

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 24

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Genesis 22 – Akedah, Binding of Isaac

Genesis 22: Abraham & Isaac, Son of the Promise

We were discussing Genesis chapter 22, which is the highpoint of Abraham's faith. I had begun discussing that at the end of the last hour. Let's go back and pick up on that. In verse 2, Abraham is told to sacrifice Isaac, his son, with his own hands. The background for that command is that he is told to sacrifice the son, through whom the promise was to be realized. Abraham at this point did have another son, Ishmael (through Hagar), but the promise was to be fulfilled through Isaac, not through Ishmael. So if you go back and look at Genesis 21:12, you read, "But God said to him, 'Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.'" But the promised line of the seed is to come through Isaac. If you go back a little bit further to Genesis 17:18 you read: "And Abraham said to God, 'If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!'" Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year."

So in chapter 17:18-21, it is explicitly stated that this line is to continue through Isaac. That is why in the last class hour when I read Calvin's comments on Genesis 22 he says the conflict in Abraham was between the word of the Lord in connection with that promise and what he was telling him to do at this point. It was a test of Abraham's faith which he was able to sustain.

Genesis 22:8, 14 God Will Provide the Lamb – Jehovah Jireh

I think the theme of Genesis 22 is the phrase, “God will provide.” You find that in verse 8 where Isaac is speaking: “Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, ‘Father?’ ‘Yes, my son?’ Abraham replied. ‘The fire and wood are here,’ Isaac said, ‘but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’”

Then in verse 14 after Abraham was ready to slay his son and the Lord prevents him, he sees the ram in the thicket and offers him for burnt offering instead. You read in verse 14, “Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah jireh.” I’m reading from the King James translation. If you translate that “Jehovah jireh,” which here is transliterated from the Hebrew, it is the same expression: “the LORD will provide.” Then the last phrase of the verse as it is said today (the King James translation I think obscures this) says, “in the name of the Lord this will be seen.” If you are consistent in your translation you will translate that phrase again as “in the mountain the LORD will provide,” because the word that is translated “provide” all the way through here is a passive form of the Hebrew verb “to see” literally. Let me go back to verse 8 in the NIV where it says, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.” If you translate it literally, it is “God will see to something for the burnt offering.” It is a good translation, but you should be consistent with “see” all the way through. The NIV says in verse 14 (I think much better than the King James), “the LORD will provide,” and then “on the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.” So that is the primary thought that is being emphasized in the narrative in Genesis 22: “The LORD will provide,” and the LORD provided the lamb and he provided his own son as a sacrifice for sin. The KJV says “in the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.” “Shall be seen” obscures the emphasis on that phrase.

Genesis 22:12 God says, “Now I know” – Anthropomorphic Expression

Now in verse 12 when Abraham has been obedient, God says, “Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son.” “For now I know” – wouldn’t God have known before? Certainly in his omniscience he knew the strength of

Abraham's faith. Certainly God was at work to strengthen Abraham to meet this challenge. I think it is best to understand an expression like that as an anthropomorphic expression – I think that is the technical term used when things that are very human refer to an attribute of God. The main point of the text is really for Abraham himself to demonstrate his trust in God and to us the faithfulness of God.

He was drawing a parallel between pagan sacrifice of the children and the nature of this text. What is the intent of the passage in which God called upon Abraham when pagans were willing to sacrifice their own children? Would Abraham be willing to sacrifice his own child?

Main Focus of the Akedah [Kaiser versus Vos]

Elsewhere in the Old Testament you have a strong condemnation of human sacrifice, which, of course, raises difficult questions here, but only to a certain extent. In Walter Kaiser's book *Old Testament Ethics* (page 262), he says, "Genesis 22 has been represented as a divine command to commit murder in its most horrible form and, therefore, is totally out of character with the holiness of God." In the next paragraph he discusses that a bit further, saying, "The law clearly prohibited human sacrifice and spoke scornfully about those who ordered their sons to be offered to Molech." He says, "Genesis 22 does not encourage such sacrifice because the narrator is exceedingly careful to introduce his account as a test. True, this notation was meant to help the reader, not Abraham, but an event must be judged by its wholeness, not by its introductory command. So Kaiser makes that distinction and then emphasizes in his own discussion that the thing that is highlighted in this is God's mercy and grace in providing. He says, if it be objected, what kind of a God would subject man to this type of ordeal? The answer depends on which part of the narrative is emphasized. If the initial command to sacrifice Isaac is stressed, then the resulting image of God will be one of deception. But if the intervention of Yahweh to stay his raised hand and his subsequent blessing of Abraham is stressed, then one's conclusion will agree with Roland Devaux, who says any Israelite who heard this story would take it to mean that his race owed its existence to the mercy

of God and its obedience to the prosperity of our ancestors.” In other words, he says you shouldn’t really focus on the pain but rather focus on the mercy of God in providing a substitute.

Now I’m not sure that solves the problem. Certainly I don’t think you can say, well, Kaiser goes further and brings up a very difficult question. Kaiser says on page 263: “Gerhardus Vos surprises us with the estimate that the divine command to sacrifice Isaac “distinctly implies in the abstract the sacrifice of a human being cannot be condemned on principle. It is well to be cautious in committing oneself to that critical opinion, for it strikes at the very root of the atonement.”

Kaiser’s statement is Vos’ point: that Abraham is asked by God to offer life, the life dearest to him, his only son. But with the last minute intervention of the angel, a substitute of one life (in this case a ram’s life) for another is announced as acceptable to God. “Therefore, Vos concludes, ‘Not sacrifice of human life as such, but the sacrifice of average sinful human life is deprecated by the O.T. (Kaiser 263-264).’”

Now, Kaiser at that point says: “I hardly know what to make of Vos’ line of reasoning. How could any human life known to man after the Fall function as a gift, much less a substitute, to God? I’ve no biblical qualms about the principle of substitution for that is germane to the text itself, but I cannot agree that Isaac as human life functions here to point theoretically or principally to a blood atonement.”

Kaiser rejects the analogy that Vos seems to be pushing. The emphasis of the passage falls on the test aspect and the grace and mercy of God, and of maintaining his promise unaided by any conniving assistance from some of the promise’s first recipients. So, in principle, what is being addressed here is the idea of a human sacrifice where life is atonement. Kaiser gets to that, but he says no human life actually could do that. He would prefer simply to look at this as emphasizing the test aspect, the grace and mercy of God providing an alternative. So, I don’t know how much you want to dwell on the parallel between human sacrifice (which did exist among other cultures) and what God tells Abraham to do here, because certainly the law of the Old Testament is against any legitimacy to human sacrifice.

Vannoy's Reflections

Now I think what I said there as far as the parallel with Golgotha is the passing of that smoking furnace with the animal in Genesis chapter 15. Here is the parallel in chapter 22 with the New Testament text: he did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all. God was willing to spare his son in order to provide for our salvation. Abraham was willing to spare his son to be obedient to God.

Abraham had total confidence in God. God had given a promise that his line would continue through Isaac. Therefore when the LORD said to take his life, Abraham was convinced if necessary that God would raise him from the dead. So, he took God at his word, did not doubt his promise, and was obedient. That is the thing to focus on. When you get into the question of how God could command Abraham to take the life of his own son, that is very hard. What Kaiser tries to do is back off that and say it was never God's intent ever for Abraham to do that. The focus should be on the mercy and grace and provision in the text; I don't know if that's the best answer or not. He could have done it and God could have, as Hebrews says, raised him from the dead, so that his promise would not be voided.

Abraham's Lapses [Gen. 12 & 20] She's My Sister

All right, let's go on to Abraham's lapses, failures, and weaknesses. Certainly Abraham was a great man – you see the greatness of his faith in chapter 22 – but he was not a perfect man. The Bible shows us weak points as well as strong points, not only with Abraham but with other prominent figures in the Old Testament. So, he is a hero of faith, he is represented as such particularly in the New Testament (e.g. Romans, Hebrews, James), but he's still a sinful man. The grace of God is primary in his life, not his own goodness. He has weaknesses, but God overrules and works in spite of those weaknesses.

So, in Genesis 12 and in Genesis 20, Abraham represents his wife as his sister as an expedient to help himself. In Genesis 12 he goes down to Egypt to seek food because of the famine, shortly after he comes into the land of Canaan. You read in verses 10-13,

“There was a famine in the land, he went into Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was grievous and it came to pass when he was come near to enter into Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “Behold now I know thou art a fair woman to look upon therefore when it comes to pass the Egyptians will see you that they shall say, ‘This is his wife,’ and they will kill me, but they will save you alive. Say, I pray, you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake and my soul shall live well because of you.”

He fears that his wife’s beauty will lead to an attempt on the part of the Egyptians to get rid of him because he is her husband. He calculates that if he says she is his sister perhaps that will lead to the opposite and he will be given favors and good treatment. That is the tactic. It seems to have been something that was agreed upon by Abraham and Sarah and perhaps used in other instances, because they did a lot of traveling.

If you look at Genesis 20:13, where the second incident of this occurs with Abimelech of Gerar, you read, “It came to pass when God caused me to wander from my father’s house I said unto her, ‘This is your kindness which you shall show to me at every place which we shall come. Say of me, “He is my brother.”’” That is a half-truth. It is not a total falsehood, because Genesis 20:11 says, “Abraham said, ‘Because I thought surely the fear of God is not in this place, and they will slay me for my wife’s sake and yet indeed, she is my sister. She is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother and she became my wife.’” She was really his half-sister who became his wife. So, when they say to someone, which apparently they did at numerous places, that Sarah was his sister, it was true. But certainly it was a deception because she was also his wife and only his half-sister.

Now a question was raised here the other day – how would Sarah have been so attractive at age 65 or 90? You get the ages by looking at Genesis 12:4. It says, “When Abraham left Haran, he was 75 years old.” Compare that with 17:17, in which Abraham says, “Shall a child be born unto him that is a hundred years old and shall Sarah, that is 90 years old, bear?” You find there that there is a 10-year difference in age between Abraham and Sarah. So, that means when Abraham left Haran to come down into Canaan, he was 75. That means that Sarah in chapter 12 was 65. If you go further,

Genesis 21:5 says, “Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born unto him.” Isaac was born just shortly after (see chapter 21). So Abraham was about 100 years old when his son Isaac was born, and Sarah was about 90 years old at that second incident.

You read in Genesis 23:1 that Sarah lived to be 127 years old. Now, with respect to her beauty and age, what was the average age of menopause when people were living to the age of 125? Today it is forty-five to fifty years old. If the average life span is now about fifty years less; perhaps menopause also was about fifty years less or at about seventy-five. Now I’m guessing – this is pure speculation. It seems to me you could speculate that menopause when people were living so much longer may have been, instead of forty-five to fifty, at about age seventy-five. If it was seventy-five for her at age 65 or 90 to still have a great deal of beauty is not unreasonable. I guess many of you saw the news maybe two or three weeks ago: Florence, the oldest woman in the world, died about at age 114, a resident in Doctor’s nursing home here in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. My wife was caring for her for the last couple years. It is a remarkable thing, somebody that lives to be 114 years old. We think that we are way off, but Sarah lived to be 127, that’s not a whole lot more.

In any case, Sarah’s beauty leads them to take this approach to try to avoid problems for Abraham. Sarah was taken into the harem of Pharaoh and, exactly as Abraham suspected, he received all sorts of gifts. You read that in 12:14: “It came to pass when Abram had come into Egypt that the Egyptians beheld the woman and she was very fair, and the princes of Egypt saw her and commended her before Pharaoh and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.” And then verse 16: “He treated Abraham well for her sake. He had sheep and oxen and men servants and maid servants, she asses and camels.” Verse 19 said, “‘I might have taken her to me as my wife. Now therefore behold your wife, take her and go your way.’ and Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him, send him away and his wife and all he had.”

Now what are we to make of this story? Why is this story included? It seems that the point is that we seek God’s grace and preservation of Abraham and Sarah in spite of their human sins. God intervenes in the midst of this impossible situation, brought about

by this tactic of Abraham and Sarah. The significant thing is related to the promised line of the seed: God protects Abraham and Sarah so that they will yet be the bearers of the promised seed. Even though they get themselves into that predicament, the Lord delivers and keeps that marriage intact – the marriage through which the promised seed will come.

In Joseph Free's book *Archaeology and Bible History* (page 55), there are a few comments on this passage. He says, "A possible reason for Abraham saying Sarah was his sister rather than his wife is furnished by the discovery of a papyrus document, which tells that Pharaoh had a beautiful woman brought to his court and caused her husband to be murdered." One can see why Abraham wished it to be understood that he was the brother of Sarah rather than her husband. In other words, his concern might have been legitimate, but that certainly does not justify the deceitfulness.

On Camels

The other thing he notices, or makes a note of, is that the casual reader usually takes no particular notice of the indication that Abraham had camels among his possessions in Egypt. Verse 16 says he had sheep, oxen, men servants, maidservants, she asses and camels. I think I mentioned earlier that Bible critics have often thought it anachronistic to say that camels were domesticated, so this cannot be reliable at this point. Free says that there is archaeological evidence showing early knowledge of the camel in Egypt, including statuettes, figurines of camels, plaques bearing representations of camels, rock carvings and drawings. Camel bones, camel hair, camel rope – these objects, some 20 in number, date from the seventh century B.C. to the period before 3000 B.C. So you get down into this argument of interpretation of archaeological data and, according to Free, there is good evidence. Camels were domesticated long before the time of Abraham.

Gen. 20 Abimelech & Abraham & Sarah and its Background God's Promises of Isaac's Birth

Secondly, in chapter 20, where this same tactic is used a second time, you read in verses 1-4: "Abraham journeys toward the Negev to Gerar and Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she is my sister, and Abimelech, King of Gerar, sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, 'You are but a dead man for the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.' For Abimelech had not come near her, and asked, 'Lord would you slay a righteous nation? Said he not unto me "she is my sister" and she herself even said "he is my brother." In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands have I done this.'" The result is that Sarah is released again.

Now I think to understand chapter 20, it's very important that we look at the context of chapter 20 and notice the background to what happens in chapter 20. If you go back to chapter 17, you read in 17:17-19, "Abraham fell upon his face and laughed and said in his heart, shall a child be born unto him that is 100 years old and shall Sarah that is 90 years old bear? And Abram said unto God, "O that Ishmael might live before you." And God said, "Sarah your wife shall bear you a son indeed, you shall call his name Isaac and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant and his seed after him."

Down to verse 21: "My covenant will I establish with Isaac whom Sarah shall bear unto you at this said time in the next year." So in Genesis 17:17-19, it is told to Abraham and Sarah that at this said time in the next year, Isaac is going to be born. Look also at 18:10-14, where there are two other statements. God said, "I will certainly return unto you according to the time of life and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And then down in verse 14 after Sarah laughs, He says, "Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return to you according to the time of life and Sarah shall have a son." So in chapter 17 there is "the set time in the next year according to the time of life," in 18:10 "at the appointed time," and in 18:14 "according to the time of life."

The interesting thing is that almost identical phrases occur in 2 Kings 4. This is the Hebrew of what is translated as "this set time" in Genesis 17:21, the Hebrew of 18:14 "at

the time appointed,” and the Hebrew of 18:10 and 18:14 “according to the time of life.” 2 Kings 4:16-17 says: “He says about this season, when the time comes you shall embrace the son.” And she said, “Nay, my lord, man of God, do not lie to your handmaid!” And the woman conceived and bore a son at that season that Elisha said unto her according to the said time.

In context, those statements are Elisha’s promise to the Shunamite woman that she would have a child, a son. It is an identical expression in the Hebrew. In 2 Kings 4:17, “at that season” is the same Hebrew expression: “it’s at that said time.” “This season” is also that expression; it’s just translated in two different ways. “Then according to the time of life” is translated “when the time comes and according to the set time,” but it is the same phrase in the Hebrew as it is in Genesis 18:10-14.

Now, it seems quite clear that what Abraham and Sarah are told is that within a year they are going to have a son. In other words, they are going to have a son at “the set time, according to the time of life.” What is the time of life? Is the time of life a year or is that the term of pregnancy? It may be the latter, so it may be that Abraham and Sarah were to conceive almost immediately: according to the time of life, at this time, in the next year, they were going to have a son.

That is all background to Abraham going down to Gerar in Genesis 20. He goes down to Gerar and tells Abimelech, “She’s my sister,” and Abimelech takes Sarah into his harem. And then the Lord comes to Abimelech and says, “You’re but a dead man, for the woman whom you have taken, she is a man’s wife.” So what we see is that God, in his grace, preserves Sarah as the mother of the promised seed. And God’s intervention prevents any suspicion or doubt arising who fathered the child to be born. That certainly is not Abraham’s doing, but God is working out his purposes in and through Abraham, in spite of his weaknesses, and protecting that promised line.

Right after the Abimelech at Gerar incident in chapter 20, “the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore a son unto Abraham in his old age at the said time which God had spoken to him” (Genesis 21:1-2). So, the Abimelech incident happens between the point of the promise

of that and the realization of it. And so it seems the significance again is in relation to this preservation of the promised seed through Abraham and Sarah.

Promise to Abraham of a Son by Sarah

Now, this backs up a bit. Abraham had been promised a seed way back in chapter 12, and in chapter 15 that promise is repeated. Genesis 15:4 says, “Eleazar shall not be your heir but he that comes forth out of thine own loins shall be your heir,” but Sarah remains barren. And you get to chapter 16 and read in the first verse that Sarah, Abraham’s wife bore him no children. So Sarah says to Abraham in verse 2, “Behold, the Lord has restrained me from having children, and I pray go in unto my maid. It may be that I might obtain children through her. And Abram harkened unto the voice of Sarai. After Abram had dwelled ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, his wife, took Hagar, her maid the Egyptian.” Hagar may be a maid she had received when they were there in Egypt. It is quite possible; she was an Egyptian. It had been ten years that the promise had not been fulfilled, so Abraham takes Hagar, and a son is born to him through her. Abraham and Sarah looked for a different way to fulfill the promise. They tried to arrange by these means for Abraham to have a son. That sort of an arrangement sounds rather strange to us, but it was not something uncommon in that time. References of this kind of an arrangement are found in Hammurabi’s Law Code and in the Nuzi texts (other ancient texts of that sort).

Sarah and Hagar

I brought two volumes of *Chronicles News of the Past*, which is an Old Testament history or, rather, a history of the Jews in newspaper format. This is “Abraham and the New Faith,” an exchange of letters between Abraham and Melchizedek: “Sodom and Gomorrah wiped out in worst disaster since the flood. Mysterious blaze, quake, sweep the valley of Siddim.” Then there is foreign news what’s going on in Egypt. Here in Babylon to Hammurabi. See, Hammurabi is about 700 years old. Abraham is about – well, the dating is not entirely accurate. Generally, this is quite good historically. “Jacob protests

son's arrest. Spy hunt in Egypt. Accused, denied, charged of espionage." They came to buy food "for their starving family." There are a lot of very humorous things in this, too. There is a copy of this in the library if you want to look at it sometime.

But the reason I mentioned this in the third one of these, there is an article: "Sarah vs. Hagar: Court rules, Hagar stays, affirms Ishmael's rights." And then there are excerpts from Hammurabi bearing on the Sarah vs. Hagar case. The quote there from Hammurabi's code says: "If a man married a woman and she did not provide him with children and he has decided to marry again, that man may marry a second wife, bringing her into his house, but with that second wife ranking in no way with the first. If a man married a woman and she gave him a female slave who then bore children, if later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she, the slave, bore children, her mistress may not sell her. She may however mark her with the slave mark and count her among her slaves. If she did not bear children her mistress may sell her. If a man's first wife bore him children and his female slave also bore him children, if the father has ever said "my children" to the children whom the slave bore him thus having counted them with the children of the first wife, then after the father has gone to his grave the children of the first wife and the children of the slave will share equally in the goods of the paternal estate, the firstborn of the first wife receiving the preferential share." That shows that the practice of taking a slave was something that was known in the time of Hammurabi and regulated by law.

Transcribed by Victoria Wittke
Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt
Final edit by Jennifer Bobzin
Re-narrated by Ted Hildebrandt