

Triennial Torah Study – 4th Year 01/02/2014

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Gen 22-23	Judges 20-21	Ps 48	Mat 27
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The Offering of Isaac (Genesis 22)

The offering of Isaac is one of the best-known stories of the Bible. In fact, it has become synonymous with faith and obedience.

Why would God need to test Abraham? The answer is implied in verse 12: “For now I know that you fear God.” As mentioned in one of our previous readings, Genesis weaves together several recurring themes. Two of those themes are the sovereignty of God and our submission to Him. Did Abraham really have a proper fear of God—respect for who God was, His divine power and awesome purpose? Did he really believe and trust in God from his innermost being? Or was Abraham merely obedient because some instant gratification was in it for him? Would Abraham obey when it appeared greatly to his present disadvantage to do so? Obedience, of and by itself, is not necessarily a sign of love or submission. One can obey out of terror or pursuit of material gain. How would God know? A test was required.

What must Abraham have been thinking? He didn't delay to obey (he rose early the next morning), but as he and Isaac journeyed to Moriah his mind was not on the weather. Hebrews 11:17-19 tells us what Abraham was thinking: “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, that in Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure” (KJV). Abraham accounted that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead in order to fulfill His promise that Abraham's primary line of descent would be through Isaac—rather than through any of Abraham's other children. The Greek word translated “accounting” signifies exactly what it appears to mean—to add up. Abraham was adding up the situation as he proceeded to Moriah. He was considering God's promise, God's integrity, God's character—adding up all the facts and coming to the conclusion that God would have to resurrect Isaac. Abraham's faith was being built by a sober consideration of who God was!

Abraham's confidence can even be seen in Genesis 22. He tells his servants, “Stay here with the donkey, the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and WE will come back to you” (verse 5)—that is, he told them that he and Isaac would return. Indeed, Abraham truly believed it. His willingness to put the knife to Isaac's

throat proved both his obedience and his faith, while proving also that he had an intelligent faith and a submission to God's sovereignty not based on a pursuit of selfish advantage.

But Abraham was not the only one being tested. It seems that Isaac, too, was being tested. Would he submit to his father's apparently crazy intentions? Would he struggle against his father? Isaac's response was simple submission. There is not a hint of resistance given, not a contrary word spoken. Isaac foreshadows the unquestioned obedience and willing submission of Christ to God. Yeshua never resisted His Father's will. Though His death would be humiliating and painful in the extreme, Yeshua was committed to doing his Father's will—"Thy will be done" (Matthew 26:39, 42)

But Abraham and Isaac weren't the only ones being tested. God was also allowing Abraham to put Him to the test. Would God become a breaker of His own word? Abraham had known God for more than 30 years. He had left his family and kindred for God. He had kept God's laws, statutes and judgments. He had observed God's providence in his life. He had spoken directly with Him on several occasions. He had reasoned with God over Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham knew God—or so he thought. Now Abraham added up the situation. For three days Abraham pondered what he had been asked to do, and who had asked him to do it. For three days the mental calculations were performed. The bottom line: If God is God, He would keep His promise. How the promise would be kept was another matter. But in the end, Abraham really would know God—and that God would always keep His word.

The Death of Sarah (Genesis 23)

Sarah dies at 127 years of age. She had lived to see her beloved Isaac reach his 37th birthday. Abraham must now provide a burial place for his wife. The transactions recorded in this chapter are insightful for their picturesque detail and cultural accuracy.

At one time various scholars declared the Hittites (descendants of Heth, mentioned in Genesis 10:15) to be fiction because archaeologists and historians could find no trace of them outside the Bible. Thus, in their reasoning, the Bible was also a fiction. But then came revolutionary archaeological finds that conclusively proved the Hittites were not imaginary but instead ruled a large and powerful empire centered in modern-day Turkey but with extensive holdings in upper Mesopotamia, down the eastern Mediterranean coast and even in Egypt for a time. Much of the archaeological data on the Hittites comes from voluminous cuneiform tablets detailing business transactions. Interestingly, those tablets show that Hittite title deeds to land made particular mention of the number of trees on the property, just as recorded in verse 17—a small detail that provides startling confirmation of the accuracy of the Genesis record.

The actions and dialogue recorded between Abraham and the Hittites provide a marvelous picture not only of Abraham's personal comportment but also of the complex rules of approach common to much of Middle Eastern culture. Abraham calls himself a stranger and sojourner when he addresses the council of the sons of Heth. The word translated stranger is *ger*. The *ger* was similar to what we call a resident alien, and it carried the idea of submissive dependency upon the host. That Abraham would so characterize himself before a council who knew him to be a "mighty prince among us" (verse 6) shows not only his humility but

also the cultural practice of self-humiliation. This self-humiliation is reinforced by Abraham twice bowing himself before the people.

The dialogue between Abraham and Ephron also preserves the very strong Middle Eastern flavor of the whole transaction. Abraham requested the council of the sons of Heth to “intercede for me” (as the Hebrew literally says) with Ephron, at once showing deference and submission befitting his status as a ger. Ephron, in fact, was already sitting before Abraham (for verse 10 should be translated, “And Ephron sat among the sons of Heth”), but to show his deference Abraham does not directly address him. Now the haggling for a price begins.

Although the conversation does not appear to be haggling, it actually is—only it is done in such a way as to cause each party to the negotiation, Abraham and Ephron, to appear to be righteous and generous. Ephron, with great show, implores Abraham to take the land without payment, an offer that he fully expects Abraham to politely refuse. Indeed, according to the culture of the day, Abraham had to refuse. It should be noted here, though, that Abraham had only asked for the cave at the end of Ephron’s field. Ephron’s response meant that if Abraham wanted the cave, he was going to have to buy the whole field. In reply, Abraham offers to buy the field, but he does not name a price—for to do so would have transgressed proper etiquette by putting Ephron in the awkward position of appearing to put the bite on a mourning man if the price were not to his liking. Ephron then replies, again with an award-winning display of “magnanimity,” naming as expected a price for the land that was somewhat excessive but characterizing it as an inconsiderable sum.

Normally, Abraham’s next move would be to “generously” offer a lower amount, leading Ephron to come down on his price. The haggling would continue until a satisfactory deal was struck. But in this circumstance, Abraham simply pays the first price Ephron names. Perhaps he wanted all to witness that his acquiring of this property was more than fair. No doubt, he wanted the land right away—and that there be no question about ownership. With the negotiations ended, Abraham acquires the property for a burial place. Remarkably, with all that God promised Abraham, this was the only piece of land the Bible records him ever personally owning during his lifetime.

The War Against Benjamin (Judges 20)

The grisly evidence of the crime of the Gibeahites produced shock in the nation of Israel. A council was held at Mizpah, the Levite giving his testimony as to what had happened. All Israel resolved to take action against the Gibeahites.

A delegation was sent to the Gibeahites demanding the surrender of the “sons of Belial” (a term denoting wicked, worthless, perverse individuals). But when the Gibeahite elders showed themselves to be implacable, the situation became ominous. Indeed, all Benjamin rallied to the aid of Gibeah. The Benjamites fielded an army of 26,000 men against 400,000 soldiers out of the remaining tribes.

That the men of Benjamin would determine to fight the other 11 tribes appears remarkably senseless, even though they were known for their courage and military prowess. Genesis 49:27 hints at this and 1 Chronicles 8:40 and 12:2 provide examples. Judges 20:16 states that their army included 700 men who possessed devastating power by use of the sling (the same weapon with which David later slew Goliath). It was an effective weapon: “The sling, which was employed with a left-handed motion, must not be confused with a modern schoolboy’s catapult; it was a formidable weapon of war used in the Assyrian, Egyptian and Babylonian armies as well as in Israel.... It has been estimated that stones weighing up to one pound could be projected with uncanny accuracy at speeds up to 90 m.p.h.!” (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, note on verses 15-16).

With the clash between the two armies looming, the Israelites obtained counsel from God on the matter and, after initial reverses, completely routed the Benjamites.

We do not really know the reason that God initially allowed the Israelites to suffer 40,000 casualties with virtually no Benjamite casualties before giving the Israelites any help. There may have been tactical reasons for the lopsided nature of the first engagement. The Tyndale commentary on Judges offers this observation: “The hilly terrain in the vicinity of Gibeah favored a defensive force rather than an attacking force, especially if the former was in a strong position, as was likely in this case, since the Benjamites were familiar with their tribal portion. In such a situation superior numbers were of limited value, since they could not be effectively deployed, and a determined group of men armed with slings could inflict heavy casualties on an attacking force.... [And] in the battle which ensued the psychological advantage lay with the Benjamites. They would fight desperately because they were fighting for their lives, whereas the opposing force, while convinced of the rightness of their cause, may have had little heart to engage in a civil war” (note on verses 19-25). If this analysis is correct, it is an interesting parallel to the American Civil War, in cases where southern armies overwhelmed numerically superior armies of the north.

Perhaps more importantly, God may not have been especially happy with the other tribes (that their hearts were not really right is evident in what happened in the aftermath of the war). We do see that they were driven to fasting and sacrificing before God, something quite rare in this period. Perhaps God wanted them to see the need for this. In any case, the Israelites finally succeeded using a tactic similar to that used at Ai. All but 600 Benjamite men were slaughtered in the fighting. The 600 men fled to a stronghold and maintained themselves there for four months.

But during that four months, the Israelites did something just as unthinkable as the crime that sparked the war in the first place—they went through Benjamin’s territory and slaughtered the entire tribe, women and children, young and old. This was an unjustified atrocity, though the Israelites may have considered it just retribution because the Benjamite cities they butchered had sent forces to aid the wicked men of Gibeah. In any case, it was an instance of anger and revenge taking precedence over self-control. When the slaughter was complete, only the 600 men in the stronghold survived.

Wives for the Benjamites (Judges 21)

The slaughter of all the Benjamites except the 600 men holed up in Rimmon only worsened the situation—now an Israelite tribe was about to become extinct. The 600 men had no wives, for they had all been slain in the carnage that followed the war, and all Israel had bound themselves with an oath that they would not give their daughters to any Benjamite man. What could be done?

While searching for an answer, the men of Israel determined that no men had come up to the war from Jabesh Gilead. Recalling that they had sworn to slaughter any who did not come up to the war against Benjamin (verse 5), the answer seemed obvious—send a company of soldiers down to Jabesh Gilead, slaughter all the men there, and their wives, but preserve alive the virgins for the 600 men of Benjamin. And so one rash action followed another and the trail of blood continued. With the slaughter of the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead, 400 virgins were procured. But that was not enough.

In the strange twists of logic common in that day, again the answer seemed obvious: since all Israel was bound with an oath not to give their daughters to the Benjamite men, let the Benjamite men take the daughters! And so the Benjamite men were allowed to raid a group of women dancing in religious celebration and to carry away whomever they chose as wives. The fathers of the women were prevailed upon not to attempt to retrieve their daughters. And in this way, all oaths were kept and a tribe in Israel was preserved.

This kind of bizarre, torturous logic with regard to oaths might seem foolish to many of us today. Indeed, it all seems rather disingenuous, as they sought out loopholes to skirt the clear intent of their oaths. But the keeping of one oath, even if it was at the cost of some strange behavior, was another one of those social customs and expected morality that was common to all Middle Eastern society. Indeed, the keeping of oaths is commanded by God. But God expects those who give their word to follow through on the intent—not just the letter. Often a considerable degree of wordplay and shades of meaning were employed to extract one from a difficult circumstance (as the story of Hushai, 2 Samuel 15-17, will show), but in the end everyone was deemed to have kept his word. Of course, none of this is to say that strange reasoning of this sort never happens today. Similar “logic” is often applied in our day when people try to avoid blatant lies while nevertheless attempting to completely mislead people.

So what should the Israelites have done instead? Following through on the intent of their oaths would have put them in an untenable position from their vantage point. Of course, that was the problem. They were looking at things from their own vantage point. What they should have been more concerned about was God’s will. Thus, they should first have repented for making foolish vows to begin with. Then they should have returned to Phinehas and inquired of God about what to do. If they were truly seeking the Lord, He would have given them an answer. And God’s direct commands always override any vow. Indeed, if a father could void his daughter’s vows and a husband could void his wife’s vows, God could certainly void the vows of Israel, who was His daughter by creation and wife by covenant. Furthermore, no vow is binding if it obligates one to violate commands God has already given. The real solution in such situations is, as already stated, humble repentance—something sorely lacking in the period of the judges, when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”

Psalm 48 locates the Great King's throne in Mount Zion—Jerusalem. It is referred to as God's "holy mountain" (verse 1), yet this should also be understood as figurative of God's Kingdom—a mountain being symbolic of a kingdom in prophecy (compare Daniel 2:35, 44-45; Isaiah 2:2-4).

Note the phrase in Psalm 48:2, "beautiful in elevation" or "beautiful in its loftiness" (NIV). Neither the original fortress of Zion, David's city, nor the Temple Mount area he later incorporated, formed the highest peak in the area. Today the Mount of Olives looks down over Jerusalem and the Temple Mount—as it did then. However, we should understand that the general area of Jerusalem was of higher elevation than the surrounding land of Judah and central Israel so that people in pilgrimage to the holy city would ascend to it.

Nevertheless, the main idea here concerns Jerusalem's spiritual exaltation. As the city of God's tabernacle and temple, and of the throne of God's anointed king over Israel and Judah, Jerusalem was the peak spiritual location on earth—and it will be on a much grander scale in the future. Even today, Jewish immigration to the Holy Land from anywhere in the world is referred to as *aliyah*—"ascent."

In the same vein, another focus of the passage is the physical city of Jerusalem as representative of the city of God now presently in heaven to later descend: "Mount Zion...the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Hebrews 12:22; see Revelation 21-22). The reference to the "sides of the north" in verse 2 could signify the Temple Mount and royal palace being on the north side of David's city. Yet it may also signify the heavenly "mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north...above the heights of the clouds" (see Isaiah 14:13-14).

The verses here would also appear to portray on some level the spiritual Zion or Jerusalem of today, wherein God now dwells through His Spirit and which He greatly blesses and protects (compare Hebrews 12:22-23).

Yet the primary focus of Psalm 48 is the future time of Christ's reign over all nations as in the previous psalm, when Jerusalem, as the capital of God's Kingdom, will truly be "the joy of the whole earth" (verse 2). God in the person of Christ will literally dwell bodily in Jerusalem's palaces or citadels—governing the earth from there.

That this is the principal backdrop we discern from the message of the previous two psalms as well as the apparent time setting of Psalm 48:4-7. "This section describes from a different point of view the final battle [at Christ's return] referred to in Ps. 2; 110. Psalm 48 describes the approach and hasty retreat of the errant kings. The connection between this text and Ps. 2 is heightened by the use of an unusual Hebrew word for fear—a term meaning 'trembling' or 'quaking terror'—which is found in both places (2:11)" (Nelson Study Bible, note on 48:4-7). The imagery of God breaking ships of Tarshish in verse 7 is later found in Ezekiel 27, where the figure is meant to symbolize the destruction of ancient Tyre and its commercial system as well as, chiefly, the destruction of end-time Tyre, the international power bloc also known as Babylon—the parallel account of its destruction being found in Revelation 18 (see the Bible Reading Program comments on Ezekiel 27).

Beyond the wars and assaults, Jerusalem will be safe because God will be her refuge (Psalm 48:3)—repeating the message of Psalm 46. Coming to the splendor and magnificence of God’s holy city, and the wonderful way of life proclaimed from there, visiting pilgrims will remark, “As we have heard, so we have seen...” (48:8). These words call to mind the reaction of the Queen of Sheba in visiting King Solomon: “It was a true report which I heard in my own land about your words and your wisdom. However I did not believe the words until I came and saw with my own eyes; and indeed the half was not told me. Your wisdom and prosperity exceed the fame of which I heard” (1 Kings 10:6-7). How much more will this be true of Jerusalem during the reign of the Great King, Yeshua Messiah.

Visitors are encouraged to walk about and enjoy the city’s awesome beauty (Psalm 48:12-13). Parents will tell their children that the city, a bastion of righteousness and justice, exemplifies the Everlasting God (see verse 14). Just as God provides evidence that He is the Creator (Romans 1:18-20), in Jerusalem He provides evidence that He is the King. In its note on Psalm 48:9-11, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* states that Jerusalem will be “a God-given visual aid, encouraging [visitors] to imagine and to reflect on the long history of God’s involvement with Israel and of the evidences of his ‘unfailing love’ (hesed).”

Though verses 9-14 paint a vivid picture of the future, the words here also applied well to the experience of the Israelites in ancient times as they came to Jerusalem and its temple to worship. Just the same, these words can have immediacy for us today as we ponder being part of spiritual Zion, God’s People, and what that entails—and as we consider what God will yet do for us in the wonderful age to come.

Finally it should be pointed out that some have objected to the last words of this psalm, which in the NKJV state that God “will be our guide even to death.” If the interpolated word “even” is left out, this would seem to make God “our guide to death”—as if to say He leads us to death. This may be why the Septuagint translators changed the final words to “forever,” which is used earlier in the verse. However, the phrase “even to death” is certainly true—that God is with us and guides us through all our lives even to the point of death. Of course, God will ultimately guide us even beyond death. It may be, as some have argued, that “to death” is actually part of a postscript to this psalm or of a prescript to the next, a cue phrase meaning set to the tune of another song titled “Death”—perhaps an abbreviated form of “Death of the Son,” mentioned in the superscription of Psalm 9.

Matthew 27

9 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet

This verse presents a problem as Zechariah is the actual source of this prophecy and not Jeremiah. There are several possible explanations for this:

1. As seen earlier in Matthew, this could be a case of subsequent scribal error. The Shem-Tob Hebrew Matthew has Zechariah as the prophet in this verse. As this shows a clear difference between translations, we view this as the most likely explanation over the next two.

2. It could also be that Jeremiah is referred to as the “source,” as in ancient times the scrolls of the “minor” prophets (i.e. Zechariah) were bound together with those of the “major” prophets (i.e., Jeremiah), and that the book of Jeremiah was indeed the “head” of the grouping. Although this is possible, it would be the only use of this method in the gospels, making it somewhat unlikely.

3. It could be that Matthew is combining two prophecies, that contain elements of the other. Although this device is used (at the Midrashic level of Hebrew Bible commentary), there doesn’t seem to be a strong reason for it here.

20 But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Yeshua.

25 Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children.

As mentioned, the “multitude” was willing to go along with the efforts of their leaders, hence Yeshua’s words about the entire generation being wicked (Matthew 12:45; 16:4). The principle in force here is that to whom much is given (by God), much is expected.

An example of this is Moses, who was given greater spiritual insight than anyone else in history. He was not allowed to enter the Holy Land due to certain sin (striking the rock and not speaking to it), which for someone of “lesser stature” would probably not have merited such punishment.

This generation was blessed beyond any to that point, in that they had the Torah in the flesh among them (i.e., Hebrews 11). They rejected this blessing however, and therefore suffered severe consequences.

Despite the words of the people, their actions did not condemn all Jews from that point on (as some anti-Semites teach). Each person is guilty for their own sin before God, although the effects of that sin may continue for several generations.

35 And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.

There are many citations of Scripture (from the Tenakh) used by Matthew (and other “New Testament” writers) with association to Yeshua being the Messiah. The quotation in this verse is from Psalm 22:18. Many people will cite such statements from “New Testament” as a fulfilled prophecy.

But one can legitimately ask, What is the basis for saying a verse from the Tenakh, is a prophecy about the Messiah, and furthermore, specifically that “Yeshua fulfilled it.”

Examining the text of Psalm 22 (which Matthew cites), we see that it is a “Psalm of David,” and is written in the “first person.” Therefore it is David who is crying out to the Lord in a time of his need. There is no specific reference to “Messiah” anywhere in the text. How then is this a “Messianic prophecy” as well as being “proof” for Yeshua being Messiah?

The same can be said of most of the other “prophecy fulfillments” of the “New Testament.” For example, the Jewish New Testament and Jewish New Testament Commentary both have lists of “Messianic prophecies” fulfilled by Yeshua.¹ Examining the Tenakh citations, we find the same thing in these texts — no mention of “Messiah.” (In fact, the term “Messiah” is only found in one place in the entire Tenakh — in chapter 9 of Daniel.)

Unfortunately, we lack the level of understanding that the (Hebrew) “New Testament” authors had to show why these Tenakh verses are “Messianic prophecies” and how they make the connection to Yeshua fulfilling them. Our ability to decipher these Scriptures is hampered due to almost 2000 years of reading the

“New Testament” outside the context of Torah, as it was understood and presented in the Hebraic minds of Matthew, John, Peter, Paul, James, etc.

40 And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days,

The deeper aspects of the relationship between Yeshua and the Temple will be explored in our future studies.

42 If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.

This wicked generation was still looking for signs to the very end (i.e., Matthew 16:4). The proper attitude of a believer was found in three men tossed into a furnace many years prior to this:

Daniel 3:17-18 – If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up.”

46 And about the ninth hour Yeshua cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

The ideas of, a) Messiah being God, and, b) God talking to God, are both difficult to prove using Scripture at the literal (p’shat) level. The concept of God’s various “emanations” lies deep within the mystical aspects of Judaism are touched on in the next section and will be dealt with extensively in our Revelation study.

47 Some of them that stood there, when they heard that, said, This man calleth for Elias.

Although the tradition of Elijah returning is associated with Passover, why they are saying that Yeshua is calling for Elijah when He is obviously calling out to God, is quite interesting.

51 And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent;

This is the veil separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. (See Hebrews 9:3-9; 10:19-22.) There is deep mystical significance here, beyond the scope of this study. We will address this issue in our future studies.

1. Jewish New Testament Jewish, Introduction, section VII, Jewish New Testament Commentary, pp. 79-80