

God Never Asked Abraham to Kill his Son

by [Petr Chylek](#) (August 2023)



The Sacrifice of Isaac, Marc Chagall, 1966

The story concerning the test of Abraham to find out whether he loves God so much that he would be willing to kill and

sacrifice his son is a cornerstone of all three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). It is generally referred to as the sacrifice of Isaac in Christianity, as the binding of Isaac in Judaism, and as the sacrifice of Ishmael in Koran. Over the centuries there were a large number of comments and interpretations written by wise people of all three religions. They provide a wide range of possible interpretations of the story.

In all three religions, the story provides proof of Abraham's absolute obedience and love of Elohim. In Christianity it is even more important, because it serves as a prefiguration of God's plan to sacrifice his Son for the sins of mankind.

Although the story of Abraham and his son has been officially treated with the highest respect in its common interpretation, there have been many attempts to explain and to understand the event on a deeper level. God's commandment not to kill, and to kill? God's commandment to develop high ethical and moral standards, and to violate them? Alternate explanations were authored from biblical times to present, ranging from Sarah's active interference with Abraham's intentions to her death due to a shock she experienced when she learned that Abraham went to sacrifice his son (Midrash Genesis Rabbah 58:5).

Let us start with the Old Testament (Torah) the verse of Genesis 22:2. The translation presented in the King James Version and most modern versions are almost identical: "Please, take your son, your only one, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the land of Moriah; bring him up there as a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I shall tell you." Here, the most important word is the "burnt-offering" which is one of the old Jewish forms of sacrifice. The usual Hebrew word for sacrifice is ZAVACH (Z-V-CH). However, this word is never used in Genesis 22.

The word for an altar on which sacrifices took place is MIZBEACH spelled with letters M-Z-V-CH, where the initial M,

according to Hebrew grammar, changes a verb into a noun. However, in Gen22:2 the Hebrew word used is ALAH (A-L-H) composed of three root Hebrew letters of Ain-Lamed-Heh. The meaning of this root is to go up, to ascend. The same root is used many times in Torah and always it means to ascent, to reach higher states of consciousness. Thus, according to the original Hebrew meaning, Abraham is asked to bring his son to the mountain and cause him to go up, to ascent (A-L-H) to the higher states of consciousness.

Now the early Torah interpreters may have had no training in meditation, no experience of higher states of consciousness, could not imagine what to go up means. Thus, they invented a re-interpretation of Elohim's order to Abraham as to kill his son, to burn his body and let the smoke go up. In this way the word based on the root A-L-H became interpreted as the "burnt-offering."

Later by endless repetition of the story, it became so engraved in people's consciousness that it became one of the corner-stones of their faith and it became difficult to modify. Thus, the story of Abraham and Isaac is today interpreted as Abraham passing the test and proving that he loves God more than anything else including his son. We should expect that if Abraham passed his last test that God would use him in the future for fulfillment of different tasks. However, according to Torah, God, after this event, never talked to Abraham again. You can wonder why.

According to Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), a great Jewish philosopher and mystic, one of the reasons why man cannot find the truth is his education.[\[1\]](#) The stories which he learns in early childhood and which are repeated year after year, became so entrenched in his mind that he is later unwilling and often even unable to give them up. All religions, unfortunately, have as one of their requirements on parents, to "educate" their young children in their basic religious beliefs.

Islam has of course a slightly different version of the event. In Genesis 22:2 God said "Please, take your son, your only one ... " A logical argument made by Muslim scholars is that Isaac was never Abraham's only son. Some years earlier Abraham had with Hagar, an Egyptian youngster that Sarah gave him for a second wife, a son named Ishmael (Genesis 16). Therefore, the reference to the only son, they argue, can be made only before the second Abraham's son, Isaac, was born. Thus, the Koran presents the event in the same way as mainstream Judaism, but the son to be sacrifice is now Ishmael instead of Isaac. We may notice that during the three-day travel to mount Moriah the name of Abraham's son is never used in the Torah. All discussions are between the father and the son, never using their names.

Only in the initial dream is the name of Isaac used. Muslim scholars argue that the Torah was redacted and changes were made to make stories fit better into developing Jewish theology. Arguments like that are difficult to prove or disprove. The Dead Sea Scrolls, although containing remnants of 24 different scrolls related to Genesis, [\[2\]](#) contain only five words from Genesis 22. They do not provide anything new towards understanding of the discussed problem.

I have not been subjected to the early education mentioned by Maimonides [\[1\]](#). My parents were secular human beings not actively participating in any religion. I have read the stories of Old Testament for the first time at the age of 70 years. Due to a strange impulse, I had started to learn Hebrew five years earlier. The third volume of the textbook used in the class [\[3\]](#) presented a Hebrew text of Gen 22:1-5. I immediately noticed the difference between the Hebrew text and offered English translation. A few decades of meditation in eastern religious traditions help me to distinguish between Hebrew "to go up, to ascend" (A-L-H), and the English interpretation as a "burnt-offering."

Over the years I have presented my interpretation of the

Abraham-Isaac story to several Rabbis. Some remained silent, other strictly rejected my suggestion defending the thousand years old orthodox interpretation. Thus, I was silent, trying not to push the explanation which seemed to contradict orthodox religions.

A few weeks ago, I have found that my “new” interpretation was really not so new. Rabbi Bachya ben Asher (1255-1340) was the 13-14th century Kabbalist in Spain. He was a member of Isaac the Blind school and a major student of Shlomo ben Ederet (1235-1310), who in turn was a major student of Nachmanides (1194-1270). The Kabbalistic school of Isaac the Blind was a major force behind the development of medieval Kabbalah. They also led the major attacks on Maimonides and his mystical teachings.[\[4\]](#)

In his commentary on five books of Moses, Rabbi Bachya explains[\[5\]](#) that the Hebrew word O-L-H, traditionally translated as “burnt-offering,” really means “rising to spiritually lofty dimensions ... It was intended to be a preamble to a higher, loftier spiritual dimensions ... The intelligent reader will draw the correct conclusions.”

At another place in his commentary on Torah, Bachya writes: “Abraham misunderstood God out of his great love for Him. He thought that God really wanted him to slaughter Isaac and burn his remains as a burnt-offering.” Bachya later refers to Jeremiah 19:6 statement “... which I did not command, nor even said, nor had it ever occurred to Me.”

All three Abrahamic religions consider the orthodox interpretation of the Abraham-Isaac story with a high respect. Is it possible that all three are wrong? No, I do not see it that way. The Hebrew sages teach that Torah has four different levels of understanding. The higher, more spiritual understanding does not invalidate the more common lower levels of interpretations. Each level of interpretation is aimed at people in different states of their abilities. Thus, whichever

interpretation resonates with your soul, that level is meant for you at this time.

[\[1\]](#) Moshe Maimonides, Guide to Perplexed, Dover Publications, Mineola, NY, 1956.

[\[2\]](#) P. Chylek, Is Genesis the last book to be incorporated into the Torah? New English Review, January 2022.

[\[3\]](#) Linda Motzkin, Bet Is for Breishit, Hebrew for Adults, Book 3, UAHC Press 2004.

[\[4\]](#) P. Chylek, Maimonides as the Greatest Jewish Mystic, New English Review, September 2022.

[\[5\]](#) Torah Commentary by Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, Lambda Publishers, Brooklyn, NY, 2003.

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