

Unconscionable Zeal

Genesis 22:1-14

This is a story which will either inspire you or frighten you. It is one that illustrates supreme virtue, as well as the worst attributes of human nature. For that reason, it is an existentially ambiguous text—a provocative parable about the human story and the divine call to be faithful. It provokes deep reverence and pious devotion while, at the same time, providing a strong emotional case for atheism. Why would anyone worship a God like this?

Granted, the traditional reading of this story, which has been so formative throughout the centuries in the minds of Jews and Christians (and to a lesser extent, Muslims), is a narrative about a test of obedience for Abraham—to test his love of God over the very one he valued most, i.e., his son, Isaac, who was flesh of his flesh through his wife, Sarah. It was Abraham’s zeal for God—an unconscionable zeal, it would seem—that has served as a paradigm for religious faithfulness for centuries—a willingness to surrender a life in response to a divine command.

This is a popular text among many Christians, who view it as a foreshadowing of God’s “sacrifice” of Jesus on the cross—what Abraham was willing to do, God followed through and completed. Abraham’s faithfulness is therefore considered iconic, demonstrated through his single-minded obedience to pursue a divine plan even when his own son’s blood would be on his hands. The “altar call” take away is this: are you and I willing to sacrifice the very things we value most in life for the sake of obeying God?

I admit, for the longest time, I accepted this message as a motivation for greater devotion and dedication in my own spiritual journey—can I walk

this walk?—even though I increasingly grew uncomfortable with its implications and of such zeal. Namely, what loving God would demand this kind of horrific assignment? What kind of faith or morality does this call for, and is it even noble? Then we have to reckon with how many lives have been violated and harmed throughout history by those who earnestly believed they were following God’s command. How would they even know? How is anyone held accountable for the harm they do against others—even someone they may love—if they can point to passages like this and even the theology of the cross itself and be convinced that violence is beneficial to some higher cause, that it’s redemptive and divinely justified, or because they believe it’s a test of their loyalty to God? What kind of religion and ethic does this?

Questions like these require us to wonder if there is another message we are to take away from this story—that it’s not about how heroic Abraham was in being willing to slaughter Isaac, but rather, how foolish he was to reduce divine commandments to something so morally and egregiously wrong! We may be at odds with the storyteller and tradition but, as I see it, the real reason the angel intervenes just before Abraham takes a knife to Isaac is not to condone his actions and congratulate Abraham on his righteous behavior, but rather to intervene and prevent him from doing horrific, irreversible harm to the ones he loved and valued, not to say his own soul. Instead of obeying the divine command, Abraham was acting out in a way to defy the very promise God had made to him through Isaac. And to what end? Sometimes, even “obedience to God” will be a curse we bring upon ourselves.

The storyteller’s empathy for the characters, however, is limited. There’s only an assumption that Abraham heard this call from God and

faithfully responded, no matter how incredible it should have appeared. For instance, why would Abraham even believe it was God calling him to make this sacrifice? What would have made him take such a thought so seriously?

Anthropologists point to the widespread practice of infanticide in preliterate cultures of the Mesopotamian region, where firstborn sons were routinely sacrificed to appease gods. So, it's quite possible this "command" from God was merely a reflection of his culture—that's what they always did. In that light, it's fair to view this story as a significant point of departure from the religious customs of the time, where Hebrew tribes, unlike others, would no longer carry on this dreadful practice—that the "test" wasn't over Abraham's submission to God to slay his son, but over the Hebrews' enlightenment on a widespread cultic practice, especially as they were moving from polytheism to a belief in one sovereign and loving God. This is quite possible. It makes perfect sense: this story is symbolic of a cultural change—Abraham is representative of all the tribes that would choose monotheism over their past with one significant move—the ancient sacrificial system taking human life would come to an end. No more would firstborn males be sacrificed to the gods.

On the other hand, to put this more personally into the context and character of Abraham, what if the real test was not that Abraham blindly follow through on such merciless demand, but instead to test his spiritual resources of wisdom and reason—to force him to think more deeply and rationally and morally before he acted—before he merely followed the ancient rites of tribal religion? What if this assignment was to challenge the immaturity of his faith that was revealed in his naïve and blind obedience?

That is a message which is timeless and addresses many people, does it not?

Seen in this light, it's possible the spiritual "test" was for Abraham to use his brain to question this call, instead of just submitting to its demand—for him to have stopped long before he headed out to Mount Moriah to figure this out. As we know, sometimes people claim to hear God speaking to them, when it's only their own delusions.

In other words, maybe what God was looking for was for Abraham to conscientiously question the absurdity of this command before putting his family through the trauma of it! Perhaps, what was at stake was Abraham's unconscionable zeal—a stubborn, obstinate certainty within him that convinced him he could not be thwarted—that he was doing God's will which made him duty-bound to obey, no matter how hard it would be to kill his precious son. If that's true, then the "test" wasn't something Abraham passed, but instead *failed*, since he didn't listen to his heart, his reason, his moral sensibilities, his conscience—his wife—even Isaac! Foolishly, he chose to be driven by this craziness bottled up inside him, believing his actions to be faithful obedience to a higher call!

The implications of this type of religious loyalty, of course, go far beyond Abraham and the ancient world. Consider the effects of blind religious zeal down through the ages and into our own times! Religious fanaticism exists everywhere, and rarely does it bring about much that is good. For every person of faith, the paradigm of righteousness should not be blind zeal that has no effective check; instead, we are to learn from this story and see ourselves in it, so that we will wrestle through the implications and consequences of any action, insight, impulse, or decision before assuming it to be divinely inspired. Realistically, the moral of the

story is to always ask: to what end will this action of mine lead? Is it to clearly do good, or to do something that, under any other context, would be considered unconscionable? If it is the latter, then would this not be a clue that it isn't of God?

It seems to me this is an important universal lesson all people need to learn: question the very beliefs we have about God—if they are authentic, they will bear good fruit; if they are not, they will bring about terrible, unnecessary harm. It doesn't surprise me this whole assignment Abraham received involved taking a long journey before he carried out his cruel mission—it wasn't just to get to a certain destination; it was to allow him sufficient time to think this through, to come to his senses and summon the courage to question the intent.

Wouldn't it have been a real test of Abraham to see if he would stand up and say “No!” to God, rather than to go all the way to the end, only to force an intervention by heaven to stop this insane madness? Wouldn't it have been more faithful of him to come to grips with the downside of his unconscionable zeal before he had to suffer the consequences of it? Blind faith is a sure sign someone's not seeing the larger picture!

The reason I raise this point is because where does the story go from here? Doubtless, the journey home must have been awkward! Honestly, what would this do to Abraham's primary relationships? How could he ever explain his thinking to Isaac or Sarah? What would be the moral justification to his own conscience, without being forced to reckon with the possibility he was wrong all along? What about trust between them all? What would Isaac now think about his father who banished his sibling, Ishmael, and then tried to slaughter him? We don't know—the storyteller never tells us. That's what often happens with trauma—no one wants to

talk about it, so it's left to silent resentment, which only erodes the trust and love between people.

I also wonder if we misunderstand the role of obedience in human spirituality. "Trust and obey, for there's no other way..." sounds wonderfully reassuring and comforting but, to be honest, it won't sustain the spiritual life or work in every instance. Strict obedience works for a time with children who know no better and it's suitable for when you're learning and cultivating faith, when you are still trying to get into the spirit of it. You discipline yourself to follow obediently, until it becomes second nature.

Yet, it seems to me, the demand of obedience is only appropriate when you lack the moral resources to make good and sound judgments. Otherwise, it's terribly manipulative. The goal of spirituality is for us to mature in our faith—to become wiser—to move beyond strict obedience—to become enlightened by daring to question the simplistic and binary worldviews of right versus wrong, of saved and unsaved, of good and evil, and to prayerfully engage and integrate all our faculties and will to arrive at good moral decisions and actions—not just surrender ourselves to easy impulsive, even reckless, ones. Religious zeal tends to short-circuit all stages of spiritual discernment.

Moral development eventually means accepting responsibility for the choices you make and living with the consequences of your actions. But it also includes recognizing gray areas that are not so clear or certain; it means thinking through our choices, good or bad, wise or foolish, instead of copping out and using the God-excuse when they don't work out. Faith, however, is taking the risk to believe that love is the ultimate value in life, and to love others, the ultimate religious principle to stand upon. If

Abraham truly loved God, then it was incumbent upon him to jealously love and protect God's own gifts to him—both Ishmael and Isaac. Instead, he put them both at risk, almost in a nihilistic way. For without these two children of promise, God's covenant and faithfulness to Abraham and his descendants was pointless.

Finally, more than we often realize, religious zeal has a way of ruining a life, unconscionably so. Blind faith generates a powerful zeal for a while; it's fueled by pious devotion and desire. But it's never enough. It will crash as quickly as it rises. That's why maturity of mind and spirit call for wisdom, perspective, and a faith that will contend with God until the right choice is made for the best of all. Maturity of faith is based in wisdom, accountability, and a wider perspective on love to inform and sustain the human soul even through the toughest times and decisions.

If this story of Abraham and Isaac is to be a timeless illustration of profound faith, then may it be an example of how divine love will never let us go, even when we choose to act like fools.

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