

Abraham and Isaac

According to the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh singled out a Chaldean man named Abram, later renamed Abraham, as the progenitor of the chosen people and their covenant with their one god. He had the man move from his homeland in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) to Canaan and in due course ensured an heir, Isaac, with his wife Sarah. Isaac's birth displaced the 14-year-old son Abraham had previously fathered on his handmaiden, Hagar (Sarah being thought unable to bear children), and both Hagar and the son, Ishmael, were cast out of the family, though Ishmael was promised that he will father a great nation (the Arab tribe known as the Ishmaelites). Ishmael is considered a prophet in the Islamic religion.

Once Isaac came of age, Yahweh suddenly asked Abraham to sacrifice him as a burnt offering to prove his loyalty and faith. Abraham and Isaac then journey to a sacred hill to conduct the sacrifice. The story has Yahweh intervening to prevent the actual slaughter, saying Abraham's faith was proven. Abraham then sacrificed a nearby ram instead.

This story has been endlessly discussed for thousands of years, with various perceptions of the meaning of the test, Yahweh's intent, Abraham's understanding of the trial, and the extent to which Sarah was also tested.

The story is set in Canaan, the lands now known as Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon. The time is the Bronze Age, early in Hebrew history—long before the migration and exile of the Hebrews to Egypt and their subsequent Exodus and return to Canaan. The location, the Mount of Moriah, refers to what would be, in Abraham's distant future, the site of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

Source: The Book of Genesis, Chapters 21–22 (compiled ca. 5th–4th centuries BCE). Translation: Young's Literal Translation, 1862.

Chapter 21

1 And Yahweh has looked after Sarah as He has said, and Yahweh does to Sarah as He has spoken; and Sarah conceives, and bears a son to Abraham, to his old age, at the appointed time that God has spoken of with him; and Abraham calls the name of his son who is born to him, whom Sarah has borne to him—Isaac; and Abraham circumcises his son Isaac, [being] a son of eight days, as God has commanded him. And Abraham [is] a son of one hundred years in his son Isaac being born to him, and Sarah says, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who is hearing laughs for me.” She also says, “Who has said to Abraham, Sarah has suckled sons, that I have born a son for his old age?”

9 And the boy grows, and is weaned, and Abraham makes a great banquet in the day of Isaac's being weaned; and Sarah sees the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she has borne to Abraham, mocking, and she says to Abraham, “Cast out this handmaid and her son; for the son of this handmaid has no possession with my son—with Isaac.” And the thing is very wrong in the eyes of Abraham, for his son's sake; and God says to Abraham, “Let it not be wrong in your eyes because of the youth, and because of your handmaid: all that Sarah says to you—listen to her voice, for in Isaac is a seed called to you. As for the son of the handmaid also, for a nation I set him, because he [is] your seed.”

14 And Abraham rises early in the morning, and takes bread, and a bottle of water, and gives to Hagar (placing [it] on her shoulder), also the boy, and sends her out; and she goes on, and goes astray in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba; and the water is consumed from the bottle, and she places the boy under one of the shrubs. And she goes and sits by herself opposite [him], far off, about a bow-shot, for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the

boy”; and she sits opposite [him], and lifts up her voice, and weeps. And God hears the voice of the youth; and the messenger of God calls to Hagar from the heavens and says to her, “What to you, Hagar? Do not fear; for God has listened to the voice of the youth where he [is]; rise, lift up the youth, and lay hold on him with your hand, for I set him for a great nation.”

19 And God opens her eyes, and she sees a well of water, and she goes and fills the bottle [with] water, and causes the youth to drink; and God is with the youth, and he grows, and dwells in the wilderness, and is an archer; and he dwells in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother takes for him a wife from the land of Egypt. And it comes to pass at that time that Abimelech speaks—Phichol also, head of his host—to Abraham, saying, “God [is] with you in all that you are doing; and now, swear to me by God here: you do not lie to me, or to my continuator, or to my successor; according to the kindness which I have done with you—do with me, and with the land in which you have sojourned.” And Abraham says, “I swear.”

26 And Abraham reasoned with Abimelech concerning the matter of a well of water which Abimelech’s servants have violently taken away, and Abimelech says, “I have not known who has done this thing, and even you did not declare to me, and I also, I have not heard except today.” And Abraham takes sheep and oxen, and gives to Abimelech, and they make, both of them, a covenant; and Abraham sets seven lambs of the flock by themselves. And Abimelech says to Abraham, “What [are] they—these seven lambs which you have set by themselves?” And he says, “For—the seven lambs you accept from my hand, so that it becomes a witness for me that I have dug this well”; therefore he has called that place “Beer-Sheba,” for both of them have sworn there. And they make a covenant in Beer-Sheba, and Abimelech rises—Phichol also, head of his host—and they return to the land of the Philistines; and [Abraham] plants a tamarisk in Beer-Sheba, and preaches there in the Name of Yahweh, the perpetual God; and Abraham sojourns in the land of the Philistines many days.

Chapter 22

1 And it comes to pass after these things that God has tried Abraham and says to him, “Abraham”; and he says, “Here I [am].” And He says, “Now take your son, your only one, whom you have loved, even Isaac, and go for yourself to the land of Moriah, and cause him to ascend there for a burnt-offering on one of the mountains of which I speak to you.” And Abraham rises early in the morning, and saddles his donkey, and takes two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac, and he cleaves the wood of the burnt-offering, and rises and goes to the place of which God has spoken to him.

4 On the third day—Abraham lifts up his eyes, and sees the place from afar; and Abraham says to his young men, “Remain by yourselves here with the donkey, and I and the youth go over there and worship, and return to you.” And Abraham takes the wood of the burnt-offering, and places on his son Isaac, and he takes in his hand the fire, and the knife; and they go on both of them together. And Isaac speaks to his father Abraham and says, “My father,” and he says, “Here I [am], my son.” And he says, “Behold, the fire and the wood, and where the lamb for a burnt-offering?” And Abraham says, “God provides for Himself the lamb for a burnt-offering, my son”; and they go on both of them together.

9 And they come to the place of which God has spoken to him, and there Abraham builds the altar, and arranges the wood, and binds his son Isaac, and places him on the altar above the wood; and Abraham puts forth his hand, and takes the knife—to slaughter his son.

11 And the Messenger of Yahweh calls to him from the heavens and says, “Abraham, Abraham”; and he says, “Here I [am]”; and He says, “Do not put forth your hand to the youth, nor do anything to him, for now I have known that you are fearing God, and have not withheld your son, your only one, from Me.”

13 And Abraham lifts up his eyes, and looks, and behold, a ram behind, seized in a thicket by its horns; and Abraham goes, and takes the ram, and causes it to ascend for a burnt-offering instead of his son; and Abraham calls the name of that place “Yahweh-Jireh,” because it is said this day in the mountain, “Yahweh provides.”

15 And the Messenger of Yahweh calls to Abraham a second time from the heavens, and says, “I have sworn by Myself—a declaration of Yahweh—that because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one, that blessing I bless you, and multiplying I multiply your seed as stars of the heavens, and as sand which [is] on the seashore; and your Seed possesses the gate of His enemies; and all nations of the earth have blessed themselves in your Seed, because you have listened to My voice.”

19 And Abraham turns back to his young men, and they rise and go together to Beer-Sheba; and Abraham dwells in Beer-Sheba. And it comes to pass after these things that it is declared to Abraham, saying, “Behold, Milcah has borne, even she, sons to your brother Nahor: his firstborn Huz, and his brother Buz; and Kemuel father of Aram, and Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel; and Bethuel has begotten Rebekah”; Milcah has borne these eight to Nahor, Abraham’s brother; and his concubine, whose name [is] Reumah, she also has borne Tebah, and Gaham, and Tahash, and Maachah.