
The Remoteness of the Sacrifice of Isaac

If you search images on the Internet of the story of Abraham offering Isaac on the altar (Genesis 22), you will find that, almost without exception, those images show us an altar located in a remote place, sometimes desert-like and sometimes more fertile. I have grown up thinking that this story took place in a desolate place.

Genesis 22 tells us that God called Abraham to sacrifice his son in Moriah *"in a place where I [God] will show you."* Abraham takes Isaac, and he sets out. When he arrives in Moriah, he sees the mountain where the sacrifice was supposed to happen, and he goes through the preparations to sacrifice his son. As he is about to slay his son, an angel calls from heaven and stops him. Isaac is saved, and, thankfully, he is able to receive the inheritance, God's promises and pass them on to his children until eventually Jesus, the Saviour of the world, is born. The death of Isaac would have meant an end to God's salvation promises, but God did not allow that to happen.

Moriah is mentioned only one other time in Scripture, in 2 Chronicles 3:1. There we read that Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, on Mount Moriah, on the threshing floor that David has bought from Araunah, the Jebusite. That story is recorded for us in 2 Samuel 24 and we learn there that David did indeed buy that threshing floor, and he offered sacrifices there to stop a plague that had broken out against the Israelites. That plague was the consequence of a bad mistake David had made, for he had taken a census of his fighting men, showing that he was putting his trust in them for victory rather than the LORD. When God showed his anger against this sin, David repented, bought the threshing floor, and offered sacrifices there. The plague stopped. David's sacrifice was offered on the same place that Abraham had offered Isaac as a sacrifice. God's people were saved through sacrifice.

Today the ruins of the Old Testament temple remain on that place, and the Dome on the Rock, the Muslim mosque stands near the place where the temple altar would have been. It is a busy place with thousands of visitors, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian visiting the place every day. It is not the remote spot pictured in the artist's conceptions of Abraham's earlier altar. Jewish people who visit the sight long for the day that the temple will be rebuilt so that sacrifices can resume, for without sacrifice there can be no salvation. Christians, on the other hand, recognize that the only necessary sacrifice has been made, and there is no need to rebuild the temple with its altar, for there is no need for another sacrifice to be made.

Today Mount Moriah is a religious site for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. It was also a religious site for Abraham, who is considered a founder of all three of these religions. We recall that a little earlier in the Abrahamic narrative, Abraham, after defeating a raiding party put together by 4 powerful kings, stopped in the city of Salem where he encountered a man named Melchizedek. Melchizedek is a rather enigmatic (mysterious) figure in the OT, but we learn that he was a priest of God Most High (he served the same God as Abraham), and it was to him that Abraham gave a tithe as a way of thanking God for his blessing in the victory over his enemies. Melchizedek lived in the city of Salem, which transliterated from the Hebrew is none other than the city of Jerusalem. (Jerusalem means "city of Salem.") In other words, when Abraham attempted to offer his son as a sacrifice, he did so in a place he had visited before, and he did so among

people he had met before. Of course, although the area was populated, Abraham's task was a lonely one, for he had been told to kill his only son, the son that he loved. The artists who depict this scene illustrate his loneliness in his task rather than the reality of the region where it happened.

If we have heard this story before, we are well aware that as Abraham's hand was stayed, God also provided a ram for the offering, something that Abraham had predicted would happen. God provided the sacrifice, not Abraham.

In the end, the text tells us, Abraham names the place, Yahweh Yireh, which is translated as "*The LORD provides*," but more literally could be translated as "*The LORD sees*." The LORD saw Abraham, meaning that he was also present in that place, observing what was going on. When God sees, God also acts, and he gives what is needed. Thus, "*The LORD provides*," while not a literal translation, is a good translation as well.

There is a troubling aspect to this story, for God's command to Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice goes against the very nature of God. God abhors the sacrifice of humans, and he would never ask that of anyone. God was unlike the gods of the nations in that area which did demand of people the sacrifice of their children. Yet, God did make that demand and even though he had a plan to stop it from happening, he did ask Abraham to do the unthinkable.

Still, in this, we see something of God's grace. The gods of the Canaanites demanded human sacrifice in the most extreme of situations, for the biggest problems demand the biggest sacrifices. There can be no sacrifice greater than the sacrifice of one's own child. The biggest problem we face is that we must face judgement for our sin and be sentenced to the appropriate punishment, namely death. We cannot deal with that, even if we offer the greatest sacrifice. Even human sacrifice is not enough to atone for the sin that permeates our lives, so it became necessary for God to provide the lamb for the sacrifice. He did, and that Lamb is none other than Jesus Christ, God's Son. The sacrifice of Jesus in Moriah (=Jerusalem) provided salvation. His sacrifice, as horrible as it was, was enough to atone for our sins and appease God so that he turned his wrath away from humanity.

The story of Abraham offering his son as a sacrifice is offensive, to be sure, but it does foreshadow what Jesus voluntarily came to do. With his Father's blessing, Jesus came to this earth to become the sacrificial lamb, offered in our place so that we do not have to offer any sacrifices ourselves. God provided the lamb.

Some scenes depicting the crucifixion of Jesus also show him to be in a remote place, but we know that he died just outside the city walls. Without any doubt, Jesus could have seen Jerusalem from the cross, if he were facing in the right direction. But the artists depict this is an event occurring in a remote area, not because it was so literally but because it shows the desolation that Jesus experienced on the cross. He was alone, forsaken by all, but in that loneliness, he brought us into fellowship.

Mount Moriah, thus, becomes a place where salvation is made known. What seems to be a remote place is a place where God is present, the God who sees, and the God who provides. And when we discover the Lamb, we know that we are not alone, for then we know God is with us.

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