

- i. At the heart of the Abrahamic Covenant was God's promise of a seed. It was introduced with the declaration that Abraham would become a great nation (12:2, cf. 13:14-16), and God ascribed this seed to Abraham's own line of descent at the time the covenant was ratified (15:1-5). Years later the Lord revealed that Sarah was to be the mother of this heir (17:15-19), and when Abraham was a hundred years old, the promise was finally fulfilled with the birth of Isaac (ref. 21:1-7).

The Abrahamic Covenant focused on land, seed, and blessing, and Isaac represented the foundational point of fulfillment with respect to all its particulars: He was to be the progenitor of the great nation promised to Abraham, and so also the basis for that nation's possession of the covenant land. Most importantly, the overarching promise of global blessing was bound up in Isaac; what God first promised to Abraham (12:3) would now be taken up in his son (22:18).

God had given Abraham a descendent just as He promised – not merely a son, but a son of the covenant. Isaac was the appointed heir of all that the covenant spoke of and promised; he would carry the covenant into the future. Among other things, what this means is that the continuance of the covenant unto its promised fulfillment, along with God's veracity regarding it, depended upon Isaac. If God were to fulfill His word to Abraham – and thereby show Himself truthful and faithful – Isaac would have to grow to adulthood and father his own children. For Isaac was the promised seed, and so also the source of the innumerable multitude of Abrahamic descendants (ref. again 15:1-5).

Thus Abraham's final altar building episode was the most significant. Whereas his previous altars all testified to the enduring quality of the covenant and God's ongoing faithfulness respecting it, this final one brought the covenant itself – and, by implication, God's integrity – into jeopardy. For on this altar Abraham was to offer a sacrifice – the sacrifice of the covenant son.

- 1) The episode at Moriah began with a second call to Abraham. As He had done many years earlier (12:1), God once again called Abraham to arise and go to an undisclosed place (22:1-2). These calls have two primary things in common, and the writer highlights their commonality by using in both a Hebrew construction found nowhere else. First, each call embodied a test of Abraham's faith. But more than that, each implicated the covenant God made with him: The first call served as the foundation for introducing the covenant; the latter one appeared to be its death knell.

God didn't wait until Abraham arrived at his destination to inform him of the reason for the journey; He told him up front that it had its goal in Isaac's death. That God would command someone to take the life of his own child seems incomprehensible, but the enormity of what was being required of Abraham only becomes clear when God's demand is placed in its salvation-historical context. God was requiring Abraham to trust Him and His faithfulness in the context of an impossible situation.

The severity of God's demand was not that it called Abraham to slay his own child (though many go no further than this in their consideration). Neither was it that Abraham was to regard this slaying as an act of worship (ref. 22:5). Its severity lay in the crisis of faith it engendered: God's command to sacrifice Isaac introduced a dilemma that, to all appearances, made His fulfillment of His covenant oath impossible. It forced Abraham to make a decision of faith: *Would he believe God with respect to the sacrifice of the covenant heir, or would he believe Him regarding the covenant promise?* It appeared that he couldn't do both, for to slay Isaac was to accept that God had abandoned His promise concerning him; on the other hand, believing God's promise seemed to mean that he had to withhold Isaac, which disobedience is itself unbelief.

But what God was requiring of Abraham was that he would *simply* believe Him – nothing more and nothing less. He was calling him to offer his son in worship as a burnt offering while, at the same time, holding tightly to the covenant promises that were bound up in that son. Abraham was being called to trust God implicitly, and he was given three long days in which to grapple with his faith while looking upon the covenant son by his side.

“The command [to sacrifice Isaac] teeters on the edge of morality. We are left with the inexplicable and exacting realization that faith demands radical obedience. Abraham is asked to behave in a way that is illogical, absurd, and, to say the least, nonconventional from the human perspective. Within the biblical world view, however, such radical behavior proves the true nature of biblical faith.” (Bruce Waltke, Genesis)

- 2) God was calling Abraham to believe Him – however incomprehensible and even outrageous His purpose and directives might appear, and the fact that he had passed this test of faith is evident even before the sacrifice occurred. When he and his party arrived near the appointed place of sacrifice, Abraham instructed his servants to wait for him there. He and Isaac were going to worship the Lord, and afterward *they* would return (22:4-5). The text seems at first to suggest that Abraham believed God would provide a sacrificial substitute for Isaac (ref. 22:7-8), but his action at the altar indicates otherwise (vv. 9-10).

When Abraham told Isaac that the Lord would provide the lamb for the sacrifice, he wasn't speaking of a substitute animal as many presume; he was referring to Isaac himself. God had provided the sacrificial lamb in the son of the covenant. Abraham had every intention of sacrificing Isaac, and yet his insistence to his servants that both of them would return reveals his confidence that God was not abandoning His covenant promise. The author of Hebrews provides insight into Abraham's thought process: He would indeed slay his son as commanded, but he reasoned that God was going to raise Isaac from the dead (11:17-19).

- 3) With that confidence, Abraham set off with Isaac and built a sacrificial altar there on the mountain. After arranging the wood, he bound his son, laid him on the altar and raised his knife to slay him. But before Abraham could take Isaac's life, the angel of the Lord called out to him and told him to withdraw his hand (22:9-12). Abraham had demonstrated his faith: He had not withheld from God his only-begotten son – the son of the covenant. Moments earlier he had insisted to Isaac that God would provide the sacrifice, and now his words were being fulfilled in an unexpected way. As he raised his eyes he saw a ram caught in a thicket near the altar.

Unbinding his son and removing him from the altar, Abraham went and took hold of the ram and offered it to the Lord in Isaac's place. And as he had done at Beersheba when he named the place of his well and called upon the Lord in order to consecrate it as sacred space, Abraham named the sacrificial site on Mount Moriah *Yahweh Jireh* – the Lord “sees” and therefore will provide (22:13-14).

- 4) Following the sacrifice of the ram, the angel of the Lord called to Abraham again, this time affirming the promises of the covenant in view of his obedience in offering his son (vv. 15-19). This affirmation serves as the climax of the entire episode and therefore requires careful comment.

Of first importance is that the angel's words don't imply that God's determination to fulfill His covenant vows to Abraham depended upon Abraham's obedience. The entire Abraham narrative to this point emphasizes God's continuing faithfulness to His covenant in spite of Abraham's unbelief and unrighteousness (cf. esp. 12:10-20, 20:1-18). As with Abraham's obligation of obedience in regard to circumcision (cf. 17:1-2, 9-11), his obedience in offering Isaac didn't determine the fulfillment of the covenant; rather, it served, by divine design, to further disclose the covenant's historical and salvation-historical significance. That is, Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and God's provision of a substitute added a crucial dimension to the promises of the covenant in terms of how God would fulfill them. At the heart of the covenant was God's promise that His blessing would flow to all the earth's families through Abraham (and now through Isaac – 22:18), and the sacrifice at Moriah provided insight into how that was to be accomplished:

God's promise of global blessing was now bound up in Isaac: The sacrificial Abrahamic seed – raised from the dead in connection with an acceptable substitutionary offering – would mediate the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant to all the nations. And to the extent that the world of men would follow Abraham's example, believing God for His promises and yielding themselves in submissive trust to His provision of a substitute, they would show themselves to be his true children and, therefore, heirs of the promises made to him.

Meredith Kline provides this summary: *“Abraham had complied with God’s directions to prepare the altar on the mount of Moriah and to proceed with the slaying and offering there of Isaac, his only and beloved son. Intervening as Abraham laid hold of the sacrificial knife, the Lord had provided the ram as a substitute offering in Isaac’s place. Thereupon, the Lord swore by himself that he would surely perform the full complement of covenant promises, culminating in the gospel promise of the blessing of the nations through Abraham’s seed. Interpreted in its setting, this oath was a commitment by God not to spare his own Son but to deliver him up as our sacrificial substitute.”* (Kingdom Prologue)

In this statement Kline hints at another important consideration, which is the typological connection between Abraham’s obedience and that of his unique Seed. Abraham’s compliance in offering Isaac didn’t merit God’s commitment to fulfill His promises, but it did show how a sacrificial act of obedience **would** earn their fulfillment. The realization of the covenant promises – first in relation to the nation of Israel, but then in their ultimacy – depended upon the sacrifice of the covenant son in obedience to God. Again, Kline’s comments are helpful: *“Within this typological structure Abraham emerges as an appointed sign of his promised messianic seed, the Servant of the Lord, whose fulfillment of his covenantal mission was the meritorious ground of the inheritance of the antitypical, eschatological kingdom by the true, elect Israel of all nations.”*

The completion of the sacrifice on Mount Moriah elicited God’s reiteration of His commitment to fulfill the covenant, and so also had important implications for the future recovery of sacred space. If God’s blessing was to come to all the nations as a direct outcome of the sacrificial offering of Abraham’s covenant son (typified at Moriah and fulfilled at Calvary), then that same offering would also be instrumental in the overthrow of the curse and the restoration of the shalomic order to which God’s universal blessing points.

The altar on Moriah represented more than simply Abraham’s last altar in the promised land; it was the greatest of those altars in that it carried forward and brought to a high point the covenantal significance of its predecessors. In their turn, Abraham’s altars at Shechem, Bethel, and Hebron and the tree-shrine at Beersheba each acted to reinforce the truth that God’s covenant grant of Canaan would indeed be realized for Abraham’s descendents. The altar at Moriah is presented as the climax of the Abraham narrative because the sacrifice offered there made the covenant absolutely sure. All the promises bound up in it – including the grant of Canaan as sacred space – were now secured by the Lord Himself by virtue of the acceptable substitutionary sacrifice He provided. As much as the Moriah episode displays Abraham’s faith at its apex, it does the same with regard to God’s covenant faithfulness, ending climactically as it does with the sovereign Lord’s solemn guarantee to fulfill all His good word to Abraham.