

A few Comments on the *Akedah* The *Binding* [of Isaac]

From *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut
(New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), pp. 149-54.

The practice of human sacrifice, which was well-known to the ancients and central to the cults of Israel's neighbors, stands a backdrop to chapter 22. In the framework of his time and experience, Abraham could have considered the command to sacrifice his son entirely legitimate. . . . It is therefore important to notice that in the beginning of the test the command is issued by Elohim—the generic term for God or gods—and the command is one that other elohim could and did make. But when the sacrifice is about to be performed it is Abraham's God, Adonai [i.e. YHVH], who stays his hand. . . .

Abraham's religion not only rejects the sacrifice of a son by a father but rejects, as well, its use as a theological theme. This is in stark contrast to Eastern religions and to Christianity, in which a father's sacrificial gift of his son plays an important role. . . .

God puts Abraham to the test, but . . . what is [He] testing him for? Is it to test Abraham's faith that God will not go back on His promise? . . . Or is it to test Abraham's unquestioning obedience, his faithfulness rather than his faith? . . .

Why must God test man? Does he not know all things?

Maimonides answers that God tested Abraham precisely because he knew that he would pass the test. Abraham's faith would shine like a beacon and be a sign to the nations. . . .

A radically different explanation is offered by Franz Rosenzweig, who sees in the test a *temptation* by God. . . . God purposely conceals His true purpose [because] if everything were clear, men would be automatons. . . . But evidently God wants only the free to be His. . . .

What kind of a God is He? How can the compassionate God of the Bible be portrayed as asking for the sacrifice of a child?

One answer is that the test came at a time when human sacrifice was still an acceptable practice and that, therefore, in terms of its own age it was merely *the* extreme test (and after all, God did not exact the final price). God thus may require of man . . . to give up that which he loves most. . . .

Another explanation re-interprets the text to say that it only *appeared* to Abraham that God asked him to sacrifice his child; such a request could not possibly square with the fundamental laws of morality. A midrash, therefore, suggests that Abraham misunderstood God altogether. It has God saying: "Did I tell you 'Slaughter him'? Did I not rather tell you 'Bring him up'?" [A word play in Hebrew.] You brought him up on the altar, now take him down again!" In this view of the story the test both succeeds and fails. It succeeds in that it proves Abraham to be a man of faith and obedience, but it fails in that Abraham's understanding of God's nature remains deficient.