but she is left out and those genealogical details are in. If we try to figure out why these things are included or excluded, we give ourselves a better chance of understanding what the story is all about.<sup>49</sup>

**22:3. “Abraham rose up early in the morning.”** The Lord had issued his instructions in the night. At sunrise, Abraham carried them out with no delay nor any word said to anyone.<sup>50</sup>

**22:3. “saddled his ass.”** The only hint of a temporary loss of composure by Abraham is in the confused sequence of the actions taken.<sup>51</sup> Normally, the wood would have been chopped first and the ass would have been saddled last. In reading the verse, we are led to wonder whether Abraham delayed as long as possible the preparation of the wood intended to consume the body of his son.

**22:4. “on the third day.”** “Three days is a typical period of preparation for something important (compare Genesis 31:22; 40:20; 42:18). Westermann noted that the mountain of God to which the Israelites sought to travel was three days’ journey (Exodus 3:18; 5:3). Indeed, the phrase “on the third day” occurs twice in the Sinai pericope (Exodus 19:11, 16).”<sup>52</sup> The text says nothing about the three-day journey itself. Any description of the journey would be a distraction from the tight focus of the narrative.

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49 Arthur Henry King, “Rhetoric,” in *Arm the Children: Faith’s Response to a Violent World*, ed. Daryl Hague (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1998), 207–208.

50 See André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992), 222.

51 My appreciation to Arthur Henry King (1910–2000) for this unpublished insight concerning Genesis 22:3.

52 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 106–107.

**22:4. “Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.”** The name of the area given in verse 2, Moriah (related to the Hebrew verb for *seeing*), provides an occasion for wordplay in this verse and later in verse 14.

**22:5. “I and the lad will come again to you.”** The medieval Jewish sage Rashi wrote that in saying this, Abraham “unknowingly prophesied that both of them would return.”<sup>53</sup>

**22:6. “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son.”** Early Christian commentators saw Isaac’s bearing of the wood of the sacrifice as a type of Jesus, also an only son, carrying His cross.<sup>54</sup> Expositions of traditions such as those preserved by the Jewish contemporary of Jesus, Philo Judaeus, contrasting “Abraham, the man who learned,” to “Isaac the man who was born good by nature” might have also resonated as a type of Jesus to Christians.<sup>55</sup>

**22:7. “Isaac spake unto Abraham his father.”** “The conversation between Abraham and Isaac on the way to the place of sacrifice is only an interruption of the heavy silence and makes it all the more burdensome. The two of them, Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham with fire and a knife, ‘went together.’ Hesitantly, Isaac ventures to ask about the ram, and Abraham gives the well-known answer. Then the text repeats: ‘So they went both of them together.’ Everything remains unexpressed.”<sup>56</sup>

**22:8. “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering.”** Old Testament scholar L. Michael Morales has summarized the “rich history of rabbinical interpretation . . . , clearly demonstrating that the sparing of Isaac was understood deeply as the sparing of Israel.”<sup>57</sup> In similitude of Isaac’s willing consecration to God, the children of Israel were required to consecrate themselves in like manner if they themselves wished to be spared. In the temple sacrifices of ancient Israel—which pointed back to Isaac’s arrested sacrifice and pointed forward to Jesus’s *un*arrested sacrifice—we are to see our own arrested sacrifice and redemption, having been spared the shedding of our *own* blood through the Atonement of Christ.<sup>58</sup>

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53 Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, ed., *The Torah with Rashi’s Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*, vol. 1, Beresheis (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995), 2:233n22:5.

54 Chouraqui, *Entête (La Genèse)*, 223.

55 Philo, “On Dreams,” in *Philo*, ed. and trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, rev. ed., 12 vols., (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 5:386–389. Philo speaks of Jacob, having received “the impress of a nobler character and the name of ‘Israel,’ ‘he that seeth God,’ . . . no longer claims as his father Abraham, the man who learned, but Isaac the man who was born good by nature.” See Chouraqui, *Entête (La Genèse)*, 211.

56 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 11.

57 L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 226.

58 Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen, “‘By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified’: The Symbolic, Salvific, Interrelated, Additive, Retrospective, and Anticipatory Nature of the Ordinances of Spiritual Rebirth in John 3 and Moses 6,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 123–316.

**22:9. “Abraham . . . bound Isaac his son.”** In discussions of Genesis 22, Isaac is often treated as a passive foil to Abraham in his trial. But there is no doubt that this experience was also a test for Isaac—a man who possessed (we might suppose) the same soberness of faith that belied the age of the young Mormon (see Mormon 1:2). Indeed, later rabbinical tradition saw explicit evidence in a grammatical detail of Genesis 22:2 that Abraham and Isaac were both meant to be tested.<sup>59</sup> Going further, Truman G. Madsen summarized related extrabiblical traditions to argue that Isaac’s obedience was no less voluntary than Abraham’s:

If we can trust the Apocrypha, there are three details that the present narrative omits. First, Isaac was not a mere boy. He was a youth, a stripling youth on the verge of manhood. Second, Abraham did not keep from him, finally, the commandment or the source of the commandment. But having made the heavy journey (how heavy!), he counseled with his son. Third, Isaac said in effect: “My father, if you alone had asked me to give my life for you, I would have been honored and would have given it. That both you and Jehovah ask only doubles my willingness.” It was at Isaac’s request that his arms were bound, lest involuntarily but spontaneously he should resist the sinking of the knife. Though many have assumed it to be so, only the Book of Mormon records a prophet’s words saying that this was in “similitude of God and his Only Begotten Son” (Jacob 4:5).<sup>60</sup>

### Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 151–153.

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59 Daniel C Matt, trans., *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vol. 2 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 194, Be-Reishit 1:119b. The textual evidence on which this reading depends springs from the presence of the Hebrew particle *et* that introduces the direct complement of the direct object within the phrase “God tested *et* Abraham.” Though *et* has “no ascertainable independent sense” (Matt, *Zohar*, 2:194n606), it is sometimes translated as “with.” Hence, the inferred meaning that Isaac was tested “with” Abraham (Chouraqui, *Entête [La Genèse]*, 220–221). The interpretation is strengthened by the fact that it is conspicuously said that the father and son went “together” three times in Genesis 22 (see verses 6, 8, 19).

60 Truman G. Madsen, “Power from Abrahamic Tests,” in *Five Classics by Truman G. Madsen* (Salt Lake City, UT: Eagle Gate, 2001), 233. For other insights relating to this statement in Jacob, see Book of Mormon Central, “How Abraham’s Sacrifice of Isaac Illuminates the Atonement,” *KnowWhy* 412 (March 1, 2018), <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowwhy/how-abrahams-sacrifice-of-isaac-illuminates-the-atonement>. Jewish tradition sometimes calculates Isaac’s age as thirty-seven years old. (A listing of sources for this tradition is given in Matt, *Zohar*, 2:193n599.) Several Jewish sources recount that Abraham told Isaac his intent prior to their arrival at Moriah, and Isaac freely consented. Compare, for example, Samuel A. Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu: An English Translation of Genesis and Exodus from the Printed Version of Tanhuma-Yelammedenu with an Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing, 1996), 146: “If [the Holy One] has chosen me, . . . I shall willingly surrender my soul to Him.” The phrasing in Madsen’s version of Isaac’s statement recalls the Passover Haggadah Thanksgiving litany, where after each element of a list of blessings is read, the audience repeats the Hebrew response *Dayenu* (“It would have been sufficient”), found in Joseph Tabory, *JPS Commentary on the Haggadah: Historical Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 45–46. (Thanks to Stephen T. Whitlock for this and other insights.) See also Michael Maher, ed., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, Genesis*, vol. 1b, *Aramaic Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 79, Genesis 22:10. At that moment, Isaac is said to have seen the angels on high, who exclaimed, “Come see two unique ones who are in the world; one is slaughtering, and one is being slaughtered; the one who slaughters does not hesitate, and the one who is being slaughtered stretches for this neck” [that is, to make it easier for Abraham to slit it with his knife] (Maher, *Targum*, 80, Genesis 22:10). See also Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1, Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 118, Genesis 22:10; Berman, *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu*, 147.

## ***Related verses***

Genesis 22:3–10

### **Genesis 22:11–12. God Accepts the Sacrifice**

**22:11. “And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven.”** Sarna gave this conjecture for why the angel is depicted not as having appeared on earth but rather as having called Abraham from heaven: “Angels need to travel between heaven and earth, as is clear from 28:12, as well as from place to place on earth, as proved by 18:22. But the critical urgency of the moment precludes their usual personal appearance, such as made to Hagar (16:7ff.), and dictates this exceptional mode of angelic intervention, just as it did in 21:17.”<sup>61</sup>

**22:11. “Abraham, Abraham.”** This phrasing provides another indication that the narrator wanted to convey the haste required to stop Abraham from harming his son. “The repetition connotes both urgency and a special relationship between the one addressed and the One who calls.”<sup>62</sup>

**22:12. “for now I know that thou fearest God.”** “As Rambam points out, it is not that God’s foreknowledge is wanting but that, for Abraham’s sake, the quality of character that now exists only potentially must be actualized. In the biblical view, the genuinely righteous man must deserve that status through demonstrated action.”<sup>63</sup>

What can we learn from Isaac’s near-sacrifice? In the temple sacrifices of ancient Israel—which pointed back to Isaac’s arrested sacrifice and pointed forward to Jesus’s unarrested sacrifice—the people were to “see” their own arrested sacrifice and redemption, having been spared the shedding of their own blood through the Atonement of Christ. Harold Attridge concluded that “Isaac’s rescue from virtual death on the sacrificial pyre is symbolic of the deliverance that all the faithful can expect.”<sup>64</sup>

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61 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 151n11.

62 Sarna, *Genesis*, 153n11.

63 Sarna, *Genesis*, 153n12.

64 Harold W. Attridge and Helmut Koester, *Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 335. For a Latter-day Saint perspective on this topic, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen, “By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified’: The Symbolic, Salvific, Interrelated, Additive, Retrospective, and Anticipatory Nature of the Ordinances of Spiritual Rebirth in John 3 and Moses 6,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 123–316. Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, *The Jewish Heroes of Christian History: Hebrews 11 in Literary Context* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 162–163, observed that the motif of a near-death experience of the hero appears more than once in Hebrews 11. In the case of Isaac, “what is stressed is that from one who was almost never born, and who after being born was almost killed, the descendants of Abraham, the descendants of God’s faithful ones, are born.”

### ***Did a figurative death and resurrection take place at Moriah?***

In Hebrews 11:19, the evidence of the complete consecration of Abraham and Isaac is described using the language of death and resurrection.<sup>65</sup> In trying to make sense of this idea, we might remember that in some Jewish and early Christian creedal formulations bearing on accounts of Abraham’s sacrifice, one can find the idea that Isaac actually died, ascended to heaven, and was resurrected<sup>66</sup>—though perhaps this tradition makes more sense if we remember that the symbolism of death and resurrection fits not only actual heavenly ascents but also the figurative context of temple ritual.<sup>67</sup> President David O. McKay reportedly characterized the temple endowment as a “step-by-step ascent

into the Eternal Presence.”<sup>68</sup> Believing Latter-day Saints see the culminating moments of the endowment as a ritual anticipation of the eventual face-to-face meeting they hope to have with the Father when they are resurrected.

As a more concrete example of this idea, consider the decorations located immediately above the *Torah* niche in the late second-century Dura Europos synagogue.<sup>69</sup> The entire panel is rich with symbols of resurrection and eternal life. In one scene, Isaac is lying on an altar, and a ram caught in a tree is shown. In the background someone is entering a “tent sanctuary,” analogous to the later tabernacle of Moses.

Considering the tradition that Isaac died, ascended to heaven, and was resurrected in his experience on Mount Moriah, Margaret Barker interpreted the figure standing at an entrance as “going up behind a curtain held open by a disembodied hand—the symbol of the lord [shown immediately to the left of the curtain]. Since the temple curtain [veil] represented access to the presence of God, this seems to depict Isaac going to heaven.”<sup>70</sup> Note that Barker’s description raises three interpretive possibilities: (1) an actual death

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65 Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 295, explaining the Greek behind the phrase in Hebrews 11:9, stated that Abraham received Isaac “in a figure” (that is, “figuratively speaking”).

66 For a listing of such sources, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the Apocalypse of Abraham: Twin Sons of Different Mothers?,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David R. Seely, John W. Welch, and Scott Gordon (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Redding, CA: FAIR; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 899–900n196. See, in addition, Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 196–199; Monika Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius: Martyrdom and Human Sacrifice* (Budapest, Hungary: Central European Press, 2017), 90–92.

67 See Hugh W. Nibley, “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” in *Abraham in Egypt*, ed. Gary P. Gillum, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2000).

68 Cited in Truman G. Madsen, *The Presidents of the Church: Insights into their Lives and Teachings* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2004), 269.

69 Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “The Ezekiel Mural at Dura Europos: A Tangible Witness of Philo’s Jewish Mysteries?,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2010): 11–12.

70 Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London, England: T&T Clark, 2008), 28. Others have interpreted the divine hand as “staying the sacrifice” of Isaac, as is clearly attested in the scene of the binding of Isaac in the Beth



and resurrection; (2) a temporary ascent to the heavenly temple (as when Abraham received God's sure promise); and (3) a figurative entry into God's presence through ritual, similar to the modern Latter-day Saint temple endowment.

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 153.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 22:11–12

## **Genesis 22:13–14. A Ram Is Sacrificed and the Altar Is Named**

**22:13. “a ram caught in a thicket.”** The ram would substitute for Isaac in the burnt offering. Earlier, in verse 8, Abraham had identified the sacrificial victim differently, saying, “God will provide himself a *lamb* for a burnt offering.” This difference in terminology has led some modern readers to see Abraham's prophecy as unfulfilled until the crucifixion of Christ. In contrast to the ram of Abraham's day, Christ was seen, in this view, as the long-awaited “Lamb of God” (John 1:29).

However, while it is appropriate for Christians to see the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac as a type of God's sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son,<sup>71</sup> they should reject the common misreading of scripture that asserts a difference between the term “ram” and the term “lamb” in the two parallel accounts. As further evidence that this presumed difference is an illusion, note that early Christians equated the adult ram that was sacrificed by Abraham in verse 13 to the lamb that Abraham mentioned in verse 8. For example, Ephrem the Syrian wrote, “In the *ram*, which was hanging from the tree and was sacrificed as an offering in place of Abraham's son, was prefigured the time of [Jesus], who was hung from a tree like the *ram* and tasted death for the sake of the whole world.”<sup>72</sup>

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Alpha synagogue. But the Dura Europos and Beth Alpha scenes and their context differ in significant ways.

71 For more on Christian typological interpretations of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, see Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London, England: T&T Clark, 2008), 31; compare 28. See also James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1997), 177–178; James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 306–307, 324–325; Hebrews 11:17–19.

72 Emphasis added. Commentary on Genesis 20:3, cited in Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 324–325. Kugel also provided other examples of similar typological correspondences.

Although Jewish tradition does not share the Christian belief in the redeeming power of Jesus Christ through His sacrifice, some Jewish texts resonate with Christian symbolism in associating the *akedah* with the Passover<sup>73</sup> and with the idea that Isaac’s willingness to die at Abraham’s hands

suffices to save Israel from all their dangers and to obtain forgiveness for all their sins. . . . [In midrash,] the redemptive value of Isaac’s merit is not limited to his world but extends even to the netherworld: “Through the merits of Isaac, who offered himself upon the altar, the Holy One, blessed by He, shall raise the dead.” . . . Rabbinic sources attribute an everlasting effect to Isaac’s sacrifice and make of it the prototype of all sacrifices.<sup>74</sup>

Of course, in the New Testament the parallels between Abraham and Christ are explicit. For example, in the Gospel of John, we read that “Abraham rejoiced to see [Christ’s] day: and he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:56). Paul called Christ “our Passover . . . sacrificed for us.”<sup>75</sup> Elsewhere, in Romans 8:32 Paul made a deliberate allusion to Abraham when he referred to God’s not having “spared . . . his only Son,” but that He rather “deliver[ed] him up for us all” (see Genesis 12:2, 12, 17).<sup>76</sup> But this verse in Romans creates a problem for Bible scholar Monica Pesthy-Simon: “In the case of Abraham it is clear that he offered his only son to God. But if God takes the place of Abraham, to whom did he offer his son? To himself? Indeed, the same problem emerged in connection with all New Testament verses where it is said that God gives (up) or offers Jesus.”<sup>77</sup>

However, because Latter-day Saints believe that God and Jesus Christ are two separate beings, they see no dilemma in the Father’s giving of His only Son (John 3:16). The parallel with Abraham is a perfect one.

**22:14. “And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh.”** A footnote in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible interprets “Jehovah-jireh” as meaning “the Lord will see or provide” (compare verse 8). “Jireh” stems from the Hebrew root word *ra’ah*, “to see.” The theme of seeing relates both to the name of Moriah (verse 2) and to Abraham’s seeing the place “afar off” at a previous time (verse 4). The theme of providing relates to Abraham’s comment in verse 8 that God would “provide himself a lamb.” The relationship between seeing and providing in Hebrew can be understood in connection with the English expression of seeing to (that is, “providing for”) something.

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73 O. S. Wintermute, “Jubilees,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 90–91, Jubilees 17:15–18; 18:18–19.

74 Monika Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius: Martyrdom and Human Sacrifice* (Budapest, Hungary: Central European Press, 2017), 89–90. William G. Braude and Israel J. Kapstein, eds., *Pesikta De-Rab Kahana: R. Kahana’s Compilation of Discourses for Sabbaths and Festal Days* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 613–614.

75 1 Corinthians 5:7. Compare 1 Peter 1:18–19; Revelation 5:9.

76 Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 324–325. See also Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius*, 109.

77 Pesthy-Simon, *Isaac, Iphigeneia, Ignatius*, 109.

With the ram in the thicket, the Lord did indeed provide for Abraham. Christians also know that God later provided His Only Begotten Son as a substitute sacrifice for the covenant people who consecrate themselves to God in likeness of Isaac.<sup>78</sup>

**22:14. “as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.”** A footnote in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible reads the phrase as, “In a mount the Lord shall be manifest (seen).” However, using a different but equally correct vocalization, the phrase could be rendered in the present tense as, “In a mount the Lord sees.” To preserve the ambiguity of the tenses, Robert Alter translated the phrase as, “On the mount of the Lord there is sight.”<sup>79</sup>

There are several typological interpretations of this verse that have to do with seeing or being seen by the Lord on a mountain. For example, Gordon J. Wenham noted that since the form of the verb *ra’ah* (Hebrew “to see”) in this verse is “regularly used of the Lord appearing to men (compare Genesis 12:7; 17:1; 18:1),” we can both make “a link backward with Abraham’s past experience and forward to Israel’s future experiences on the mountain of God [Sinai] (Exodus 3:1–2, 16; Leviticus 9:4, 6, etc.).”<sup>80</sup>

Another common typological interpretation of this phrase is the original Jewish tradition, later adopted by many Christians, that Mount Moriah can be identified as the later site of sacrifice within the Jerusalem temple mount.<sup>81</sup> Indeed, 2 Chronicles 3:1 calls the temple mount in Jerusalem Moriah. Though the exact location of Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem is disputed, the approximate site of Herod’s temple is now occupied by the Islamic Dome of the Rock. For this and other reasons, Old Testament scholar L. Michael

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78 Jeffrey M. Bradshaw and Matthew L. Bowen, “‘By the Blood Ye Are Sanctified’: The Symbolic, Salvific, Interrelated, Additive, Retrospective, and Anticipatory Nature of the Ordinances of Spiritual Rebirth in John 3 and Moses 6,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 24 (2017): 123–316.

79 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:74n14. Nahum Sarna translated this similarly, using “vision” instead of “sight” (Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok [Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 154).

80 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1994), 111.

81 See, for example, Martin McNamara, *Targum Neofiti 1: Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 119; Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends (Sefer Ha-Aggadah): Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1992), 41; Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols., trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909–1938. Reprint, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 5:253n253; Psalm 76:3, from William G. Braude, ed., *The Midrash on Psalms (Midrash Tehillim)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 2:14–15; Genesis 22:15, from Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg, ed., *The Torah with Rashi’s Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated*, vol. 2, *Beresheis* (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1995), 237; Genesis (Vayera) 22:14, from A. J. Rosenberg, ed., *Mikraot Gedolot*, vol. 1, *Genesis and Exodus* (New York, NY: Judaica Press, 1993), 259; Genesis 22:14, from Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic, and Rabbinic Sources* (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:806–807; Genesis (Vayera) 56:10, from H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah*, 3rd. ed., 10 vols. (London, England: Soncino Press, 1983), 1:500–501.

Morales was correct when he argued that Genesis 22 “probably served to prefigure the entire cultic economy—even as the foundation story for the Jerusalem temple.”<sup>82</sup> Speaking of the Christian understanding of the role of sacrifice in salvation history, Morales wrote:

The Jewish authors of the New Testament had come to understand Jesus’ sacrifice on a Roman cross as *the* event that, on the one hand, had given the temple system of animal sacrifices its provisional acceptance and value and that, on the other hand, has made such sacrifices obsolete ever after, having fulfilled them.<sup>83</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 153–154.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 22:13–14

## **Genesis 22:15–18. God Solemnly Declares the Sure Promise of Abraham’s Blessings**

His response to the Lord’s divine request enabled Abraham to develop and demonstrate his readiness to “patiently endure.” Thus, he was qualified, according to Joseph Smith, to “obtain the promise” by a personal oath from the Father that he would attain eternal life (see Hebrews 6:13, 15) and that his beloved wives and children would be “secured [to him] by the seal wherewith [he would be] sealed.”<sup>84</sup>

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82 L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 73. Morales also noted the presence of cultic terminology in the binding of Isaac on Mount Moriah that is “clustered together elsewhere only for the ordination of the Levitical priests (Leviticus 8–9) and for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)” (page 73). He observed that Isaac was offered up specifically “as an ascension offering (*‘ōlā*), the same as that offered up by Noah at the foundation of the newly cleansed world” (page 74).

83 L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 31.

84 Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980), 241, August 13, 1843. For a more detailed description of Joseph Smith’s teachings on this topic, see Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Now That We Have the Words of Joseph Smith, How Shall We Begin to Understand Them? Illustrations of Selected Challenges within the 21 May 1843 Discourse on 2 Peter 1,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 20 (2016): 47–150.

Sometimes, due to faulty interpretations of statements by the Prophet Joseph Smith, it has been mistakenly taught that the temple sealing of worthy parents in marriage ensures the salvation and exaltation of their children. However, this blessing is not conferred by the marriage sealing but rather through qualifying for an eventual “sealing [of] the blessing [of] the everlasting covenant, thereby making their calling and election sure” (Joseph Smith Jr., August 13, 1843, in Joseph Fielding Smith, comp.,

After emphasizing Abraham's status as a friend of God (which Abraham attained after demonstrating his willingness to sacrifice Isaac), Latter-day Saint scholar E. Douglas Clark summarized scriptures and teachings of Joseph Smith confirming Abraham's "election made sure," which occurred at that time:

When God announced the blessings, it was not just by promise but by oath, as emphasized by the letter to the Hebrews: "When God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by Himself. . . . And so, after [Abraham] had patiently endured, he obtained the promise" (Hebrews 6:13, 15). So what did it mean for the Almighty to swear by Himself? God was really saying, according to the Midrash, "Even as I live and endure for ever and to all eternity, so will My oath endure for ever and to all eternity." It was the unconditional promise of eternal life, his calling and election made sure, which, says Joseph Smith, comes to a man after "the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man is determined to serve him at all hazards." Accordingly, explained Joseph Smith, it was "the power of an endless life. . . which . . . Abraham obtained by the offering of his son Isaac," an event that "shows that if a man would attain to the keys of the kingdom of an endless life, he must sacrifice all things."

The rabbis stated that at the beginning of the great trial, when God had first called Abraham's name and he had answered "Here am I," the real meaning was "Here am I—ready for priesthood, ready for kingship, and he attained priesthood and kingship." Similarly, Joseph Smith stated that by the "oath of God unto our Father Abraham," his children were "secured [to him] by the seal wherewith [Abraham had] been sealed."<sup>85</sup>

In the end, Abraham's binding of Isaac for the sacrifice was revealed as the necessary prelude for God's binding of Isaac to Abraham for eternity.<sup>86</sup>

Are Abrahamic tests required sooner or later of every disciple? Elder Neal A. Maxwell answered this question affirmatively when he taught, "If we are serious about our discipleship, Jesus will eventually request each of us to do those very things which are the most difficult for us to do."<sup>87</sup> Thus, "sometimes the best people have the worst experiences because they are the most ready to learn."<sup>88</sup>

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*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* [Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1969], 321. Compare Ehat and Cook, *Words of Joseph Smith*, 241, 300n19). Prior to the marriage sealing of Benjamin F. Johnson and his wife, the Prophet Joseph Smith explained the difference between these two kinds of seals: "There were two seals in the Priesthood. The first was that which was placed upon a man and a woman when they made the [marriage] covenant and the other was the seal which allotted to them their particular mansion" (William Clayton, journal, October 20, 1843, cited in James B. Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2002], 408; punctuation and grammar modernized).

See also David A. Bednar, "Faithful Parents and Wayward Children: Sustaining Hope While Overcoming Misunderstanding," *Ensign*, March 2014, 28–33.

<sup>85</sup> E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 217–218.

<sup>86</sup> Paraphrasing Clark, *Blessings of Abraham*, 218.

<sup>87</sup> Neal A. Maxwell, *A Time to Choose* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1972), 46.

<sup>88</sup> Cited in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2002), 20.

Emphasizing at once the reality, urgency, and authority that the story of Abraham and Isaac imposes on believers while acknowledging the threatened loss of these qualities as modern culture distances itself socially and intellectually from the spirit of Abraham's world, Erich Auerbach wrote,

Far from seeking, [like fiction], merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, [the story] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history. This becomes increasingly difficult the further our historical environment is removed from that of the Biblical books. . . . When, through too great a change in environment and through the awakening of a critical consciousness, this becomes impossible, the Biblical claim to absolute authority is jeopardized; the method of interpretation is scorned and rejected, the Biblical stories become ancient legends, and the doctrine they had contained, now dis severed from them, becomes a disembodied image.<sup>89</sup>

Latter-day Saints who cherish the story of Abraham and Isaac as a divinely inspired reflection of historical and personal reality will find in it a source of endless spiritual nourishment and a supernal tutorial on discipleship. The significant lesson of the story of Abraham, who is mentioned by observant Jews daily in morning prayers and within the weekly liturgies of the synagogue, is summed up in *Lectures on Faith* 6:7:

From the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things: it was through this sacrifice, and this only, that God has ordained that men should enjoy eternal life; and it is through the medium of the sacrifice of all earthly things, that men do actually know that they are doing the things that are well pleasing in the sight of God. When a man has offered in sacrifice all that he has, for the truth's sake, not even withholding his life, and believing before God that he has been called to make this sacrifice, because he seeks to do his will, he does know most assuredly, that God does and will accept his sacrifice and offering, and that he has not nor will not seek his face in vain. Under these circumstances, then, he can obtain the faith necessary for him to lay hold on eternal life.<sup>90</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 154.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 22:15–18

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<sup>89</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 15–16.

<sup>90</sup> Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), 93, lecture 6:7.

## Genesis 22:20–24. Three Groups of Twelve Sons

André Chouraqui described the three groups of twelve sons mentioned here:

[The narrator] gives the names of Abraham’s nephews, the sons of Nahor: eight sons from his wife and others from his concubine. Jacob will also be the father of twelve sons, eight from his wives and four from his concubines. And the sons of Ishmael will number twelve kings at the head of twelve tribes. These thirty-six tribes united by close family relationship and culture will be nomads from Mesopotamia to Arabia and in Canaan.<sup>91</sup>

Robert Alter aptly summed up what this genealogical aside adds to the narrative as a whole:

The genealogical list inserted here, which reflects a Mesopotamian confederation of twelve tribes akin to the twelve tribes of Abraham’s descendants, is directed toward the introduction of Rebekah (verse 23), soon to join the Patriarchal narrative as a principal figure. The genealogy marks a kind of boundary in the larger narrative. Abraham has accomplished his chief actions; all that is really left to him is to acquire a suitable burial plot for Sarah, which will be his final gesture in laying claim to the land. At that point, even before Abraham’s death, the concern of the next generation will take center stage (chapter 24).<sup>92</sup>

### Source

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 154–156.

### Related verses

Genesis 22:20–24

## Genesis 23:1–2. The Death of Sarah

**23:1. “Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old.”** “Since she was 127 at the time of her death, she died three years before Isaac’s marriage at age 40 (Genesis 25:20).”<sup>93</sup>

**23:2. “Sarah died in Kirjath-arba; the same is Hebron.”** “Kirjath-arba” means “city of four.” The meaning of the reference to “four” in the name is uncertain. One tradition identifies it with four

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<sup>91</sup> André Chouraqui, *La Bible: Entête (La Genèse)* (Paris, France: JC Lattès, 1992), 228n20.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:74nn20–24.

<sup>93</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 156.

prominent members of a race of giants (Anak and his three sons, mentioned in Joshua 14:15; 15:33; 21:11; Numbers 13:22; Judges 1:20)<sup>94</sup> and another to the four biblical couples traditionally thought to be buried in the cave of Machpelah (that is, Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah).<sup>95</sup> The name may instead refer to a federation of four townlets or four hills that was later known as Hebron. Or it may be a non-Semitic place name that was later Hebraized.<sup>96</sup>

Kiryat Arba is also the name of a modern Jewish community east of the old city of Hebron that was founded in 1968.

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Abraham’s Hebron Then and Now, Part 2: The Tomb of the Patriarchs,” video, 14:21, February 14, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=T8lOjtD2sd4>; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 156–157.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 23:1–2

## **Genesis 23:3–16. Negotiations with the “Hittites”**

Summarizing the events and significance of this encounter, Nahum Sarna wrote,

The account of the purchase of the Cave of Machpelah is extraordinarily detailed, indicating the importance that the episode had assumed in the consciousness of Israel. There are several possible reasons for this emphasis. Not only is it the first recorded death and interment in the history of the Jewish people but it also concerns none other than Sarah, the first matriarch. Abraham’s actions are indicative of the great respect for the dead and of the importance of proper burial that remain a characteristic of the Jewish faith. Machpelah is the first piece of real estate in the promised land secured by the founding father of the nation, and its acquisition presages the future possession of the entire land. Since all three patriarchs and three of the matriarchs eventually were interred in the cave, it most likely enjoyed popular veneration as a shrine and as a symbol of national and social unity. This may well have influenced David’s choice of Hebron as the first capital of Israel. Finally, the narrative in a very real sense presents another

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94 Jacob Neusner, ed., *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis, A New American Translation*, vol. 2 of 3, *Parashiyyot Thirty-Four through Sixty-Seven on Genesis 8:15–28:9* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985), 58:4, H, 2:297.

95 Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 58:4, F and G, 2:297. A separate tomb at a different location memorializes Rachel, the second wife of Jacob, who died on the way to Jerusalem after giving birth to Benjamin.

96 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:75n2.



mute affirmation of Abraham’s faith. In the preceding chapter the divine promises were reiterated and expanded. Now Abraham faces harshly contrasting reality: to gain a mere burial plot he must receive permission from the local population and pay out a large sum of money. His insistence on acquiring the estate in perpetuity is an expression of faith that his descendants would indeed inherit the land.

The narrative itself is suffused with legal terminology and practice, an understanding of which is essential to its interpretation. First, Abraham labors under two disabilities that derive from his status as an alien. He cannot avail himself of local burial facilities without municipal permission, and he cannot acquire land. Second, even if these restrictions were to be overcome, he would still face the problem of procuring an inheritable estate to be used by future generations, for an alien could not normally own land in perpetuity (cf. Lev. 25:23). Third, apart from legal problems, there is still to be encountered the reluctance of landowners to part with their property, a pervasive and deep-seated attitude throughout the ancient Near East. . . . All this is reinforced by the strong influence of communal solidarity, the consciousness that disposal of real estate to an alien may upset the local demographic balance, impair social cohesion, and weaken the community in its relationship with neighboring cities and tribes. Given these circumstances, it is small wonder that the entire community was involved in transacting a sale of land.

Abraham wishes to ensure that his purchase is final and irrevocable, his ownership absolute and incontestable. For these reasons, he refuses a gift: donations are notoriously insecure in law. They may be challenged by heirs or by other members of the family or community, or even by the donor himself should his goodwill wane. Only a payment that is manifestly accepted by the seller of his own volition ensures the unchallengeable nature of the transaction. That is why Ephron, not Abraham, must first state the price and why, once that is done, there is no further bargaining.<sup>97</sup>

**23:3. “the sons of Heth.”** “Whether these are actually Hittites who have migrated from Anatolia [Asia Minor, which includes most of modern Turkey] into Canaan or a loose Hebrew designation for non-Semitic Canaanites is unclear.”<sup>98</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 156–160.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 23:3–16

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<sup>97</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 156–157.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2019), 1:75n3.

## Genesis 23:17–20. A Legal Description of Machpelah

Commenting on these verses, Nahum Sarna wrote,

The final paragraph, doubtless reflecting written deeds of sale, reads like a legal document, although the contract in this instance is based on a verbal agreement. It is divided into two sections. Verses 17–18 contain the following information: the identity of the transferor, the location of the property and a description of its contents, the identity of the transferee, the mode of acquisition of property rights, and the fact of the conveyance of title executed in the presence of witnesses in a public proceeding. Verses 19–20 . . . are integral to the transaction. Because the authorities have allowed the land transfer to an alien on the understanding that it be used as a burial site, it is necessary to affirm that Abraham fulfilled this precondition in good faith. It is the act of burial that legally completes the transaction, that makes the sale absolute and incontestable, and that confers the power to dispose of the property by testament or will. Hence the concluding summation in verse 20.<sup>99</sup>

**23:17. “the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre.”** In Jewish tradition, the name Machpelah, thought to have the meaning of “doubling,” is usually said to refer either to the structure of the caves as two adjoining cavities or to the fact that several biblical couples are buried together there.

### ***Subsequent history of Machpelah and the Tomb of the Patriarchs***

The cave of Machpelah has been a site of pilgrimage for thousands of years. Machpelah has been under the control of Jews, Christians, and Muslims at various times in its history. It was enclosed two thousand years ago within a roofless structure whose imposing walls were built by Herod the Great. It was later the site of roofed Byzantine and Crusader Christian churches.

In 1267, minaret towers were added by Muslim rulers, and the structure was transformed into a large mosque, *al-Haram al-Khalil*, the *al-Khalil* referring to Abraham as “the friend,” meaning friend of God. Muslims also call it *al-Haram al-Ibrahimi*, meaning Abraham’s mosque. Jews call it *Me’arat HaMakhpelah*. At the present time, a synagogue is also contained within the building. Thus, both Muslim and Jewish services are currently held within the monument.

In recent decades, the interior of the building has been significantly revamped. Two exterior entrances (one for Jews, one for Muslims) were created, and the interior was partitioned into two areas, with the larger area reserved for Muslims. Tourists can enter both sides, but Jews and Muslims can enter and visit their respective sides only.

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<sup>99</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 160.

The stone structure that encloses the cave of Machpelah is about sixty-one meters long, thirty-six meters wide, and fifteen meters high. The walls are two meters thick. The monument sits at the far end of the plains of Mamre and is clearly visible from a distance. The most important features of the structure are the six cenotaphs. The six cenotaphs are monuments to the dead, not tombs or sepulchres that hold their actual remains. The bodies themselves are thought to be buried in the cave beneath the building.

Some Jewish traditions tell of how Abraham was led to the cave of Machpelah by a supernatural light and the smell of paradise due to the presence of the bodies of Adam and Eve and the nearby gateway to Eden.<sup>100</sup> This would explain Abraham's eagerness to buy the cave as well as the high price he paid for it. Today, a memorial to the grave of Adam can be seen there, consisting of a small tree growing out of a square enclosure, similar to other ancient burial monuments in Palestine. In a niche in the area where Jacob's tomb can be viewed sits this unmarked relic of Adam's footprint, marking the place where he ascended to heaven. (Others say that it is not Adam's footprint but rather Muhammad's). Why are these footprints located here? Because, in some strands of Jewish tradition, the two caves to which the Hebrew word "Machpelah" alludes correspond to the two realms of earth and Paradise. All souls must pass through both of these realms on their way to heaven.

The two entrances to the cave itself are currently sealed off. One of the entrances can be seen by visitors, but the other is hidden. Lit candles can be seen at the bottom of the small aperture of the public entrance. The hidden entrance, through the lamp aperture, is the one associated with the threshold of the Garden of Eden.

The caves were rediscovered in 1119 by a monk named Arnoul. Arnoul said he had discovered bones in the first cave, and believing them to be those of the biblical patriarchs, he washed them in wine and stacked them neatly. According to an account written in 1163 by Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, there was a sequence of three caves, the first two of which were empty; in the third cave were six tombs, arranged to be opposite to one another.

In 1967, after Israel gained possession of the area during the Six-Day War, Moshe Dayan wanted to explore the caves below the monument. Not knowing anything about the second, larger entrance, he directed the lowering of a brave twelve-year-old girl named Michal into the tiny aperture. In the dark, she explored what she could of the lower level, which no one else had seen for centuries, it seemed. Some years ago, Dr. Meishe Misheah told me the story of early explorers beneath the monument and of his own descent into the caves in 1981. He said that there were two caves: an upper and a lower. On top of the upper cave were bones that have since been dated to the time of ancient Israel in the Iron Age. Because

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<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Marc-Alain Ouaknin and Éric Smilévitch, *Chapitres de Rabbi Éliézer (Pirqué de Rabbi Éliézer): Midrach sur Genèse, Exode, Nombres, Esther* (Lagrasse, France: Éditions Verdier, 1992), 224.

the caves have been filled in with dirt, we only have the description of an ancient explorer to tell us about the second cave. No further exploration has been permitted since 1981.

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, “Abraham’s Hebron Then and Now, Part 2: The Tomb of the Patriarchs,” video, 14:21, February 14, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=T8lOjtD2sd4>; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 160–161.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 23:17–20

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