

NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

# FURROW

*The*

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Jonathan Burroughs

Caught in a Bind:  
*Experiencing the  
Akedah*

December 2018

# Caught in a Bind: *Experiencing the Akedah*

---

Jonathan Burroughs

The story of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen 22:1-19), which is known in Jewish tradition as the Akedah (from the Hebrew ‘to bind’), is one of the most troubling stories in the Bible. It is a story that has engaged theologians (such as Augustine), philosophers (such as Kierkegaard) and artists (such as Caravaggio), to name a few. In the year of the World Meeting of Families, there will be much attention on what the Bible says about family. While the Gospels are likely to garner much of the attention, it important that a text as challenging as the Akedah is not wholly ignored. Although the Akedah is a demanding text, it is, ultimately, a text about family.

The current article will place three eclectic things in dialogue: (1) the text of the Akedah, (2) how personal experience influences interpretation of the text, and (3) the World Meeting of Families. The first part of the article will offer some interpretation of the text of the Akedah (Gen 22:1-19) and draw attention to features that are significant for the purposes here. The second part of the article will discuss how the particular experience of each reader determines to some extent the interpretation of the text. The article will conclude by offering some reflections that might provoke and foster some thought in the aftermath of the 2018 World Meeting of Families.

## THE TEXT OF THE AKEDAH (GEN 22:1-19)

The Akedah is a story about family intrigue, and in order to appreciate fully its complexity, it is helpful to set it briefly in its literary context. The story of Abraham and his family is told in the Book of Genesis and is part of the patriarchal narratives (Gen 12–50). The patriarchal narratives narrate the wanderings of the patriarchs (i.e., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons) prior to the settlement of the Israelites in the Promised Land. The patriarchal narratives begin with God’s call of Abram in Genesis 12. In 12:1-3 the Lord makes many promises to Abram (for example, great nation, great name, blessings and cursing). In return, Abram has

---

Jonathan Burroughs is a lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, St Patrick’s Campus, Thurles.

## THE FURROW

to show faith and obey God's call to move. The call to move has implications for Abram's family: he is asked to leave his country, kindred and father's house (12:1). If Abram leaves his family, the promise is that in him "all the *families* of the earth shall be blessed" (12:3). The seventy-five year old Abram immediately obeys the Lord and departs with his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot (12:4-5). The text does not comment on the emotional decision of Abram to leave his family, it merely states "So Abram went, as the Lord had told him" (12:4).

A more formal account of the promises to Abram in Genesis 12 is cast in the form of a covenant in Genesis 15. In 15:2 the reader encounters Abram's desire for an heir and his distress over remaining childless: "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless." The Lord promises that not only will he provide an heir for Abram (15:4), but he will give land to Abram's descendants (15:7, 18-21) and informs him to "look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. . . . So shall your descendants be" (15:5). All that is required of Abram is that he has faith in the promises of God.

In Genesis 16 Sarai (Abram's wife) encourages him to conceive a child with her Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar. When Hagar becomes pregnant with Abram's child (Ishmael), a conflict between Hagar and Sarai emerges when Hagar looks on Sarai with contempt (16:4). Abram permits Sarai to do as she wishes with Hagar, with the result that Hagar flees (16:6). An angel of the Lord intervenes and persuades Hagar to return by promising that her son will have plentiful offspring (16:7-12). Nevertheless, Hagar is also told to submit to her mistress, Sarai. The reader is left in no doubt about Sarai's greater importance.

Abram's conceiving of a child with Hagar has consequences for his covenant with God: in Genesis 17 a requirement to God's promises is introduced – every male among the descendants of Abraham must be circumcised as a sign of the covenant (see 17:10-14). To signify a new beginning, Abram's name is changed to Abraham (17:5), while Sarai becomes Sarah (17:15). The birth of Abraham's and Sarah's son Isaac is also prophesied: "your wife Sarah shall bear a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him" (17:19; see also 17:16).

When Isaac is born another conflict between Hagar and Sarah emerges in Genesis 21. While in the earlier story in Genesis 16 Sarai acts on her own behalf, in Genesis 21 she acts on behalf of her son Isaac to protect his inheritance (21:10). Abraham is distressed that Ishmael might be sent away, but God tells him that Sarah is right, and that it is through Isaac's offspring that God's promises

will be fulfilled (21:11-12). Consequently, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness (21:14), where God will cause Ishmael to prosper. Here, the priority of divine election is more significant than a mother and child being sent away.<sup>1</sup> Abraham is now left with one son, Isaac, whom had been promised to him by the Lord in Genesis 12. This is the literary context for the story of the Akedah.

In Genesis 22 the reader of the Akedah is privileged and is given a key to interpret the story from the outset: the reader is informed that God is testing Abraham (22:1). As a result, the reader knows more than the character Abraham in the story. The close paternal relationship between Abraham and Isaac is also highlighted from the beginning of the story: “take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love” (22:2).<sup>2</sup> The attentive reader will notice that Isaac is referred to as Abraham’s *only* son.<sup>3</sup> The tension and stakes for the only son that remains with Abraham are being heightened (while Ishmael is still alive, he has been sent away in Gen 21).

When God commands Abraham to take Isaac to Moriah and offer him as a burnt offering (22:2), the reader is informed that “Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him” (22:3). If Abraham was troubled about God’s command to sacrifice his son Isaac, the reader is not explicitly told about those emotions. On the third day of their journey, Isaac asks Abraham, “The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (22:7). Abraham responds by saying: “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (22:8). Those words have been broadly interpreted in two ways: (1) Abraham truly believes that God will provide the lamb or (2) Abraham says those words so that Isaac will continue on the journey. Either way, Abraham and Isaac continue on their journey and come to the place that God had shown Abraham. After building an altar and laying the wood, the text tells us that Abraham “bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (22:9-10). While Abraham’s earlier words in Gen 22:8 could

1 The divine election of Israel is indicated in the priority of Isaac over Ishmael. On the other hand, it is important to remember that Israel will be a light to all nations (see, for example, Isa 42:6).

2 The motif of sonship is present throughout the story, with various references to sonship; for example, (1) we read “his son Isaac” in Gen 22:3, 6, 9, 10; (2) Isaac calls Abraham “Father” in Gen 22:7; (3) Abraham calls Isaac “my son” in Gen 22:7, 8; and (4) the angel of the Lord says to Abraham that since you “have not withheld your son, your only son” in Gen 22:12, 16.

3 The attentive reader will also notice that Sarah is not mentioned in the story of the Akedah.

## THE FURROW

be interpreted that he believes God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, it seems at this point in the story that Abraham is willing to obey God and sacrifice Isaac. If so, the reader does not get any insight into Abraham's emotions, we can only reflect on his actions (or intended actions). However, Abraham does not have to carry out the sacrifice, as the angel of the Lord intervenes and a ram is provided and offered as the burnt offering instead of Isaac (22:11-13). The reader is then told that Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide" (22:14).

The story of the Akedah communicates that fearing and obeying God is key. For example, when Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac, the angel of the Lord intervenes and says "for now I know that you *fear* God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (22:12). Furthermore, the Akedah concludes with Abraham receiving promises from heaven through the angel of the Lord on account of him having *obeyed* God's voice:

"By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have *obeyed* my voice" (22:15-18).

The above promises echo the ones promised by God to Abraham throughout his story. A delay in the fulfilment of those promises (particularly the delay of a child to Abraham and Sarah) results in some crises in the story. However, God's promises to Abraham are ultimately fulfilled in the story. It is important to note that in Gen 22:15-18 there are no new stipulations attached to the promises and blessings to Abraham and his offspring; showing faith and obedience to God, and symbolizing this faith through circumcision is still key.

The story of the Akedah is still disturbing despite its somewhat happy ending, that is, if you were to accept the non-sacrifice of a child as a happy ending. Abraham is characterised in such a way that shows his faith in God, yet, he is willing to sacrifice his son: what does this say to the reader about his fatherhood?

### PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETING THE TEXT

I have read the text of the Akedah with various cohorts of students in different settings and in different institutions.<sup>4</sup> While the students, settings and institutions have varied, one constant of those encounters was me. However, while I may have been a constant, I

4 I am indebted to those students who I encountered along the way, where many of the insights in this article were teased out.

have changed throughout those experiences, sometimes in radical ways. While I have always had some theoretical understanding of the test facing Abraham – to sacrifice his son Isaac on God’s command – a new layer of interpretation has presented itself to me with the birth of my first child. In other words, my recent personal experience has altered how I experience the text. It is that significant observation which requires some discussion.

There is a reciprocal relationship between the interpreter, the questions of the interpreter, and the interpretation: the interpreter determines the questions asked and, in turn, the types of questions asked prompt the interpretation attained. Even though different interpreters read the same text, they will assimilate the elements differently, placing some of the details to the fore, and allowing others to recede into the background. Therefore, the interpreter or the reader is an indispensable participant in the production of *meaning*. The thought of Wolfgang Iser is helpful in drawing this out.

Iser holds that the text is not a “solid object” where meaning is self-evidencing; rather, it is more like a skeletal framework that has gaps, indeterminacies, and properties that are not written but only implied. In order to produce the literary *work*, which Iser carefully distinguishes from the *text*, the reader must go through the temporal, sequential process of filling these gaps, indeterminacies, and properties of the text. For him, a literary *work* is generated only when the text is read, that is, when the gaps of the text are filled by the reader.<sup>5</sup> In Iser’s framework there is a discourse between the text and the reader, where both the text and the reader contribute to the actualization of a literary work: “Effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor of the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process.”<sup>6</sup> The meaning assigned to the text by the reader is both more and less extensive than the written text. It is less extensive as the reader does not realize every possible meaning contained in the text and more extensive as every reader fills the gaps and implied properties of the text with meanings that reflect their own experience of the

5 For a fuller discussion, see the following works of Wolfgang Iser: *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974), esp. 274-94; *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978); “Interaction between Text and Reader,” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (eds. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 106-19; *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach,” in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (2 ed.; eds. David Lodge and Nigel Wood; New York: Longman, 2000), 189-205; *How to Do Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), esp. 63-69.

6 Iser, *The Act of Reading*, ix.

## THE FURROW

world. In this way, the text becomes a place of encounter: the text reads us as we read it.

It is important to outline the identity of the reader who actualizes the potential structures of the text. The reader of the text may be a real or hypothetical reader, internal or external to the text, a professional or non-professional reader, a first time or experienced reader, an ancient or post-modern reader, a competent or incompetent reader. Nonetheless, the search for the reader has to begin with a concentrated look in the mirror, as every reader reads from a particular cultural and political position. Interpretation does not occur in a vacuum and it is inescapable that the presuppositions, social location, and personal experience of each reader impacts upon the reading of the narrative.

For some, by maintaining that the reader is a co-creator of the meaning of a text, this will lead to charges of indeterminacy and relativism. Unlike some post-modern literary critics who argue for open-ended interpretations and an unlimited degree of subjectivity, Iser asserts the stability of the text. The “works” produced by readers reading a text will vary somewhat, but the “text” is a constant and invariable feature in the interpretive process. In other words, the reader does not have the freedom to construct the *text*, only the *work*.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, Iser gives an objective status to the text and attributes an authority to the text whereby the patterns in the textual object control the subjectivity of the reader’s interpretation. The text guides the reader through devices intrinsic to the process of storytelling, such as point of view, narration, symbolism, irony, intratextuality and intertextuality. Although a text’s potential for meaning is theoretically limitless, in Iser’s framework the text provides a reliable criterion for establishing a range of critically acceptable interpretations.

Every interpreter brings a particular view and experience of life to the text. The presumption that interpretation is neutral and that the text can be divorced from the interpreter’s paradigm in a presupposition-free exegesis, and that correct interpretive tools assure objectivity, is a naïve assumption. Critical objectivity remains an important goal, but is to be tempered by a clear understanding of one’s presuppositions and interpretive goals, which makes the interpreter, to a certain extent, self-aware. Relating this to the Akedah, my reading of it has been dramatically transformed by the birth of my first child. I am now experiencing the text primarily as a father whereas I used to experience the text primarily as a son. While I am still a son, in light of my new family experience, I find that I am now encountering the text through Abraham’s role

7 Iser, *The implied Reader*, 274-75.

## CAUGHT IN A BIND: EXPERIENCING THE AKEDAH

of father to Isaac.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the gaps in the text regarding the emotions of Abraham have become more real and less academic to me; I am filling those gaps with my emotions.<sup>9</sup> Where previously I could understand that the Akedah is a demonstration of Abraham's faith in God, now I find it difficult to reconcile his willingness to sacrifice Isaac with his fatherhood. I struggle to comprehend how Abraham could be willing to sacrifice his child. The presumed inward struggle of Abraham *in* the text has become my inward struggle *with* the text. In other words, I now feel that I am caught in a bind when it comes to the particular challenges of this text.

### THE WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES

In the aftermath of the World Meeting of Families, it may be worth reflecting on how the Akedah can inform the proclamation of the gospel of the family today. The Akedah is a hard story but hard stories matter. Stories are to be experienced, they resonate with people, and influence decisions. The story of Abraham in its entirety presents a challenging picture of family: it begins with Abraham leaving his family, we read about Abraham's and Sarah's distress over being childless, there is the complication of Abraham having a child with Hagar, the rivalry that ensues between Sarah and Hagar, Hagar and Ishmael being sent away, and the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. As we discern what values underpin family, the story of Abraham's family may make us aware when discussing the current reality of the family, as Pope Francis writes in *Amoris Laetitia*, not to rigidly propose "a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families."<sup>10</sup> Despite the challenging complications in the story of Abraham's family, it is striking that, upon Abraham's death, Isaac and Ishmael seem to come together to bury their father (see 25:7-11): a family experience that many may relate to and one which often binds a family together.

8 As noted in a previous footnote, Sarah is not mentioned in the story of the Akedah. It is thought-provoking to consider how different the story would be if God commanded Sarah to sacrifice Isaac. Also, as every interpreter brings a particular view and experience of life to the text, it follows that a mother (actually, any person) reading the Akedah would have a different experience than me.

9 It is worth noting that this article is, by no means, suggesting that you need to be a father, or even a parent, to experience fully the text of the Akedah.

10 *Amoris Laetitia* #36, It is worth noting that the Akedah is not mentioned or referenced in *Amoris Laetitia*.